Lesson Plan: Altered Stories for Language Production
By Eva A. Combs

What if Cinderella had lost her cell phone at a party, or Baba Yaga sued Tatiana for emotional distress? Altering stories in the form of comics with structured language objectives can provide your students with an opportunity to use language (even obscure language) you have practiced in class in a new and creative way. Using stories the students already know provides a bridge so that they do not have to come up with a whole new story from scratch. Also, it shows the students that many new Hollywood movies are actually variations of standard stories.

Besides being a highly motivating activity, altering fairy tales empowers students to take control and change something that may have been seen as set in stone, and it also fosters critical thinking skills. Do not be surprised when some students continue to do this after your lesson is over.

Materials: paper, pencils, pens, a computer with Internet and projector, access to the website Non-Sequitur: The Three Little Pigs, by Miller (2012)
Audience: Midbeginner to fluent, ages 10–25; this can be done with mixed-level classes. It is recommended for mixed language classes but can be done with groups who speak the same first language.
Objectives: Students will be able to • use a grammar point and/or vocabulary practiced in a different class in writing, • critically think about how changes alter outcomes, and • engage in their learning.
Outcome: Students will critically alter fairy tales and creatively play with language and plot lines.
Duration: 80 minutes

Schema Activation and Hook

With the class, have the students tell you the story of "The Three Little Pigs." Only help if necessary; let the students tell you the story. It is okay if one or two students dominate and tell the story.

Via the Internet, have the students read the short comic, Non-Sequitur: The Three Little Pigs, by Miller (2012).

Wait for their reaction to the ending. Ask them to talk to the person sitting next to them: What happed in this version? Do they agree with the characters at the end (the characters ask if fairy tales need updating)?

* Tip: I recommend knocking on the table at the three moments when the wolf does.

Altering a Story: Whole Class Together

Ask the students to tell you the story of "Little Red Riding Hood" (a short, basic version). Next, ask the students how they would update the story (usually, no one answers).

Ask them to imagine that it's set in New York City. Ask them how the story would need to change: for example, there are no wolves in the city, so who is the wolf? Is Little Red still going to see grandma? What else can change?

Tip: Providing the students with the stories of "The Three Little Pigs" and "Little Red Riding Hood" can give them something to work with if they have trouble thinking of a story themselves in the next activity.

Altering a Story: In Pairs

Students work in pairs to choose a fairy tale (both must know it) and draw it as a comic strip, and they must change at least one thing about it. Every pair is free to choose its own story and alteration points. Reassure students that you are not testing their drawing skills. If you have done this activity before and have permission from a previous student, you can quickly show them at the front of the class an example, at a distance, of a poorly drawn comic from a previous student.

Important: Do not let them see closely any examples from previous students at this stage; it can inhibit their creativity.

Give the students a grammar and/or vocabulary point they have been working on to incorporate into their story. You may ask them something like, "Use relative clauses two or more times," or, "Use the simple past three times and underline each use"—whatever makes sense for your students.

Give the pairs two pieces of paper and have them draft an outline first (important because they may run out of space unless they plan). Sometimes the draft becomes the final piece. Remind students of the time they have to complete the task.

Tip: Odd grammar points can work surprisingly well. My students did the obscure grammar point of inversion and the results were great. Any grammar having to do with ordinal time or transitions works well with this activity.

As the Students Finish

Some pairs will finish before others. As the students finish and if time allows, you can either have them create another comic, or have them start switching theirs with other pairs' and reading them. If you have done this activity before and your previous students have given you permission to copy, you can have them read the previous students' comics (this is preferred).

Wrap-Up

Collect the new comics for assessment and ask what the new stories were. What happened? If they read other stories, ask which were their favorites and why.

Recommend that the students continue to alter comics/stories and publish in English and share on Facebook or other social media.

* Tip: You may want to have your institution's waiver form available for the students to sign if you would like to use their work in future classes.

Possible Variations of This Lesson

- Have the students finish as homework.
- Change the mode of production to a spoken story, role-play, dialogue, written narrative story, news story, or something else.
- You may adapt this for older students by changing the story from something other than a fairy tale, for example, a news story, classic piece of literature they have been reading for class, or a historical event—but only with caution; fairy tales are scary enough!

Reference

Millar, W. (2012, November 25). Non sequiter. [Cartoon] Go Comics. Retrieved from http://www.gocomics.com/nonsequitur/2012/11/25

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