

STORYTELLING WITH YOUNG LEARNERS

When I was about six years old I got lost walking home from school. I always walked home from school, so I knew the way very well and never had to think about it. It never took much more than fifteen minutes. It was a happy routine.

But on this particular day it was unbelievably foggy. Very thick fog. It was late afternoon, autumn, cold and damp. I had never seen fog like it. It was already getting dark so I could hardly see the other side of the main road I had to cross. Eventually, I crossed the road. I knew the small road on the opposite side would lead me through the housing estate, through other small roads, and home to where I lived.

Once I had crossed the main road, I looked back and was shocked to notice I could hardly see my school. It looked like it was becoming invisible, devoured by the fog. It started to disappear as I walked away and this scared me. I also noticed that most kids had gone now and that the teachers had gone inside. I suddenly felt very alone. Panic started to rise up inside me. My stomach turned. My mind started racing. These were all new feelings to me. I believe that this was the very first time I felt terrified and helpless...

So, dear teacher, you were expecting to read an article about storytelling in ELT and instead you are thrown into a mini memoir! But I wanted start by demonstrating just how powerful stories can be, grabbing and holding the attention, making us think, and making us curious. When a story starts we sit up and take notice; we want to listen to more of it and understand. Stories are a key resource, therefore, for any teacher who wants to motivate their class to learn a language.

A good story is easy to follow, exciting, memorable, and relatable. It delivers step-by-step sequences and creates an emotional response. Since all this really happened to me, it also builds a personal connection. Surely you felt sorry for me? What would *you* have done? How did it make you feel? And didn't it make you think about a time when *you* were scared as a child? Plus, you now know something about my life beyond that of being a teacher. This makes me 'real' and, in turn, brings authenticity and power to my role. And doesn't a good story also make you want to tell it to someone else? This creates intrinsic motivation for getting students involved and communicating.

Moreover, as a storytelling technique, by holding back the story's ending we make the class curious about what happened next. *Did he get home easily in the end? Did he stay lost for long?* What if I tell you that I *did* make it home in the end but that I did not *walk* home? Nor did I have money for a bus. So what happened? (* see the end of this article.) Guessing and predicting are such important aspects of learning a language.

By starting this article with a quick story, I also wanted to show how stories of our own, or those of our students, add an extra, *natural* dimension to the content of our classes. Telling stories is what humans do. Think about anything that happened at the weekend, last night, or this morning. Somewhere in there you will see narratives. They don't have to be thrilling, but there will be sequences of action and emotion.

More importantly, we are *naturally compelled* to tell our stories to others. We *need* others to know our excitement, happiness, sadness, pain, etc. Think about the last time you shared your recent narratives in a conversation, in some texts, or on social media. We do not set out each day to notice and tell stories, but they happen and we do it anyway, all the time. It is how we express ourselves and relate to others.

So, to teach English with storytelling – for any age group or level – is much more than an ‘activity’ or a ‘treat’ now and then for the class. It is *everything*. To teach students with storytelling is to bring into the classroom what comes naturally and to teach a language in a highly effective way.

Kids especially love stories, because theirs is a playful world full of fostered imagination and creativity. Stories are familiar to them and, as we have seen, a natural context for them to *experience* new language (rather than learning grammar, etc. formally). Being memorable and fun, using stories also welcomes repetition, invites curiosity, interaction, and personalisation, and motivates retelling – perfect!

Finally, we are much more than language teachers. We are educators preparing young people for a life after school. So, if we choose the right stories for our English classes, such as simplified classics or fairy tales, we will also be strengthening the learners’ social and emotional learning. We will be building cultural awareness, modelling positive citizenship, and teaching them about the world at large and the many different characters we encounter. And what a wonderful part you will be playing in ... well ... blowing away the fog to show your young learners a visible way forward.

Storytelling tips

The story

When choosing a story make sure it will attract the attention and curiosity of pupils, stimulate their imagination, and prompt them to respond positively and use new language. It needs to be of high interest, therefore, relevant to pupils’ interests and your current lesson topic, and perhaps with a valuable life lesson or message. Many stories such as fairy tales will develop the social and emotional learning of the pupils.

The narrator

Usually that’s the teacher, but some activities can and should involve retelling by the class, either all together (e.g. choral repetition or chanting), in groups, or individually. Create visuals for your story (or use illustrations if you are using a book) to pre-teach vocabulary, and to get the pupils to activate prior knowledge and make predictions as you tell the story. You can use the pictures to prompt pupils to retell the story or do role-play and drama activities.

Rehearse telling your story, practising different voices for the characters and exaggerating intonation to keep the attention and emphasise meaning. Use dramatic pauses, too, or leave gaps to see if pupils can predict the next word. You and your

pupils can create and use flashcards, props, or simple puppets to really get into the story and make it come alive.

The listener

If you are telling a good story well (from memory or by reading aloud) you will have the class in the palm of your hand – what a great feeling for you and for the class! What a great way to build a positive atmosphere, rapport, and the learners’ sense of achievement! As they listen, pupils can mime or do actions, make sound effects, or draw. Later, they can retell the story to their classmate and parents.

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** Well, I’m ashamed to say that I walked around lost for a long, terrifying quarter of an hour, until I found my way back to the main road, where a car stopped and I was taken home. Yes! I got into a stranger’s car! So I got into big trouble with my parents for being late and for getting into a stranger’s car! I was lucky. Nothing happened. Except now I trust fog less than I trust strangers!*