
Storytelling

Over to you: What is storytelling? Think of a definition, then share it with a partner. You will have the chance to share your definition with the rest of the group.

Some definitions consider storytelling the ‘art’ of telling stories, and I think that’s a frequent connection that is made: that it is an ‘art’. However, even if we can all probably think of individuals who really are great at telling stories, great ‘artists’ – or storytellers – the fact is that every one of us can tell a story, and we do, all the time. What happens to us each day is communicated to others, very often built into a larger narrative that covers a greater span of time. We are all used to the usual tools of storytelling – establishing context, developing narrative, building expectation, suspense, etc. In other words, do not be afraid about including stories in your classes.

But why bother?

Why use storytelling in the classroom?

Think about the kind of exchanges you have in your language each day. Naturally many are transactional, may relate to your work and your needs, etc, but almost certainly, at some point – however short it is – you tell a story. Perhaps something that happened to you on the way home? Or maybe a story a colleague told you over coffee which you then repeat for somebody else. Stories are everywhere, and have always been with us.

They don’t just belong to adults either. Learners are familiar with plots and typical storylines whatever their age or culture. So why use storytelling?

Over to you: Fill in the gaps to complete the statements on why storytelling can be a useful tool for the language teacher (and learner).

How to do it

Storytelling does not have to be about the teacher reading a story aloud; the learners can do it too – to the whole class if appropriate or in smaller groups or pairs. It does not have to be about the learners reading aloud either – reading silently is the way we usually read in our native language, after all. Whichever way you actually use the story, there is plenty to do around it to help the learning process. We will consider how the following relates to that process:

1. What kind of story?
2. The teacher as storyteller
3. Before, during, after
4. Flexible resource
5. Don’t tell the story
6. Dictogloss

What kind of story?

Over to you: What kinds of story can you use in your lessons? Brainstorm - either individually, in pairs or as a whole group.

Perhaps the kind of stories teachers are most used to are class readers, which are typically fiction written in graded language. They can certainly be useful, but don’t underestimate your learners ability to follow stories even if the language involved is perhaps more complex than that which they encounter in a typical lesson.

In general, any published stories that you (or your learners) select will probably be short – from mini-sagas (around 50 words!) to more usual short stories; they might be in print, audio only, or perhaps presented in graphic form as a comic strip. Later on we’ll be looking at using a comic strip with learners from the Premier Skills English site.

You and your students may use your own stories too, of course!

When it comes to making a decision, aim for something which will be motivating for your learners – this will obviously vary from group to group, dependent on age, background and level. Again though, it can be surprising how, say, a group of adult learners can be interested in hearing a typical story for children (e.g. fairytale) in English.

The teacher as storyteller

This feels like a ‘traditional’ way of teaching – the teacher telling a story to their learners. Why not start your lessons from time to time with a short story of what happened to you, say, on the way to the class? You probably do something like this already! If it’s relevant to what you’re planning to do in the lesson, all the better. If not, perhaps it will be interesting enough for the learners to build something from it, say a discussion or sharing of similar stories. You could also, of course, make something up, create a story... all of this will depend on the learners you have, the teaching context, etc.

In recent times, it has been common to consider excessive teacher talking time as potentially a ‘bad thing’, and of course we should maximise opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful communication themselves in the classroom, and avoid meaningless teacher talking time as much as possible. However, very often a story from your day, in your shared context will have meaning for your learners. In addition to that, it’s an opportunity to expose them to language which is appropriate for them – whether because it’s graded or perhaps just because it contains language that you have covered in recent lessons.

In short, spending time talking to your learners, telling stories – as long as they are engaging – is almost certainly a good thing for their learning process.

Extending this further, actually taking time to read a story to class can be a refreshing change or addition to the regular lesson routines. What you read will depend on the age group – maybe let them decide – but a short story can be read in one go, or perhaps you could try a longer story broken down into several parts, over several lessons.

In short, the ‘teacher as storyteller’ approach is one which goes back hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, and there is still a place for it in the classroom today. However, there are other approaches...

Before, during and after

If you have taken the Premier Skills English workshop on developing listening skills in the classroom, you will be familiar with this approach, and the use of tasks to help learners gain an overview (or ‘gist’) of a text, and further tasks to really go into detail.

Don’t fall into the comprehension question only trap!

When you go into detail, remember that it doesn’t have to just be simple comprehension questions, or tasks about the lexis or grammatical features, even though texts can be a fantastic source of real language. Why not explore the detail with more reflection?

Over to you: Put these tasks/activities into ‘before’, ‘during’ or ‘after’ categories (see worksheet).

A flexible resource

One of the reasons using a story in your classes is great is because of the wealth of activities and tasks you can build around it. You can use a story in a very simple way, for example: you or the learners read a short story in your class at the end of a lesson; you ask them how they felt about it, and stop there. Alternatively, at the other end of the spectrum, you could do work on tasks before reading in lesson one, have some games or activities for each part you or the learners read in lessons two, three, etc..., then develop the story or characters further in lesson four, five, etc.

Stories are a wonderfully flexible resource.

Don't tell the story

So far, we've considered the teacher or the learners reading the story as an essential part of any lesson plan or series of tasks. However, have you ever considered using a story without actually reading it? It is a fantastic way to engage with your learners' creativity, and is very simple to do, requiring minimal preparation. You can find an example lesson plan around it on the TeachingEnglish website:

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/telling-a-story>

Over to you: Put these stages in the correct order for a 'don't tell the story' lesson (see worksheet).

Dictogloss

Dictation is a teaching tool or technique which – rather like teacher talking time – has often been seen in a negative light since communicative language teaching became increasingly prominent. However, techniques such as dictogloss can provide a very thorough integrated task i.e. covering multiple skills as well as language and lexis. Dictogloss is a type of dictation which aims to get learners to restructure a text to convey the same meaning, even if grammatically or lexically it is quite different: the teacher reads a short text and asks learners to listen. Then the teacher reads a second time, a bit more slowly than normal, pausing between sentences perhaps, and learners note down key words. Working together, they then use these key words to help rebuild the text. Very short stories, especially 'mini-sagas', are perfect for this – 50 to 100 words long. If you have time, dictate a mini-saga to the group. Just google 'mini-saga' and find one that is appropriate.

Over to you: You will now going to work through several tasks yourselves to consider those strategies for encouraging storytelling in the context of working with materials on the Premier Skills English website.