

# **EXPLORING THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD THROUGH THE BIOGRAPHY COURSE METHODOLOGY**

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## **Abstract**

This paper principally examines the ongoing development and adaptation of methods and materials, particularly the use of ‘authentic texts’ and multi-media, for the Exploring the English Speaking World through the Biography course taught at Kanda University. In addition, the paper examines the overall objectives of the course, its context in the arena of international education and student perceptions of the course. Descriptions of the course content, including the integral use of student presentations at the end of the course, are highlighted in the text as well as the process of adapting the materials and methods to better serve student interests and facilitate the development of English language skills. An explanation of how the course’s theme may be adapted to a single lesson or series of lessons in an existing course is also provided in this paper.

## **Introduction**

Exploring the English Speaking World through the Biography (Kanda University, Sogo 37/72) has been designed with the idea of moving beyond grammar points and standard EFL skills by exposing English language learners to a wide range of leading figures, both living and dead, that have made an impact on the international community. It aims to connect the students’ own lives with those studied and gives them opportunities to research and present a biography of their choosing at the end

of the course.

As is often mentioned in academic mission statements and research papers the cultural buzzwords of Japan, globalization, internationalization, international studies and global community are in vogue, and for good reason. As students grapple with the future that Japan will encompass, they are asked to use their English skills not only for sitting exams but foremost for meaningful communication. This course hopefully furthers this aim and provides a wide range of media and inputs to allow students to think about Japan's present, past and future in a global context.

In examining the complexities and misunderstandings, as well as rare successes within the international community, issues and policies are examined foremost in university courses around the world. This is the most common approach. Looking at individual leaders, decision makers and artists that make up this community is another. By using the biography as a tool, we can introduce English language learners to the English-speaking world around them.

Within the confines of the ESL classroom, we can introduce students to this concept by studying figures from around the world from a variety of backgrounds and fields while, at the same time, working on their four core skill areas of language learning (speaking, listening, reading and writing).

### **A Simple, Applicable Concept to Teaching the Biography**

All universities or academic institutions have differing facilities, as well as logistical and technological support. While Kanda University is well equipped with multi-media technologies, this course could be carried out regardless of the level of technology available at other institutions. The course must be tailored however to what the institution can reasonably provide. While there is a multi-media dimension to the course, its basic syllabus is simple, easy to follow and straightforward.

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The course looks at international figures in a variety of themes. Each theme (for example, music, politics or art) covers several individuals. This can be adapted based on time constraints and class levels. However, in general we look at one individual per 90 minute koma, or course period. Each course lesson (with notable exceptions of introductory lessons, mini-presentations, final presentations and autobiographies) has one biographical figure a lesson; one figure each day. Each new lesson presents a new figure and activities to tie the students' own lives to that figure. It must be stressed again that the biographies are not chosen randomly, but must follow a pattern within a specific category or subset, such as political leaders, musicians, artists, writers, spiritual leaders, etc.

An example of a sub-set within the biography course can be seen in Figure 1 below. In Figure 2, we see how a hypothetical group of subsets fits in within the general framework of the course.

Figure 1

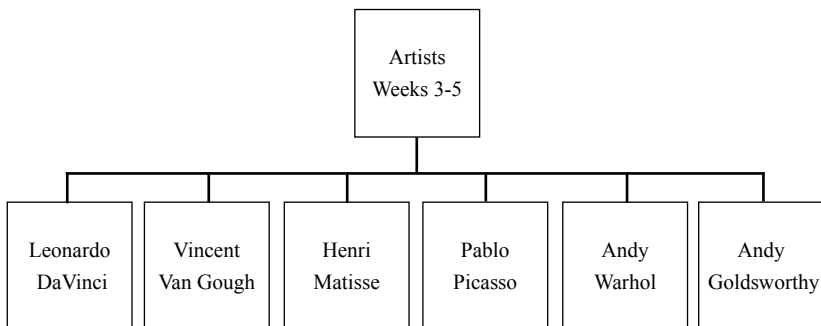
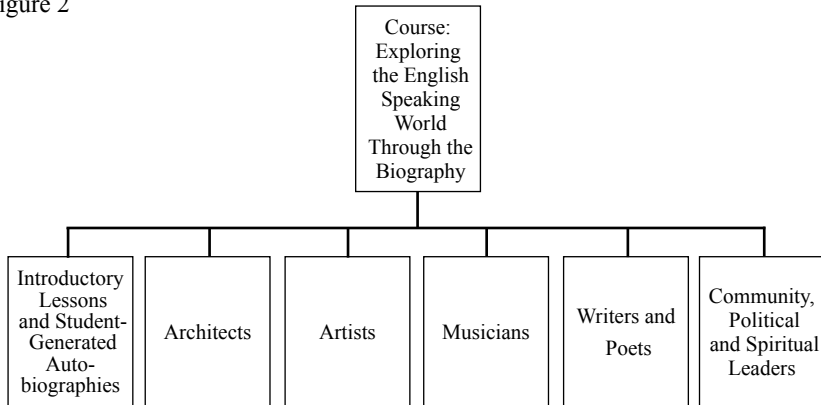


Figure 2



A typical lesson may involve a course reading, usually assigned as homework in a previous lesson, vocabulary work on the reading and discussion on key points of the reading. This may be followed by either a biographical video segment or audio recording of a piece of music produced by the individual. A brief lecture by the instructor may take place before or after the reading and then a discussion session. Discussions in groups are undertaken on various aspects of the person's life and more importantly the impact that individual made on a given movement, issue or policy, whether it be in politics, music or popular culture. These discussions, if carried out well, are the most valuable part of the lesson in allowing students to form opinions and express themselves on a wide range of issues. Many students have admitted never before contemplating the issues brought up in the biography course before being assigned readings and taking part in discussions as well as lectures in class.

In this course, the student's activities, as briefly described above, can be best described as 'authentic tasks.' (McGrath, 2002) Authentic tasks are defined as being tasks that ask students to perform activities and skills required of them in the 'real

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world’ as opposed to activities solely created for the classroom.

Authentic tasks can be contrasted with *pedagogic* tasks (e.g. controlled grammar practice activities such as gap-filling or transformation exercises), which focus on the development of accuracy rather than language using.<sup>1</sup>

In planning the course, constant refinement is necessary in assessing and modifying course materials and the teaching/facilitation of the content. Using ‘The Cycle of Course Development’ (Graves, 2000) proved to be helpful in having a blueprint of the steps needed to undertake planning, teaching, modifying and re-teaching the material. It must be stated that this course is still a work in progress and over successive years more modifications will no doubt be necessary.

### **Materials**

Materials were designed to be practical, thought-provoking, not overly time-consuming and useful for class discussion in particular. Using McGrath’s (2002) Criteria as a basis in the selection of authentic texts<sup>2</sup> I revised internet-based articles, biographies and texts to create a reading I felt appropriate for the students’ level and interest. The criteria are stated below:

1. relevance (to syllabus, to learner’s needs)
2. intrinsic interest of topic/theme
3. cultural appropriateness
4. linguistic demands

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<sup>1</sup> McGrath, 2002 Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching, page 114.

<sup>2</sup> Authentic texts are texts/materials written not for language learning but for general consumption, i.e. internet web-pages, newspapers, encyclopedias, journals, etc. See McGrath (2002) pg 104 for more on authentic texts.

5. cognitive demands
6. logistical demands
7. logistical considerations: e.g. length, legibility/audibility
8. quality (as a model of use or as a representative token of text-type)
9. exploitability<sup>3</sup>

Materials were chosen, edited, refined and distributed based on the above criteria, but it must be stressed again, that the selection and adaptation of materials is an ongoing process and by no means complete.

## Multi-Media Approach

While the biography course relies on readings, discussions, traditional homework assignments and both written and spoken class activities, there is use of multi-media technology as well. Examples of multi-media usage are:

1. **Audio CDs/MDs.** In researching musical artists, Bob Dylan for example, music is played in the classroom. Students focus on the melody, rhythm and mood of the music, study the lyrics on paper and then listen again to the actual songs. Discussions of the artist's lyrics follow. Some teachers may also use cloze activities to study the lyrics and check for vocabulary use in lower level classes.
2. **Video/DVDs.** Approximately every third of fourth class incorporates video in the biography lesson. Video materials are available in the library of Kanda University as well as in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC).

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<sup>3</sup> McGrath, 2002 *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching*, pg 106

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Videos have also been rented at local video stores. The use of these video is to highlight aspects of the life of the person being studied and to facilitate listening and comprehension practice. DVDs with sub-titles on/off functions are useful, especially if lower-level students have trouble with non-subtitled videos, rich in content. It is up to the discretion of the instructor as to whether or not to use subtitled videos. A typical video lesson would consist of background introduction by the teacher of the person being studied, reading of biographical material, video viewing – often in segments – and questions elicited from the instructor, followed by discussion and/or homework on the video.

3. **Software.** Most students hand in reports using MS Word and MS Power Point has been a popular software in presenting information in the students' final presentation. Power Point enables the students to integrate text, images, charts and surveys into their presentations. Some teachers make P.P. usage mandatory but in this course the presentation method is up to the students, P.P. being used in approximately 75% of the presentations.

### **Student Presentations - Methodology**

In the Biography course, Students present a biography on a figure of their choice towards the end of each semester. This presentation, both the actual presentation as well as the paper that accompanies it, is the single biggest factor in the student's grade for the course. The students are asked to choose someone they wish to present on early in the semester. There are no requirements as to the figures they present on, other than the person must be someone who has influenced the international community in a significant manner. Students are asked to submit an outline detailing:

1. The person they wish to present on
2. How that person has influenced the international community
3. Why they chose that person (their personal interest in that person)
4. Their research methods

Students are expected to prepare their research carefully and then present their biography to the class using, but not limited to, posters, writings and books, CDs/MD music, DVD/VHS video clips, Power Point presentations, and/or whiteboards. Students are expected to present for approximately 20 minutes with 5 minutes remaining for questions from the class. The presentations themselves take up approximately 20% of the total number of classes in a semester.

In addition, students evaluate their peers and give feedback in written form on their presentations, making them active, rather than passive participants.

In two semesters of conducting this course, students have been enthusiastic as presenters and participants. The student presentations are, for some students, the highlight of the course, as it allows them to present on biographies that are of interest to them, to take the role as teachers and be active in the learning process. The instructor acts as a facilitator at this point and allows the students a great deal of freedom in their presentation style and manner. The students have given mostly positive feedback on the process and seem to enjoy the experience.

Student presentations have covered a wide variety of biographies, including those of Mother Theresa, originator of Levi jeans Levi Strauss, Mahatma Gandhi, Audrey Hepburn, ukioe print master Hokusai, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Walt Disney, Leonardo DaVinci, and others.



## **Students' Perceptions**

Since the course is new, materials, assignments and the course design need to be assessed, revised and again, reexamined. It must be noted here that this is an ongoing process and that at this point, further research is needed. In designing the survey I consulted heavily J.D. Brown's *Using Surveys in Language Programs 2001* with a focus on conducting qualitative as opposed to quantitative surveys for the course. As with any course, some students like what others dislike in regards to certain aspects of the coursework. Through conducting qualitative research in the form of student surveys in class, I tried to establish if any patterns existed that could highlight what 'worked' in the course and what didn't. Applying practical guidelines based on Brown (2001) survey questions were generated and a questionnaire was distributed in class that would, hopefully, demonstrate whether or not the course was meeting the needs of the students as well as look for any commonalities in weaknesses, as well as strengths in the curriculum.

The results were varied and mostly positive. No strong commonalities surfaced as to weaknesses in the curriculum, however many students commented on the actual biographies we covered in the course. Some wanted more contemporary or popular figures in entertainment and music.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some students felt that readings were too difficult or that there were too many new vocabulary words.

Positive feedback included interest in new or unusual biographies, an appreciation, interest in or more detail of, the issues surrounding the biographies such as AIDS,

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<sup>4</sup> These results were somewhat unsurprising. One of the aims of the course is to expose the students to figures of interest that are unknown to them, have made an impact in the international community and may or may not be seen as positive. Students, through their semester presentations, have the ability to present on anyone they chose to as long as their biography represents someone who has had an impact on the international community (as opposed to merely being well-known or well-liked in Japan).

indigenous people's rights, discrimination, political violence and genocide.<sup>5</sup>

## Using Biographies in Existing Courses

How would instructors incorporate the concept of this course into already existing courses? For many, a new course based on biography is infeasible. In this case, elements of the biography course could easily be adapted to fit into any existing language course syllabus. Group presentations, group discussions and individual presentations based on biographies could be conducted within the framework of any content-based English language course.

By following a similar framework as in figures 1 and 2, the concept of this course could be adapted to an individual lesson, segment or unit within a larger curriculum.

A single lesson based on the biography could also be devised based on the concepts outlined above. Often by personalizing the material, adding a face to a daunting issue or theme, the students feel connected to the material, even if there is only one lesson in a unit or entire course based on the biography methods outlined in this paper.

## Conclusion

While this research is meant only to serve as an introduction to teaching biography courses for the English language classroom, it must be emphasized the materials and methods are very much works in progress. Hopefully the concept of using biography as a tool in the classroom will be improved upon, utilized and adapted by a variety of instructors in a variety of classroom settings and levels within English language instruction.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, many of the students did not know of the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot or the deaths that occurred from 1975-1979 in Cambodia until they learned about them through Dith Pran's biography.

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