

Story telling: the language teacher's oldest technique

In this article Mario Rinvoluceri explores a range of story telling techniques that he uses in the classroom and gives some insights into why these techniques are effective. You can read the whole text or click on the links below to find out about an individual technique:

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Why story telling

Can I open this article by asking you about listening to stories in your own experience? When you were small:

- Where did you tend to listen to stories?
- What time of day was it, typically?
- Who told you or read you stories?
- How did you react to the stories?

Now you are older:

- Have you read or told stories as a parent?
- What are your feelings in the parental role?

The point of these questions and the answers you have given them in your mind is for you to realise how you yourself relate to stories. My impression is that most people relate pretty strongly to stories experienced in early childhood. Let me tell you an anecdote that illustrates this:

I was teaching a micro-group of three or four business men. They were all at elementary level. My boss at the time was quite firm with me 'none of those childish stories of yours with this group... we don't want them all going home in disgust.'

For a couple of weeks I heeded his words and then decided that the best possible way to teach the past tense was the story of Little Red Riding Hood.

I was well into the story, at the point where the wolf is about to eat the little girl up, [What big teeth you've got granny!] when the Italian marketing manager, a man in his early 30s, shouted: 'Fermati!' ('Stop!')

I asked why he'd interrupted me and he said that this was the point at which his three year old daughter always begged him to stop the story. She could not bear the next bit!

Can you think of a more powerful way of teaching this guy English than with a text that had him living two roles, that of himself as a child and that of himself as a parent? The power of the story lies, of course, in the text but also, and centrally, in the relationship between the teller and the students.

My claim is that story telling is a uniquely powerful linguistic and psychological technique in the hands of a language teacher which s/he can use with people of any culture (though the story needs to be culturally appropriate) and with people of virtually any age.

The power of story telling lies in the fact that the teacher is in direct communication with the class, she is not dealing with 'third person' text, by telling a story she makes it her own. The Italian marketing manager was reacting to the girl and wolf story as told by Mario and, simultaneously, to his own telling to his little daughter.

Mixed language telling

There are, of course, many different ways of telling a story to a group. One of the most powerful ways with a group of beginners is to tell the story in the way that follows: (In this case the target language is Modern Greek):

*There was this man and he seemed very agitated. This **andras**, this guy, he went round and round the **kipo** behind his house (*kipo* is a garden) looking for something. The **andras** got down on his hands and knees and started scrabbling around in the border underneath the **traiadafila**, the roses.*

*Now the wife of the **andra**, his **yineka**, happened to be in one of the upstairs rooms of the house. The **yineka** looked out through the bedroom **parathiro** and saw her **andra** searching for something in the border under the **traiadafila**.*

*She asked him what he was doing. 'I'm looking for my house keys' her **andras** shouted back.*

*'Did you lose your house **klidia** down there in the **kipo**, in the border under the **traiadafila**?'*

*'No' said her **andras**, 'I didn't lose my **klidia** here under the **traiadafila**, but the light is so much better here!'*

I hope the text construction was logical enough for you to understand all the Greek words without having to strain too much. Bi-lingual stories of this sort are magic with small kids and people at this stage of linguistic brilliance (3-8) lap up and 'interiorize' the new language without realizing what is happening in their minds. When the story has been told half a dozen times with more and more target language words being used in each telling the whole story is told in the target language and the learners have the giddy sensation that they have understood everything.

Multi-voice storytelling

A technique I really enjoy is telling a story with the help of the listeners. Let me show you how this goes:

- I ask a couple of learners to sit either side of me and a bit back from me, all three of us facing the class group. I then start the telling like this:

This story is about three people who lived in a village in Vietnam. It was a small village and it had a big river... I simply don't remember what the river was like and where it ran... [turning to one of the helpers] Do you have a better memory than me? Can you describe it?

- Both helpers have a go at positioning the river in the village.
- I then carry on telling the story. Five or six times I stop and get the helpers to enrich the telling with their descriptions. I am careful to retain the plot in my own hands until very near the end. I then ask all the students to write down the ending that they imagine.
- They read their endings to each other and I will finally also give them my ending. Told in this way, the story belongs much more securely to the group than if I tell the tale on my own.

Sandwich story creative writing technique

Let me now offer you a creative writing version of the above technique that uses a story from Papua New Guinea. (I learnt this story from the Exeter story-teller, David Heathfield.)

Example:

- Dictate to your class these first lines of a story:

'Do you know why dogs in Papua New Guinea always sniff each other's tails when they meet? Well, you'll soon find out. Long long ago all the dogs on the island came to the hilltop for a meeting.'

- Then ask them to please describe all the different kinds of dogs which came to the meeting place. Give the students time to write about the dogs. Then ask them to please write what you dictate and say the next sentence:

'The meeting place was a huge hall at the top of a hill.'

- Then ask them to describe the sort of building they imagine and give them a few moments to write their description. Then once again dictate the next part of the story:

'Before the dogs arrived the place had been very, very quiet.'

- Ask the students to describe what it sounded like with more than 1000 dogs all moving around. Give them time to write and then continue dictating the story.

'Before they went into the great hall all the dogs had to go and hang their tails up in a special tail-house.'

- Ask the students to explain why the dogs could not enter the great hall with their tails on. Give them time to write the explanation and then continue dictating.

'Halfway through the meeting the dogs smelt something burning. They rushed for the doors of the great hall and saw smoke billowing out of the tail-house.'

- Lastly, ask the students to finish the story in any way they like.
- Group the students in threes and tell them to read their text to their classmates. They read both the dictated parts and the parts they have written.

The Papua New Guinea ending is that the dogs rushed into the tail house and grabbed any tail they could find in the smoke. From that day to this all dogs have wanted to find their own tail, lost on the day of the great meeting!

This sandwich story creative writing technique is, I think, an outstanding one for the following reasons:

- Half of the final text is in fully correct English, the parts dictated by the teacher
- Half the text is the students' own free invention
- Psychologically the student appropriates the teacher's part and feels it to be his own because of his own creative input
- All of this boosts the student's linguistic confidence

Two histories, one fiction

Think of two incidents from your life that you are happy to tell the class and mentally prepare to tell these as brief anecdotes. Also dream up something that might have happened to you but which did not. Prepare to tell the made-up anecdote with the same conviction as the two real life stories.

- Come into class and simply invite the students to listen to three different things that happened to you some time ago.
- After the telling explain that two of the anecdotes were real-life happenings while one was fiction.
- Group the students into fives to decide which was the 'imaginary' story. Tell them they will have to justify their choice.
- After a few minutes in the small groups ask students to give their views to the whole class.
- Take a vote on which the made-up story was.

Students tend to really love lie-detecting especially when the teacher is the 'liar'.

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