

# The Tsunami project: writing narrative poetry

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In an extended cross-curricular project, Years 3 and 4 create a poem scroll based on a traditional Bengali form of poetic narrative.

The reading landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century includes many forms of text which combine print and image as well as sound and movement. In this article we describe an extended project which not only took account of the many dimensions of multimodal texts but supported the language development of children whose first language is not English. We were joined by Mrs Hirani, a support teacher for two children in the class who have special educational needs. We chose a text that would reflect Newham's criteria for planning culturally inclusive units of work (Bednall *et al.* 2008) – the scroll book *Tsunami* (Chitrakar & Chitrakar 2008) designed by Patua scroll painters from West Bengal, telling of the terrible tsunami that overtook the region in 2004 and dedicated to those who suffered from it (see note 1). The tragedy is depicted through wood block pictures and a narrative poem. We wanted to teach explicitly about how different modes work by considering the messages conveyed by the pictures and what the words contribute to the meaning. Through drama activities and the spoken word we also wanted to explore how sound, movement and gesture add to what is being communicated.

All the cross-curricular multimodal projects developed in the school are built on key teaching and learning processes of visual literacy, critical literacy, enquiry based learning and emotional literacy, with creativity at the heart of each project. When starting to plan a project like this, teachers can be anxious that they will not have the time to do all the creative activities but the school has found that cross-curricular projects release more time for learning which produces work of high quality. In this case, the project allowed us to develop the skills and content of Literacy, Art and Geography. The children developed their reading skills through visual and word based texts, their writing, layout and art skills in making a class scroll and Geography skills in learning about earthquakes, tsunamis and the areas hit by the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that caused devastation in parts of South-East Asia. The work was planned for nine afternoon sessions.

## Beginning the project

To make an impact, we hung the *Tsunami* scroll and an intricately designed Bengali embroidery at the front of the room so that the children would see them as they came in. We explained that the children would be making their own class scroll and poem about a tsunami. Using diagrams and

photographs, we explained what earthquakes and tsunamis are and why they happen. We had found four photographs of the day of the disaster and four images of the same places taken five years later when the area had recovered somewhat, asking the children what was the same or different in the pictures. As part of planning for emotional literacy, we had chosen the later images to give the children a sense of hope in the face of having to confront information about a terrible disaster. In a drama activity, the whole class recreated the movement of a huge tsunami wave



making suggestions about how they could show movement by the way they arranged their bodies. After this, they discussed how they might use group freeze framing to show how tsunamis affect people's lives.



The second session was devoted to reading the poem. We put copies of three verses of the poem with their accompanying illustrations on each table, one copy per child, and read the whole poem to the class and then

asked for their thoughts. In groups of three, the children annotated their verses with questions or comments which were shared with the class. We asked them to think about the pictures alongside the verses and to consider whether the images make the words any easier to understand or whether they pose more questions. The session closed by taking suggestions from each table about the meaning of particular verses, images, lines and the poem as a whole now that the children had been able to look more deeply. These were noted on the digital flipchart under headings vocabulary questions, meaning questions and thoughts:

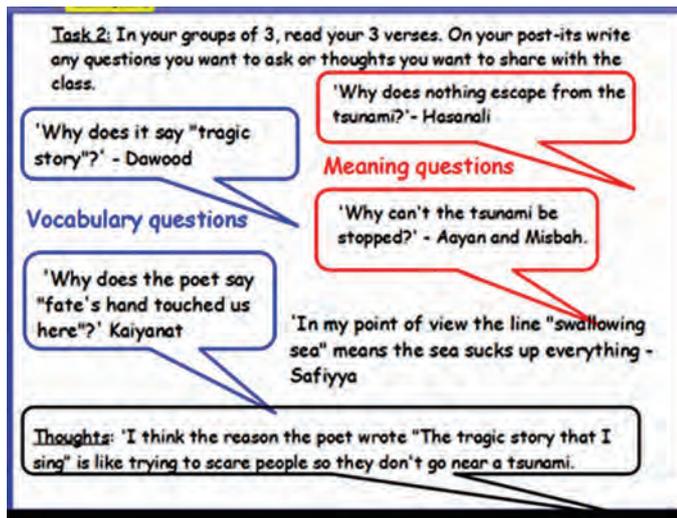


Figure 1: screen capture – questions and thoughts

### Rich descriptive language

The third session focused on language, aiming to develop rich description and to encourage children to listen attentively to how the words of a poem make meaning. As a starting point, Jane told the class about a previous project with a Year 3/4 class which had used the Bengali poet Jasim Uddin's saga poem *The Field of the Embroidered Quilt* and images from quilts to create poems and artwork. They had written moving and eloquent poems about the tragic love story of Rupa and Shanju (Bednall & Sarkaria 2012). We shared parts of Jasim Uddin's poem and some of the poems that the class had written, commenting on examples of rich description we liked, and asking the children to do the same. The focus then shifted to children examining artwork carefully. Each table had three artwork images from *The Art of Mithila* by Yves Vequaud (1977) (see note 2) and after we had modelled how to comment on the artist's use of pattern, colour and the story/message of the picture, pairs considered:

- What do you see?
- What do you find interesting?
- What colour has the artist used?
- Has the artist shown you how the people are feeling?
- How has the artist used pattern?
- What inspiration will you take for your drawings?
- How can this picture help me create my picture for the tsunami poem?

In commenting on the image of the man being swallowed by a big fish, Asim said that it reminded him of the story of Yunus in the Koran and he also knew about the story of

Jonah and the whale in the Bible. We were very impressed with this link but also found it interesting because the images looked more like Hindu art than Muslim art, and Mrs Hirani explained that there is a story of Vishnu being eaten by a fish in Hindu lore.

The children worked in pairs, reading and annotating chosen verses from the previous class' poems *Rupa and Shanju*, guided by prompt questions, for example:

- Pick a sentence that you like and tell your partner why you like it
- What pictures are created in your mind?
- What do you notice about the descriptive language?

The session ended with the children sharing their thoughts about the language and imagery used and these were recorded on the flipchart to return to later.

### Developing expression

To consolidate the work on poetic language, the next session concentrated in more detail on the words of the *Tsunami* poem. The children practised reading aloud with expression and used the verses which describe the reporters arriving at the disaster site. We showed how to make a list of the events that happen in these two verses, drawing on both the words and the images. With the extracts they had on their tables, the children made their own lists of events shown in the words and the pictures. Working with one group, and building on the children's experience of the drama work in the earlier session, we showed how to make a group tableau of the events listed. To end the session, each group made their own tableaux from their lists.

We began the next session with the question: what is the purpose of a poem? Jit suggested: 'Poems are about feelings' and Aryan thought that 'Poems catch the meaning of something'. We showed the children an example of one of the refrains from the poem: *Tsunami! The swallowing sea!* and read a few verses aloud, asking the children to listen for the refrain at the end of each verse. Each refrain was different but followed the same structure. In pairs, the children created their own refrains.

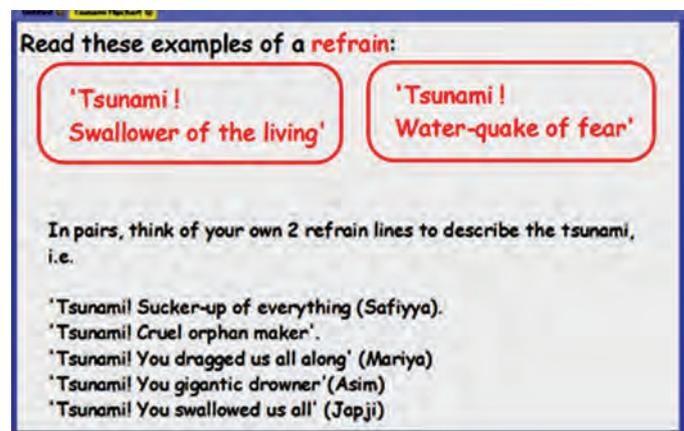


Figure 2: screen capture – refrains

Using the lists of actions and events from the previous lesson, we showed how to turn lists into poetic lines and the

children were invited to try improving: 'A lost child floats by' and 'The world watches the horror on TV'; thinking about using descriptive language, repetition, the sounds of words and any questions the poet might ask:

A girl floats by feeling lonely, miserable and lost.

Khadijah

The miserable child swooped up by the giant Tsunami.

Are people abandoned?

Amirah

Why, why do you have to make people fight for food?

Asim

In their groups the children orally rehearsed two lines from their lists of drama actions which they had turned into descriptive lines of poetry. After sharing these with each other and improving them, they wrote their actions as verses of a poem. We explained that their verses would be joined together to make a class poem. The session ended with some children reading their verses aloud with expression:

Shoulder to shoulder and arm to arm

The tragic people screaming to death

People shouting and fighting.

Is that how you live?

Is that destiny?

Hamdan

All religions that are buried line by line

Like a watery graveyard.

Friends and family died together.

Families died all by themselves.

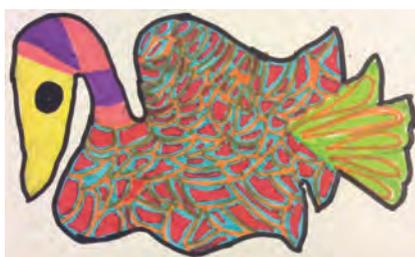
Tsunami!

Who killed us all.

Ibrahim

### Creating the scroll

The next two sessions were dedicated to the art work for the scroll. Each child made a block print of wave patterns which would be used as a backdrop to the scroll and we showed the children artwork which had the complex decoration representative of Hindu art. We had prepared templates in animal shapes and the children chose shapes to decorate in that style.



In order to create the verses for the final scroll, this session was devoted to the children improving their verses.

We reminded them of the work they had done on descriptive language, asking them if their refrains showed the power and destruction of the tsunami. Guided by examples on the flipchart, the children considered if they had asked thoughtful questions in the same way that the original poem does, if their poem would move the reader and make the reader understand, and feel for the people affected by the tsunami, asking: 'Have you stepped into the shoes of the people in the tsunami?' (see screen capture 3) With support where needed, the children improved their poems, with early finishers writing a second verse. After we had responded to these, each child copied their verse on plain paper using guide lines. The session ended with children reading their poems aloud to the class and we were able to praise expressive reading and effective imagery.

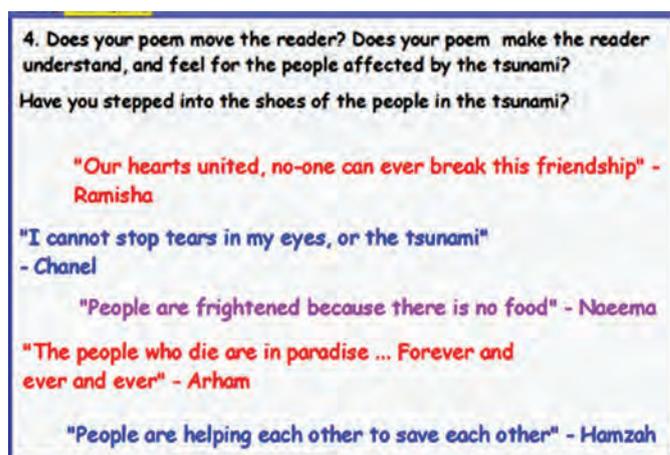


Figure 3: screen capture 3 – other people's shoes

In the final session, the class assembled their verses and art work on to long scrolls placed on the classroom floor.



Extracts show how the children not only felt empathy with the victims but followed the format of the poem, creating their own images and evocative descriptions (corrected spelling; children's own punctuation):

#### Tsunami

People are shocked and scared holding on to their tiny babies really tight.

The beautiful hearted babies might go away from their lovely parents.

The miserable child swooped up by the giant  
Tsunami.  
Are people abandoned?  
Animals rush in horror to the enormous mountain.  
Tsunami you cruel orphan maker.  
People are getting killed from the thundering strong  
wild Tsunami. Amirah

Reporters are coming with huge big cameras ready to  
talk.  
Telling the story across the world.  
Orphans there, orphans here, orphans everywhere.  
Is this destiny?  
Does life have to be like this?  
Tsunami!  
You life taker of living.

People scooped by helicopters  
Just like ice cream being scooped.  
Women and men boys and girls destroyed by the  
monster of greed.  
Can't you learn a lesson? You thief of land.  
Tsunami!  
You killed us all.

Fame and fortune never lasts  
No wishes No dreams  
They will never last.  
Tsunami!  
You stealer of dreams. Safiyya

Worried people watching terrible news.  
Happy faces not any more.  
Tsunami! You hurt us all.

Why did you do this, Tsunami?  
People running to high mountain tops.  
Shouting and screaming.  
Tsunami! You make us die. Mariya

Tsunami! You thief of living.  
You swallowed up everyone.  
Tsunami, tsunami, tsunami.  
You thief. Kaiyanat

All religions that are buried line by line  
Like a water graveyard.  
Friends and family died together  
Families died all by themselves.  
Tsunami! Who killed us all!

Helicopters arrive everybody is saved.  
Cars driving home.  
People holding on to their babies safely home.  
Tsunami! Who does not kill us all. Ibrahim

Tsunami, you took everything.  
People are in graveyards side by side.  
Fate has touched us here

Tragedy struck all things dear.  
Before the year closed its door.  
Tsunami, swallower of the living.

Drowned here, drowned there  
Things underwater everywhere  
Ships, houses, trains and rails  
Tsunami, you took everything  
When death falls thick and fast. Muhammad Raheem

We hold our shoulders tightly together.  
Our toes in the centre on top of each other.  
The last group hug I think we will have.  
No one will break our powerful friendship.  
Tsunami!  
The killer of the dead!

Frightened people watch in horror.  
Careless reporters just filming  
People suffering.  
Why don't they care?  
Tsunami!  
You dragged us all! Maleka

Tsunami!!!  
A lonely child floats by left behind separated  
Who will help them now?  
Tears well from my glittering eyes.  
Tsunami!!!  
You hurt us here. Ramisha

The project ended on a high note celebrating the collective effort of the children in contributing to the class discussions and the artwork and poetry for the scrolls. A few weeks later, the class presented their work to the whole school to great acclaim for the depth of feeling expressed in the poems, the impressive language of the descriptions and the imaginative artwork.

### Notes

1. Patua scrolls are a form of narrative graphic art. Traditionally they would be taken from home to home and presented accompanied by song. As they travelled, the singers would pick up news and carry it on to their next destination. See [www.tarabooks.com/books/books/adults/picture-books--visual-arts/tsunami/](http://www.tarabooks.com/books/books/adults/picture-books--visual-arts/tsunami/) for a description of how the scrolls are made and the words of the English version scroll accompanied by song in Bengali.
2. Mithila is in North East India. The Mithila women paint scenes from the Ramayana in vivid colours. The pictures form part of family ceremonies and village festivals.

### References

- Bednall, J., Culora, N. & Fell, S. (2008) *Developing a Culturally Inclusive Curriculum*. Mantra Lingua.  
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Vequaud, Y. (1977) *The Art of Mithila*. Thames Hudson.  
Bednall, J. & Sarkaria, P. (2012) 'Painting with words: reflecting on learning' in *English 4-11*, No. 45, pp. 16-18.