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Why Not Tell Stories? Addressing Concerns about Storytelling in Teaching

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Storytelling, whether the stories are myths, legends, folktales, jokes, urban legends, family stories, or personal anecdotes, comes as naturally to human beings as speech itself, and offers a variety of linguistic, cultural, and personal benefits to students in a language class. Many language teachers, however, are hesitant about using stories in their own classes. This paper will attempt to give an overview of some of the advantages of oral storytelling in the classroom, address some concerns common among language teachers, and conclude with suggestions for activities that can be used to facilitate students' comprehension of stories.

ストーリーテリングとは、昔話、お伽話、伝説、逸話、個人の経験談などを含む、話の基を辿り教えるものである。外国語教育では、特にストーリーを通しての文化の継承が学習者にとり語学的にも、精神的にも役に立つ。しかし、ストーリーテリングに興味を持っている教師でさえも、実際に教室で利用することを躊躇してしまう。本稿はストーリーテリングの実用性を簡略に述べるとともに、外国語教師からもっともよく聞かれるストーリーテリングの起用への不安を和らげ、ストーリーを用いた基礎アクティビティーをいくつか紹介する。

Storytelling, whether the stories are myths, legends, folktales, jokes, urban legends, family stories, or personal anecdotes, comes as naturally to us as speech itself. Storytelling is a regular feature of our daily conversations, and yet, when we give it a name and begin to discuss the possibility of bringing it into our classrooms, many teachers hesitate; as teacher and storyteller Mark Wagler relates, “The minute we name it ‘storytelling,’ [teachers] suddenly freeze and say, ‘I can’t tell stories!’” (Mooney & Holt, 1996, p. 146). Here, we will explore a few of the many benefits that storytelling can bring to a language class, address some of the concerns that teachers have about storytelling, and finally, examine a few story-based activities.

The word “storytelling” will be used here to mean the oral telling of stories in the teller’s own words, as distinct from the reading aloud of literary compositions. Literary stories and reading aloud undoubtedly have their place in language education, and oral storytelling and reading aloud are by no means mutually exclusive, but oral storytelling has a number of advantages to offer.

A literary story belongs to its author, but oral stories, whether traditional tales or personal anecdotes, belong to the teller. A storyteller knows that no one has ever heard the same story the same way before, or ever will again, even from the same teller; every telling is different. Thus, stories used in class, and the complexity of their language, can be altered to suit the interests and

proficiency level of the students. A teacher reading a literary story aloud may perceive simplifying the words of the story as an injustice to the author, or inserting an additional explanation as an interruption, but with an oral story, adjustments such as these can be incorporated seamlessly into the telling.

A Peace Corps volunteer in central Africa tells the story of the sudden arrival of electricity in a village where an old storyteller lived. When a television set was installed, the children were enthralled at first, but weeks later, the storyteller was back on his stool, while the television lay idle. Asked for an explanation, one of the children said: “The television knows more stories, but my storyteller knows me” (Collins & Cooper, 1997, pp. 41-42). Teachers as storytellers share the same advantage: we know our listeners, and can choose and adapt stories to suit them.

Storytelling, unlike reading aloud, places no barriers between teller and audience, in the form of either someone else’s words or the physical book. It leaves the teacher’s eyes free to make eye contact with the students, and the hands free for supporting gestures. An often-heard formula says that the words themselves contain only 7% of the meaning of any spoken utterance, while tone of voice counts for 38% and body language for 55%. While these numbers have been erroneously applied to contexts far beyond the narrow scope of the experiment that first produced them (Mehrabian, 1971),

it is still indisputable that tone of voice, facial expression and gestures convey a large portion of the meaning of spoken language. With oral storytelling, all of these are at the teacher's disposal to bring added richness to the story.

“Why?”

The benefits of storytelling in the classroom

Linguistic

The linguistic benefits of using stories in a language class are well known. Telling stories in the classroom naturally creates a rich environment for language acquisition, and in stories, students hear vocabulary and grammar in a meaningful context, facilitating acquisition of new language items and providing valuable reinforcement for language already learned. In particular, folktales follow a clear, repetitive pattern that made them easy for ancient storytellers to remember, and also makes it easy for modern language students to remember the vocabulary and grammatical structures contained in them.

In addition to facilitating receptive skills, storytelling can be a powerful aid to the development of productive skills. Teacher and storyteller Roberta Simpson Brown gives an example of using a “problem story” activity (in which the teacher tells a story up to the point where a problem is posed, then pauses to let students propose their own solutions before revealing the original solution) to teach sentence structure: Jack, the hero of

the story, is granted one wish and allowed one day to consult with his family before making his decision. Jack wants to be rich, his blind mother-in-law wants to see, and his wife wants a child. How can he phrase his wish so that all three are satisfied? The original solution is “I wish my mother-in-law could see her grandchildren eat off gold plates for the rest of their lives”, but students’ versions frequently expanded upon the original, adding “daughter and grandchildren” or “long, healthy lives.” As the teller reports, “It works much better than opening a grammar book and saying, ‘I want you to combine this list of short, choppy sentences for me.’” (Mooney & Holt, 1996, pp. 142-143).

Cultural

The traditional stories of any culture provide a window into the minds of its people. In the Japanese story of the old man and the seven stone guardians, for example, an old man goes to market on New Year's Eve to sell six straw hats he made in hopes of making money to buy *mochi*. When he fails and goes home, he passes by seven statues of Jizo (the guardian deity of children), and places the hats he made on the heads of the first six, and his own on the seventh. That night, he is rewarded for his generosity by mysterious visitors driving sleighs full of *mochi*, rice, salmon, and gold. Although short, this story illustrates several aspects of Japanese religion and New Year's celebrations. A teacher

introducing these facets of Japanese culture to a class could simply say, “The Japanese have traditionally revered Jizo, the guardian deity of children, and kindness to his image was often regarded as equally admirable as kindness to human beings,” but presenting this cultural information in the form of a story not only makes it more memorable and interesting, it takes the raw facts to a deeper level by allowing students to observe these cultural practices from a first-person-singular perspective.

The window, of course, opens both ways. By listening to stories from the target culture, students can gain a deeper understanding of that culture. Likewise, by learning to tell the traditional stories of their own culture in the target language, students can offer the same understanding to people they meet from outside their own cultures, thus becoming cultural ambassadors.

As well as providing information about a particular culture, folktales make a statement about the universality of certain aspects of the human experience. Very often, a story from one culture will have a parallel in another. In addition, beneath the cultural trappings in folktales often lie messages that will resonate with all hearers regardless of culture. One such theme evident in the story of the old man and the stone guardians, that generosity and self-sacrifice are rewarded, appears in numerous other tales from Japan and around the world.

Personal

As participants in the author’s workshop commented, sharing personal stories gives students initiative, making the class more learner-centered. In addition, using student stories as the focus of the class gives students a greater share of the responsibility for preparing the class.

Furthermore, having a story to tell is a powerful motivator to find the language necessary to tell it. As Zora Neale Hurston said in her 1942 autobiography, “There is no agony like carrying an untold story inside of you.” If students have stories inside them and the chance to make them heard, that alone can provide the motivation to learn the necessary language to be able to tell them.

“Why not?”

Teachers’ concerns about using stories

This section will attempt to speak specifically to teachers who are intrigued by the idea of storytelling in the classroom but may still have doubts about their own ability to put it into practice.

“I’m not a skilled storyteller.”

This may be teachers’ most common concern. Mark Wagler, quoted in the first section, has this answer: “You teachers can impress people with the beauty and power of your storytelling better than any professional group I’ve ever encountered . . . You talk and improvise all day

long. You are masters of storytelling!” (Mooney & Holt, 1996, pp. 145-146)

Many teachers are hesitant about using storytelling in class because they compare themselves to professional storytellers. Professionals, however, are trained to perform before a paying audience of strangers, often in a cavernous auditorium. A storytelling style suitable to this environment would be out of place in a classroom; students will appreciate a story told to them in their teacher’s natural voice more than one told in a more self-consciously theatrical style.

“I can’t memorize a story.”

There are many good reasons *not* to memorize a story word for word. Memorizing someone else’s words puts distance between the teller and listeners, and concentrating too hard on getting the words right distracts the teller from the images of the story, impairing the ability to share those images with listeners. As alternative ways of helping the teller remember the essentials of a story, Morgan & Rinvoluceri (1983) suggest “story skeletons” containing only the bare bones of plot and dialogue; Lipman (1999) recommends outlines based on the teller’s perception of the most important thing in the story; and Collins & Cooper (1997) propose visual story maps.

“I feel guilty about having too much teacher talking time.”

Story-based activities with the teacher as teller may arouse concerns in teachers who have been trained to minimize teacher-talking time (TTT). As Lewis (1993) argues, however, the judicious use of TTT is often the students’ best source of listening material. Furthermore, students will not be passive listeners; some ways to involve them actively in the story will be discussed later.

“I’m not a native speaker of English; I’m worried about making mistakes.”

Non-native teachers of the target language are sometimes understandably nervous about telling a lengthy story, especially at the prospect of making mistakes. Students, however, will be concentrating on the story, either listening for details or trying to grasp the overall plot and see the images lying behind it. Either way, they will hardly be in a position to pounce on the teacher’s linguistic mistakes. The story itself will make a far deeper impression on students than any mistakes the teacher makes. In fact, mistakes can be used as the subject matter for stories, providing a rare glimpse into the fallible human nature of the teacher; as Deacon and Murphey illustrate, “mistake stories” can help open students’ minds to the idea that “mistakes are opportunities and evidence of learning instead of catastrophes” (2001, p. 12).

“My students won’t be able to understand.”

This is a common concern, especially among teachers of lower-level students: At what proficiency level can stories successfully be introduced to the language class? Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1983) suggest that stories can be used with complete beginners, provided their native language is similar enough to English (including Scandinavian and some Romance languages, for example, but excluding Chinese or Japanese). As demonstrated in the author’s workshop with a Mongolian folktale, however, the proper scaffolding can make it possible even for newcomers to a language completely different from their own to understand, enjoy, and learn from a story.

Activities

This section will provide a highly abbreviated overview of some possible pre-, during-, and post-story activities, with a focus on the teacher as teller. There are numerous other activities, with either the teacher or the students as tellers, to be found in published collections; Morgan & Rinvoluceri (1983) and Taylor (2000), for example, are written especially for language teachers, while Collins & Cooper (1997), written for educators in general, contains many activities that can easily be adapted to a language classroom.

Pre-story activities include: pre-teaching essential vocabulary through the use of pictures and/or gestures (Total Physical Response is particularly effective for

verbs); brainstorming vocabulary around the theme of the story (e.g. the prompt *pirate story* could generate “ship, sea, island, treasure, gold, palm tree, parrot” etc.) and expanding this list through synonyms and word association; or predicting the action of a story from a visual prompt (such as a picture or series of pictures).

During-story activities can make use of pictures, either one main picture for the general setting (possibly with smaller cutout figures to move around on the “stage”) or one picture for each scene in the Japanese *kamishibai* tradition; teachers without the time (or, as in the author’s case, artistic talent) to prepare all the scenes themselves may leave their creation to students (which not only saves time but adds the interest of wondering how their own scene will fit into the story). Other possibilities include: arranging events or pictures in order (strip story activities); filling in a map or timeline (as detailed in Taylor 2000); or a “call-and-response” pattern in which students make a verbal and/or physical response (such as the cry of an animal) whenever they hear a certain word or character’s name.

Post-story activities can include twists on typical “comprehension questions”, such as questions inviting students to use their imagination (e.g. asking for the favorite color of a certain character), or the “Revenge Questions” activity devised by Morgan & Rinvoluceri (1983) in which students may “take revenge” for a lifetime of boring comprehension questions by crossing

out any or all of the questions on the list, leaving only the ones they wish to answer. Summarizing a story also adds depth to the learning process (Stevick, 1996) and helps students listen more actively to each other's stories as well (Deacon & Murphey, 2001).

Conclusion

The uses of storytelling in the language classroom are limited only by the teacher's imagination. A paper of

this length cannot even scratch the surface of all the benefits that oral storytelling can provide, or the possible activities that can be structured around stories. Perhaps, however, this paper has addressed some common concerns about storytelling in the classroom, and provided the inspiration for teachers with a tentative interest in storytelling to look into the subject further and experiment with it in their own classrooms. Why not?

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