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Chapter 16

Handcrafted Books: Two for the Price of One

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The authors discuss a strategy that gives students an authentic purpose for writing as well as providing a source of reading materials which are comprehensible and interesting to students. Handcrafted Books are texts written and illustrated by students to be read by their fellow students.

Introduction

The benefits of reading for pleasure, sometimes called "free voluntary reading" (FVR), are well-documented for both first and second language acquirers (Elley, 1991; Krashen, 1993). FVR is a major source of vocabulary growth, grammatical accuracy, reading comprehension, and writing style. Despite these obvious benefits, most foreign language teachers report that they do very little FVR in their beginning and intermediate classes (Huber, 1993), and foreign language students similarly report little independent pleasure reading (Dupuy, under review; McQuillan, 1995).

One problem in promoting FVR in lower level foreign language classes at the secondary and university level is the lack of available texts to read that are both interesting and comprehensible to students. Books that are easy to understand, such as children's stories, are not very interesting to most adults and high schoolers. On the other hand, books that are interesting to such students are often too difficult to comprehend. Thus a materials "gap" exists in most programs between texts that are comprehensible and texts that are interesting.

One way to close this gap is the creation of Handcrafted Books (HB), texts written and illustrated by foreign language students for their fellow students at similar or lower levels of proficiency. Similar in some ways to the "language experience approach" of early literacy education (Van Allen, 1976), HBs are products of the students' own experiences, thus enhancing both their comprehensibility by other students and their topical interest. HBs have the additional benefits of providing students with a real purpose in writing (Johns, 1990) and of giving them a sense of ownership and authenticity in their compositions (Dupuy, under review).

The production of HBs also gives teachers a chance to create their own classroom library. Research on the importance of access in promoting FVR (e.g., Morrow, 1982) suggests that classroom libraries can increase the amount of FVR done by students by making texts readily available to them. More access means more reading, and more reading leads to more language acquisition.

Setup of the Project

The Hancrafted Books project was carried out at Louisiana State University (LSU), a large, public university in the southern part of the United States. Many of the students at LSU are from Cajun/Creole origins, as well as different Latin American and Asian cultures. The participating 250 students were all enrolled in third

semester French classes as part of their university foreign language requirement. Although we implemented the project with university French students, the HB approach can be easily adapted to other settings and other languages. HB was one component of an intermediate French course in which the books were used as part of a foreign language library at the university, to be read by students at a lower or similar level, and future students. Students wrote the texts, and teachers gave students feedback on organization and content, and helped them edit their texts for style and accuracy (see Appendix for a sample of HB). Prior to beginning the project, students were given some general publication guidelines.

Publication Guidelines

1. Focus and Scope of the Books

Authors were told that the books could have original story lines or be retellings of familiar and not-so-familiar stories from their culture, either fiction or non-fiction. This might include anything from nursery tales to classic novels, to short reports (e.g., travel reports)--anything that was of interest to them. They were also advised to write their books without the use of a dictionary, since it was important that the texts be written at beginning and intermediate levels. If they did not know a word, chances were that their fellow students or students at a lower level wouldn't know it, either. Interest and comprehensibility were the key considerations.

2. Illustrations

Authors were invited to illustrate their books. Not only did this make their story more appealing, it also enhanced its comprehensibility. Authors had several options in illustrating their work: draw their own pictures, have friends or classmates help them, cut out pictures from magazines, or use computer-generated graphics. Still another way was to have intermediate students collaborate with their classmates or with beginning students, with the intermediates writing the text and their peers or beginners doing the illustrations. This last method was also a good check to see if other students were actually able to comprehend the written text of the author.

3. Submissions

Authors turned in their first draft books to the teacher for comments. On the first draft, revisions were restricted to the content of the story, with recommendations if needed on the development and coherence of the story, the sequence of events, the characters, and so on. If possible, it was recommended that a group from the potential audience for the books, beginning students, contribute to this phase of revision, giving comments on interest and comprehensibility of the text. Comments on the second draft of the book focused more on questions of style and accuracy, with the authors working collaboratively with the teacher/editor. Books were normally no longer than 25 pages in length, and the text was printed or handwritten in a large font to make it easy to read. Each book had a title page which included the author (and illustrator, if different) and the source of the story (original or retelling, with title and author of original story).

The quality of HBs ranged from handwritten, stapled texts with few or no illustrations, to word-processed, desk-top-publishing-produced documents with sophisticated computer graphics. The level depended on the local resources of the school and students. We recommend that at least the text be done on a word processor, however, for ease of revision and editing. As the books are widely used, a concern for durability has led us to advise students to print their books on thick cardboard and to laminate them, if possible.

4. Copyright

After having been informed of the purpose of the HB project, authors gave permission to have their books published on the World Wide Web, and to have the books duplicated for other students. This was also a good way to discuss with students the concept of ownership as it related to published material.

5. Assessment

The most important assessment of the HBs is whether or not students find them interesting and understandable. Grading by the instructor was pass/fail for the HBs; only students who did not turn in an HB received a fail for the project.

Book Collection

In one semester, the 250 students in intermediate French classes produced a collection of 400 books in a great range of genres, including comic books, children's stories, and classical literature. All of the books were housed in a Language Resource Center for use by students. In addition, several of the books were placed on the World

Wide Web in order both to allow students to download and reproduce the books on their own, as well as to give the authors a much wider audience for their creations.

Opinions of Authors

At the end of the project, the participating authors/students filled out a short questionnaire which sought to probe their opinions of this new writing experience. A majority of students reported that they found writing HBs to be more interesting than traditional types of foreign language writing assignments. Many of the authors thought the HB project would be useful for future classes, and indicated that they were proud to be HB authors. Students also indicated that what they liked best about the project was that it was creative and fun, and that they had the opportunity to self-select their book topic. A few also said, however, that the project was time-consuming, and disliked being graded on their work. For those lacking artistic abilities, there was some dissatisfaction with having to illustrate their own stories. Some of these negative comments are understandable, given that the students are at the university level and concerned about getting a good grade in the class.

Conclusion

The production of HBs provides one solution to the difficult problem of giving beginning and intermediate foreign language students interesting and comprehensible texts. The approach advocated here can be used in any language and at all age levels, and requires as few materials as a pencil, paper, and a stapler. Best of all, the HB project gives foreign language students a real purpose for writing and is directly beneficial to both current and future students.

The use of HB can go a long way in giving foreign language students - for the first time, in most cases - books that they can enjoy and understand.

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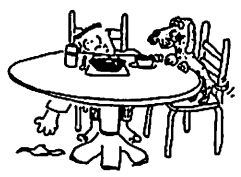
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Pauvre Raoul!

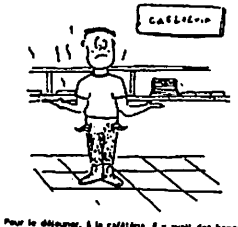
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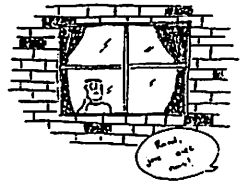














Translation of French Text

Page 1
When Raoul got up that morning, he had a little accident. He stepped on one of his sister's roller skaters. He fell on the floor and hurt his elbow. Fortunately, his elbow was not broken.

Page 2
For breakfast, Raoul's mother had prepared some toast and cereal. When Raoul sat at the table, his napkin fell on the floor. He picked it up, but in the meantime, his dog had eaten his breakfast.

Page 3
Every morning, Raoul and his neighbor walk to school together. This morning it was raining, of course! On their way to school, it was pouring, and they had no umbrella.

Page 4
In his history class, the teacher returned the exam. To his surprise, Raoul got a "D." What a shame!

Page 5
For lunch, they were serving French beans, delicious chicken, and dinner rolls at the cafeteria. Raoul was very hungry. Unfortunately, he had left his lunch at home. Raoul did not have lunch that day.

Page 6
When Raoul got home, his mother wanted to take him clothes shopping. Raoul was sad, because he wanted to play with his friends. Poor Raoul!

[In the bubble: "Raoul, come play with us!"]

Page 7

At 8:00 pm, Raoul's father told Raoul that he looked tired. Raoul said no. But as his father is the head of the family, Raoul went to bed at 8:00 pm. He hoped that tomorrow would be better.