

The Love Clinic: Using Advice Columns in the Classroom

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Introduction

The purpose of this activity is to improve students' reading and speaking (i.e. clarifying, relating a problem, offering advice, etc.) skills, and to offer an arena for cross- or intercultural exploration and to achieve this in an entertaining forum. The procedure has been used in mostly in college classes (occasionally in company classes and community center ones) and has always been enjoyed by the participants.

Materials

- newspaper clippings: advice columns from one or more newspapers (non-Japanese ones)
- desks and chairs

Level

high-beginner/lower intermediate and up

Rationale

Many newspapers in English speaking countries carry advice columns that deal with problems of love, growing up, etiquette, relationships, and so on (AKA as "Agony Aunt" columns in the UK). Readers of American columns are certainly familiar with "Ann Landers", "Ask Miss Manners" and others of this genre. Although the advice, reflecting changing social mores, does vary over time, it cannot be denied that such columns are culturally loaded and offer an interesting type of material to use for cultural exploration and discussion.

Although most any type of advice column would have served the purpose, I was able to obtain some samples (if dated somewhat from 1983) from a Kenyan newspaper column entitled "Ask Zesi", which I use in class. The questions asked, and the advice offered betray hints that in Kenyan society at that time, polygamy occurred and that couples would sometimes have children before determining whether to proceed with marriage.

Procedure

1. Reading For Comprehension/Reaction Follow-up

- Students were directed to read the advice columns, both questions and answers, and to answer questions with regard to general comprehension and vocabulary.
- In small groups students were to discuss the columns and to note any general distinctions that could be made, using the columns as evidence, between Japanese society (relationships, notions of etiquette, what could or could not be discussed in print, responsibilities, etc.) and the society represented in the advice columns.
- In pairs, students were assigned a particular question and told to assume the role of Japanese newspaper columnists assigned to answer the question (from whatever they assumed to be a Japanese cultural standpoint) submitted by a reader.
- The student read out their and then these were discussed or debated upon by the other students.

2. Student Love Clinic

Preparation

After a short break the second part of this activity was embarked upon. Clinics were set up in the classroom using the desks and chairs available. Each clinic was composed of one chair with a desk-behind which the "doctor" would sit-and six or seven chairs set around the desk in a semi-circle. These chairs were for the patients. This activity could therefore be adapted to any size class, with large ones presenting no problem at all.

Activity

- I selected certain students to be "love doctors" based on what I knew to be their English-speaking ability and what I indirectly assumed to be their either their potential maturity in such a role or their ability to be entertaining.
- The other students were directed to come up with "love problems" but assured that the activity was a simulation and that in no way should they feel in any way obligated to reveal anything of a personal and private nature. On the contrary, they were urged to be inventive in dreaming up situations.
- The doctors were directed to take their places and the patients to enter the clinics and take seats.
- A protocol was established whereby:
 - Patients would be helped one at a time
 - The doctor would initiate a session by saying something like " Young lady, how may I help you today?"
 - Patients would refer to the doctor as "Doctor"
 - Other patients could only listen while they were waiting their turn to be helped. They could not offer advice of their own or contradict the doctor. The doctor might say something like "Your problem is very, very serious" to give atmosphere to the simulation.
 - Doctors were told that they should offer some advice but they could offer any advice they felt like offering, even unusual advice.
 - Patients were told that they could go to another clinic in the classroom to seek a second opinion.
 - At some point the new doctors were made and the ones who had been doctors allowed to become patients.

Reflections

Students appeared to enjoy the activity immensely, especially the "Love Clinic" and if anything, it was difficult to get them to stop. The types of "love problems" that they came up with were occasionally commonplace, and perhaps even reflected upon their real experiences (e.g. There is a handsome/beautiful student whom I like but I am too shy to approach, etc.). More often than not, they vied to come up with truly, in their eyes, bizarre problems such as (by one young lady) "I am deeply in love with my younger brother". Perhaps the strangest "problem" came from one college girl this year, who had previously been very quiet during the semester, but seemed to come alive during the activity. She said, "My husband and I have been married for two months and we have a six-month old child. I went to the store to do some food shopping. The store was closed so I came back early. When I got home, I found my husband in bed with his mother. Love Doctor, what should I do?"

At the end of class there is sometimes a discussion about the activity and whether such problems as they have mentioned are commonplace in Japan and whether these problems are publicly aired.

I generally use about 90 minutes for this activity, with equal parts for the reading/reacting and love clinic sections. It could be adjusted to run a shorter time but the students seem to enjoy it, particularly the "love clinic".