

STORY-TELLING

IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Patrick Philpott
The English Language Centre
Córdoba

By story-telling, at least for the purposes of this paper, we mean, principally, oral story-telling: it is clear that there many and excellent ways of telling and exploiting written stories, but that, as the saying goes, is another story ...¹

Before the paper really got under way, the audience were invited to discuss among themselves when they used to have stories told to them; this served to elicit many childhood memories, and to establish the fact that story-telling is an important part of everyone's personal development. Or, at least, it used to be. Nowadays, when children derive all their stories from impersonal media – TV, videos, comics, etc— one begins to wonder if they have not been deprived of one of the most essential experiences in life. Perhaps by using story-telling more in class we can in some way counter this dehumanising trend. We also briefly discussed what we meant by «story», and agreed to keep the definition as loose as possible.

Several ways of presenting and telling stories in class were then demonstrated by the speaker, and discussed and evaluated by the audience in groups of four. The techniques demonstrated were:

1. The grand, dramatic approach, with lots of mime, gestures, acting, repetition, audience-participation, etc.

2. A simple one of the cuff telling of a funny story.

¹ This article is Patrick Philpott's written story of his lecture at the Vth Encuentro de Profesores de Idiomas, Guadalajara, September 1991.

3. Telling a story from a skeleton; this latter, as explained by Morgan and Rinvoluceri, is a schematic summary of the story, with only the key words in it. It makes the telling much more real than reading it out, while still lending strong support to the teller.

4. Simply reading out a story.

5. Using Cuisenaire rods to elicit a story from the audience; the teller has a story in his mind, but lets the audience transform it as they go along.

6. A question story (based on an idea picked up many years ago from *English Teaching Forum*, by R.H. Kressel) in which the teacher writes up several words from the story on the board —the class not having seen the story before-hand, naturally—. He/she then asks questions to which the words on the board form the key; the class choose the appropriate words, give answers (which the teacher either accepts or rejects until they are correct) and so form the whole story as they go along.

7. A Silent Way story, which the class have to squeeze out of the teacher; the latter can only help by signs and gestures, and by approving or rejecting whatever the class offer —although if things get really desperate, he/she is allowed to write a key word or two on the board, or even, pace Gattegno, to speak a word or two.

The point was made that many of these story-telling techniques can be made more interesting by cutting the story up into bits, missing bits out, changing the order and generally trying to make students' lives even more miserable than they usually are. After ample discussion, we concluded that all these different ways of putting a story over have their virtues and vices —yes, even plain reading the story out loud. We each probably have our favourites, but clearly, the more ways we can command, and the more we know about their relative merits and dangers, the better teachers we will be.

The speaker went on to outline the advantages of using stories in class. In short, these were that story-telling is an age-old, very natural human activity, with strong childhood associations; it is a kind of experiential learning, since it effectively blends language and experience; it encourages creativity, divergent thought and the use of analogies and metaphors; it is also a fine introduction to literature; it makes students concentrate perhaps more than they do in other classroom activities, and has the great virtue of presenting language, not word by word but in chunks, and with the focus on content, not form (which is the way Prabhu tells us we should acquire languages); it can very easily introduce or reinforce both themes and structures, as needed; it is a vehicle which will carry whatever we want to load onto it, or can be used simply for pleasure (as in many recent courses); finally, it is an excellent instrument for teacher training, since it teaches the teacher to select, prepare and deliver the story to a given

class at a given time, paying attention to themes, structures, interest areas, elocution, timing, acting and so on.

After dealing with «why», we then proceeded to talk about «how» to use stories most effectively in class. In the first place, we must either choose a «good» story or somehow make it good, bearing in mind that we are preparing it for a given class; it need not be completely understood, for instance, on a linguistic plane, so long as the «story» itself is clear. Most stories will have to be adapted in some way by the teacher; many can be more relevant, for instance, by bringing them up to date — say, by making a carpenter a computer programmer, a rude boy a punk. Secondly, the telling of the story deserves all our care and attention; it must be rehearsed, props must be made ready, it will have to be tied in with what the class have been doing previously, or are about to embark on; personal touches will make a story come alive, but they cannot always be improvised. Finally, we will normally want to exploit our stories to the full and get the class to re-tell them, act them out, change them or do any other exercises based on them. That led us to consider different ways of exploiting stories in class.

Three ways were outlined. The first was telling a story, then asking the students to re-tell it, but putting themselves into it, either as one of the existing characters or as a new one. Next the speaker told a story to the class while four members were outside. These were called in one by one; the first had the story told to him by a member of the class; then he told it to the next one, and so on. Surprisingly, the story did not change all that much in the course of the several tellings! This exercise, by the way, is very useful as a starting point for a discussion on communication. Finally, the speaker put 12 key words from a story on the board and asked the class to hypothesize on what the story would be; the words were arranged in a circle, what we call a «word rose», and the idea is what sort of story the class can produce, and how it compares to the «real» one (it is often more interesting!).

Just before we ran out of time, it was possible to demonstrate a story elicitation technique in which the teacher starts the story off, then throws a (soft) ball to a student, who must carry on for half a sentence or so, before throwing the ball to a classmate, and so on and so forth. Stories can be generated by all kinds of stimuli — pictures, doodles, sounds, objects, characters chosen at random and so on. Stories can be completed, transformed, modernised, told back to front, bit by bit, word by word, and in a thousand other ways. They are certainly a first class tool in the hands of a competent teacher, and should probably be exploited much more than they are today.

REFERENCES

On Using stories in class:

Garvie, E. 1990. *Story as Vehicle*. Multilingual Matters.

Morgan and Rinvolutri. 1983. *Once upon a Time*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Picture sources:

Heaton, J. 1966. *Composition through Pictures*. Longman.

Heaton, J. *Beginning Composition through Pictures*. Longman.

Kerr, J.Y.K. 1971. *Picture Cue Cards for Oral Language Practice*. Evans.

Sources:

Hill. *Elementary/Intermediate/Advanced Stories for reproduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hill. *Elementary/Intermediate/Advanced Comprehension Pieces*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Also, any collection of jokes, graffiti, odd occurrences, mishaps, etc.

On content-based teaching:

Prabhu, N.S. 1987. *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford:Oxford University Press.