

Creating a Storytelling Classroom for a Storytelling World

Junko, a middle-aged student in one of my lower intermediate classes, caused a flurry of excitement. The students were doing paired practice with a list of “Have you ever...?” questions: “Have you ever climbed a mountain/driven a foreign car/sung on a stage?” One question was “Have you ever met anyone famous?” Junko and her partner’s interaction went something like this:

Q: Have you ever met anyone famous?

A: Yes, I have. I’ve met Kirk Douglas.

Q: (*Excitedly*) Eeeeh! Kirk Douglas! When did you meet him?

A: After I graduated from high school, I was an elevator girl in a big hotel in Osaka. Kirk Douglas was a guest at the hotel, and I met him in my elevator.

Q: Did you speak to him?

A: Yes. I said, “Hello.”

Q: What did he say?

A: He said, “Hello. How old are you?” I said, “Nineteen,” and he said, “Oh, very young.” So, I (*mimicking a coy expression*) — Hee! Hee! Hee!

Junko’s story of her surprise encounter with the veteran Holly-

wood actor, Kirk Douglas, is one of many stories I have heard in my classroom. As a language teacher, I am always delighted when a student has a story to tell and attempts to deliver it in English. I value it not only for the rich language practice it involves, but also because of the prevalent role that stories of personal experience play in human interaction. Many researchers have commented on the high frequency with which short personal narratives crop up during coffee break conversations in the workplace (Slade 1986; Eggins and Slade 1997), at neighborhood get-togethers (Ochs and Capps 2001), and with friends over the dinner table (Tannen 1984). Tannen (1984) has also demonstrated that one person’s narrative may often be taken up by one or more of the listeners who will add similar narratives of their own to create what she refers to as a “story chain.”

Speaking for myself, I can recall many occasions in which I have been sitting with friends or relatives and a large part of the interaction involves us swapping stories about our triumphs,

our misfortunes, and various things that have happened in our lives. As Andrew Wright (1995) has succinctly remarked, “Go to any pub or party and you will hear a constant babble of stories. The whole world is full of storytellers” (16).

Our students also have stories to tell and can become a part of that storytelling world to which Wright refers. In this article I will detail the following four-step approach to help students develop their skills as conversational storytellers:

1. The first step is an introductory lesson that presents learners with a model story and follow-up questions to raise their awareness of the story’s generic structure as described by Eggins and Slade (1997).
2. Step 2 is a follow-up lesson that invites learners to apply the Eggins and Slade (1997) framework and practice telling stories of their own. This practice is combined with a fluency development technique known as 4–3–2 (Maurice 1983; Nation 1989; Nation and Newton, 2009).
3. In Step 3 teachers make conversational storytelling a regular feature of their classes and help their learners add interest to their stories through the use of devices such as extreme adjectives, idiomatic expressions, and direct speech.
4. Finally, Step 4 draws attention to the active role of the listener by helping learners use back-channeling and other linguistic devices to show interest and empathy as they listen to and interact with the storyteller.

Step 1, Part 1: Generic structure and raising awareness

Once our students have reached the lower intermediate level of English, we can introduce them to the art of conversational storytelling. A good start is for the teacher to present a model story based on some experience of his or her own:

I’ll tell you something funny that happened to me once. It was a few years ago when I was working as a junior high school teacher. It was about the middle of April and I was hiking in the countryside with some third-year students and a

couple of other teachers. Anyway, we were walking past a rice field and suddenly I saw a snake lying at the side of the path. So I asked some of the students, “Is it dead?” And then one boy walked over to the snake and he kicked it. Yeah, that’s right. He kicked it just like this (*mimicking the boy’s movement*) and the snake moved its head. And then the boy turned to me and said, “No, it’s not dead.” And I ... I just looked at him and said, “What are you doing? You just kicked a snake. Are you crazy?” And he just laughed—“Hah! Hah! Hah!” Oh, there are some crazy people in this world, aren’t there?

This story is from my own repertoire but, of course, teachers should feel free to choose any story that they feel would be of interest to their particular students. For teaching purposes, however, two things need to be insisted on: (1) the story should focus on one simple event that gave rise to some emotional reaction such as pleasure, surprise, fear, or anger, and (2) teachers should ensure that their stories provide the students with a clear model of the five generic components of conversational anecdotes identified by Eggins and Slade (1997). These components are *abstract*, *orientation*, *remarkable event*, *reaction*, and *coda* (Eggins and Slade 1997; Thornbury and Slade 2006). Following is an explanation of these five components and a description of how they apply to my snake story:

1. **Abstract.** This is a short phrase or sentence indicating that a story is about to be told, and it often contains a hint of the type of story to expect: “I’ll tell you something funny that happened to me once.”
2. **Orientation.** This explains the essential background information that the listener needs in order to be able to appreciate the story—who takes part, and where, when, and under what circumstances the story unfolds: “It was a few years ago when I was working as a junior high school teacher. It was about the middle of April and I was hiking in the countryside with some third-year students and a couple of other teachers.”
3. **Remarkable event.** This tells what actually happened and includes the section

from “Anyway, we were walking past a rice field and suddenly I saw a snake” to “And then the boy turned to me and said, ‘No, it’s not dead.’”

4. **Reaction.** How did the protagonist or other characters in the story react to the event? How did they feel, what did they say, or what did they do?: “And I ... I just looked at him and said, ‘What are you doing? You just kicked a snake. Are you crazy?’ And he just laughed — ‘Hah! Hah! Hah!’”
5. **Coda.** This rounds off the story by relating it to another time or place and could be a reference to the long-term effects of the related event: “And ever since, I’ve never been able to look at a mango without feeling sick” (McCarthy 1991, 138); or, as in the snake story, we might make a concluding remark commenting on some aspect of human behavior: “There are some crazy people in this world, aren’t there?”

Eggs and Slade’s (1997) five components constitute a framework that teachers can present to the learners as a useful scaffold on which to build their stories. In particular, teachers should focus on the three central components: *orientation*, *remarkable event*, and *reaction*. This is because the abstract and coda are optional features that will not necessarily appear in every anecdote (Eggs and Slade 1997). The remaining three features, however, will normally be present in any well-told anecdote. To draw the learners’ attention to these three features, the teacher can provide a transcript of the story she has told and ask a few questions that are designed not only as comprehension checks but also to function as consciousness-raising questions (Jones 2001), drawing attention to the three central features of the generic structure outlined above.

1. When did this happen? Where did it happen? What was I doing just before it happened?
2. What happened?
3. How did I feel about it? Did I say or do anything?

After the learners have answered these questions, the teacher can introduce and explain the Eggs and Slade (1997) terminology with a brief summary on the board

and demonstrate how the questions they were asked relate to the basic structure of the story:

1. Orientation stage: Who, where, when?
2. Remarkable event stage: What happened?
3. Reaction stage: How did you feel? What did you do?

As for the non-obligatory *abstract* and *coda*, these can be referred to after the three central components have been explained. The teacher can draw attention to the *abstract* in her own story (e.g., “I’ll tell you something funny that happened to me once”) and then present a few other typical abstracts: “You won’t believe this story,” or “Wait till you hear this!” The *coda* can be explained as a comment on how the storyteller feels about the story as he or she looks back on it now: Did it change you? (e.g., “Ever since then I’ve been afraid of dogs.”) Did it teach you something about life? (e.g., “There are some strange people in this world.”) Finally, as a check that the learners have understood the structure of the framework, they can be given the transcript of another anecdote and asked to break it up into its components.

Step 1, Part 2: A language focus

After introducing the generic features of conversational anecdotes to our learners, we can start preparing them to tell their own stories. Before we actually start them on storytelling, however, there is one grammatical feature that teachers might like to focus on. The *past continuous tense* is cited as being particularly frequent in the orientation stage of anecdotes as it gives the listener background information on activities that were in progress at the time the event occurred (Labov 1972; Thornbury and Slade 2006). In the *orientation* of the snake story, we can see two instances of the past continuous: “When I was working as ...” and “I was hiking in the countryside.” We can also see it foregrounding the *remarkable event*: “We were walking past a rice field and suddenly....”

Practice in using this form can be given in two stages. First, the teacher can give a blank-filling exercise of the type that can be found in many grammar practice books (see, for example, Swan and Walter 2001; Murphy 2004). This can then be followed with a more open-ended exercise in which the teacher gives the

beginning of a sentence (e.g., “Last Sunday, I was chopping some onions in the kitchen and suddenly...”) and invites the learners to continue it with ideas of their own. An added bonus with these activities is that the examples given in the exercises can sometimes trigger memories of episodes in the learners’ own lives that they can use later to tell stories of their own, which brings us to the next step in the learning process.

Step 2: Getting started on the stories

Preparation for the second step can be given in the last ten minutes of the consciousness-raising lesson. The teacher can choose a topic—for example, small accidents and misfortunes—and then take the learners through the following activities:

1. The teacher tells a story about, for example, falling off a swing when she was a child.
2. The learners are asked consciousness-raising questions similar to those in the previous section and are reminded of the Egging and Slade (1997) framework.
3. The learners are then asked to think of some small accident or misfortune they have had and be prepared to tell a story about it in the next class. The teacher can nominate some possible topics to start them thinking (e.g., a sports injury, falling off a bicycle, forgetting their bag in a restaurant, etc.).

In the next class, the teacher begins by eliciting her swing story to remind the learners of what will be expected from them. She then instructs the learners to take a pen and paper and make a few notes in answer to the following questions, which she reads out:

Orientation: Where did it happen? When did it happen? Was anyone with you? What were you doing just before it happened?

Remarkable event: What happened?

Reaction: How did you feel? Did you do anything? If you were with someone else, did that person say or do anything?

The teacher can also encourage the students to add an optional *coda* by asking a question such as one of these: How do you feel about that story now? Has it changed you in any way? Did you learn anything from it?

When the students have finished making their notes, the teacher gives them a couple of minutes for review, and she can also remind them of some of the typical abstracts given in the first lesson. Then they put their notes away, and the storytelling begins. A recommended format for the storytelling part of the lesson involves telling the story three times to different partners via the 4–3–2 technique. The principles and procedure behind this technique are explained in the next section.

Improving fluency through 4–3–2

As the learners get ready to tell their stories, bear in mind that telling a story in a foreign language can be a very demanding task. The first attempt is likely to be marked by hesitations, false starts, unnecessary repetition, and other disfluencies. The 4–3–2 approach, attributed to Maurice (1983) and popularized by Nation (Nation 1989; Nation and Newton 2009), is a procedure that can help to rectify this problem and lead the learners towards a more fluent performance.

In the purest form of 4–3–2, each learner tells a story or speaks on a familiar topic to a partner for four minutes. The learner then repeats the exercise with a different partner within a three-minute time frame, and then with another new partner for two minutes. The principle behind this approach is that repetition will bring improvement with fewer disfluencies being evident in the second and third renditions. According to Maurice (1983, 29):

The first four-minute time frame allows the student time to think about the topic while struggling with the language. This time is usually filled with many pauses. When a student speaks for the second time, he/she already knows generally what he/she wants to say and should be able to condense the four minutes of pauses and backtracking into a more organised way of speaking ... The last time frame, two minutes, is meant to push the students into speaking as fluently and naturally as they can.

Nation demonstrates that there may also be improvements in grammatical accuracy and lexical choice, as in the following example, which compares part of a first rendition with its equivalent in the third:

Rendition 1: We stay in the youth hostel that night. By that time it was very late.

Rendition 3: That night we had to stay in the youth hostel, because we reach there very late. (Nation 1989, 382)

To set up 4–3–2 in the classroom, teachers can arrange the learners in rows facing each other. Each learner then exchanges stories with the person he or she is facing. When the teacher signals that time is up, the learners on one side move down a place so that everyone is facing a new partner to exchange stories with.

Let me add that teachers can be flexible about time allocation and should not feel compelled to adopt a strict four-minute, three-minute, two-minute timing sequence. In my own classes, the time is usually negotiated with the students and is also influenced by the language level of the class. A higher-level class, which might be expected to produce more ambitious and detailed stories, might be given the full four minutes for the first rendition. On the other hand, a lower-level class might be given two minutes for the first, one and a half minutes for the second, and one minute for the third. In my experience, students have often reported that they enjoy this activity both for the chance to improve their stories and also for the fact that they have heard three different stories from three different classmates. Like Maurice, I have also found that disfluencies become less frequent during the second and third renditions.

Step 3: Improving the quality of the story—a focus on reaction

Even though students have now been initiated into the art of conversational storytelling, they will need substantial exposure, time, and practice in order to develop their skill. Teachers can help by making storytelling a regular feature of their conversation classes. Various themes can be proposed: success and achievement stories, memories of kindergarten or elementary school, or funny stories about pets or family members. The teacher can repeat the processes outlined in previous sections: giving a model story, asking consciousness-raising questions, encouraging learners to apply the Eggins and Slade (1997) framework, and setting up 4–3–2. The teacher can also focus on story content and help the learners add inter-

est to the story and improve what McCarthy (1998) refers to as its *tellability*.

A high school student had been talking about her part-time job at a restaurant when she was asked if she had ever had any amusing or embarrassing experiences in her workplace. She told the following story:

When I carried food ... er meat ... I carried an empty dish. I fell ... big sound ... (*gesturing*) *kacha!* Every customer saw me ... but my boss forgave me.

A week later, the teacher casually asked the student to repeat her story. She started off with more or less the same words, and then she added something:

Student: Every customer looked at me. ... I was very ashamed. My face was very red and I ... (*quietly*) *katazuke* ... I picked up the dishes and soon ... and uh hurried uh returned back to the kitchen without saying sorry for customers.

Teacher: And what did your boss say?

Student: My boss forgive, forgave me. He didn't blame me.

The main difference between the two versions is that in the second she gives greater voice to her feelings about the incident. Granted, "Every customer saw me" in the first version carries an implication of embarrassment, but in the second version she states more clearly that she was "very ashamed," that her "face was very red," and that she "returned back to the kitchen without saying sorry." In other words, her second version contains a more developed reaction stage.

For me, the richness of the story's reaction stage is the key to its tellability. Labov (1972) emphasizes the need for evaluative devices that say "this was terrifying, dangerous, weird, wild, crazy; or amusing, hilarious, wonderful; more generally, that it was ... worth reporting. It was not ordinary, plain, humdrum, everyday, or run-of-the mill" (371).

While a well-expressed reaction stage would appear to be a crucial element in giving that extra spice to the story, it is possible that our learners may lack the linguistic resources to express their reactions and feelings effectively. We may find, for example, that their repertoire of adjectives and verbs is limited to a small, rather bland set of the most common (e.g., I was very happy, I felt sad, I was angry, I laughed). If this is the case, we can devote

some class time to rectifying this situation. We can, for example, have exercises in which standard adjectives like *happy*, *sad*, *funny*, and *angry* are matched with some of their more dramatic, extreme counterparts: *delighted*, *devastated*, *hilarious*, and *furious*. This can be done with pelmanism (i.e., memory-based) games in which, for example, an “angry” card is matched with a “furious” card, or with bingo games in which, for example, the teacher calls out “interesting” or “hungry” and students mark *fascinating* or *starving* on their bingo cards. We can also practice these adjectives in a more contextualized way through mini-dialogues in which learners are invited to upgrade a standard adjective to an extreme adjective, as in this example:

Q: Were you happy when you finished the marathon?

A: Happy? I was absolutely _____ (thrilled/ecstatic).

Learners’ attention should also be drawn to the fact that while we can say “very happy,” “very sad,” etc., extreme adjectives tend to co-occur with *absolutely*, *just*, or *really* rather than *very*.

In addition to extreme adjectives, we might also teach a selection of useful idiomatic phrases. For example, we can express delight with phrases like “I was absolutely walking on air,” or anger with “I nearly hit the roof.” “I laughed” or “I cried” can be intensified with “bursting” expressions: “I nearly burst out laughing,” “I just burst into tears.”

Extreme adjectives and idiomatic expressions can be taught and practiced as the main focus of a lesson. They can also be taught proactively in the course of storytelling activities. One of the attractions of getting learners to tell their own stories is that it is they who are supplying the content while the teacher takes more of a facilitating role in helping them to express that content more effectively. If, for example, a learner says, “I laughed,” the teacher can ask, “Was it a big, loud laugh or a quiet, gentle laugh?” Depending on the learner’s reply, the teacher can then suggest or elicit a suitable word or expression.

For teachers who wish to give students opportunities to use extreme adjectives and idiomatic expressions within the body of a story, my personal recommendation would be stories of success and achievement. A teacher’s

story about the first time she swam a length of the pool as an elementary school child or her feeling after her first solo drive as a novice driver can provide an excellent context for extreme adjectives like *ecstatic*, *thrilled*, *fantastic*, idioms like “over the moon,” or non-idiomatic lexical phrases like “I couldn’t believe I’d done it.”

Another device that learners can employ to add color and interest to their stories is the use of direct speech. Notice, for example, that in the snake story the interaction between myself and the boy was expressed through direct speech: “What are you doing? You just kicked a snake. Are you crazy?” Likewise, a student describing her first solo performance on the trumpet will be able to give a more vivid impression of her feeling of triumph with, “My friends came up and said, ‘Hey Miki, you were great!’” than with a more mundane “My friends congratulated me.”

To give practice in expressing emotion through direct speech, teachers can consider giving learners short newspaper articles in which interaction is expressed through indirect speech and ask them to speculate on the actual words they think the characters might have used (Jones 2007). And again, when students are telling their own stories, the teacher can monitor and be proactive, prompting them with comments like, “You said your teacher was angry. What did he actually say?” Encouraging a certain amount of mimicry can also add color to the story.

Earlier in this section, reference was made to Labov’s (1972) observation of the need for evaluative devices to highlight the feelings aroused in the story. The use of extreme adjectives and idiomatic phrases to express strong feeling, and the use of direct speech to add atmosphere and immediacy, are some of the devices that we can practice with our learners and encourage them to use in their own stories. Such devices will, hopefully, add interest to the story and prevent its being killed by a disinterested “So what?” from their listeners (Labov 1972), a reaction that every storyteller dreads.

Step 4: Becoming an active listener

We now come to the final step in the teaching process, which shifts the focus away from the storyteller to the listener(s). Though

I say “listener,” Ochs and Capps’ (2001) term, *interlocutor*, may be more appropriate, for while a professional storyteller with a paying audience may expect to give an uninterrupted rendition and receive a round of applause, a conversational storyteller can expect to receive a substantial amount of interaction.

This interaction may range from what Ochs and Capps (2001) refer to as *low involvement feedback*, such as the continuers “uh huh,” “yeah,” or “hmm,” expressions that “signal attentiveness and encouragement to the storyteller but otherwise does (sic) not contribute substantially to the telling of the emergent narrative” (26), to higher involvement reactions such as asking for clarification (“And this was while you were still in the airport?”), expressing empathy (“That must have been scary!”), showing surprise or outrage (“You’re kidding! He didn’t!”), or prompts to provide more detail (“So, did you contact the police?”).

How can teachers help learners train other learners to become more active as listeners? Thornbury and Slade’s (2006) three-way process of *exposure-instruction-practice* can be helpful here. In the first stage, *exposure*, the learners are given transcripts of dialogues containing short, contextualized back-channeling phrases such as “Really?,” “Yeah,” “Uh hmm,” “I see,” “No!” and “He didn’t!” These dialogues can be taken either from their regular course books, if appropriate, or supplied by the teacher. The learners then listen to them either on a recording or as modeled by the teacher and practice reading them in pairs with a focus on correct intonation. In the second stage, *instruction*, the teacher focuses on the phrases themselves and discusses their individual functions (e.g., “Yeah” and “Uh hmm” as continuers, “I see” to show understanding, “Really?” to show surprise, “He didn’t!” and the extended “No-oo!” to indicate shock). Teachers should also stress that these phrases, simple though they may seem, play an important role in showing the speaker that we are listening, are interested, and wish to encourage him or her to continue. In the third stage, *practice*, learners can be given short, one-sided dialogues containing the main speaker’s part (A) only and be invited to fill in the listener’s part (B) with suitable expressions:

A: It was a good holiday, but we got a terrible shock on the last day.

B: [Why? / What happened?]

A: Well, Jane was walking along the street, and she stopped to look in a shop window.

B: [Yeah / Uh huh]

A: And a guy snatched her bag and ran away with it.

B: [No-oh! / You’re kidding! / What!]

At a later stage, teachers can focus on a selection of higher involvement responses to extend the learners’ repertoire. One phrase that is frequently used by listeners is the *I bet + auxiliary verb* structure. Teachers can compose simple drills to give practice with this item:

I was tired after that climb. —I bet you were.

I just wanted to sit down and have a cup of tea. —I bet you did.

I won’t be doing it again for a long time. —I bet you won’t.

A variety of sentence heads (Lewis 1993) for expressing empathy can also be taught: “That sounds...,” “I bet that was ...,” “That must have been ...,” and “I bet that must have been” These can be practiced in response to situations like the following:

So, I went up to the checkout to pay for my groceries. I took out my wallet and suddenly realized I didn’t have any cash.

(Possible response: I bet that was embarrassing.)

After students have had some practice with exercises like these, they can be invited to share their own stories about times they were angry, scared, embarrassed, or happy while their partners are encouraged to show interest and make frequent responses. One way in which this can be staged is for them to work in a group of three in which one partner tells the story, another partner makes listener responses, and the third partner acts as secretary, noting down how many and what kind of responses the interlocutor made. The interlocutor can then be given feedback on his or her performance. The storyteller can also be asked how helpful she found the interlocutor’s responses. Did they encourage her to tell the story well?

One memory that stays with me is of one upper-intermediate class in which there had been a strong focus on listener responses. One student finished telling her story to a partner and then turned to me with a happy smile. She commented, “It was so easy for me

to tell that story because Yukari seemed very interested and she encouraged me.” The “feel-good” factor this student experienced here and the apparent boost to her confidence is, for me, one of the great payoffs of this type of activity. That we will make a better job of telling a story if we can see that our listeners are interested appears to be a matter of common sense, and while encouraging our students to be good storytellers, we should also encourage them to become good story listeners.

Conclusion

The human need to communicate personal experiences makes storytelling a natural way to design lessons that help students develop their English language skills. Once learners get into conversational storytelling, it is an enjoyable experience for both them and the teacher. Raising awareness of the generic features of conversational storytelling is a first step to enable learners to share their own stories with their classmates. Various techniques add interest to the narrations and promote greater fluency, including retelling activities and exercises that broaden the use of adjectives, idiomatic expressions, and direct speech. In addition, a focus on active listening creates a true interactive environment that enhances the development of higher-order language skills.

The ability to tell a personal anecdote in English, to be able to share it with others, and to react positively to other people’s stories is a great social asset. I encourage teachers of English conversation to devote some of their time to helping their students develop this valuable skill.

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