

The Use of Podcasts to Enhance Narrative Writing Skills

by KINANA QADDOUR



This activity uses podcasts to model narrative writing techniques. The challenges students face when exercising narrative writing skills are unique when compared to those of persuasive and expository writing; my students have repeatedly expressed their qualms with articulating experiences that engage their audience. Although students have extensive exposure to literary works, both in their native language and in English, fostering creativity and incorporating narrative elements based on their own experiences has caused panic. The more creativity a task was expected to generate, the more students' confidence was undermined. Podcasts present a creative, nontraditional model of narration for students.

PODCASTS

Models presented in writing lessons are usually written; the intent here is to steer

away from written samples and instead use an oral presentation of this writing genre where an emphasis on narration and “voice” is present. Without models, students' anxiety may be heightened, as they might feel expectations are not clear. Podcasts like those found on *StoryCorps* present students with authentic narrative material; the oral format may also elicit more engagement than a written sample handed out during the lesson, especially when the listening task is paired with a follow-up discussion (detailed below).

Following a discussion, students make personal connections with the experiences shared in the podcast and analyze both character and plot development. In return, they feel a sense of confidence in applying this format to their own writing. Are the characters worthy of the spotlight? Is there a conflict and resolution, or is the reader left to wonder? Using both

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written and oral materials reinforces the ways in which content and presentation are intertwined when people share experiences.

StoryCorps is published and managed by NPR (formerly National Public Radio). The dialogues or “interviews” the podcasts are made up of are submitted by individuals living across the United States. *StoryCorps*’s mission is to “remind one another of our shared humanity, to strengthen and build the connections between people, to teach the value of listening, and to weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that everyone’s story matters,” according to the “About StoryCorps” page (<https://storycorps.org/about/>). This mission is parallel to that of English language learning, engaging the social, cultural, and ethnic layers of the individual, not limited to the linguistic. All episodes are available for listening through *StoryCorps* online and on NPR. The website has information on how to record your own interview, listen to others’ interviews, read interview transcripts, and even watch recorded video interviews. The archival and auditory format of this resource makes it accessible to teachers and students alike, providing an authentic example of a contextualized, cross-cultural exchange. Teachers should be sure to check podcasts to confirm content is appropriate for students.

Another option is *Modern Love: The Podcast*, also produced by NPR and based on *The New York Times*’ collection of reader-submitted essays. The title may make one assume that the focus is limited to romantic love, but that is not the case. Readers and listeners submit stories that “explore the joys and tribulations of love” between families, friends, and even pets!

THE TECHNIQUE

This activity should take place after students have had exposure to the basic structure of

a narrative essay, including elements such as setting, climax, resolution, and theme. The construction of a narrative thesis statement should be discussed, preferably with example essays provided. In addition, it would be useful to offer support in developing an outline for a narrative essay and a discussion on how it differs from, for example, an expository essay.

The activity is best used in the context of upper-intermediate English language learners.

Materials needed include episodes accessed through <https://storycorps.org/>, *Modern Love* at <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/469516571/modern-love>, or another podcast application.

Students should listen to each podcast two times at home and take notes, then return to class ready to discuss. While students are free to listen to podcast episodes multiple times, my recommendation is for them to avoid listening too many times and relying on the need to understand each and every word—which may not be possible for all English language learners. You can check students’ understanding informally by asking them to include a percentage (written on a sheet that will be handed to you) that estimates how much of the podcast they understood after listening two times. You can then decide whether to include podcasts at this stage of learning in the future or to find content that is more appropriate.

Remind students that podcasts may include cultural references, phrases, and terms they may be unfamiliar with, but they should take note of those that left a lasting impression in order to discuss in class. Students should listen to two or three podcast episodes, bring notes to class, and discuss the following in small groups:

The discussion serves as a critical step to bridge podcast analysis and writing.

- a. What is the setting of the story?
- b. What is significant about the narrator's experience?
- c. What is the conflict in the narrative?
- d. Who are additional characters in the narrative?
- e. Is there a resolution to the conflict?
- f. What is the theme or lesson the narrator shares, either explicitly or implicitly?

The discussion serves as a critical step to bridge podcast analysis and writing. It should not be overlooked or rushed, especially given that the content, style, and format of podcasts may be new to students. Be sure to encourage note-taking while students discuss in order for groups to share ideas with the class later. The discussion component should provide students with a platform to clarify any elements of the story. Did they feel confused about any events or a character's behavior? Was there something left to be desired at the end of the story?

The whole class should then share how they feel one or more of the podcasts could be used as a model for a written narrative essay. Students should review the purpose of narrative thesis statements and understand the objective of the individual components of an essay, as well as the essay as a whole. Students should then be given the prompt samples, suggested below. Students should have time to plan the elements of the story in the brainstorming phase, write the essay, and then review and edit their work. Suggest or require a length that is appropriate for the students' language level and the amount of time available.

I have used the following prompts:

Choose one of the following and write a narrative essay.

- Write about a time that you learned an important lesson.
- Write about a special vacation or trip.

In my classes, students have written their essays in a timed writing format because it fits with one objective for this particular course, to write a variety of essays in a fixed time period. If you feel your students would be more successful when the essay is completed over the course of a week (or multiple lessons) or at home, modify as needed.

After students have completed their essays, they participate in a peer exchange and conduct a post-writing assessment of their own work. Students first exchange essays and answer the questions below for a peer's essay.

- Is there a conflict in the narrative? How would you summarize the conflict? Is it something you could relate to? If so, explain why. (In narrative writing, a conflict of some sort should be present.)
- Are there multiple characters?
- How developed are these characters within this story? Is the reader able to know the character(s) on a deeper level based on what is included in the narrative? (That is, do we know about the emotions, experiences, and viewpoints of the character, or just "superficial" qualities, such as physical appearance?)
- Do you feel as though the writer engaged the reader? Is there genuine reader interest in the conflict or the characters' ability to resolve it?



Feedback should be provided in written format to return to the owner. After all students have read at least one peer's essay, students should have a short conference to discuss each essay. After peer feedback, students will analyze their own essays. They do not have to provide full responses, but take time to write about how they performed while taking into consideration both the questions above and any rubric you might have prepared for the essay (given to students before the writing task).

AUDIENCE

The audience for these essays is not limited to peers and the instructor. The essays could be included in a collection of narrative essays to share in any educational or noneducational context, such as a book or online narrative collage. Just as *Modern Love* is a collection of stories and narratives on a given topic that can be accessed through a website, the same could be designed to share these essays. Students should also be encouraged to share individually, in written format, via online platforms. While this task is at its core a writing activity, it could be expanded to engage speaking skills. Following completion,

and given resources available, students record their essays and share in a joint podcast, also shared via an online platform (such as a blog). Students demonstrate storytelling skills, engaging listeners through general intonation, emphasis, and tone in their sharing of the narrative.

If narratives are shared through a different platform online, students will be given an opportunity, prior to sharing, to reflect on how the mission of *StoryCorps*, or even *Modern Love*, reflecting on “shared humanity” and “the value of listening,” is demonstrated in their narrative. While students may or may not come from diverse backgrounds, there is value in the simplicity of sharing through *any* platform, be it the classroom or for a larger audience, and teachers should use the opportunity to do so.

Kinana Qaddour received her master's degree in TESOL from the University of Kansas and taught ESL at the post-secondary and secondary levels in the United States and the Middle East. She serves as an education programs manager for a Syrian nongovernmental organization that supports educational initiatives for under-resourced communities inside Syria.