

9. Stories in language teaching

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Abstract

In this article I offer the argument that stories are central to society and should be central to language teaching for three reasons. The first reason is that stories offer so much richness in language learning and teaching. The second reason is that the aim of most language learning is to be able to present oneself as a whole person through the foreign language and that is done very powerfully through storytelling. The third reason is that many language teachers accept their broad responsibilities to the students as 'student developers' and are not only concerned with the foreign language development of their students. Stories are fundamental to one's sense of identity and to dealing with experience.

What I mean by 'stories'

I use the word stories with an extensive meaning...any description of a series of events whether true or untrue. Stories, for me, include myths, legends, fairy stories and fables which originated in the oral form. But stories also include written fiction and in particular short stories, as well as theatre and film. Furthermore, for me the word 'story' includes our own personal anecdotes, descriptions of the development of a firm or a nation ('The Story of British Steel'), the news (The top stories today are...) and, more difficult to grasp as an idea, the story in which we live (That's the story of my life!).

I believe that we are producers, directors, costume directors, make-up artists and actors in our life stories...stories which have to be constantly adapted to changing circumstances.

This wide range of meanings for the word story is not due to my idiosyncrasy as our language shows:

- *Tell me a story daddy.* (the most obvious sort of story)
- *These trousers have shrunk! That's my story and I am sticking to it.* (information asserted as fact... partly wry humour)
- *The story of Anglo-French relations.* (selective fact)
- *He told me the story of his life.* (selective fact)
- *The top stories today are...* BBC/ITV/CNN... (selective fact)

- *Breaking story... BBC/ITV/CNN... (situation happening at the moment)*
- *She told me a story about a tarantula spider breeding in a cactus she bought at Marks and Spencers. (probably fiction but offered as fact)*
- *It would be interesting to hear his side of the story. (selective fact)*
- *It's the old story... moan, moan, moan! (behaviour)*
- *She just tells one silly story after another. (lie purporting to be the truth)*

Writing and telling stories

Of course, the written story will always be important! However, the orally told story is now rampant and this will increase in the future as computers become more and more powerful and have enough memory to carry long videos and have developed voice recognition to a sophisticated level.

For a long time we have been given the feeling by our teachers that the spoken word is inferior to the written word. Now we have universities (Nottingham and Birmingham in the UK) giving respectability to the spoken word...even producing spoken grammars.

Many of the forms we have in written English did not derive from the 'natural' growth of the language but were added by influential individuals imposing concepts of quality based on the classical languages of Greek and Latin. This artificiality was regarded as a positive virtue in the past rather like the tight clipping of hedges and pruning of trees in a symmetrically planned French garden... nature dominated by man. Now more people give value to the 'natural' development of a language. Grammars are no longer written by erudite individuals crouched over their desks but based on enormous computer data banks revealing how language is actually used.

Oral storymaking and telling (in the broad way in which I define it in this article) is now and will become even more so, an immensely important form of communication. As language teachers, we have an opportunity to contribute to the development of our students in developing their powers in this direction.

The importance of stories in language teaching

There are three broad reasons for language teachers to take the use of stories in their teaching very seriously for all kinds of students from children to adults and from beginners to advanced students. The first is a short-term reason: **The cornflakes of the classroom**. The second is longer term: **What it means to be French when speaking English in international settings**. The third is a fundamental educational reason: **We are the stories we hear and make**. I would like to examine each one of these reasons.

The cornflakes of the classroom

Cornflakes contain a wide range of nutritional elements. A plate of cornflakes a day provides a good basic set of the elements we need. Stories are similar. Here's why:

- Everybody wants to hear a story. That is why stories are so central to our society. The students walking into our classrooms are not just language students, they are people... made of stories... and wanting more stories...
- We are who we are through stories.
- Words are the most common medium for conceiving and communicating stories. Language teaching and stories are all about words, surely stories should be central to language teaching!

Here is a list of benefits in the classroom from the use of stories in language teaching, either creating them or responding to them.

1. Some exams expect the student to be able to give an explanation or story behind a picture, etc. Preparing for the exam is a motivating factor for most students.
2. Some people are only involved and only use their full intelligence if they can be creative. Making and responding to stories is one way of being creative. By being creative rather than imitative we sharpen our observation and encourage our curiosity. We see the possibilities of new relationships between bits of information. We learn to be able to do something about our perceptions and have the confidence in ourselves to do it. We revel in sharing it with others, confident that they will be open to it, if not in

agreement with it. We learn to associate the second language with experience of feelings... not at a distance... through translation but as a first hand element in real events which matter to us. By doing all of this in the foreign language we make it into a second language rather than a foreign language to be used for real at some time in the future.

3. Making or responding to stories is one of the best ways of developing fluency. Fluency is one of the most difficult skills for the students to acquire and they need reason and opportunity to do so.
4. Stories offer an effective way of introducing new language, making it meaningful and memorable.
5. Stories have a natural role to play in cross curricular work. In a story there can be a range of geographical, historical, sociological and cultural information. Activities arising out of stories might range from a study of foods in the *Hungry Caterpillar* story for young learners to a study of hubris in the story of *Bellerophon and Pegasus* for the most advanced students.
6. Stories are a distinctive manifestation of cultural values and perceptions. Stories invite reflection on values and culture. For example there are hundreds of variations of the story of Little Red Riding Hood. In one version Little Red Riding Hood plays a trick on the wolf and gets away (traditional French country version), in another she and her grandmother are eaten and that is the end of the story (Perrault), in another a man saves the two of them (Grimm) and in another LRRH and her Grandma trick the wolf, kill it, skin it and then take it in turns to wear the wolfskin as a coat (Liverpool women's group)!
7. Making and telling stories requires the students to organise information into a cohesive and coherent whole in order to communicate to other people and to develop the students' ability to sustain a monologue.
8. Making and telling stories develops in the students a heightened sense and awareness of English due to familiarity with sustained texts.
9. Stories invite empathy and sharing between students in class and later between the students and other users of English they meet.

Indeed, anecdotes are a key part of everyday conversation...*she's very kind... I remember only last week I...*

10. Stories and metaphors are the classic way of explaining something. To be able to use stories and metaphors fluently, appropriately and naturally is one mark of an accomplished speaker and writer. The language class offers an opportunity to develop this ability.
11. Of course we can 'teach' new words by translating them. However, we all know that translation is far from a perfect method! Very often the associations connected to the two words will be different. The word 'breakfast' for a French and an English person are likely to conjure up very different images, not only sensually different but in terms of value. Furthermore, the superficial ease of translation does not help to make the word memorable. If we want to create the concept of 'courage' in someone's mind how better to do it than through a story? And then the word, 'courage' associated with the experience of the concept is more likely to be meaningful and memorable.
12. Making and telling stories gives the students an opportunity to reflect on their own concerns, perceptions and values. Listening to the stories of other students presents an opportunity to reflect on the perceptions of others and to respond to those reflections. Our own anecdotes help us to give shape and meaning to our lives. Other peoples anecdotes throw a new light on our own experience and become part of our own experience.
13. Making stories can give personal dignity and awareness. One student I worked with once told me, "*I didn't know I had any stories in me and now I know I do.*"
14. Frequent listening to stories develops the students' listening skills.
15. Studying and learning stories contextualises language diversity in dialect, register, narrative description, speech.
16. Retelling stories develops awareness of language change from a written story to its spoken form.
17. Storytelling develops in the teller a heightened feeling of the nature of spoken language and a feeling for the relationship between language, voice and body and objects related to different content, contexts and listeners. Stories link verbal language to the

languages of voice and body. The voice can be used with great variety: pace, pitch, volume, rhythm, pause, timbre are all used to be clear and to be expressive. Similarly, the body can be used to help to communicate content meaning and feelings in conjunction with the words being used.

Summary

The teacher may reasonably ask, "But what proficiency level of student are you talking about?"

The whole range of students from beginner to advanced can benefit from the use of stories and in particular the making and telling of stories. Beginners can be encouraged to 'have a go' at putting together the words they have and combining these words with pictures, drama or music to become 'real' storying. By using dramatic art beginner students can even make a story out of the two words, 'Yes' and 'No'. More advanced students can use English to develop their general story making and storytelling skills so crucial in social intercourse.

However, storymaking and telling in the classroom can only flower if the teacher clearly enjoys and values stories and wishes to share stories. Being only intellectually motivated by the arguments put forward in this article is not going to be convincing enough for many story activities to really work.

What it means to be French when speaking English in international settings.

Some French people may have no wish to be seen as French in international contexts. Such people might prefer to be like chameleons and to melt into the background of whatever culture they happen to be in. But many French people are understandably proud of being French and want to offer their 'Frenchness' to the world wherever they are.

But don't you show your French character and perceptions and values partly through the stories you tell? And remember 'stories' for me range from the current news items you decide to pass on to your personal anecdotes right through to your wonderful French traditional stories!

The form and manner of the 'Frenchness' you choose to manifest is your choice and your students' choice. The stories you choose to tell are thus your choice. It is not for me to say that you *should* be able to tell French legends and traditional stories so that you can grip company at dinner or a companion on a train journey or your hosts' children at bedtime with the passion of your French stories. But if you could do so your listeners would never forget you!

Why should language teachers concern themselves with this aim which must seem rather distant from the classroom and even from the examination? I believe it is worth specifically working towards because students are motivated by the sense of it... and being motivated are more likely to use the full potential of their brains and hearts... and so learn and remember better.

How can language teachers help the students to develop their ability to tell stories and not to merely describe their pets, favourite music and say how many brothers and sisters they have got? In this part of my article I will pass on a few thoughts about stories and the craft of storytelling.

Stories

The whole range of stories I refer to above are relevant to the idea of being French, in English. However, I would like to enthuse a little about French legends and traditional stories. Perrault's collection of stories has influenced all Western societies and more broadly, the world at large. However, I am particularly struck by the relationship of Perrault's versions of the stories related to the readers he had in mind and their courtly values at the time. Zipes in his books (see Further Reading), shows how the story of Little Red Riding Hood varied significantly according to the different social groups who adopted it. In Perrault's version she is killed, getting what she deserved as a disobedient girl. In a version for country people in France, Little Red Riding Hood tricked the wolf and got away.

I advise that the students discuss the values and perceptions evidenced in the stories so that they can link their storytelling to whatever conversations are going on before they launch into their story telling. Of course, the students need a reasonable level of English to discuss stories. If their level is too low to do it

satisfactorily then you might, for example, offer them five sentences expressing different opinions on the story and ask them to put them into their order of preference. You can adapt the activity out of *Dictation* by *Mario Rinvolucri and Paul Davis*, in which the teacher dictates five sentences about the story and the students write them at the top of the page if they agree with them, in the middle if they half agree with them and at the bottom if they don't agree with them.

Of course you want the students to get their English right but emotionally it is more important to help the students to work on their craft of telling. The craft of telling is a big subject but I can list a few points which might be of some practical use.

Here are some of the basic considerations in developing a craft of storytelling:

1. Usually listeners have to be prepared in some way for the idea that you are going to launch into a story, unless it is a short personal anecdote.
2. Always concentrate on how you can give the story and your feelings about it to the listener rather than thinking about yourself.
3. Of course, tell the story with feeling and put everything you have got into it.
4. The main components are: the gist of the story, crucial details, rich and precise words, expressive use of voice and body.

The students can work in groups to develop these skills and you can make audio and video recordings to study and analyse.

We are the stories we hear and make.

Our bodies are made out of the food we eat and our minds out of the stories we have heard and made. The fundamental developmental importance of stories is significant to the language teacher *if* the teacher accepts her or his responsibility for contributing to the building of the individual student's values, perceptions, identity and relationships with others. All teachers do affect the personal growth of students, particularly young students, whether the teachers accept partial responsibility for this or not! For this reason I will note some of the ways in

which stories play a central part in our society at the adult level as well as for children. Stories are certainly not just for little children!

A few years before my mother died she asked me if I believed in an after life and in being able to speak to the dead. In those days I believed that truth was the most important thing and I said, "No!" Today I would probably be, at least, evasive in my reply. My mother was not gloomy about her own impending death except in so far as it would cut her off from the family she loved. That is why she hoped for the possibility of talking to us once she had 'gone to the other side'. My mother accepted what I said, but replied, "But you must admit one thing! We live on in the people we have affected. Even a smile at a bus stop affects us but how much more so a life of stories and shared experiences."

When my mother died my brother and I had to sort out all her things and decide what to do with them. In her later years she had bought some rather good naturalistic water colours of Derbyshire which she loved. John and I agreed to sell them. The dealer who had sold the pictures to my mother agreed to come to the house. I expected him to be a ruthless business man and I had my price ready and all my determination not to budge!

The dealer came, sat down, looked at the first picture and said how nice it was! I was amazed! This was no way to do business!

"Your mother was a woman of great taste!" he said. "These are excellent pictures!"

"How much will you give me for them?" I asked.

"No, you are selling them!" He said, "You must tell me the price you want for them!"

I gave him my upper price expecting to have to begin to bargain. He took out his cheque book and signed a cheque without speaking a word. He gave the cheque to me and said, "I can't cheat your mother! They are worth twice as much!" My mother lived on in his action.

In 1997, the DNA of a 9,000 year old skeleton found in the Cheddar Gorge, in England, was examined. A local man, Adrian Targett, whose family, as far as

he knew, had always lived in the Cheddar Gorge area was found to have some crucially identical parts of the same DNA pattern. Adrian now knows that he is descended from the man whose skeleton was found in the cave! Adrian said that he had often been in the cave but had never known that it was his family home. Physically, people of only 9,000 years ago looked just like us... dress them up and put them on a bus and you wouldn't think about it.

My mother was right; we live on in other people. How many of Adrian's gestures are similar to those of his ancestor from 9,000 years ago... the way he walks and smiles? But what about his values and perceptions? What about his stories and the roles and behaviour he lives by?

We are the stories we have heard and the stories we make.

I have lived in Hungary for about five years. I have not settled down here in the sense of adopting the Hungarian story as my own. On the other hand I am apart from my own story setting. In England I could feel the meaning of every stone in an old building, I could see the ridge and furrow in contemporary fields and 'see' the peasant making them in the Middle Ages before the fields were enclosed. When I use the word 'cow' I can 'see' the Saxon farmers raising the cows. When I use the word 'beef' I can see the Norman French speaking invaders eating the meat (boeuf).

Sometimes, in this different story setting in Hungary, I feel 'story less' and barren and lost. Without stories we are without identity. Stories bring us into being.

But what sort of stories should we live by?

Once, in Vancouver, a man called Croft Island, a dealer in real estate who was small, wore a coffee coloured raincoat whenever I saw him and always wore dark glasses so that I never saw his eyes, suggested that I live in North America. I said I would miss my family furniture which dates back to 1650 and my friends and the ridge and furrow in the fields and the sound of the curlew high on the moors.

Croft replied, as he drove his long Chrysler smoothly through the traffic, "Listen! I don't own anything. Not this car, not my home, not my clothes, not even my shades! And I'll tell you something, I don't even own my name. I just invented it one day and had it accepted in law."

Could you live in a life story in which you just hire yourself another story to live in? Who is Croft Island? I am not too worried about the possibility of his reading this part of the article... he will have a new name by now, I suppose... and may even have no memory of the man I met.

At an art school where I was a lecturer many years ago a colleague asked his students to write down ten things about their values and behaviour and ten things about their habits. He then asked them to spend one week living out the exact opposite of each one. He told me that some of the students never returned to their previous stories!

When people experience a sudden and horrific tragedy, their lives are destroyed and specialist psychiatrists have to be brought in to help them to sort things out. They are living in their story and suddenly a calamity hits them and knocks them out of their story. One moment the people in Locherbie, in Scotland, were living out their normal evening lives at home and the next moment the airplane, blown up above them, crashed onto their village. People in a state of shock, stare, hardly respond to normal events around them. They have been derailed. A train without a track goes nowhere. The psychiatrists must help them to build a new story which allows them to incorporate this horrific change to their circumstances.

Of course some people have a story which incorporates the notion of change and even of inevitable disaster so that when it comes it is not so shocking for them and they recover more quickly. We are facing a millennium of great changes. Are the stories we are giving our students flexible enough for them to adapt to change, even horrific change? On the other hand, do the stories we give them offer stability and security, identity but the strength of good relationships with others?

There is no story we can give our students which does not contain values

and perceptions. One bar of chocolate doesn't do anyone any harm... regular chocolate makes you fat and makes your teeth drop out. One story manifesting questionable values probably does no harm to anyone but what about a regular diet of stories offering violence as a solution to problems, offering narrow roles for men and women, etc.? Are stories and mental health the concern of the language teacher? Each teacher decides.

I would like to take a different tack and look at other analogies for the phenomenon I am calling 'story'. Some people refer to 'maps' and 'life maps' which are given to us and which we modify and which we travel across. Some people refer to our 'path'... a lit path through darkness with bottomless depths of chaos on either side.

Some people refer to our 'films' in which we are the director who has to adapt to a real setting not a studio controlled one. The film is partly the result of what the weather is like at the time of shooting. It is also partly the result of the performance of the various actors. However, we are also casting director and we have done our best to choose who we want for each part — just what our wife should be like and what she should think and behave like. We are our costume director — at least of ourselves as protagonist. Some people place themselves in a minor role in their own film and others demand the central role. Some people prefer to think of living in their own 'soap opera'. I believe the travelling actors in the *Commedia del Arte* didn't have a fixed script but entered situations in character and responded according to their characters. Our lives are loosely scripted. We are loosely knitted together by our stories.

Conclusion

Well! Well! Well! This is all pretty ethereal stuff...full of trendy assertions!

But... The British royal family has appointed a 'spin doctor', a person whose job it is to find good stories about his or her employer and to give them to the press. He or she might even tell the queen how to dress, have her hair done, how to modulate her voice and what to say. But you might argue that the British royal family is presented as a story so it is not surprising that they should employ a professional storymaker and teller to do it for them!

The British government employs spin doctors... or, at least, the British New Labour party does. Their job is to send good stories about Labour to the press and to find and write up and send bad stories about the other parties to the press! Every political party in the West employs spin doctors.

Every car advertisement on the television tells a story rather than giving a list of technical information. You buy a car as a ticket into a story as much as a way of getting from A to B. The news readers of BBC, Sky News and CNN begin the news by saying, "The top stories today are...": How honest journalists are! They begin by telling us that they are going to tell us a story albeit based on a selection of information from 'real' facts.

The toughest and most powerful people in the world: politicians, the bosses of commerce, warlords and church leaders and media chiefs all know that controlling stories means controlling the way people think and behave. We are in a world made of stories and in so far as we, as teachers, feel partly responsible in influencing how our students grow, so we will, or will not, take the role of stories in language teaching, very seriously indeed.

Biodata

Andrew Wright is an author, illustrator, teacher trainer and storyteller. As an author he has written books for Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press and Longman. His books include: *Storytelling with Children*, OUP; *Five Minute Activities*, CUP; *1000 + Pictures for Teachers to Copy*, Longman. As a storyteller he has worked with about 40,000 students in the last ten years in about ten countries. The ideas expressed in this article are more fully developed in his books. He lives in Godollo, Hungary with Julia Dudas and their two children Timea and Alexandra. If you would like to follow up this article or to enquire about courses run by Andrew in storymaking and telling then please email him on: ili@mail.pipenet.hu

Further reading

Morgan, John and Mario Rinvolutri *Once Upon a Time* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983

This was the first book in the field of using stories in foreign language teaching and is excellent.

Rosen, Betty *And None of It Was Nonsense* London: Mary Glasgow Publications 1988. The author has done a lot of work using Greek myths with inner city London teenagers.

Wright, Andrew *Storytelling with Children* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995

This book offers ways of helping students to respond to stories, most of the activities can be applied at most proficiency levels.

Wright, Andrew *Creating Stories with Children* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997

This book offers ways of helping students to make stories.

Zipes, Jack *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales*

New York: Routledge 1979

Zipes, Jack *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion: The Classical Genre for Children and the Process of Civilisation* New York: Routledge 1983

Zipes, Jack *Creative Storytelling: Building Community, Changing Lives*

New York: Routledge. 1995.

This is such a rich book in ideas about stories as well as about ways of helping students to become more aware of stories.