Story-Telling: Unexpected Returns From A Forgotten Resource

By Earl D. Wyman

Many of our students who are very capable at doing oral exercises and drills in the classroom exhibit a contrasting reluctance to use that part of the language they have already "learned" when they are outside the protective walls of the school. For many, the barrier between controlled classroom practice and free outside conversation is a major obstacle which is never overcome.

Fear of making errors is certainly an easily-identified and significant part of this barrier. Less easily identified are the psychological and sociological causes for the fear. Logic, too, can be a part of the problem. It is extremely illogical, for many people, to struggle and communicate poorly in their second language when both speakers could use a common first language and communicate with ease. Many a teacher has mulled over the problem of how to get a Japanese to practice his English with another Japanese, or a Tongan with a Tongan, or a Greek with a Greek. This additional perspective of "first language interference" is a very challenging obstacle to overcome.

The story-telling technique discussed here has been very successfully used in several variations as a means of surmounting these psychological barriers and bridging the communication gap which lies between the classroom and the real world. The technique is not only successful in bridging this oral production gap but has to its credit a number of other positive characteristics which make story-telling both dynamic and practical.

The Mechanics of the Technique

The first step in the technique is to select the story to be used, and this involves many possible variables. The language level, age, sex, cultural and educational background, special interests, and personalities of the students will influence the choice. So, too, will the instructional purposes of the teacher and the availability of material.

This material should consist of stories with universal themes based on human nature, clever reactions or unexpected results. Adapted versions of fables, folktales, media anecdotes, or local legends are most effective in story-telling. A workshop to which participants come prepared to exchange examples can multiply a teacher's collection of stories very quickly, and even casual observation of the story-telling class will make it immediately obvious which stories are worth using another time.

Although the first time the technique is used the teacher will want to explain the mechanics to the students, such explanation is not usually necessary a second time.

The next step, which consists of dividing the class into dyads or pairs, is similarly straightforward when initially used. However, as is usually true, practice makes perfect—or at least better. The skill the teacher has in making these dyads influences and maximizes the effectiveness of the technique. Where the nature of the class makes it possible, pairing students of different linguistic backgrounds is ideal. But the skillful teacher also considers personality types, individual language ability, rapport between individual students, and relevant factors of interpersonal relationships. As the teacher better understands the process and potential of the technique, the creation of the dyads becomes both challenging and intriguing.

Since the follow-up to creating the dyads involves sending one of each pair of students out of the classroom, an awareness of human nature dictates certain planning for this time. Especially with less mature students, additional supervision may be required, or an assignment to occupy them while out of the room. Weather, physical facilities and school policies can influence the manner in which this is handled. Where sending the students out is not possible, a tape-recorded

story and listening posts may be utilized to tell the story while the other half of each pair does a relevant seat assignment. (A crossword puzzle of vocabulary selected from the story can be worthwhile.)

Whatever approach is used, the next step requires that the remaining students hear the story from the teacher or from a recording. While the use of a recording does enable the teacher to work with the other half of the class, it also eliminates the discussion of vocabulary and comprehension until the entire story has been told. It may be necessary to repeat the story a second time, to discuss essential vocabulary, and to answer student questions in order to assure the story is understood. Third repetitions or extensive discussions are indicators that the story is too difficult.

When the teacher is satisfied that the class is ready to proceed, the dyads are restored, and the students who have been made familiar with the story relate it to their partners, all dyads working together at the same time. The teacher must determine the degree to which help from other students, dictionaries, or the instructor will be encouraged. While the students are working in their pairs, the teacher is free to move about from dyad to dyad, facilitating, making notes, and generally supervising the activity.

Just as a teacher must learn to discern when student silence is meaningful, the teacher must also realize that at times noise can be an indication of success. For a teacher with students who are trying to cross the gap to free conversation, there really can't be a more satisfying experience than to pause and observe what is happening during this story-telling. Especially after the technique has established its good reputation with the participants, the students coming in from the hall are aware that the others know something that they want to know. In this desire to know they have readied themselves to listen, and they are putting the subtle pressure of responsibility on their partners to communicate with them. The combination of this desire to hear and the obligation to dispense provides the environment in which story-telling proves its worth. At the same time, the acceptance

that it is "just a story" sufficiently reduces the level of importance with the students so that the need to use the first language is eliminated. (When asked to verify that these factors actually existed, one teacher simply responded, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating.") There should be great satisfaction in simply pausing and acknowledging that the rather high level of noise in the room is the result of the students speaking in English. This din, when studied carefully, has several individual qualities which are tremendously satisfying. Knowing the students are not only speaking enthusiastically in English but are doing so in a situation with high distraction potential (all the others speaking simultaneously) is very significant. And the look of intense involvement, enjoyment, and effort on the students' faces is an achievement the teacher should savor.

At this point, the students are tackling both of the barriers initially mentioned. They are speaking English to another person, perhaps of the same linguistic background, and they have reversed their priorities and have put the need to communicate ahead of the need to be accurate. Their fear of error has been relegated to its proper place.

But there are even more advantages to this peer communication than the reduction of these obstacles. For example, students who have developed an immunity to being corrected by the teacher, or who have disbelieved the instructor's insistence that they cannot be understood, suddenly find it believable when their partners tell them the same thing. It takes surprisingly few times for one of these immune students to accept his pronunciation weaknesses when his partner (carefully chosen by the perceptive teacher) repeatedly insists, "I can't understand what you're saying." This story-telling technique has been responsible for enabling many students to reach the state where they desire (for the first time) to actually communicate in English. A further advantage lies in the fact that several specific skills can be taught or reinforced by practice during the dyad work. By careful selection and adaptation, contextualized vocabulary and structures can be presented, along with expressions used to

politely interrupt a speaker, such as, "Excuse me. What did you say?" or, "What does 'quazzekel' mean?" or, "Do you mean that . . .?" and so on. It has been through story-telling that many students have learned the value of eye-to-eye and nonverbal communication as well as the role of lipreading in conversational English.

Follow-Up Techniques

Story-telling is further enhanced as a teaching technique by the wide variety of follow-up activities that are possible.

A very worthwhile extension of the technique is to have the listening partner in each dyad tell the story back to the first student. This accomplishes a number of things—gives faster dyads something to keep them busy while others are finishing, enables the first student to appreciate how well he has communicated the story, and frequently leads into additional conversation. If on no other grounds than this, the rapport that is created between the students justifies the use of the technique.

Tape recording the story, as partners or as individuals, can be another follow-up procedure. Some students have recorded the story and then played it for friends, neighbors, roommates, or family members with tremendous returns in terms of enthusiasm, awareness, and confidence. In other cases, the students have been prompted to tell or record other stories which are brought to their remembrance by the stories used. (This also helps add to the teacher's reservoir of stories.)

Comprehension questions based on the story can be effectively used to continue the processes begun in the dyads. By giving each partner questions to ask the other, they continue their use of the target language with one another, reinforce their interdependence in the exercise, and extend the rapport established between them. Arranging the dyads appropriately and projecting the questions so only one of each dyad can see the questions can be an effective variation.

The use of the cloze exercise is appropriate as a reading or writing class follow-up activity. A cloze passage based on the story can be given to the students to complete by working individually, in pairs, or in teams as a competition. This can be effectively done by numbering the blanks in the passage and then projecting the exercise onto the blackboard. The teams can take turns filling in the blanks either in order or randomly with points being accumulated for correct answers. (An imaginative teacher can create many variations of this technique.)

The writing skills can be reinforced in other activities as well. Dictation is a time-proven technique that can be used as a follow-up to story-telling. It can be given by the teacher on tape or directly to the class as a whole, or it can be given in pairs, or small groups by the students themselves. Instruction on how to give a dictation properly will be necessary when peer dictations are used.

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As a step away from strictly-controlled writing, sentence completion can be used. In this technique the teacher prepares a copy of the story in which blanks are substituted for portions of sentences. The students must complete the sentences in the context of the total passage and can work individually or in pairs to do so.

Paired or group work can also be a variation of having the students write the story as they understood it. An extension of this was used by one class when they used the stories as the body of compositions for which they practiced creating titles, introductions, conclusions, and controlling ideas. The results were creative and extremely instructive as students began to identify strongly with the story and wished to apply a personal touch.

In conclusion, though by no means finally, the students can be assigned to tell the story to someone they live or work with.

It helps to suggest a way to approach these people, such as, "Excuse me. I'm taking a class to improve my English, and I wonder if you could help me with an assignment. All you have to do is listen to a short story and tell me if you understand it." After trying this post-story-telling assignment several students (with some clever planning on their own part) have developed very enjoyable friendships with the very people they asked to help them. And once they have "an English-speaking friend", tremendous progress can be noticed.

Conclusion

Here, then, is an extremely versatile technique for getting students to speak English. In very specific and very dynamic ways, story-telling can overcome a variety of psychological and sociological obstacles. The story-telling technique can be used with most levels of students, at most ages, and for a variety of reasons. It can be one of those marvelous teaching tools that enables a student to bridge that oft-formidable gap between classroom practice and the world of communicative free conversation.