

First Road to Learning

Language through Stories

All learners, from babies to grandmothers, learn better with stories. Stories are energizers. When someone says, “Let me tell you a story,” listeners perk up their ears and smile. Even hard truths can be taught easily through story.

Stories told and read at home and school both entertain and educate young learners. Using stories in the classroom is fun, but the activity should not be considered trivial or frivolous. Indeed, there is strong support for storytelling in pedagogical theory. Cortazzi (1994) points out that storytelling is fundamental to education and specifically to language teaching. Zipes (1995) and Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1992) find stories a basic part of the whole language approach to learning, reaching the “whole person” and appealing to the subconscious. According to Brumfit and Johnson (1979), reading or telling stories in class is a natural way to learn a new language.

Stories—whether they are fairy tales, folktales, legends, fables, or are based on real-life incidents experienced by students themselves—can help

learners appreciate and respect the culture and the values of various groups. These stories foster the transformative powers of education. According to Ada (2004), stories can also lead to harmony, understanding, and peaceful resolution of conflict.

Stories from around the world are excellent to use in the classroom, but teachers also need to use stories from the students’ own culture and heritage. Using local or national stories insures that the students know the background culture and may already know the story. This familiarity lowers the young learners’ stress and reduces anxiety in the classroom. According to Krashen (1982), stories lower the young learners’ affective filter, allowing them to learn more easily.

Joseph Campbell (1987) points out that the themes of folk stories and myths are universal; people everywhere appreciate tales from other groups, even if they aren’t from the listeners’ own culture. But students are especially pleased—and their self esteem is likely to be enhanced—when they learn that a story comes from their own part of the world.

Stories as culture bearers

In 2004 we were privileged to work in Tanzania with teacher trainers at the elementary and secondary school level. In our workshops, we used stories to promote all four skills, showing the benefits of using stories as culture bearers. In traditional African societies, oral literature has been both a form of entertainment and a way of passing on the knowledge, traditions, and customs of the community from one generation to another. Thus the stories carried the wisdom, teachings, and culture of the elders that were to be inherited by the new generation. At the workshops, teachers were reminded that the history of the clans was also stored in the form of stories, and that, through them, children could learn not only the clans' history and traditions but also behavior and conduct acceptable to the clan.

Unfortunately, radio, television, and other technologies are fast replacing the elders who, in traditional family huts, used to tell folktales and fables by the fireplace. Today, parents, children, and grandchildren listening to the radio or watching television are absorbing material divorced from their ancient culture, and little of their heritage is being transmitted. Unless teachers make an effort to continue the tradition of storytelling, today's children will have little of their culture and heritage to pass on to the next generation.

Stories as solutions to large classes and limited resources

In many countries, a shortage of teaching/learning resources is a major constraint. Teachers can use stories to teach language and to introduce other subjects, such as the HIV/AIDS problem. Even in the absence of books, storytelling or reading can enable teachers to manage large classes, such as the 60- to 100-pupil classes seen in Tanzania. In such situations, teachers can exploit stories, enhancing them by using simple objects, to improve the language skills of their students.

Getting started

Collect all types of stories—fairy tales, folk stories, fables, etc.—as well as pictures, children's books, and small everyday objects or toys.

Types of stories to use:

1. Folk stories, fairy tales, legends, fables: start by using stories from the culture of

the children. They may know the stories in their native language and this will promote understanding and self-esteem among the learners.

2. Nursery rhymes: A treasure trove of material can be found in English nursery rhyme books.
3. Little stories: These can be longer rhymes: "Mary Had a Little Lamb," "Three Little Kittens," "This is the House that Jack Built," or popular children's books like Bill Martin's *Brown Bear*, or *Polar Bear*, or Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and *From Head to Toe*.

For speaking skills

1. *Storytelling with objects.* Use objects such as toys, forks, cups, to trigger stories. For example, divide learners into groups of three to five, and distribute four to five objects to each group. Ask each group to make up a story that includes all of their objects. First, model the activity by choosing five objects from the box of objects (e.g., a car, a spoon, a girl, a banana, a monkey). Then tell the learners an impromptu story, which might go like this:

A long time ago a girl was walking along a road carrying a spoon and a banana. A fast car passed by her. She was scared. She dropped the banana and the spoon and ran into the trees. When she came back, she saw the monkey eating the banana with the spoon. She laughed at the monkey.

A story this simple will give the students confidence that they can tell a story, too. After the groups create stories, have each group tell its story to another group or to the whole class.

2. *Storytelling with pictures.* Use pictures in the same way as objects were used in the first activity. Distribute four to five pictures to each group, making sure each person has one picture. Ask each group to make up a story that includes all the pictures. Each person adds to the story using ideas suggested by his or her own picture.

For listening skills

1. Read or tell simple stories to the students. You can use pictures or the small objects. Telling stories has certain advantages over reading in that the teacher-teller can hold the attention of the learners with the power of eye con-

tact, while at the same time permitting the teacher to observe how well the students are following the story. Telling allows you to use your body more than you do when reading.

2. After the initial telling, have the learners tell the story. This technique is most effective if it involves several students. Choose one person to start re-telling the story, then call on others to continue the story, letting each child say one to three sentences until the whole story has been retold. If a child gets confused and misses something important, or remembers it wrong, the teacher can make a correction.

For reading

1. Find a version of a tale that the children can read. If this can't be done, re-write a story that you know, simplifying it by deleting the difficult words or by changing them into words that the learners know or words that you want to teach them.

2. Read the story aloud the first time, or let the learners read the story silently the first time. (The latter approach allows the teacher to devote time to learners who need help with reading.) A third option is to let the students read the story aloud, with each child reading one sentence. This provides an opportunity to help students with pronunciation.

3. One method of introducing a story is *choral reading*, which involves the teacher reading a phrase or sentence and the class repeating it. Read the story quickly, using a chant-like rhythm. Students improve their intonation and pronunciation with this method. Choral reading is possible even if the students do not have a copy of the story, in which case it also becomes a listening activity.

4. Caution: After the first reading, ask comprehension questions to find out what the students understood. Help them with parts of the story they do not understand.

5. Important: use the same story for several different activities. One story provides rich material for other activities, such as discussion of values, role play, creating small playlets, even creating individual books.

For writing

1. Have the learners draw or paint a scene or character from a story and then write at least one line from the story under the picture.

2. Use a variation of the speaking activities above (storytelling with objects or storytelling

with pictures). After the learners create the story, have the group dictate it as one person writes it down. Once the stories are complete, this can be turned into a speaking activity, with each group reading/telling its story to the class.

3. Have students each write their own story, using objects or pictures. Then they can compare their stories within small groups.

Combining skills: Enhancing critical thinking and creativity

1. *Students retell the story.* Through oral retelling, students can demonstrate their comprehension of a story. Help students by emphasizing the beginning, middle, and end of the story. Then have students, working in pairs, retell the story first to each other and later to the entire class.

2. *Use Total Physical Response (TPR).* Select four verbs from a story and place them on index cards. Say each word and model its action. After the students know the first four verbs, add more.

3. *Make a story timeline.* Have students list the events of the story in the order in which they occur, using simple words. Assist the students by asking questions such as: "What happens first?" "What happens next?"

4. *Read the story repeatedly.* Introduce a story by asking the students to predict what it is about by looking at its pictures. Pre-teach vocabulary; then read the story several times.

5. *Tell the story.* Instead of reading the story to the class, tell it or have a student tell it.

6. *Create a story board.* Have students do simple line drawings of the story in time sequence such as is found in an animated movie or comic book.

7. *Rewrite a story.* Have the students rewrite a familiar story in a simplified form.

8. *Create a chant from the story.* Using a story that features repetitive language, ask questions such as, "Who is it?" "What is it doing?" Use a question chart on the board and pictures, or draw simple stick pictures. For example, "Have you seen my cat? This is not my cat." or "Did the hippo kill the tortoise? No, he didn't kill the tortoise." (This chant can be used with the story, *The Tortoise and the Tug of War*, featured in Appendix 2.)

9. *Teach sentence patterns.* Again using a book that features repetitive speech, write the sentence patterns on the board. Then have the students create new sentences to fit the pat-

terns. Some examples are: “Who is sleeping in MY bed?” (from *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*) and “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?” (from *Brown Bear*).

10. *Create story cards.* Take short stories, such as fables, and put them on cards or construction paper. Have students, working in pairs, read the stories and then tell them to their partner.

11. *Do jigsaw reading.* Separate a story into four equal parts. Number each part and post each one in a different corner of the room. Divide the students into groups of four and have students in each group number off from one to four. Then ask students to go to the corner that matches their number and silently read the story piece there. They then return to their seats and write down from memory what they recall of the story. After they finish writing, in numerical order each student tells the others in the group his or her part of the story.

12. *Use story theater.*

- a. Divide a folktale into 4 or 5 parts for a class of 20.
- b. Form groups of 4 to 5 students. (For larger classes, have several groups of 20).
- c. Give each group a section of the story. Have students read their section and decide which character they would like to play. If there are not enough parts in their section, have those without parts work together as a choral narrator, freely adapting descriptions into narration. They may choose any props on hand and use any actions.
- d. Allow students to practice their section of the story for 15 to 20 minutes.
- e. Ask students within each group to line up according to the story’s sequence and to either read or perform the story as seamlessly as possible.

An excellent description of how to use story theater can be found in Hines (1995).

13. *Create books.* Have students create their own books, either by retelling an existing story, or by making up a story of their own.

14. *Dictate short stories.* To improve listening skills and help students practice their spelling, dictate short stories to the students.

References

- Ada, A. F. 2004. *Authors in the classroom: A transformative education process.* Boston: Pearson.
- Brumfit, C. J., and K. Johnson, eds. 1979. *The communicative approach to language teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, J. 1987. *Primitive mythology: The masks of God.* New York: Penguin Books.
- Cortazzi, M. 1994. Narrative analysis. *Language Teacher* (27): 157–70.
- Hines, M. 1995. Story Theater. *English Teaching Forum* 33 (1): 6–11.
- Krashen, S. 1982. *Principles and practice in second language acquisition.* New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Morgan, J., and M. Rinvolucri. 1992. *Once upon a time: Using stories in the language classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zipes, J. 1995. *Creative storytelling.* New York: Routledge.

Useful websites

1. Aaron’s Storybook – Folktales: <http://www.aaronshelp.com/stories/folk.html>
2. Cinderella Variants: <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type0510a.html>
3. Storytelling in the classroom: <http://storyarts.org/classroom/retelling/index.html>

MYRTIS MIXON, Ed.D., a teacher at the University of San Francisco, was a recent Fulbright Scholar in Slovakia and, before that, an EFL teacher-training fellow in Albania and Croatia. She is the author of several ESL/EFL textbooks; all of them use stories.

PHILOMENA S. TEMU is a senior school inspector at the Ministry of Education and Culture, Tanzania. Educated in Dar es Salaam and Scotland, she has worked in Development Projects Management and has participated in the Tanzania English Language Teaching Support Project.

APPENDIX 1 | NURSERY RHYMES

First Road to Learning: Language through Stories • Myrtis Mixon and Philomena Temu

WEE WILLIE WINKIE

Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town,
Upstairs and downstairs, in his nightgown:
Rapping at the window, crying through the lock:
“Are the children in their beds?
For now it’s eight o’clock.”

ONE, TWO

One, two, buckle my shoe.
Three, four, shut the door.
Five, six, pick up sticks.
Seven, eight, lay them straight.
Nine, ten, a good fat hen.

RAIN, RAIN

Rain, rain, go away.
Come again another day.
Little Johnny wants to play.

THE CAT AND THE FIDDLE

Hey, diddle, diddle!
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon;
The little dog laughed to see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

HUMPTY DUMPTY

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the King’s horses and all the King’s men
Could not put Humpty together again.

LITTLE BO-PEEP

Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep,
And can’t tell where to find them;
Leave them alone and they’ll come home,
Wagging their tails behind them.

THREE BLIND MICE

Three blind mice,
See how they run!
See how they run!
They all ran after the farmer’s wife,
She cut off their tails with a carving knife.
Did you ever see such a sight in your life
As three blind mice?

BAA, BAA, BLACK SHEEP

Baa, baa, Black Sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes, sir, three bags full;
One for my master, one for my dame,
And one for the little boy that lives in the lane.

PAT-A-CAKE

Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker man
Bake me a cake as fast as you can;
Roll it and pat it and mark it with “B”
And put it in the oven for baby and me.

THERE WAS A LITTLE GIRL

There was a little girl,
And she had a little curl
Right in the middle of her forehead.
When she was good,
She was very, very good,
And when she was bad,
She was horrid.

APPENDIX 2 | SAMPLE STORY WITH TEACHING STRATEGIES

First Road to Learning: Language through Stories • Myrtis Mixon and Philomena Temu

Before you read

1. Describe an elephant, a hippo, and a tortoise. Discuss with students how the animals differ from each other;

2. Pre-teach unfamiliar vocabulary such as *insult, apologize, challenge, vine, respect, tug of war.*

(Note: This story is readily adaptable to choral reading.)

The Tortoise and the Tug of War

Many years ago, Tortoise was walking in the jungle. He was unhappy because Hippo had chased him out of the river. **Suddenly**, Elephant ran across the path and almost stepped on Tortoise.

“Watch where you’re going, you big fool!” said Tortoise.

Elephant did not like to be **insulted**. He said, “You watch where you’re going, tiny Tortoise, and also watch your tongue. Don’t insult me.”

“You don’t frighten me,” said Tortoise. “I’m stronger than you think. In fact, I’m as strong as you.”

“No, you’re not!” shouted Elephant. “You are too small to be strong. **Apologize** or I will step on you.”

“I have a better idea,” said Tortoise, as he took hold of a thick vine. “I **challenge** you to a **tug-of-war**. You hold one end of this long vine with your trunk and I’ll go down to the river with the other end. I will yell, ‘Pull, big animal, pull!’ when I’m ready.”

“Very well,” agreed Elephant, “it will be fun to make a fool of you.”

Tortoise took the other end of the vine and went into the jungle. When he got to the river, he called, “Hippo! Hippo! Stick your head out of the water!”

Hippo raised his head. “What do you want, little one?”

“You chased me out of the river, and I’m angry. You think that you’re strong because you are big, but I will show you that I am strong too.”

Hippo laughed, “Your words are bigger than you are. You are not strong like me.”

“I challenge you to a tug of war!” said Tortoise. “You take this end of the vine in your mouth and I’ll go into the jungle with the other end. You try to pull me into the river, and I will try to pull you into the jungle. I’ll yell, ‘Pull, big animal, pull!’ when I’m ready.”

Hippo agreed. He bit on the end of the vine and Tortoise walked back into the trees. Then he yelled in his loudest voice, “Pull, big animal, pull!”

Both Elephant and Hippo pulled and pulled with all of their strength, but neither could move the other.

“Tortoise is as strong as Hippo!” said Elephant as he pulled harder.

“Tortoise is as strong as Elephant!” said Hippo and he pulled harder.

Tortoise saw they were tired. He yelled, “Stop, stop! The vine is breaking. Let’s **call it a tie!**”

Both of the large animals were happy to stop pulling.

Tortoise ran to the Elephant, and Elephant said, “You are strong, friend, and I will be careful not to step on you.”

Then Tortoise went down to the river and Hippo said, “I’m sorry for chasing you out of the water, little friend. You are strong.”

They treated Tortoise with great **respect** from then on.

After reading the story, ask students:

1. Did you understand the story?
2. What did Tortoise do to trick Hippo and Elephant?
3. How did the big animals act toward Tortoise in the end?

Continued on page 37