

# The Use of Storytelling as pedagogic tool in the ESOL Classroom

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# Abstract

*There is an Indian proverb which states: Tell me a fact and I'll learn. Tell me a truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever. ESOL learners bring stories to the classroom in the form of life experiences from their own cultures, based on their beliefs, customs, and language identity. Storytelling traditions are vital in many discourse communities where the spoken word is relied on to communicate, as access to other forms of literacy are not possible or do not exist. Storytelling is therefore an essential communication tool which can be transferred to the language classroom to generate creativity and imagination in teaching and learning. This paper analyses storytelling as a teaching technique in the English as a Second Language (ESOL) classroom. It discusses the advantages of using storytelling as a pedagogic tool in learning and teaching to enhance learners' language and literacy skills and to encourage learner engagement and learner interaction in the language classroom. It explores how storytelling activities can be used as a vehicle for improving understanding, motivating oral discussion and increasing and promoting interesting language usage in all four skill areas.*

## Key words

Storytelling, ESOL, Pedagogy, adult learners

# Storytelling

The novelist Philip Pullman (2014) imparts that after nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world. Isak Dineson cited by (Gaita, 1998) states that all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them. It is by telling stories that human beings try to make sense of our lives, sorrows and joys.

Many ESOL learners bring transferable skills from their own cultures, based on their beliefs, customs, and language identity. Oral communication and storytelling traditions are essential in some communities where the spoken word is relied on to communicate, as access to other forms of literacy is not possible. ESOL learners learn through their own schemata, “ members of communities and the wider society participate in events and practices in which they frequently use oral language drawing on skills that are both personal to them and cultural or social in origin. Many are good storytellers, eloquent speech makers or good listeners’ (Hughes 2010:265).

Nelson (1989) states that the storytelling experience is a vehicle for enhancing understanding, both literal and inferential: motivating oral discussion; increasing and promoting interesting language usage. Storytelling can indeed be an effective teaching and learning tool to aid learners in becoming more proficient in speaking and understanding a new language, as before students can achieve proficiency in other skills such as reading and writing, oral language is one of the most important means of learning and of acquiring knowledge.

As an experienced teacher trainer I have found that ESOL Teachers in language classrooms, often hesitate to include storytelling into language teaching because of an already overloaded and restricted curriculum. The current UK ESOL provision is restricted by a very prescriptive approach to delivery and Curriculum content, with rigid learning objectives assessed by government target setting, with a strong focus on employability skills. Recent government cuts to ESOL funding have resulted in more limited teaching hours and a product model of curriculum in which learners are viewed in terms of economic commodities.

This programmed approach to learning is measured in terms of behavioural learning outcomes with little space for teacher creativity.

This existing educational climate leaves very little flexibility or opportunity to explore alternative models of curriculum, or to investigate alternative pedagogic tools to enhance language development. De Bono (2014) highlights the importance of developing creativity in every possible aspect and states what great motivator creativity is when engaging the teacher’s interest.

There is no doubt that creativity is the most important human resource of all. Without creativity there would be no progress, and we would be forever repeating the same patterns. Creativity is an essential component of lesson planning in any language classroom.

## Storytelling as a stimulus for Creativity and Imagination

In my experience effective stories can create and recreate places, far away and near, they can inspire and engage, grow imagination and expand students’ schemata of the world. Narrative stories tell the story of who we are, where we came from and where we would like to go. Storytelling is an interactive process which can encourage ESOL learners to be active participants rather than passive recipients in the process of language learning. It can engage them to contribute more fully to the language acquisition process by bringing their own experiences, knowledge and expectations of life and work. Storytelling can also encourage spontaneous authentic communication when learners speak without preparation, or worrying about how to say something correctly. This often occurs when learners tell a story, adding in their own opinions, emotions, ideas and perceptions. Authentic communication between ESOL learners will cross different cultural barriers, the communicative approach encouraging ESOL learners to become more confident and natural communicators. Morgan and Rinvoluceri,(1983: 1) champion storytelling, ‘as a favourable ‘communicative’ alternative to traditional language teaching methods which engages learners and facilitates learning through ‘unconscious’ processes. ‘Stories, tales, folklore and myths may hold the key to a world of languages. Stories are everywhere, ‘hidden inside everyone’ (Morgan and Rinvoluceri, 1983: 3)

## Storytelling as Art and Culture

Storytelling is the one of the oldest of arts passed down from generation to generation, as a means of explaining and understanding the world. Families use stories to transmit principles, social history and cultures; it is used to entertain and to instruct, to moralise and warn, and to ensure the cultural survival of memories. New members marry into families and bring varying interpretations and historic perspectives. Fairy stories and legends are a part of every culture, in addition to love stories, adventure stories, ghost stories and bible stories, all of which can express information about different countries and cultures.

Storytelling offers opportunity to widen awareness and respect for diverse cultural backgrounds, developing learners' schema. Linguistic scheme theory was first applied to linguistics by Bartlett (1932). He noted that when an American Indian story was told to British people, they adapted the details when retelling it to fit with their own schemata, adding in familiar frameworks and leaving out unfamiliar ones. Nair (2003:5) notes how stories appear to have evolved across cultures, "A good story is one that can be 'taken away' by listeners and/or tellers and repeated in other conversations, other contexts, other cultures".

Storytelling widens our awareness and understanding of our own culture as well as other cultures, offering a sense of shared belonging to a group. Collaborative storytelling tasks can be socially interactive as well as individual. It encourages students to work in cross cultural groups on more complex tasks, encouraging a pooling of knowledge and offers multiple perspectives. Savvidou (2010) explores the use of storytelling, as reflective dialogue to encourage professional development in English lecturers sharing and responding to stories.

## The Aims of using Storytelling in the ESOL Classroom

The aim of using storytelling activities in the ESOL classroom is to encourage a shared social practice through which explicit and tacit knowledge can be transmitted and identities acquired (Boje, 2001). The objective is to engage students' interest, allowing learning to take place more readily and more naturally, in a meaningful and interactive communicative context (Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm, 1998).

Storytelling can offer language practice in the safe and relaxed environment of a classroom, encouraging friendly and co-operative interaction between classmates. This will lower learners' affective filter (Krashen, 1981) so that learning acquisition place more easily. In a comfortable learning environment students are more likely to develop language from their participation as both speakers and listeners and learn to respect the opinions of others. As a result this will promotes turn taking and encourage students to generate dialogue and develop ideas by listening to and telling stories from a variety of cultures, identifying the similarities and differences. Dialogue can be defined as 'a conversation informed by a narrative', in this way language will be used to encourage the concept of 'dialogue' within storytelling activities, highlighting its function as a tool for seeking knowledge and consensus (Abma & Widdershoven, 2005: Abma and Widdershoven, 2005).

## Storytelling as a pedagogic tool in the ESOL Classroom

Storytelling is teaching technique that has stood the test of time (Chambers 1970). Using a range of storytelling activities in the ESOL classroom can enhance learner engagement and interaction and promote language communication skills, developing interactional language by encouraging learners' socialization in literacy learning, which is one of the primary goals of language learning as learners need the ability to competently interact in social situations, engaging in social practices both inside and outside of the classroom. This competence is achieved through socialization into in the language classroom; interactive storytelling activities can be used to promote English literacy and language skills and engage learners in 'language socialization'. Hellerman (2006) found evidence that post-reading story re-telling, can develop learners' interactional competence and increase engagement in a classroom setting through their socialization into a literacy event e.g. reading a book silently and

retelling the story to a partner. This research suggests that socialization during literacy events in the classroom, leads to increased participation in literacy outside the classroom. This theory is supported by (Morrow, 2001) who purports that almost as important as storytelling itself are the follow-up activities after storytelling, such as story recollection which allows learners to revisit the story and enhance their understanding, to recycle new vocabulary, as well as allowing teachers to assess students' current language levels.

Many ESOL learners are working adults who bring shared life experiences and understanding of the world to the classroom from home languages and cultures, this providing an important contextual resources for storytelling which are salient to the learners. Savidou (2010) states that storytelling is a way of thinking about experience valuing the individual's view of the world. Boje (2001)) goes further, stating that storytelling is a shared social practice through which explicit and tacit knowledge can be transmitted and identities acquired.

Storytelling is a feature of language interaction which includes not only productive skills (speaking and writing), but also receptive skills (listening and reading). However the main focus of ESOL teaching is to develop learners' speaking and listening skills so they can communicate effectively to function in work and society. The specific educational and social benefits of using storytelling with second language learners are numerous and well researched, especially with regard to children. According to Wilson (1997) including storytelling in the curriculum can improve the level of learning in all four language skills. The concept of storytelling is grounded in theories of speech communication; storytelling is inherently dialogic, so that whenever a story is told it provokes a response. (Bakhtin, 1984:1986). Hibbin (2014) proposes that the use of oral storytelling in primary schools promotes speaking and listening skills, but that storytelling is under-utilized within Primary Education in the UK; children with poor oral language skills being disadvantaged in school as a result. She champions the use of oral storytelling as a pedagogic tool used for creative and dialogic teaching methods.

It can certainly be argued that storytelling can engage the cognitive processes of learning, encouraging learners to question, examine their own assumptions, beliefs and knowledge, or those expressed by other storytellers. Savidou (2010) examined a group of English language lecturers using storytelling as a form of professional dialogue. It identifies five dialogic processes: connecting, echoing, developing, questioning and constructing. Many of these values are applicable to adult language teaching, such as helping adults recognise patterns in language, stimulating creativity, developing skills in social dialogue and cooperative interpersonal behaviour. (McGuire 1992) states that it can specifically enhance learners' awareness of semantics, syntax, and phonology, skills we use naturally in our first language without thinking.

Halliday (1985) describes language as a social phenomenon with a purpose or function behind all communication. Learning a foreign language is about communicating and interacting with other people e.g. finding out personal information, expressing feelings, giving opinions and sharing experiences and news; a system of language choices for making meaning. This oral communication is often communicated via questioning, narrative, reported speech or storytelling. The storyteller becomes the source of language, and the listeners are actively involved in understanding (Morgan 1983). Authentic communication consists of different speech acts and discourse events which are both socially and culturally reflexive. Announcements, declarations, promises and requests all invoke stories (Langellier and Peterson 2004), Benjamin (1973) claims that storytelling comes from the realms of living speech and experiences reported by others, as it is the narrative of daily life and human communication practice. Telling one's stories invites reciprocation of people's own stories (Geissner 1995). Hoffer (1955) suggests that stories give meaning to life. Connelly and Clandin (1990) state that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives. Storytelling and its related activities are based in humanistic language learning, integrating communication, building knowledge and developing skills and attitudes conducive to emergent literacy (Fogarty, 1997).

## Storytelling and Listening Skills

Ellis (1979) suggests that storytelling is an effective way to develop listening skills. Storytelling develops 'active listening skills' as it promotes exposure to more complex language, offering an ideal format for natural listening material and useful contexts in which to explore language. Krashen (1981) states that one who hears no language speaks no language. Zhao (2005) agrees that the input the learner receives from being exposed to

the target language becomes part of the learner's knowledge, if they are not exposed, they do not develop proficiency. Storytelling has the capacity to facilitate dialogue and empower learners by, giving them a voice to express emotion or create meaning. In everyday social interactions, personal experience stories are not presented as monologues; rather storytelling is part of an interactional event, a conversation, in which stories are mutually constructed by storytelling participants roles iinterchanging (Schegloff, 1997).

Listening which takes places during storytelling is different from the more usual classroom listening comprehension tasks, such as listening to a CD. Listening to a live story is much more engaging, especially if it is followed up with questions the listener wants answered, as opposed to comprehension questions. Storytelling can mean the difference between listening passively and listening actively. Nelson (1989) maintains that the combination of language, story, and metaphors heightens listeners' awareness. She states further that through the listener's emotional involvement, literal and inferential comprehensions are increased. Through listening to stories told in the target language, learners are exposed to the target language in a natural way and therefore become more proficient in speaking and understanding it. (Ray & Seely, 2004).

## Conclusion

In an educational climate which promotes a more restrictive and prescriptive ESOL curriculum in the Further Education Learning and Skills Learning sector, it is important to explore and investigate the use of creative techniques such as storytelling in the ESOL classroom, in order to extend knowledge and understanding of second language acquisition theories in order to improve practice of language teaching and to promote the use of meaningful and communicative language learning, in a relaxed and enjoyable environment which is conducive to learning.

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