Analysing the language of poetry through podcasts

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Overview

Seeking to engage Year 9 students in working collaboratively on the language of poetry, Kate asked them to produce podcasts. She developed a structured series of lessons that allowed students to work in groups without disturbing other recordings. Students' conversations as they compiled their scripts revealed detailed consideration of the language of the poems; Anna concludes that the *process* was important as well as the final podcast. The students developed speaking and listening skills, learnt new ICT skills, really engaged with the poems they were studying – and perhaps most importantly seemed to be having fun. Her next step is to encourage other teachers to involve their groups in creating podcasts that can become a shared resource for all GCSE students.

Introduction

The target group for this case study was a class of Year 9 students after their Key Stage 3 examinations. We have already developed a module which introduces students to the *Poems from Different Cultures* section of the Anthology for their GCSE exam. The GCSE course often does not leave enough room for teaching the poetry in an in-depth and engaging way – mostly because there is just so much to get through! A more creative approach can be adopted in Year 9 and then revised in Year 10 or Year 11.

The class that I have chosen for the project is a middle to low ability class, partly from necessity as it is the only Year 9 group I teach, but it is often the lower ability students who find analysing language a particularly difficult task.

The hard-to-teach topic

Students find language difficult to talk about as often they are unaware of what they already know. As the task asks students to indirectly look at the language by asking them to create a reading of the poem, this should give students the confidence to create a reading of the poem which reflects the meaning. One of the main reasons behind this approach to teaching the poems is that it constantly asks students to be thinking about the words used without actually asking them to analyse the language. Their choices in regard to how they read the poem will all unconsciously be centred on an appreciation of the language without the barrier of having to explain their decisions straight away. This project will therefore focus on the 'hard-to-teach' topic of analysing language.

Aims

- To encourage students to work collaboratively
- To use combinations of word, image and sound of a particular text
- To help students engage with the language of texts

Intentions
- Students to work collaboratively in groups on a reading of the poem to reflect content and meaning employing pace, sound effects, background music.

- Students to also prepare a summary of the key points – with a particular focus on language.
- Place the podcasts on the common drive for department to use – in this way there will be more than one podcast of the same poem which will promote discussion about why each group might have chosen to present their poem in a particular way. This may be for development after the project deadline.
- Develop the project to include the whole of Year 9 to create a department resource.

Method

A general scheme of work for the whole project is included as Appendix 1; this section will focus on the teaching of the podcast section.

The students who took part in the study had never used Audacity before (it is a free program available on the Internet which allows you to create voice recordings and edit by adding music and sounds) and so I felt it would be beneficial to have a trial run before we attempted to record the final version of their poems. As errors sometimes occur when using new technology for the first time, this would also reveal any technical problems which might be encountered at a time when it would not ruin the whole project. I made sure that the room we were to use for recording the podcasts was capable of running Audacity and arranged for the microphones to be set up by an IT technician before the lesson to minimise disruption at the beginning of the lesson. She was also available to support during the lesson which was a great help.

Some preparation before the lesson was needed. In order to make sure that the students had sounds to use (I did not think that the school system would allow them to download sounds), I downloaded likely sounds that they might need from Microsoft Office Online and saved them on to the Common Drive. The students were then able to access these in the lesson and insert them into their projects.

The students were making podcasts based on the *Poems from Different Cultures* in the AQA Anthology. We had previously studied the poems as a class so that the students were familiar with all the poems I had chosen to look at. At the start of the lesson we discussed how to make the reading of a poem effective and what to avoid. I split the class into groups of three and gave them an A3 size print-out of their poem. Their first task was to create a working script – they needed to think about which words they would emphasise and why, and consider which sounds could be inserted to enhance others' understanding of the poems.

The second task the students had to complete was to write, and then record, a script which covered the key details of the poem and explained why they had emphasised certain words and why they wanted to add sounds. They needed to say what they thought the poem was about and talk about the most important features. This meant that the recordings could be staggered because when they had finished recording they still had tasks to do. The project needed to have another piece of work running alongside it though, because when they had finished their script as well, they were without a task to do. This problem was solved because in Year 9 we start a piece of creative writing coursework: the students continued this when they had completed the tasks for the podcast.

When most of the groups had finished recording, the whole class was able to use the ICT room again and the last few groups were able to use my classroom to record instead. The final stage of the project was to insert any remaining sounds that they thought were necessary. Again, to prepare for this stage, I went over what they needed to do, using the SMART board to demonstrate in my classroom first. Students then inserted their sounds and edited their recordings to cut out any errors.

Technical and classroom management issues

I have found that the best way to introduce new programs to students is to demonstrate the program on the SMART board before taking the class to the ICT room and then give them 'how to' sheets to take with them. This means you have their attention without the distractions of different logging on speeds and the students have seen what the program should look like. When they get to the ICT room, the students can then use the help sheets and what they remember in order to get started. Once most of the students had finished, I introduced Audacity to them on the board. We then went to the ICT room to start to record the poems.

The one thing I did not do was to show the students how to open the saved version of their project. This became a problem later when one student corrupted her whole project and had to start again. Audacity saves the files in two ways: as the actual project which can be edited and as an accompanying folder which contains all the individual elements of the program. One of my students opened up the folder and was deleting the parts she did not like from there. Unfortunately I did not know what she had done until she had corrupted her project and we were unable to retrieve the files so she had to start again from scratch.

The trial lesson was a good idea because it revealed a major difficulty with the room we were recording in. Because of the close proximity of the different groups in the room, all the recordings were picking up the other students' voices. This meant that I had to think carefully about how to manage the recordings so that the room was quieter. In order to solve this problem, I arranged for just two groups to use the ICT room at once whilst the rest of the class worked in my classroom (it would have been even better to have just one group at once). This was possible because we have a small ICT room attached to the English department and because I had the help of the ICT technician: she supported in the ICT room with the small groups. The students were each given a time slot to record their poem (the students found this very hard to stick to though because they spent too much time re-recording from the beginning when they had made a mistake rather than just pausing and then continuing).

Key tips

- Make friends with your ICT technician – if they are available to set up and put away the equipment it is really handy and if they can support in the lesson it is great!
- Demonstrate the program using a projector first to familiarise the students.
- Show the students how to open their file.
- Prepare sounds/download sounds and save them on a common drive.
- Have a secondary piece of work running alongside the project.
- Make sure there is somewhere quiet for the students to record.
- Carefully consider the time of year for the project. The Summer term was perhaps not a good choice because the ICT technician was needed for the ALAN exams and Year 9 were actually taking some GCSEs. As there also seem to be a lot of CPD activities which go on in this term, I missed a few lessons due to training. This affected the project because it lost momentum in the middle and dragged a little in the final stages. It's very hard to set cover for recording lessons because some staff would not be comfortable with the program. Again, it was valuable to have another piece of work running alongside the project to overcome this difficulty.

Findings

Most of the students finished their podcasts in the allocated time and gained a good understanding of what the poem was about. When listening to their conversations about what to include in the script and where to insert sounds, it was obvious that they were considering the language of the poems. Some of the recordings were not very polished and it was very hard to hear some girls if they had not spoken loudly enough, but the *process* involved in making the podcasts was important as well. The students were developing their speaking and listening skills, learning about a new ICT program and really engaging with the poems they were studying – and perhaps most importantly seemed to be having fun! I asked the students to write one sentence about what they thought about the project and I have included all their responses below.

> I thought the podcast project was really fun although I kept deleting my work, so I had to keep recording my work on the other hand I really had fun with this project.

> I thought the podcast project was fun we had to work hard but had fun working together with my partner. Hopefully we will get a chance to podcast again sometime.

> We thought the podcast was okay but it was a bit boring in the middle.

> The podcast project was very interesting and I enjoyed doing it.

> The podcast was good but only the recording and the sounds were hard to put in and difficult to find.

> I really liked it at the beginning but later on it got boring because we didn't know what to do. I would want to in the future do something like this again because it was fun.

> I really liked doing the podcast at the beginning while recording but I found it hard to put the sounds effects in the right place.

> It was good but we spent too long recording and didn't get finished.

Podcast Revision (www.podcastrevision.co.uk) has been an excellent site to use with Year 11 this year because students can hear the poems and a brief summary of the key ideas in each poem. Students have engaged with the poems and enjoy listening to the podcasts. Students will also be able to hear their own work in Year 11 which will engage them in their own learning and work as an aid to memory.

Next steps

I think podcasts have many applications as a form of revision within English and other curriculum areas as they help students to revise in two ways – firstly by creating their original podcast and then (hopefully!) listening to it again. I would like to run this project throughout the English department and save all the podcasts to the common drive so that all the students can access them and so that they can return to their work when they come to revise the poems for their GCSEs.

Appendix

Medium term plan for the podcast revision project

Some of the finished podcasts will be posted with the online version of this case study.

Additional materials on using Audacity
- Students were given a help sheet on the sound editing software by Anna Barker which can be found on the Teacher Resource Exchange (http://tre.ngfl.gov.uk) – search for 'Audacity cribsheet'.
- Phillip Lloyd has also created a series of PowerPoint slides for students on using Audacity; his file will accompany the online version of his case study on the NATE site: www.nate.org.uk/htt

Appendix: Analysing language: medium term plan

Week	Activities
1	Read and discuss 'Presents from my aunts in Pakistan'. Discuss use of images in the poems and the language used. Read 'Half Caste' considering what is important about the language of the poem and experiment with reading it in different ways and with the emphasis on different words. Annotate the key details of the two poems. Homework: write a one paragraph summary of the content and key ideas of each poem.
2	Read and discuss 'Blessing' and 'Island Man'. Show images and discuss use of images in the poems and what sounds are important in the poems. Particularly focus on the sound effect of the alliteration in the poems. Discuss and annotate key language features of the two poems. Homework: write a one paragraph summary of the content and key ideas of each poem.
3	Explore the poems we have studied so far and consider how to read the poems aloud effectively. Students to use blank copies of the poems to create a working script – underlining / highlighting words they wish to emphasise and why, including sound effects and strong visual images inspired by the poems. Podcast tutorial (include a variety of sounds on common drive). Students to work in pairs to experiment with recording one of the poems and adding sound effects. Review what students learned from their first experience recording their poems to inform what they need to do for their 'real' podcast.
4	Listen to two different podcasts of 'Vultures'. Discuss how differently the poem is presented and why hearing it in this way can help our understanding of the poem. Compare to their own podcast poems – how could they adapt their reading of the poem to really reflect the key ideas in the poem? Listen to the analysis of vultures which follows the reading of the poem and make a list of the key points to focus the students' analysis of their own poem. Discuss and annotate 'Two Scavengers in a Truck'. Homework: write a one paragraph summary of the content and key ideas of 'Two Scavengers'. Group students into pairs or threes and give them one poem to focus on (differentiated by ability) Homework: to find/record music/sound effects for their given poem.
5	Students to work in pairs to create a script for their podcast which includes how they will read the poem as well as the analysis at the end. Students create podcasts (which will include a reading of the poem and a summary of the key ideas and language used). Save podcasts to 'Common Drive'. Listen to and discuss effectiveness of podcasts as a class. Homework: complete evaluation of the project.
6	Possible extension task: students to use PowerPoint to create a slideshow to accompany their podcast. The slideshow should combine images and key words and phrases from the poem and their podcast.