

報 告

Further Developments in the Conversation/ Composition Class: Using *Farewell to Manzanar*

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要 旨

共通科目の上級英会話・作文（4年生）ではcontent-based instructionという方法で引き続き担当してきた。普遍性のあるテーマは受講者の支持をうけてきたが*Farewell to Manzanar*における戦争，家族，アイデンティティーというテーマに対して受講者の反応について報告したい。

1. Introduction

For the last three years in the Advanced English Conversation/Composition class, I have been using as a text *Farewell to Manzanar*, an autobiographical account of Jean Wakatsuki Houston's childhood experiences during World War II in U.S. concentration camps for Japanese Americans. My belief in the effectiveness of a content-based approach for an advanced-level class came from my previous years of teaching the same course using Charlie Chaplin's autobiography, as reported earlier in this journal. (Journal of Foreign Language Institute No. 25) Challenging higher-level students with provocative issues requires them to stretch their skills in especially speaking and writing, as well as their ability to perform in small group discussions. Relevancy of the material determines whether or not the students engage at a level deeper than daily conversation. I would like to report on how the students responded to the issues raised in the text as evidenced by both their oral and written output and also discuss the

methodology used.

2. Student Profile

Students who elect this course come from a variety of majors, including German, Chinese, geography and English literature to name a few. All are at least 4th year students, with several 5th year students attending as well. Many of the students have studied abroad for a year as exchange students, so they have had much more exposure to the larger world. In addition, auditors who are studying to get their teaching license are also enrolled. Class size is optimum for more personal interaction with less than ten students per semester, due to the fact that 3rd year students now attend a course separate from this. In any case, all students express a strong desire to have a class in which they can actually communicate in English and not merely study about English. Women students generally outnumber males approximately three to one.

3. Course Description

This class is conducted entirely in English with all materials in English as well. An example of the course outline is given below. From the beginning, students are informed that all matters related to the class will be done through the target language. Aiming to recreate a classroom experience similar to one in north America, I have students sit in groups of 3 to 4 per table, with me joining them. An informal, yet academic atmosphere is aimed for and I have found students to be cooperative in adapting themselves to this classroom culture. In addition to the actual coursework, informal conversation time is taken each week to develop a rapport among the group. A balance of using the four skills, with an emphasis on speaking and listening during class time was a major factor during the planning and implementation of this class.

Handout example:

Advanced Conversation/Composition

Wednesday, 3rd Period

This advanced level course is designed to meet the needs of students who want to use English as a means of communication in both formal and informal situations. The

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chosen text will address many issues such as family, war, racism and identity. The instructor will act as a 'facilitator' with the focus on students' active participation in discussions.

Spring Semester Schedule April–July 2003

Date	In Class	Homework
April 9	Introductions, explanations	Read Chap. 1
April 16	Discuss Chap. 1	Read Chap. 2
April 23	Discuss Chap. 2	Read Chap. 3
April 30	First report due, Discuss Chap. 3	Read Chap. 4
May 7	Discuss Chap. 4	Read Chap. 5
May 14	Discuss Chap. 5	Read Chap. 6
May 21	Discuss Chap. 6	Read Chap. 7
May 28	Discuss Chap. 7	Read Chap. 8
June 4	Second report due, Discuss Chap. 8	Read Chap. 9
June 11	Discuss Chap. 9	Read Chap. 10
June 18	Discuss Chap. 10	Read Chap. 11
June 25	Discuss Chap.11	Prepare for interview
July 2	Third report due, Individual Interviews	

REPORTS

One report written in English about a particular chapter from *Farewell to Manzanar* is required each month for a total of three reports. These reports may be submitted by email. The length should be at least one page (A4). Late reports will be penalized

EVALUATION

The heijoten method will be used to evaluate student performance.

Classroom performance (50%) Written work (30%) Interview (20%)

For the first session, in addition to self-introductions, background knowledge regarding Japanese Americans is solicited. Surprisingly or not, students have exhibited knowing almost nothing about Japanese Americans but express a curiosity and desire to learn about who they might be. Equally shaky was their understanding of the reasons for World War II and how it affected civilians in both Japan and the United States. With such a lack of prior knowledge, how would the students grapple with the main contents of the text, namely, the internment experience of Japanese Americans?

In addition to my observations, I will let student voices speak for themselves later in this paper.

4. The Text

The text was chosen for its content, level and enduring appeal over the past 30 years. A forerunner of autobiographic accounts of individual experiences covering the internment era, Wakatsuki Houston's narrative from the viewpoint of an 8 year-old girl is approachable for most students. It vividly describes life in the camp and how it affected her and family members. Intended for 6th grade-level readers in the U.S., the book includes a chronology of pertinent facts related to the history of Japanese. First published when ethnic studies were gaining legitimacy as an academic study area, this work has been used as a text throughout schools in the U.S.

On the average, one chapter per week was assigned as homework, which varies in length from 5-10 pages. As an authentic text, the students find the vocabulary challenging as well as following the narrative, which occasionally includes flashback episodes. Another aspect that also stretched their reading comprehension skills was dialogue passages. On the average, students reported spending at least 2-3 hours on the reading assignment each week. It was noticed that preparing for class involved much underlining and note writing in the margins of the book.

5. Discussion Strategies

Before any discussion could take place, checking the level of reading comprehension was essential. I often found that the time I originally set aside for discussion was taken up with students' questions about vocabulary and content. Misunderstanding my directions to come with comments or questions about the text, most of the questions initially asked did not lead to discussion of the issues, as I had hoped. However, this process was essential in helping students feel uninhibited about asking questions.

Auxiliary materials were necessary to augment comprehension, such as maps of southern California, where most of the story took place. Other visual aids such as a time line to chronicle the events mentioned in the story proved to be helpful. As the

story involved a large number of characters, namely the family members of the author, a family tree diagram also proved to be effective. In addition, photographs and documentary videos depicting actual internment camps could help bring to life the text which did describe in detail the living conditions of the camps. Students were not aware of such study aids and tended to rely on word-for-word translation of the text for comprehension. Use of the internet to search for more background information was not a part of their usual study schemes.

Repeating the same routine each week of eliciting questions, having students respond to those questions and then asking for issues or themes that were considered to be of interest, we finally arrived at the stage where discussion can take place. Introduction of useful phrases for beginning a discussion, expressing an opinion, eliciting a response from a classmate, disagreeing and changing the subject was necessary and for several weeks, blackboard reminders proved to be needed. Initially, my role as facilitator often encompassed much more and too much reliance was placed on me to keep the discussion going. It wasn't until the second semester that I could witness students taking the initiative to begin and maintain the discussion autonomously.

Observing the students towards the end of the second semester, noticeable changes had occurred in their behavior. They displayed good eye contact with each other and their posture indicated that they were listening intently to their classmates. They also learned how to rephrase questions or statements when they realized that the listener could not understand them. Another point they learned was how to restart the discussion when an overlong silence prevailed. Involving all members of the group in the discussion by calling on the more quiet students was also another indication of their improvement in discussion skills.

6. Written Response

Each month, a one-page typed report on one of the chapters discussed was required which could be submitted electronically. The reports added a dimension to my understanding of how students were grappling with the text, which was not often brought out in the discussions. With an emphasis on responding to the text on a personal level, students strove to make sense of how war impacts the lives of ordinary

citizens. They attempted to get into the shoes of the characters and pondered how and why they acted and felt the way they did. Issues related to the family were the subject of many reports. One student writing about the father who was arrested and separated from his family after the Pearl Harbor attack remarked, “. . . he lost the things which are necessary for father and the power in his family. . . . to be cared by his family hurt him. My ideal of father is strong and powerful for children, but I think Mr. Wakatsuki is powerless. And also he is similar to recently powerless fathers.” Filling the vacuum caused by his father’s absence, another student remarks on how older children respond to this situation with “And I’d like to be like Woody. Woody hugged his mother. I think, he had a big responsibility, too. He feel scared that he has lots of daily chores to do. The future of his family seem uncertain, but he didn’t forget to smile. I want to be that I always wear a smile on my face. Because I’d like recover from the tragedies with smile.”

Coming to terms with the injustice of the incarceration from the viewpoint of young men, the debate about how to deal with the loyalty oath which would determine eligibility to enlist in the U.S. armed forces was a topic which drew many responses. One student commented on the dilemma faced by nisei young men, “. . . Nisei was born in US so they have US citizenship. They don’t know Japan so much. I think if they could speak from the heart, they would not answer Yes nor No. The answer would be the grey or in-between answer.” Another student, struck by the gravity of the decision that nisei men faced remarked, “I don’t understand patriotic spirit. After the 9.11 terrorism and Iraq war, I felt scary by Americans. I like Japan. I have no cause to hate Japan. But I can’t have such a patriotic spirit.”

Reflecting on the impact of the internment experience, one student commented, “And it gave this family a real separateness. They were forced lose not only physical things, but also things we can’t see, for example the relationship of the family, father’s power, freedom, position and trust of Japanese Americans in United States society.” In another statement, one student remarked, “Probably the suffering has continued still now and most of them don’t tell about it. That’s very sad history of Japanese Americans and also for Japanese, and it could be for the people all over the world too. So I think we should know this fact.”

7. Spoken Response: Presentations

At the end of the second semester, students chose a theme related to the contents of the book and were required to do research which was to be shared with classmates in the form of a presentation. In addition to strict instructions on using note cards and not reading from a prepared text, emphasis was placed on using visual aids as well. Each student was asked to prepare at least 10 to 15 minutes of material.

The range of topics reflected the diversity of how the students engaged with the topic matter. One student became particularly interested in how the war effected the lives of people in Japan and chose the Hiroshima bombing as an example of wartime suffering. Graphic photographs of the aftermath of the nuclear bombing were shown and references to the popular comic *Barefoot Gen* were made. Mention in the text of the bombing and how it had a severe impact on many Japanese Americans who had relatives from the area encouraged this student to locate this incident not as just a Japanese experience but one that deeply influence those of Japanese ancestry in the United States.

Another student attempted to draw comparisons between the lifestyle of Japanese during World War II with that of Japanese Americans in camp. She interviewed older relatives about their life during the war and commented on the lack of food and other hardships experienced by most Japanese. In addition, she viewed movie footage taken at internment camps and made observations on clothing, food and group activities shown. She pondered on why certain Japanese customs such as mochi-making were allowed in the camps. Furthermore, she voiced relief at seeing children laughing while they played on swings and slides.

In a different approach, another student reported on the use of racist language in relation to Japanese and Japanese American in the U.S. media during World War II. Examples from mainstream magazines and newspapers as well as song titles were introduced. Visual images such as distorted caricatures of Japanese facial features used in cartoons were another example of how negative views towards Japanese and Japanese Americans were created.

Although not enough time was available for extensive research, the students exhibited great interest in what occurred during World War II on both sides of the Pacific. Learning about how innocent people suffered struck a strong chord within

them and they expressed their abhorrence to war.

8. Language Learning Issues

In this class, I attempted to mix a number of learning activities which were both familiar and unknown in order to make the students feel at ease, yet not allow them to fall into behavioral patterns which are counterproductive to gaining communicative competence. Using a singular text and requiring a weekly reading assignment was no doubt what the students are accustomed to. I noticed that they continued to write the Japanese equivalent to unknown words in the margins of the text. As the discussions were first led by the instructor during spring semester and later by the students themselves in fall semester, I found that the students could take on the responsibility for maintaining the discussion, having had adequate practice. In regards to the monthly reports, a very wide range of ability in writing a three-paragraph essay was evident. However, not much class time was spent on writing skills per se as the students clearly wanted to concentrate on improving speaking skills.

It was evident that the students had gained confidence as English speakers, which I judged from their willingness to initiate informal conversation or to take on the role of discussion leader. They expressed clearly that having read one book in English without any Japanese translation was also another factor leading to their confidence as English learners. Having learned about historical issues to which they could relate on their own level was another reason they cited for their satisfaction with the class. I hope to include a wider variety of supplementary materials in the future which could lead to presentations based on more extensive research.

Bibliography

Houston, Jean Wakatsuki and James D. Houston. *Farewell to Manzanar.*, Bantam Books, 1973.