

A manner of telling

May 2012

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Story-telling is one of the oldest of pleasurable human activities. Apart from serving as the memory bank of a people through which myths and worldviews are passed on to future generations, stories can also be used to develop language skills.

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Introduction

All children love to listen to stories. So why not exploit this tool to teach children to listen, speak, write, express, comprehend and communicate? While we can all tell stories, the way we tell them also matters a lot. If we are to achieve learning objectives through story-telling, we have to know the art of story-telling.

A manner of telling

Most of us, as teachers, are aware that learning, especially second language learning involves a great deal of unconscious acquisition rather than conscious, systematic study. For this, more material is required than is provided by the conventional systematic syllabi for classrooms. The frame of story-telling—an ancient and compelling human activity—can be used to promote a range of learning activities: listening comprehension, communication, expression, writing skills, and different exercises as alternatives to traditional modes of teaching/learning grammar. One, the quality of listening that occurs while hearing a story is different from that which occurs during the usual teacher-reading-aloud sessions; it is also standard and accepted practice to have ‘comprehension questions’ during story-telling. Two, there are stories hidden within all of us—students will invariably bring these out as they delve into their memories and are encouraged to narrate their own versions, or new stories. Three, lots of stories contain sequences or sentences as essential devices. Often, a particular grammatical structure will occur naturally as part of the repetition. These can be used as a basis for further practice drills or unconscious grammar intake.

There are many ways of telling a story—under a tree, facing the listeners, or even from behind the listeners. An adventurous teacher can stand on a chair in front of the students, and with body posture, mime, and voice level, capture a dramatic one-person theatrical style.

In contrast, a teacher can sit with the students in a circle, and by seeking and exchanging eye contact, draw the students into the story and give a sense of participation in the process of telling. On the other hand, withholding eye contact can create a mood of fantasy. You will have to experiment and evolve your own style to make it work comfortably.



Various ways of telling stories, and different activities for the students have been suggested. You can modify/develop these according to the level of your students, and your teaching purposes.

Your magic bag

You will need a selection of objects such as stones, shells, twigs, dried leaves, small vegetables, and artefacts such as keys, paperweights, bottle caps, cans, coins, paper clips, etc. Put all these in a ‘magic bag’ and allow each student or group to choose one object. The student, or group, can then pretend to be the object, and narrate a story around it. You can provide some initial guidance with questions such as:

What are you made of?

What colour are you?

How old are you?

Where do you live?

What do you like about your life?

What do you hate about your life?

What would you like to do?

What will become of you?

Give them a little time to think, and have a discussion to weave their tale. As a variation, you can also let each student or group keep their object a secret, the rest of the class can guess at the identity as they hear the story of the object. For example, The story of a small potato...

The Story of a Small Potato



I am an underground tuber, pale brown in colour. I grew up under the earth, covered by warm, moist soil. By the time I assumed decent proportions, I was dug up.

Human beings eat my kind, we potatoes are deliciously edible! We are produced cheaply and available in large amounts. I am quite nutritious to humans: starchy and hence full of energy!

To be cooked and eaten is the fate of every vegetable. I accept my end philosophically...

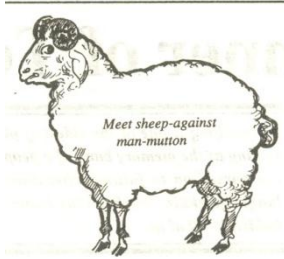
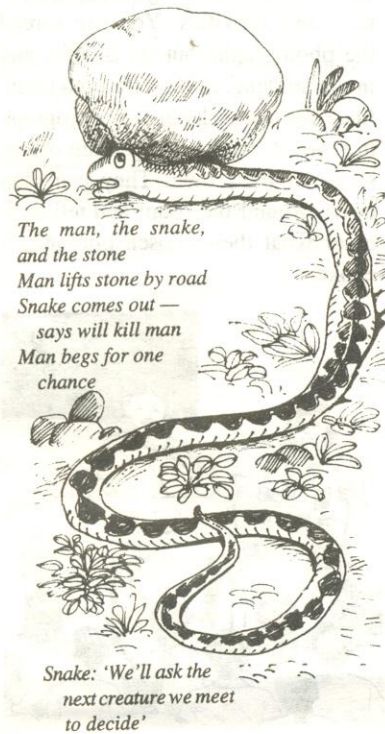
Click-a-story

You will need a large quantity of photographs; preferably not featuring yourself, and covering a wide span of time and activities. You can spread the photographs out on a table, and invite students to look through them. Each one can pick out one photograph that brings back a story, memory or scene of their own. They can move around the room and tell each other what their chosen photograph evokes.

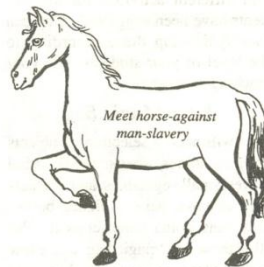


Telling tales

Traditional folk tales and fairy tales are always hugely popular. More often than not, some of them will know different variations of the same outline or theme. Here we suggest a skeletal outline of a story that can be used in various ways with different levels of students.



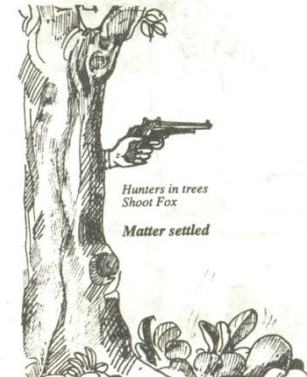
One more chance



One more chance



Tells snake to lie where he
was
Fox replaces stone on
snake
Fox asks payment
Go to man's house
Man gives chicken in sack
Says open sack away from
house - neighbours won't
like him helping fox
'Go to that clump of trees,
it's quiet there'
Fox goes



As follow up activities, you can ask each student to narrate an animal story each, along with a moral. You can also have students in groups of five to enact the story with freedom to create their own lines and dialogue. For higher level students, you can initiate a discussion on the moral of the story, the object of the moral with a debate on the moral in class. After a sufficient amount of discussion has taken place, the students can write down their opinion in a brief paragraph. You can also have role play, with students saying what each one would do if she/he were the fox, or the snake.

A very interesting activity with students of higher levels would be to re-tell a traditional story. For instance, you can re-tell the story of "The Princess and the Pea" emphasizing the fragility of the heroine and the ludicrousness of a pea under seven mattresses interfering with the sleep of the princess. Another instance—how about modifying/inverting the good/bad rules of Cinderella and her step-sisters in 'Cinderella'? You can be sure your students will feel challenged, and come up with their own creative versions!

All of these activities are geared to use the enjoyable activity of telling and listening to stories in order to learn the language, to be able to communicate and express freely. You can draw on fairy tales, folk tales, newspaper reports, literary short stories, films, personal anecdotes, rumours, incidents and on the imagination of your learners to have fun and to learn.

Happy telling!

This article first appeared in Teacher Plus, Issue No.44, September-October 1996 and has been adapted here with changes.