

Storytelling

Ways of Using Stories in an ELT Classroom

Storytelling is an age-old tradition. The listeners learn from the teller and apply the lessons to their own lives. **Michael Berman** explains some of the pitfalls, some of the ways to overcome them and gives us some concrete activities to use in storytelling.

Whenever people meet, stories are told and they have been told since time immemorial. Storytelling is an oral tradition and because of the issues which have been worked through by the telling of the stories, storytelling has contributed to the creation of the great epics of the world. The storytellers themselves have been described as the bridge to other times and ancient teachings and the telling of the stories helps to keep these teachings alive. The children of future generations learn from the storytellers and apply lessons of the stories to their own lives.

As a learning tool, the telling of stories can encourage students to explore their unique expressiveness and can heighten their ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner. These benefits transcend the art experience to support daily life skills. In our fast-paced, media-driven world, storytelling can be a nurturing way to remind children that their spoken words are powerful, that listening is important, and that clear communication between people is an art. Becoming verbally proficient can contribute to a student's ability to resolve interpersonal conflict non-violently. Negotiation, discussion, and tact are peacemaking skills. Being able to lucidly express one's thoughts and feelings is important for a child's safety. Clear communication is the first step to being able

to ask for help when it is needed. Both telling a story and listening to a well-told tale encourages students to use their imaginations. Developing the imagination can contribute to self-confidence and personal motivation as learners envision themselves competent and able to accomplish their hopes and dreams. Storytelling based on traditional folktales is a gentle way to guide young people toward constructive personal values by presenting imaginative situations in which the outcome of both wise and unwise actions and decisions can be seen.

As a storyteller, it is obviously important to know your story but this does not necessarily mean memorizing the words. You can do that if you want to, but the main thing is to know what happens to whom and when it is supposed to happen. One way of accomplishing this is to make an outline of the story to study. Another way is to imagine a picture for each part of the story with all the important things in the picture. Any special parts of the presentation such as poetry or complex phrases can be learned by heart and/or you can print them out on cue cards for reference. The more you repeat them out loud, the easier it will be to say them, whether you memorize them or not. Use stories you are confident with from previous occasions for a first time situation because the knowledge that you are well prepared helps diminish any nervousness you might be experiencing.

Before it is time to tell, if possible, check out the space. If there is something that needs to be set up or changed, something to be planned, do it early, before you tell. Anticipate some of the things which might go wrong and know the strategies you will

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use to deal with any problems that might crop up. Make sure you have a fall-back position or some extra material up your sleeve to use if necessary. Remember that most of the things which are not right will probably only be noticed by you. Deal with everything you need to deal with beforehand, then forget about those things. When you get up to tell, it is time to concentrate on the listeners. Keep the introduction and explanation as brief as possible. You may want to memorize some opening lines to make sure you leave nothing to chance and to show the audience that you know what you are doing; from then on it is up to them. As for the ending, take your time, but not the next speaker's. Be on, be good, and be off (vaudevillians' rule). Prepare a clean punch line or closing comment to finish with. "And that's the story of __," will do. And remember to thank your audience too.

Making mistakes is a natural part of performing. It is not a question of what to do if you make a mistake, but simply a matter of when you make a mistake. The most important thing is to stay calm and keep going. The audience does not know you have made a mistake unless you tell them so do not draw attention to the problem by admitting to it or apologising. As far as they know, the way you told the story is the way you meant to tell it. When you look out at the people listening to you, avoid anyone who makes you nervous. Try to find the people who make you feel safe. There is no reason to be scared of your audience. Your audience is (usually) your friend. They want you to succeed. And, since many of them are also nervous about talking in front of people, they will be sympathetic if things go wrong.

The nervousness you feel before going on is your performance energy. That is what will get you up on stage and into your story. And if you do not feel it, your performance will probably fall flat. The energy you feel is an instinctive reaction to stress. The body knows something is about to happen and is preparing for action. However, the emotional

content is entirely conscious. Research shows that physiologically, fear, anger, excitement are all identical. The body is reacting in the same way. Your mind determines how you react to those stimuli and your emotions are under your control. With some practice, you can control whether it is fear or excitement running through your head before going on. If you suffer badly from nerves, the Zen concept of No-Self as an approach to the problem can prove to be helpful – "There is no teller ... only the tale." In this way you disappear for yourself as well as for the listeners. And if you have disappeared then there is no one to be nervous for.

An alternative approach is to make use of a "Talking Stick" which you pick up when you tell and hand to others when they tell. It helps to connect you to those legions over the centuries who have told stories and to remind you that you that you have an ancient responsibility to both audience and story. This carries you well beyond the awareness of nervousness. The nervousness is still there but now it is harnessed to bringing out the life in that story. The idea is to make your focus the responsibility to your audience and your story rather than focusing on yourself. Let go of yourself and think about the people you are telling the story to. Pay attention to them and you won't be thinking of yourself and you won't be nervous.

Guided visualisation can also be an effective tool. Sitting in some quiet place, imagine as clearly as possible that you are preparing to perform – employing all your senses – the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings associated with these pre-performance moments. Be as specific and detailed in your imaging as possible. When you have placed yourself as fully as possible into the pre-performance context, imagine yourself feeling completely confident–fearless. Imagine how great it would be to feel that way, rather than scared. Then continue on with the imagined performance: you present your material–solidly, and with confidence. Slowing down your breathing can help to control nervousness too. If you must focus

on yourself, then focus on your breath. Breathing is the most important thing for life. If you are nervous, if you are scared, or feel anyway you don't want to feel, then think about your breath and control it. Deep breaths – in through your nose – out through your mouth. Once you have your breath under control, you can do anything. One way to practise storytelling with others is to pick a partner and sit facing each other, close enough to have your knees touching. Have other partners on either side of you so you are in two long lines all up close against each other, and all facing your respective partners. One person in each pair starts the story and after thirty seconds to a minute say, 'and', and then 'throw' the story to the person opposite to continue. That person makes up the next short segment, says 'and' and then passes the story back to the first person again. The story unfolds by being passed backwards and forwards this way between the same two partners. Before everyone starts they are told that the story that is to unfold between each pair is to be about a journey. Two people who are very fond of each other go their separate ways and on their respective journeys. Many things happen during the course of their journeys that stretch their resourcefulness and help them grow in wisdom. Then circumstances happen such that they find each other again and share the experiences they had along the way.

- Have each of the students take the part of one of the characters and re-tell the story from his/her point of view. The re-telling can be written or spoken.
- Cut up the stories into paragraphs for students working in groups to re-order.
- Invite each of the students to write a letter to one of the characters in the story – asking for advice, praising or criticising the character.
- Spotting the difference between two pictures is a classic information gap activity that can also be used with texts.

Make two different versions of an extract from the tale for this purpose and use it for the post storytelling stage of the lesson.

- Have each of the students write a letter from one of the characters in the story to him/herself.
- Ask students to reflect on what they would have done if they had been one of the characters in the tale, then to work in small groups to compare/justify their hypothetical actions.
- Invite each of the students to take the part of a character in the story, then to pair up and interview each other. They answer as the characters they're playing, not as themselves.
- Instead of providing the learners with a set of questions based on the story, invite students to work in pairs and produce their own. They can then exchange questions with another pair and answer the questions they receive. In *Implementing The Lexical Approach* (Language Teaching Publications 1997) Michael Lewis includes an activity of this type that can be used with whatever story you tell. An adapted version of the idea is presented below:
- Work in pairs. Prepare a set of questions about the story. Then exchange your questions with another pair and answer the questions you receive. Use the following frames to help you:

What did you think was the most _____ thing about the story?

Was there anything in the story that really _____ you?

According to the story, what _____?

What reasons are given for _____?

What would you have done if _____?

If you suffer badly from nerves, the Zen concept of No-Self as an approach to the problem can prove to be helpful – “There is no teller ... only the tale.”

Do you agree with the ideas/suggestion that _____?

- As a post-reading activity, you can cut up the stories into paragraphs for students working in groups to order. Another possibility is to omit the ending of the story when telling it to the class, then to invite the learners in groups to predict the conclusion. After listening to the various suggestions they come up with, these can be compared with the original which you can show on an overhead transparency.
- Working with fairy tales, invite the learners to rewrite the story from the bad person/character's point of view or to change the original tale into a modern version – instead of three little bears you could have three little computer programmers, for example.
- Students listen to a story on cassette and try to describe the appearance of the speaker from the sound of their voice. You then show them a picture and they say what they got correct and where there were differences.
- Ask students to imagine they're going to make a film version of the story. They have to cast the actors, decide on the director and perhaps make some modifications to adapt it for the big screen. They can work on this activity in groups, then present their ideas to the rest of the class.
- To ensure an attentive audience while telling a story, you can interrupt the narrative to interpolate the word *shoes*; and unless the learners immediately respond *socks*, break off the tale without finishing it! This is a distinctive storytelling convention used in certain Gypsy communities.
- Ask the learners to stand up or raise their hands when they hear a specific word or identify differences between what they hear and what is written down.
- Invite students to work in pairs. Student A plays the part of the forgetful storyteller. Each time Student A hesitates, Student B provides the first word that pops into his/her head. Student A then adds this word to the story in a way that makes sense. The goal is to tell a complete story within a certain time limit. The roles can then be reversed.
- Go round the class and to ask everyone to offer one line from a story they know. Then go round the class a second time, asking students to add a second line to the first line from their tales. Students can then be invited to go over to the person whose lines they found the most interesting to listen to the whole story the original extract came from. It is a gentle and non-threatening way of encouraging learners to tell tales to each other without being under the pressure of having to tell a story to the group as a whole. While the tales are being exchanged, you can circulate and make a note of any errors that crop up on an overhead transparency. This can be flashed up on the board at the end of the activity and students can be given the opportunity to self-correct.
- One way of making use of the learners' own stories is to invite students to tell you a story about themselves outside class time. Then you write up the story for them, sticking as closely as possible to the original, but making sure that it's readable and that the English is correct. It is a great boost to the person's confidence to see a story of their own in correct English shared with the class. It might even be possible for the storyteller, with some prior preparation, to run the lesson in your place.
- Storytelling breaks can be provided by presenting the class with a category. Examples could be, *Incredible*

Coincidences, The Wonders of Science, Funny & True, Embarrassing Episodes, Clean Joke of the Day, or Strange but True.

Working in small circles, the learners can contribute tales based on the theme to the group. While this is taking place, you can circulate to make notes of language points that come up which can then be dealt with at the end of the session.

- Story cards can be created to facilitate storytelling too. Twenty cards can be cut out and divided into five categories – characters, events, actions, times and places. Draw a picture with a caption on each of the cards and mark the category on the back. To play the game, invite students to choose one card from each category and then to prepare a story based on the prompts on the cards. Although games like this take a great deal of preparation, they can be recycled and are well worth the time and effort required.
- As a pre-listening activity, show a picture of one of the characters in the story and invite the learners to speculate on the nature of the tale. Alternatively, ask them to speculate on the basis of the title or a sentence from the text.
- As a while-listening activity, ask the learners to identify a certain number of words in the story that are semantically or grammatically incorrect. They can then pair up or form small groups to compare their answers.
- As a post-listening activity, invite the learners to rewrite the story as a newspaper article. Placing the tale in another setting in this manner is an effective way of checking that learning has taken place.
- As an alternative to pre-teaching the new vocabulary in a story, put new words from the text on the board prior to the start of the lesson. Invite the learners to come up to the board to choose a word they think they know to explain to the rest of the class. This word can then be erased and the process repeated until the board is (hopefully) nearly blank. The aim is to boost the learners' confidence by drawing on their own pool of knowledge.
- As a post-listening activity, ask the learners to tell each other the story in pairs while you circulate to make notes and provide any assistance required.
- Write skeleton sentences for each step in the story. Invite the learners to work in small groups to write out the complete version from the skeleton, which they can then compare with the original.
- Draw a horizontal line across the middle of the board, then hand the marker to one of the learners and invite them to add to the picture you have started. Continue the process, with each member of the class coming up to the board and adding an item to the picture. When you feel the picture is sufficiently complete, ask the learners to name what they can see. They can then work in small groups on inventing a story that relates to the scene on the board. While this is taking place, you can circulate to provide any assistance required. A spokesperson from each group can then present their tale to the rest of the class. Meanwhile you can take notes on both the effective language used and the errors that crop up, which you can deal with at the end of the session.
- *One Sentence:* The object of this activity is for the learners to tell a story together. One player gives an opening sentence of a story. The next player adds a sentence and so on around and around the group until a player ends the tale.
- Ask each member of the class to write three sentences. One is copied from the story, one is copied but with minor changes, and one is made up. Students can then pair up, swap sentences, and

their partners have to work out which is which.

- Jumble the order of the words in some of the sentences. Then ask the learners to order them. As an alternative, students could be encouraged to produce such exercises for themselves to try out on each other.
- *Pandora's Bag*: Bring a bag of odd objects to class. Have each student or group representative draw one item out of the bag, which they must then use inside their stories. Then the stories can be written, either individually or chain-style.
- Make multiple copies of two different stories. Half the learners are given Story A to read and half the learners are given Story B. Set a time limit for the task and then collect in the texts. After this, students pair up and take it in turns to tell each other what they read about.
- Hand out individual copies of a story and ask each of the learners to write a certain number of comprehension questions about it. They can then pair up and set each other the questions to answer.
- Ask the learners to listen to you reading the story while they follow the text. As you read, make small changes to the text. Ask students to underline the words that are different. Get feedback by asking the learners to list the changes you made.
- Write twenty words from the story on the board. Invite the learners to board definitions next to the words. When you are satisfied that the definitions are acceptable, ask everyone to write them down and rub the words from the story off the board, leaving only the definitions. Students then read or listen to the story. At the end of the lesson go back to the definitions and ask the learners to recall the words the definitions apply to.
- As a pre-listening activity, give the class a

few key words from the tale and then ask them to predict the contents from these prompts. This activity can also provide an alternative means of pre-teaching new vocabulary.

- *Stop and Go*: The object of this activity is for students to tell a story. The first player gives as many sentences as he or she wishes and stops and points to another player who gives as many sentences as he or she wishes. He or she then points to a third player who continues and so on around the group until someone ends the tale.
- Hold up a picture. Then explain to the learners that something happened before this picture was taken and something happened after it was taken. Split the class into two groups. Have one group prepare the *before* stories and the other group the *after* stories. Then have students "join" the *before*s and *after*s that fit.
- As a post-listening activity, choose a short extract from the story and decide which syllables and letters you are going to blank out. Put this on an OHP transparency or write up the text you have chosen on the board with the gaps you have decided on. Then invite the learners to come up freely and add in the missing syllables and letters.
- Invite the learners to work in pairs and take it in turns to tell each other a story from their own lives at the beginning of the lesson. You could start the ball rolling by providing an example of your own. This activity not only helps to break the ice but also makes everyone aware of how much storytelling we all do in our lives just because we're human beings.
- As a post-listening activity, invite the learners to copy ten to twenty words from the story and to create a matching activity by splitting the words in two. The aim is to match the numbers on the left with the letters on the right. They

can then exchange activities with their partners and test each other.

Alternatively, they can produce gap-fill activities by copying out an extract from the story and omitting certain words for their partners to find.

- As a pre-listening task, ask the learners to guess what the tale is about from a list of ten key words/expressions taken from it.
- As a post-listening activity, present the class with 30 words from the story and ask them to learn 20 for homework. The advantage of this approach is that it gives students some control over their learning.
- As a pre-listening task, take six sentences from the story and place them in random order. Then invite the learners, working in small groups, to order the sentences, to glue them on to a sheet of paper leaving a few centimetres between each, and then to write linking texts to join the extracts together. A spokesperson for each group can then read out their tales and these can then be compared with the original.
- Ask one of the learners to leave the room after telling him/her that the rest of the group will then make up a story and that on his/her return he or she will be asked to guess the plot. After he or she leaves, the group members are then told that

there is in fact to be no story, but that the missing student will in fact make up a story upon his/her return. The trick is that to each of the unsuspecting student's questions, the group are to answer only yes or no, according to whether the last orthographic word in his/her question is a vowel (plus "y") or a consonant.

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In practical terms, coursebooks are the filter through which theory reaches the classroom.

I don't think it's wise to write a coursebook solo unless you have an excellent editor and one who has the confidence (or courage) to intervene on a regular basis.