

Finding the Plot: Using stories for business English

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When do we use stories in business life?

The answer is very often: when pitching for business, giving report backs after a trip, telling the story of a company or a deal in marketing pieces, advertising and annual reports as well as more obvious examples such as small talk and anecdote-telling as we socialise. If stories are frequent in business life, how can we use them to help students learn language and understand the intercultural aspects of business?

Today's workshop is going to look at why stories are important and investigate ways that we can use material incorporating stories and create some activities of our own that have stories at their core.

The importance of stories

Traditionally humans have always loved stories. Our brains are hard-wired to create a story from a tiny amount of detail. Have you ever stared into someone else's shopping basket and wondered about their life? Or decided what's going on in your neighbours' lives from the glimpses you get on the stairs?

This skill is very important. It enables each generation to pass on to the next its culture, values and the knowledge which helps it survive and make sense of the world.

“Storytelling is ... an effective vehicle to deliver messages to the subconscious where the 'ahas' of metaphor take place. It is our ability to make metaphorical connections that allow us to learn anything at all. When something new is like something we've done before, we take what we know from the first situation and transfer our knowledge to the new situations. Metaphor instills the learning of content or process on a very subtle, often subconscious level. When the subconscious is activated or accessed, the material enters the mind with no resistance.”

Michael Berman, 'Once upon a story' May 2000 Article 12, ELT newsletter

We learn from birth that stories follow a particular sequence of events. This sequencing plays an important role in guiding us to predict and prepare for likely outcomes from a range of situations. They also provide all humans with a common base of shared experience. How common is described by Christopher Booker in his book on storytelling *The Seven Basic Plots*¹, which argues that all the stories ever told can be divided into seven universal categories. He has found over a thousand independent versions of the Cinderella rags-to-riches story from around the world for example. In short, stories have a track record of success as a didactic tool not just over time but in every culture.

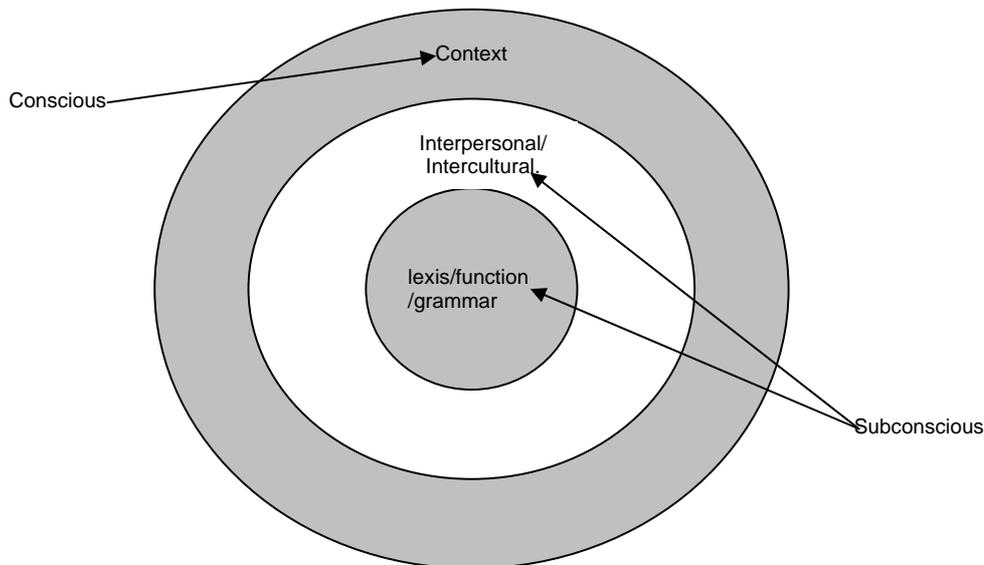
However, stories have fallen out of fashion especially in business English textbooks. Although they were more common in the books of the 70s and 80s, now teachers often fear that business English students will reject material that doesn't look as if it is culled directly from the business

¹ *The Seven Basic Plots* by Christopher Booker, published by Continuum, 2005. ISBN: 0826480373

press. We've already seen that stories are an everyday part of business life and we're going to look at how we can successfully use material with stories in the classroom.

Holistic learning

Stories help people learn better - they provide a holistic learning experience.



As the diagram shows, on the first level the student follows the story, which provides the appropriate situation. At the second level the student observes the interpersonal and intercultural skills that the protagonists need or use to achieve their goals. Finally at the core comes the actual lexis, functions or grammar employed. Level one is of course conscious but levels two and three are largely subconscious. Because the story structures are so familiar, they provide students with the mental scaffolding to help make unconscious predictions about the kind of language necessary as a story unfolds. This means our students can absorb the skills and the language in a meaningful and motivating context before they need to focus on them consciously.

Using stories in teaching

So how could we use a story in a lesson? One idea is to use an anecdote from the teacher's own experience. I have a range of different stories from my previous life as a Marketing Manager. It is best to prepare an anecdote in advance for this activity and think about the language you will be using. It is also useful to write it down so that you can deliver roughly the same version twice. I tell the students I'm going to tell them a story and I recount the anecdote. We might discuss the story but I'll then ask the students to listen a second time to the language of the story itself. In a group situation you can ask small groups of students to listen for particular aspects such as use of tenses, business lexis, linkers etc. The advantage of an activity like this is that it introduces language in context, allows students to focus on the 'how' not the 'what' and it also builds rapport between student and teacher as you share your experience. A good follow up activity such as the one outlined below will also provide students with extended speaking practice.

For the follow up activity, ask students to tell an anecdote from their own experience. They too will need time to prepare and it helps to give them some ideas. The table above is one possibility.

It is taken from *Double Dealing Pre-Intermediate*.² Students listen to an audio clip of a person telling an anecdote and complete the table before using the same structure for their own story.

Anecdote structure

Topic:	1 <i>Holidays</i>	
When:	2	
Place:	Tokyo.	
What happened:	Missed plane to 3	
Why:	Flight not announced	
Result:	Wife 4 , staff put us in airport hotel, tickets for next day.	
Conclusion:	Go to the plane 5	

Another example of using a story in a class activity involves students retelling the news. For this, you need to choose a topical news article about a story that has been in the headlines over several days and has several steps. (You also need students who are aware of current events!) In September I used the SNCM strike when troops stormed a hijacked ferry and ports in Marseille and Corsica were blocked. Elicit events from the students in any order. Write the events on the board. If they don't know the vocabulary, leave blanks and write sentences as students say them including errors. Write the story in the order it emerges from the students and use the verb tenses they use.

When they can't think of any more events, hand out the article. Ask students to read the article and looking back at the board, put the events in the correct order and note any vocabulary they were missing - reordering the story can be done orally or as a writing exercise using the board notes.

The new *Double Dealing* series from Summertown Publishing³ is a rare example of recent material containing a story. Each book contains a story based in the business world with realistic situations and characters. The central characters are from different cultures and as a result the books have a strong cross-cultural focus. The story allows the introduction of the language in context and story-so-far sections mean that teachers can still cherry pick rather than follow every unit sequentially. The story is the framework - not every page or activity contributes to it.

The advantage of using material with stories is particularly evident in the listening clips. Having character with whom the students identify adds an emotional dimension and allows students to listen for the tones and language people use in situations where they are stressed, jealous, flirting,

² page 114, activity 5/CD track 64

³ *Double Dealing* by James Schofield and Evan Frendo, published by Summertown 2004-6. For more information visit www.summertown.co.uk/doubledealing

etc. Having a story in turn allows students to relax and listen. Some students who find listening a challenge can tense up before the clips is played. They focus hard on listening for the 'right' information and find it difficult to listen for global understanding. Listening to material such as the *Double Dealing* extracts is more pleasurable because the first reaction of most students will be to find out what happens next rather than listening for correct answers.

A good example is found at the very beginning of *Double Dealing Pre-Intermediate*.⁴ An audio track sets up one of the main themes of the book (tension between the US and European characters) and makes you sympathise with the embattled main character.

Stories also make a useful basis for role plays. It is not always easy to get students to buy into a role play and finding a situation that everyone in the group thinks is relevant is also hard. Using stories with characters that the students can identify with can get over these hurdles and allow students to profit from the unpredictable nature of role plays that makes them so useful in language practice.

One lesson idea can be found at Onestopenglish.com using the film Meet the Parents. The full lesson plan can be found here:

<http://www.onestopenglish.com/Lessonshare/Archive/Grammar/grammar28.htm>

Conclusion

I hope I have convinced you that stories can be used successfully to teach language and cross-cultural aspects in Business English as well as providing an excellent tool for motivating your students. Any feedback on this subject, especially if you have used some of the ideas for activities or *Double Dealing*, can be sent to me at c.whitaker@wanadoo.fr

Acknowledgement

My presentation was heavily based on an article and workshops given by James Schofield, author of *Double Dealing*. See *Has business English lost the plot?* Guardian Weekly, January 21 2005

⁴ page 2/CD track 2