Tell Me About the Personality of Your Word
by Patrick T. Randolph

Possibilities & Synesthesia

"I am large…. I contain multitudes."
—Walt Whitman *from Leaves of Grass [51]*

Consider, for a moment, the following question: What if every word in your mind had a "personal identity," "personal history," or "personal psychology?" In such a scenario, "ambiguous" would be a shy, evasive woman from Wyoming; "meticulous" would be a tall, thin, and very punctual man from London; "the" would be a meditating monk from western Japan; "and" would be a curious angel flying above the skies of Turkey.

For a number of people, such a reality is not far from the truth. According to Cytowic and Eagleman (2011), about 1 in 23 people have a neural condition called synesthesia. Synesthesia is a very unique brain condition in which the senses crisscross and produce distinct perceptions that differ from their normal functions. For instance, synesthetes "hear tastes," "smell colors," and "touch sounds." Another intriguing kind of synesthesia is personifying numbers and letters. One synesthete recorded in Cytowic's and Eagleman's research perceives the personification of numbers in a very detailed way. For her, the number 5 is "blue, deeper than sky blue…; male; a bit of a worrier but not without self-confidence; mature" and the number 7 is "dark grainy gray, with an almost beigey sense to it; male; playful, and impressively handsome" (2011, p.42).

Applying Synesthesia to Words and Creative Writing

With Cytowic's and Eagleman's (2011) research in mind, I asked the question: In order to personalize English vocabulary and make it more meaningful for my students, what if we "personified" the vocabulary items we learned in class, gave them all a "personal identity," and wrote character sketches about them?

The day after posing that question, I thought I would give the idea a try. The results were more than inspiring. After our vocabulary review warm-up for the lesson, I asked my students to think of the word "meticulous" as a person. Then, I asked them to brainstorm as a class and come up with as many personality traits as they could related to the word "meticulous." Within a mere 3 minutes they came up with 18 descriptive attributes. Here is their list: a 37 year-old man, serious, well dressed, British, very silent, uses a cane to walk, always hits the books at the library, lives in the library, is a bachelor, wants a wife, slowly but surely responds to people's requests, has only a few (carefully picked) friends, always carries a small mirror, is traditional, wears a tie, is fashionable, is rather tall, and is thin.

As a result of the students' positive and impressive response, I understood that they would easily be able to create character sketches about words and do so in very creative and intriguing ways. Based on the above activity, I set up the following creative writing procedure for my academic writing class.

The Procedure

DAY 1: Pair Up and Review

First, the students pair up and review the definitions and parts of speech for the week's vocabulary items by quizzing each other. After they define and categorize each term, they provide original example sentences. The instructor should monitor this part of the project very closely.

Personal History and Characteristics of the Words

Next, the pair members ask each other what they think the personal characteristics and backgrounds of each term are. They address the following aspects: the overall personality of each lexical item, the body type, hair color, complexion, age, gender, culture, career, schooling, religion, marital status, sports the term might play, and its favorite kind of film, food, and drink.

Choosing a Favorite Item and Creating an Oral Character Sketch

The third step is to choose one lexical item and present an oral character sketch. I have found that requiring the students to create an oral character sketch before providing a written character sketch is beneficial for a number of reasons. First and foremost, talking about any topic before one writes on it acts as a "creative-midwife," in that speaking helps to elicit ideas in the "birthing" process. Second, students are apt to talk freely about their "word-characters," and this gets the juices flowing and the pump primed. There is not the immediate hurdle of "Where do I start?"—they just talk about their character as if he or she were a friend. Third, given this ease with their character, they open up more easily and are less critical of what they are doing. The upshot is that they become more creative and less critical—an important step in this part of the process. And fourth, given that they are talking *to* someone, that someone can offer immediate feedback and help develop the character even more.

DAY 2: Writing the Lexical Item's Character Sketches

Before I ask students to finally sit down and write the lexical item's character sketch, I ask them to find a new partner and share their oral character sketch. This gives them the opportunity to make more adjustments and present the character with a fresh mindset. The remainder of the class (30 to 40 minutes) is given for the actual writing of the character sketch.

I prefer to have the students write these in class as opposed to writing them at home because they are more focused in class, and they usually produce better initial writing in class. It also gives me the opportunity to see how they write without help from others. I do give them the chance to edit, refine, and develop the details as homework, but the initial stages of writing are done in class.

DAY 3: The Final Stages: Reading Aloud and Revising

In the last stage of this project, I ask the students to make small groups of three and read their pieces to each other. The students who are listening are asked to close their eyes and imagine

what the character looks like and get a feel for his or her personality. The listeners are required to write down one strong point and one point to develop or work on for the final draft of their classmate's character sketch.

The final drafts are assigned as homework. However, if time allows, these can be done in class. The final piece is then submitted together with the first draft and the "listening" students' comments so that I can see how the students incorporated their peers' ideas and insights in the polished work. Here is a short sample of student work from an advanced writing class. The student gave permission for use of the work, but asked to remain anonymous:

> *Introducing "Miss Look Up To"*
>
> "Miss Look Up To" is a very polite Japanese junior high school girl. She is 15-years old and wears an extremely large smile on her face. She makes her little brother feel proud.
>
> Her little bedroom is always neat, clean, and it is full of Japanese sunshine from the big window. Next to little "Miss Look Up To"'s bed is a photograph of her parents, Ayako-san and Katsu-san. She admires and respects them. "Miss Look Up To" considers her parents to be the stars in her life.
>
> Like her name, she looks up to her parents with special love. Every morning she looks at their picture and says, "Arigatou!" Then she holds the photo in her small but strong fingers and looks up again to the sky and says again, "Arigatou for these friends!"

A Word on the Words

This activity can work with any kind of lexical item; however, adjectives, transparent idioms (e.g., *shed light on, walk on air*), and phrasal verbs will elicit the strongest images from the students' imaginations.

The major benefit that this activity provides can be summed up in the words of one of my former students. He said, "How do you expect us to ever forget these words now that we have become friends with them and made them into people?" The notion that the students make *emotional human contact* with the words significantly helps them retain the items in their long-term memory after they have initially learned them and moved on from my class. In addition, the students begin to understand that words and idioms are no longer just mere lexical items, but rather they are unique and wondrous living beings that touch our lives on a number of intellectual and emotional levels.

References

Cytowic, R. E., & Eagleman, D. M. (2011). *Wednesday is indigo blue*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Whitman, W. (1885/1986). *Leaves of grass*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

NOTE: A version of this article was first published in CATESOL News*, Volume 45, Issue 4 (2014). Modified and reprinted with permission.*

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