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# Storytelling in ESL/EFL Classrooms

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## Introduction

Storytelling is described as “a technique of teaching that has stood the test of time” (Chambers, 1970, p. 43). With first language children, storytelling is being promoted as an “ideal method of influencing a child to associate listening with pleasure, of increasing a child’s attention span and retention capacity, or broadening vocabulary, and of introducing a child to the symbolic use of language” (Cooper, 1989, p. 3). Nearly every advocate of storytelling in classrooms points out that it is just good plain fun. Other values of storytelling for first language children are listed as: sensitivity to various forms of syntax, diction, and rhetoric; recognizing patterns in language and human experience; stimulating creativity; and giving practice in problem-solving, decision-making, and evaluation (Baker and Greene, 1987).

Storytelling in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms is often used informally by teachers to share cultural and personal information (e.g. telling “American” stories, or “growing-up” stories, or simply stories from one’s experiences to communicate an idea). More recently, however, storytelling has been promoted as an effective way to teach the English language to non-native speakers. Stories are valued as providing comprehensible input that facilitates language acquisition (Hendrickson, 1992). ESL/ EFL professional journals (e.g. *English Teaching Forum*, January, 1995), conference presentations, and textbook publishers are highlighting this topic, ranging from a focus on teacher as storyteller, to student as storyteller, to hiring professional storytellers to tell tales in ESL / EFL classrooms.

The interest in this paper is to explore the literature written on storytelling in pedagogy, especially as it relates to second language education. The focus of this review will be on what proponents claim as the specific instructional outcomes when using storytelling, as well as theoretical underpinnings to suggest storytelling as an effective tool for language instruction. In the first section of the paper, a brief history and definitions of storytelling are presented, followed by descriptions of storytelling in classrooms, and ending with theoretical underpinnings to support storytelling as an effective pedagogical tool.

## The Storytelling Tradition

The oral story, the transcribed story, and the literary story have existed since the beginning of time. As Jane Yolen, editor of *Favorite Folktales from Around the World* explains: "Storytelling, the oldest of arts, has always been both an entertainment and a cultural necessity . . . storytellers breathed life into human cultures" (1986, p.1). Historically, oral cultures throughout the world had (and many still have) the tradition of an esteemed storyteller (i.e., the Irish shanachie, the African griot, the European minstrels and troubadours, and the Native American tale teller). Having a large repertoire of stories and songs, storytellers told tales of local and national history as well as moral stories, creation stories, love stories, adventure stories, and supernatural tales (Yolen, 1986, p.2).

Today, in the United States, the tradition of storytelling has been revived. In 1974, the National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) began out of a tiny storytelling festival held in Jonesborough, Tennessee. It has since become nationally renowned. More recently, other storytelling groups such as the North Dakota Center for the Book also began to promote storytelling and festivals (or "tellabratations") in 1992. They define storytelling as

An art form through which we have preserved our heritage, passed on traditions, learned skills, and most importantly, developed our limitless imaginations. Storytelling is at the heart of human experience; a means by which we gain a better understanding of ourselves and our world (Storytelling On-line).

The formal telling of stories has a history full of treasure and delight. Even informally, in daily conversations, the use of storytelling to communicate ideas and to express one's experiences is evident. Stories are passed frequently between people. Children tell stories to their imaginary playmates and about them; adults tell their childhood stories to their children; stories are told between co-workers about bosses or clients; stories are told from the pulpit, the lectern, and the podium. Stories are told to entertain, inform, educate, enlighten, and simply emote. Eric Hoffer, an American philosopher, claims that humans have an innate need to tell stories, and we must "story" our lives to make order and sense out of them. He claims, "Man is eminently a storyteller. His search for a purpose, a cause, an ideal, a mission and the like is largely a search for a plot and a pattern in the development of his life story — a story that is basically without meaning or pattern" (Hoffer, 1955, p. 62). According to Hoffer, stories give meaning to life. Some say that educators, in the same way, use stories to give meaning in learning.

## Stories in Classrooms

The arguments for teachers using stories in the classroom are found in case studies ranging from pre-school through university level classrooms. Most deal with how stories are used, both when the teacher is storyteller and when students are storytellers. For example, Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1983) discuss teacher use of stories as lead-ins to listening comprehension activities and as prompts for written comprehension questions. After stories are told by the teacher, students may be asked to retell the story to practice speaking or to recall details and sequence. Stories also provide a context to discuss grammatical points. Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1983) contend that, as stories are told, affective filters come down and language acquisition takes place more naturally. They list linguistic benefits such as improved listening comprehension, grammar presented in true-to-life contexts, and numerous opportunities to encourage oral production.

Pedersen (1995) advocates teachers as storytellers and storytelling as a pedagogical method, especially when working with ESL children. Stories help to communicate literary and cultural heritage while also helping learners better develop a sense of rhetorical structure which assists in the study of literature and in their own writing. Pederson explains that stories enable ESL children to “have an experience with the powerful real language of personal communication, not the usual ‘teacherese’ of the foreign language classroom . . . the full range of language is present in stories” (1995, p. 2). The benefits he found in telling ESL children stories were that listening skills were developed and more natural and complete language input was possible. Affective benefits include helping the children to develop emotionally and socially.

Hines (1995) found that using story theater, in which stories are dramatized, was successful in her second language classroom. As students acted out a piece of text and told a story, she claimed their affective filters were lowered so that language learning could more easily take place. She suggests that teachers first select and introduce the story, then encourage students to create their own interpretations, working in small groups to perform the story. Students thus communicate and work together to accomplish their task. Besides application as a second language learning tool, Hines also found that storytelling helped as a means to connect cultural experiences. Common experiences of the students’ different cultures were often discovered as students worked with multicultural stories. Hines reiterated Campbell’s (1987) observation that universal themes are expressed in the myths and legends from all cultures.

Other authors advocate students as storytellers, drawing upon their own personal stories and experiences. Cooper, author of *When Stories Come to School* (1993), focused on elementary aged children telling their personal stories and then acting them out. She noted many advantages and explained that, “even in the most supportive schools do we

rarely have time to hear . . . to know our children's stories . . . for no statistics can measure how knowing them is related to school business and school success" (p. 6). She claims educational advantages of storytelling that are both affective and linguistic. Affective benefits of students sharing stories are the generation of intragroup trust, which in turn fosters greater freedom to learn. Linguistic benefits are that students who regularly hear and share stories become more intimate with their language—developing, expanding, and increasing language skills while interacting and communicating. Livo and Rietz (1987) would add that through the students' tellings, they begin to recognize and to develop the suprastructures, or shapes, of stories.

In 1983, an ethnographic study was conducted in which an award-winning teacher, TJ, was the subject. TJ was renowned for his ability to weave stories throughout his lectures. The purpose of the study was to observe how teaching and storytelling were integrated and developed within TJ's class (Cooper, Orban, Henry, and Townsend, 1983). Data were collected through observations, videotapes of class sessions, and interviews with TJ and his students. The researchers found that storytelling was used as a way to organize and structure class content. For example, TJ would introduce a new or important concept and then transition into a story which demonstrated the concept. He also used storytelling as a means to activate or build upon schemata the students already possessed. TJ's students viewed the stories as a way to relate course information to real world settings. In addition, the stories helped students feel interested, connected, and involved within the classroom. A student from the study commented that TJ ". . . seems more human, down to earth. I see him as another individual rather than someone inaccessible up on a platform" (Cooper et al, 1983, p. 177).

### **Educational Advantages of Storytelling**

Advocates of storytelling as a pedagogical tool claim many advantages. The most frequently mentioned advantages in the research literature are affective benefits: storytelling interests students, lowers affective filters, and allows learning to take place more readily and more naturally within a meaningful, interactive communication context. Holt and Mooney comment on the importance of stories to teach multiculturalism: "Stories tell of our similarities and differences, our strengths and weaknesses, our hopes and dreams. They have the power to teach us understanding and tolerance. This is a powerful tool" (1994, p. 9). Storytelling is also promoted as fostering natural communication, allowing students to experience authentic language input. Pesola (1991) describes storytelling in foreign language classrooms as "one of the most powerful tools for surrounding the young learner with language" (p. 340). Alan Maley writes

Clearly the power exerted by stories in the mother tongue has a similar potency in foreign language learning . . . Stories are comfortingly familiar; there is a ‘grammar’ of stories which can be followed . . . (allowing for) the natural and enjoyable repetition of words and phrases. At the same time they offer opportunities for inventive variations through relating the stories to the learners’ own lives and imaginations. They virtually solve the ‘problem’ of motivation at a stroke. And they offer multiple possibilities for spin-off activities involving visual, tactile, and dramatic elements. (Wright, 1995, forward).

Proponents claim that storytelling leads to improved language skills as students engage in storytelling and story enactments themselves. By using stories, students can begin to recognize and to understand how stories are structured—necessary knowledge and skills for both reading and writing (Carrell, 1984a; Livo and Rietz, 1987). Theories behind the narrative paradigm, schema activation, and the role of story schemata in second language comprehension all support the view that storytelling can be a useful tool within the language classroom.

In his text entitled *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, value, and Action*, Fisher (1987) contrasts the narrative paradigm with the rational-world paradigm. The narrative paradigm “symbolizes human communication as an interplay of reason, value, and action” (p. 59). The rational-world paradigm is consistent with scientific method which promotes behavior ruled by reason only (p. 60).

Ma (1994) explains that the thinking of American educators is typically along the lines of the rational-world paradigm. The teacher is viewed as the provider of knowledge, excluding students from co-creating and sharing knowledge. He describes storytelling pedagogy as multi-vocal and interactive between teacher and student: “Classroom learning is viewed as a process of continual re-creation of stories by both the instructor and students rather than injection of conventional knowledge into students’ minds. It is a pedagogy that promotes pluralistic thinking . . .” ( p. 7). Summarizing from Pineau (1994), Ma states: “The value of storytelling lies not only in the teaching effectiveness but also in its reflection of an open educational system . . . pluralistic and nonhierarchical” (p. 5).

Pluralistic, interactive, collaborative classrooms reflect a teaching/learning philosophy which values student control and positive feelings of worth. Storytelling is thought to be beneficial in part because it fosters teacher-learner collaboration, learner-centered models, and more pluralistic (inclusive) approaches to instruction. Ma, Pineau, and Fisher all suggest the benefits of storytelling as “pluralistic” instruction in which

students feel important since a lesson centers around student interaction, stories, and thoughts.

Storytelling is also widely promoted as an effective means by which to activate and build upon learner background knowledge and experiences, or schemata. Vacca and Vacca (1989) believe that “comprehension involves the matching of what the reader already knows to a new message” (p.15). If new ideas and concepts are taught within the context of a story, the chance of the student understanding the material will likely be improved since the student can experience an array of familiar details while also being introduced to new concepts. Liston (1994) states: “It is apparent that learning is based on previous learning and that unless new information is related to pre-existing student interest and knowledge, there will be no point of entry, no previously established neural network onto which students can connect or hang new extensions” (p. 8). A story can thus promote learner interaction and reaction to the concepts being taught. Accessing the internal state allows the learner to more readily interact with the new (external) material being presented.

Stories also provide students with a more comprehensive and diverse array of data available for processing. A broader array of data, some say, will more likely result in successful processing of new information. Liston explains that the human brain is “wired” to process stimuli into output, “to recognize patterns, and generate responses to our world” (p. 9). She contends that educators too often present “distillations of information and have the conclusions already drawn for the students . . . (not allowing) students to engage in pattern detection” (Liston, 1994, p. 9–10). By simplifying the material, pertinent facts are sometimes removed from context which may be valuable to the learner.

Liston explains, for example, that the way most students learn geography is through “lists of cities, rivers, and mountains to memorize and locate on maps . . . (making) them trivialized and irrelevant to our students” (p.10). She instead advocates presenting large amounts of information and encouraging students to detect patterns within it. For example, when learning the geography of West Africa, “. . . rather than a dry and decontextualized list of nations and capitals, the students are shown a wide variety of materials from that region and are presented with tales from those who have lived or traveled in Western Africa” (p. 10-11). Students, as they recall the facets of the story that interested them (i.e. the West African dress, their colors, music, food, houses, customs, families, language, schools, and their religion), will also recall the facts “deemed important to the official curriculum and testing” (p. 11). Liston also suggests that students who interact with stories as they learn will typically retain the information much longer than with traditional presentation methods. Another point to consider is that

personal learning style of each student may be more readily accommodated when using stories during learning since storytelling allows for personalized interpretations and visualizations of the content.

The importance of story structure in second language comprehension also supports the use of storytelling as a pedagogical tool. Carrell (1984a) conducted an empirical study with ESL students on how knowledge or lack of knowledge of the structure of stories influenced learner comprehension and recall of a story. She found that discourse as well as understanding in English were greatly influenced by knowledge of story structure. The importance of background knowledge and recognition of story structure in second language comprehension is now widely accepted (e.g. Carrell, 1984a, 1984b; Kintsch & Yarbrough, 1982; Mandler, 1978). For ESL learners, use of stories in the classroom can result in better language comprehension, higher interest, and enhanced learning of cultural aspects. Academically-bound ESL students are likely to benefit from the rhetorical structure inherent within storytelling. Recognizing text structure assists them as they attempt to employ sophisticated reading strategies and to interact with difficult, unfamiliar texts.

Theoretical underpinnings based on the narrative paradigm, the importance of activating prior knowledge and experience, and the role story structure plays in second language comprehension all suggest the benefits of interactive pedagogical storytelling. The narrative paradigm describes the benefits of a pluralistic classroom where information is exchanged between teacher and students, fostering a collaborative, shared learning environment. The activation of prior knowledge and experiences (schemata) through storytelling has been found to enhance language comprehension and improve retention of information and concepts. Students' recognition and understanding of story structure similarly enhances their abilities to comprehend and recall information, as well as helping them in their own efforts as readers and writers of the target language. Storytelling, when used effectively, requires that students draw upon their abilities to organize, evaluate, and interpret information.

### **The Need for a Research Agenda**

While pedagogical benefits suggested by advocates of storytelling in the second language classroom make sense from both theoretical and practical perspectives, few studies can be found which rigorously support the purported benefits of storytelling. Linguistic benefits such as skill enhancement to improve discrete or global listening comprehension, to help students in acquiring sentence structure, or to build knowledge of vocabulary are noticeably lacking in the research literature. Data explaining how storytelling activities effectively improve writing skills or pronunciation, intonation and

stress are likewise missing. Despite the importance of schemata activation and story structure familiarity in reading and writing proficiency, the effects of storytelling in these areas have received little attention. Evidence to suggest the affective benefits of stories in the second language classroom are likewise anecdotal rather than grounded firmly in research. It seems that these areas are rich possibilities for teacher-researchers as they focus on action research within their classrooms.

Detailed evidence of the second language learning benefits of storytelling in ESL/EFL classrooms for both adults and children is needed as teachers contemplate how and if storytelling should be incorporated within their instructional plans. Storytelling as a second language learning tool should be linked to clear, well articulated language learning objectives. As is the case when deciding text, audio, video, and computer materials for language learning, teachers should be concerned with the optimal effectiveness of the medium and mode selected. Is storytelling the most appropriate, efficient, and positive means by which specified learning objectives can be met? To date, the literature describing the benefits of storytelling in second language classrooms remains quite vague in regard to its effectiveness to meet measurable and observable target objectives.

There is similarly a lack of statistical and theoretical data describing storytelling contributions to concept formation, memory and retention, and enhancement of evaluative and other critical thinking skills. If proven to be effective, when is it most effective? When learners articulate their own stories? When stories are provided by a trained professional? Or when stories are accompanied by other related input? Are there different effects and benefits for learners who are at different proficiency levels, or in different language learning (ESL versus EFL, for example) contexts? Is storytelling effective for learning because the learner is able to personalize and create a unique vision of the information presented? Is it effective because of group dynamics, or is it simply effective because students are more interested and “tuned in” to instruction due to the stories?

Perhaps storytelling should be considered a new mode of instructional input due to its integrative aspects (reading, listening, speaking, writing, grammar). What are the differences when the story is told on video-tape versus by a live storyteller? How does varying the role of storyteller from teacher to student to outsider vary the pedagogical outcomes? The extent to which a teacher uses storytelling often depends upon the teacher’s personal style, interest and background. Some teachers may be embarrassed to tell personal stories and not find it “professional.” Others may not want to take the time in class, considering it “getting off track.” On the other hand, individuals who grew up

hearing family stories on a regular basis may naturally use storytelling in their classrooms.

Some teachers are interested in using storytelling as a pedagogical technique but have no training or expertise. What training topics and techniques help teachers to use storytelling effectively for language learning purposes? What are the personality, learning style, training, and other characteristics of teachers who are able to effectively use storytelling in second language classrooms?

Similarly, we should be concerned about student personalities, learning styles, and backgrounds when examining the effects of storytelling within second language classrooms. Shrum and Glisan (1994) explain that “students use a variety of learning styles, approaches, and ways of interacting when learning a new language” (p. 199). Are learners who share similar cognitive profiles (e.g., global, intuitive, cooperation oriented, with thick ego boundaries), for example, more adept at sharing and learning from and with stories? Research examining how different cultural groups view stories, respond to stories, and gain in target language skills is needed.

The information gaps and issues related to storytelling in language learning are potentially rich areas of study for teacher-researchers. Qualitative and quantitative studies focusing on specific linguistic, interpersonal, and cognitive aspects of storytelling are needed. Interdisciplinary research would be particularly helpful in understanding the full benefits of storytelling from both a teaching and a learning perspective. Research on cultural differences, teaching styles, and learning styles in relationship to storytelling are certainly worthy areas of investigation.

## Conclusion

Teachers are increasingly being provided with an array of creative storytelling materials and ideas for second language learning. Advocates discuss benefits which include enhanced student enjoyment, lower affective filters, authentic and enriched language input, and more inclusionary, collaborative classrooms. Stories appear to enable students to draw upon their own experiences and to organize information in personalized ways, thus better comprehending and retaining information and concepts. However, scholarly discussion and research are needed to better understand benefits for second language learning, interpersonal communication, and cognitive processing. Storytelling as a pedagogical tool in ESL needs examination from an interdisciplinary perspective and better support on the basis of both theoretical and instructional principles.

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