

TEACHING ENGLISH THROUGH STORYTELLING

Nino Dvalidze

Prof, Dr., Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Adjara AR, Georgia, nino.dvalide@bsu.edu.ge

Abstract

Stories provide a common thread that can help unite cultures and provide a bridge across the cultural gap...

The presented article deals with the benefits of using storytelling in the classroom. This method of teaching is rather captive and it has really a good drive among the students. The article is constructed on the shared experience with a famous storyteller and teacher-trainer Michael Berman.

We often give stories to our students to read, but how often do we tell them a story? One can hardly find a person, who was not brought up on the stories, told by the parents or grandparents. Sitting at the fireplaces or bedsides, stirring childhood's rich imagination, and travelling on the paths of imaginary world like Alice in wonderland or Harry Potter... if it was not so, some others, perhaps, used to read fairy-tales and myths, folklore, legends or real stories.

We hope the readers and learners would agree with us, that childhood 's stories stay in mind for ever ,as the first impression and experience you have got at your young age is unforgettable and the most impressive knowledge of the world and life! For this reason, we think that teaching the foreign language through the storytelling is the most interesting and impressive way for successful learning the language.

Thus, the article looks at the benefits of storytelling and gives advice on performance techniques

- What can storytelling offer?
- Storytelling and intercultural understanding
- Other benefits of using storytelling in the classroom
- Commonalities of cultures around the world
- Performance techniques

Keywords: storytelling; provides a bridge; benefits; Commonalities of cultures; Performance techniques

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the justifications for the use of storytelling in the classroom is its global nature as an activity. Students are not restricted to a narrow range of potential language as can happen with grammar-focused course-book activities. There is the opportunity to draw upon all areas of their previous knowledge of the language as well as to experiment with new forms.

Storytelling as also an effective vehicle to deliver messages to the subconscious where the "ahas" of metaphor take place. Our ability is to make metaphorical connections that allow us to learn anything at all.

When something new is like something we have done before, we take what we know from the first situation and transfer our knowledge to the new situation. Metaphor instills the learning of content or process on a very subtle, often subconscious level. When the subconscious is activated, the material enters the mind with no resistance. As a result, metaphor can affect dramatic change in an individual.

Each time you ask someone to stretch their awareness of time and space you are inducing a light state of trance and each story that starts with “once upon a time” provides an example of this. According to educational psychologist Howard Gardner in his book “Leading Minds”, what makes a leader is the ability to tell a compelling story that resonates with the audience. Such stories broaden our horizons, connect us to a vision and provide an over-arching narrative for our journeys through life. Telling stories, after all, is one of the basic ways that humans communicate with each other. When you tell your partner about your day at the office, you are telling a story. If you are a student and tell your parents about that “insignificant” explosion you caused in the chemistry lab at school, you are telling a story. If you tell friend the latest joke, you are telling a story. Therefore, there is no need to be intimidated when faced with telling a story. You are already an expert with a lifetime of experience behind you. The storytellers themselves describe as the bridge to other times and ancient teachings and the telling of the stories helps to keep these teachings alive. Future generations will learn from storytellers and apply the lessons of the stories to their own lives.

1.1 The History of Storytelling

The earliest stories were probably chants or songs of praise for the natural world in pagan times. Later, dance and music accompanied stories. The storyteller would become the entertainer for the community and the historian, musician and poet too. The oral tales that passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth included epics, myths, parables, fables, fairy and folk tales.

The art of storytelling, orally sharing a story or experience with an audience face to face, was particularly popular from around AD 400 to 1500. Storytellers would travel around visiting markets, villages, towns and royal courts. They gathered news, swapped stories and learned regional tales in the process. With the advent of the mass media, the storyteller has unfortunately become extinct. It is helpful to draw a distinction between the telling and the reading of stories. The former is much more likely to hold the attention of the audience and have a greater impact. In the language-teaching classroom, you can adapt the story to cater for the level of your students by telling it instead of reading it.

1.2 What can storytelling offer?

Students have an innate love of stories. Stories create magic and a sense of wonder at the world. Stories teach us about life, about ourselves and about others.

1.2.2 Storytelling and intercultural understanding

there are a number of ways in which storytelling can enhance intercultural understanding and communication. Stories can...

- allow students to explore their own cultural roots
- allow students to experience diverse cultures
- enable students to empathize with unfamiliar people/places/situations
- offer insights into different traditions and values
- help students understand how wisdom is common to all peoples/all cultures
- offer insights into universal life experiences
- help students consider new ideas
- reveal differences and commonalities of cultures around the world

1.2.3. Other benefits of using storytelling in the classroom Stories...

- Promote a feeling of well-being and relaxation
- Increase student's willingness to communicate thoughts and feelings
- Encourage active participation
- Increase verbal and written proficiency

- Encourage use of imagination and creativity
- Encourage cooperation between students
- Enhance listening and reading skills

1.2.4. Commonalities of cultures around the world

Stories reveal universal truths about the world. Through stories we see how very different people share the same life experiences and how human nature can transcend culture. Storytelling is a unique way for students to develop an understanding, respect and appreciation for other cultures, and can promote a positive attitude to people from different lands, races and religions.

2. Performance skills

“Stories are medicine ... they have such power; they do not require that we do, be, or act anything...we need only listen. The remedies for repair or reclamation of any lost psychic drive are contained in stories”. Clarissa Pinkola Estes

Sitting or standing in some quiet place, imagine as clearly as possible that you are preparing to perform – employing all your senses – the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings associated with these pre-performance moments. Be as specific and detailed in your imaging as possible. When you have placed yourself as fully as possible into the pre-performance context, imagine yourself feeling completely confident-fearless. Imagine how great it would be to feel that way, rather than scared. Then continue with the imagined performance: you present your material solidly, and with confidence. Imagine the smoothness and grace with which you will make presentation. Imagine your heart keeping a steady pace instead of racing. Imagine your breath deep and full, not shallow and shaky. In other words, paint an accurate and detailed mental image of every step of the process – the way you have experienced it so many times before – but with a successful outcome. Once you have experienced success in non-ordinary reality in this way, it becomes that much easier to achieve in this reality.

Slowing down your breathing can help to control nervousness too. If you must focus on yourself, then focus on your breathing. Breathing is the most important thing for life. If you are nervous, if you are scared, or feel, anyway you do not want to feel, then think about your breathing and control it. Deep breaths - in through your nose - out through your mouth. Once you have your breathing under control, you can do anything.

In a story telling session, you leave the everyday world behind you the moment storyteller says “once upon a time”, you are transported beyond yourself into another setting during the telling of the tale, and you return with new self-knowledge if the story worked as a metaphor for you. So the next time you plan or analyze a lesson, see whether the three stages described in this model can be applied to it. If they cannot, then perhaps there is something missing – a vital ingredient that could make it work better.

Finally, it is important to remember that storytelling is a task shared by storyteller and story listeners. It is the interaction of the two that makes a story come to life so try to create as many opportunities as possible for this. Now read on and enjoy! A story is for the upper-intermediate level students.

3. The Earth will take its Own

- The Story and a possible lesson plan

There lived a certain widow and she had an only son. The son grew up and that only he had nobody he could call father. “Why does everybody else have a father and only I don’t have one?” he asked his mother.

“Your father died.” “What does it mean, died” Does it mean that he won’t come back to us anymore?”

“He won’t come back to us but we’ll all go there – to where he is,” said his mother. “Nobody can run away from death.”

The young man said, “I didn’t ask anybody for life, but I’m already alive and I don’t want to die. I’m going to find such a place where they don’t die.”

For a long time his mother begged him not to go, but her son did not listen, and he set out to look for such a place where they do not die. He went round the whole world. And wherever he went, he asked the same question, “Is there death here?”

“There is,” they answered him.

The young man became sad: there is not such place where they do not die. On one occasion when he was

walking across a plain, he saw a deer with high branching antlers. The young man liked the deer's antlers very much, and he asked the deer, "Don't you know somewhere where they don't die?"

"There's no such place", said the deer, "but until my antlers grow up to the sky, I won't die; but when they grow up that high, my death will come too. If you like, stay with me and you won't die while I'm alive."

"No," said the young man, "either I want to live eternally, or I might just as well die where I come from."

The young man went on further. He crossed the plain; he went all through the valleys and reached the mountains. He saw a raven sitting on a crag, cleaning himself, and shedding his downy feathers into a huge deep gorge below. The young man asked the raven, "Don't you know a place where they don't die?"

"No," said the raven. "Here I'll live of this gorge is filled with my downy feathers, but when it's filled, then I'll die. Stay with me and live on until the time when I die."

The young man looked into the gorge and shook his head. "No," he said, "either I want to live eternally or I might just as well die where I come from."

The young man went on further. He passed through the whole world, and approached the sea. He walked along the shore, not knowing where to go. One day passed, two days passed, but nothing could be seen. On the third day, he saw something shining in the distance. He walked towards it and there stood a crystal castle. The young man walked around the castle, but he could not find any kind of door. For a long time stuck until he noticed a narrow gap in the wall. He pressed with all his strength and it opened. The young man went inside and saw, lying there, a young woman of such beauty that the sun itself would envy her if it saw her.

The young man liked the woman a lot and she fancied him too. The young man asked, "Beautiful lady, I want to get away from death. Don't *you* know a place where they don't die?"

"There's no such place", said the young woman, "why waste time looking for it? Stay here with me instead."

He said, "I wasn't looking for you, I'm looking for such a place where they don't die, otherwise I would have stayed there, where I have come from."

The young woman said, "The earth will take its own, you yourself would not want to be immortal. Come; tell me, how old am I?"

The young man looked at her: her fresh cheeks, the colour of roses, were so beautiful that he completely forgot about death.

"Fifteen years old at the very most," he said.

"No," answered the young woman, "I was created on the first day of beginning of the world. They call me Eva, and I will never become old and will never die. You would be able to stay with me forever, but you will not want to – the earth will call you," The young man swore that he would never leave her.

They began to live together. The years flew past, like a moment. Much changed on the earth. Many died. They turned into dust. Many were born. The earth changed its face, but the young man did not notice how the time had flown. The young woman was always just as beautiful, and he was always just as young. Thousands of years flew past.

The young man missed his old home, and wanted to visit his people. He said, "I want to go and see my mother and family."

She said, "Even their bones no longer remain in the earth."

He said, "What are you talking about! Altogether, I've only been for three or four days. What could have happened to them?"

The young woman said, "As I've been telling you, the earth will take its own. All right, go then! But remember that whatever happens to you, you've only got yourself to blame." She gave him three apples and told him to eat them when he started to feel miserable.

The young man said goodbye to her and went. He walked, and he walked, and he saw the crag that the raven had been sitting on. The young man looked: the entire gorge was filled up with his downy feathers, and there was raven himself, lying all dried up. It grew dark in the young man's eyes, and he wanted to go back again, but already the earth would not allow him, it drew him forward. He went further, and he saw, standing on the plain, the deer. His antlers reached the sky, and the deer himself was dying. The young man realized that much time has passed since he left home. He went on further. He reached the area where he

had been born, but he did not find either relatives or acquaintances. He asked people about his mother, but nobody had even heard of her. He walked alone and nobody knew him. At last, he met a certain old man, and told him who he was looking for. The old man said, "That woman, as I heard from my grandfather and great-grandfather, lived once; but how could her son be alive now?" There went through the whole land the rumor about this person. Nevertheless, what they say about him! They regard him as some kind of freak.

The young man carried on walking alone. He came to that place where once there stood his home, and he found only ruins, which were reddened with moss. The young man remembered his mother, his childhood, his companions, and he became sad. He decided to eat the apples that the young woman from the crystal castle had given him. He got out one apple, ate it, and suddenly there grew on his face a long grey beard. He ate the second apple, and his knees gave way, the small of his bent and he fell to the ground without any strength. He was lying there, unable to move either an arm or a leg. He called a passing boy, "Come close to me, Boy. Get the apple out of my pocket and give it to me." The boy got the apple, and gave it to him. He took a bite of it and he died right then and there.

The entire village community came to bury him.

(This version of the story was taken and then adapted from Georgian Folk tales, translated by D.G. Hunt, published in 1999 by "Merani" Publishing House in Tbilisi, Georgia).

3.1. Notes for Teachers – a Lesson Plan

Setting the scene:

As a means of leaving the everyday world behind, start by playing a piece of mood music, ideally something instrumental maybe something from the Republic of Georgia.⁶

Provide the class with the title of the story and hand out the pictures, ask the learners to work in groups and produce a story from the pictures. A spokesperson for each group can then read the group's story to the rest of the class. After telling, the stories created from the pictures can then be compared with the version you told to the class.

Tasks to be performed during listening:

Ask the learners to make a note of any words that come to mind while they listen, which can be written up on the whiteboard.

Pre-listening discussion:

Would you like to live forever? Why or why not? This is the choice the young man in the story is required to make.

While telling the story:

1. Pause after the words 'He walked towards it ...' and ask the listeners to predict what the young man saw.
2. Pause after the words 'She gave him three apples and told him to eat them when he started to feel miserable' to ask what was special about the apples.
3. Pause after the words 'He reached the area where he had been born' and ask the listeners to predict what the young man found there.
4. Pause after the words 'The boy got the apple, and gave it to him,' and ask what happened next.

Post-listening discussion:

What would you have done if you had been the young man?

Exercise 1: Prepare a set of questions about the story. Then exchange your questions with someone else and answer the questions you receive. You can make use of the following frames or alternatively make up your own questions:

- a. What do you think was the most thing about the story?
- b. Was there anything in the story that reallyyou?
- c. According to the story, what ...?
- d. What reasons are given for ...?
- e. In what way would you ...?

f. Do you agree with the idea / suggestion that ...?

Exercise 2: Working in small groups, discuss the questions below:

The elect a spokesperson to present your views to the rest of the class:

- a. How important are family ties to you?
- b. Make a list of all the things people do to make themselves look younger. What do you think you would be prepared to do when the time comes?
- c. Are you the sort of person who hangs on to the past or are you able to let go and to move on to new things?

Exercise 4: self-review

Another way of bringing about re-incorporation after the telling of The Earth will take its Own (or any other story for that matter) is by inviting the learners to complete a self-review process, and the set of questions provided below can be used for the purpose. After taking some time to consider their answers, the learners can then pair up or form groups to compare their findings.

What was new for you?

- a. What was already familiar to you?
- b. How did you react emotionally to the information?
- c. What difficulties did you have with the material, and how can you realistically deal with them?

3.2. Dealing with the language of the listener

- New Vocabulary: To pre-teach or not to pre-teach?

There is a strong case to be made not pre-teaching new vocabulary when telling stories unless it is essential in that the tale will not be understood any other way. Stories are above all for enjoyment. As teachers of English, we want to exploit them for language purposes, but we must take care not to milk them dry and kill the joy.

Dealing with new vocabulary as it arises, gives you the chance to present it in context, elicit its meaning, and then give the students the opportunity to transfer it to another setting. It helps to break the story up into more chunks that are manageable and enables you to involve the class more actively in the storytelling process. Moreover, a few words unknown to the reader can add effectiveness and local colour to a narrative.

Stories not only entertain; they can also alter our experience to facilitate growth and change, and the tales should be chosen with this aim in mind. However, at the same time, in selecting which tales to include, their length is a factor and their subject matter.

3.3. For home assessment

1. Listen to the authentic story record read by Michael Berman or your Teacher
2. Recall one of the main topics discussed at class after telling the story, write in your Journal entries a new similar story, where you will use newly learnt words and phrases and describe your own reflection of that story. Prepare your essay for the presentation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

We often assume we know what is best for students without bothering to find out what they really want. That is why there is a strong case to be made for having a "round" at the end of each week – a feedback session to find out how they are feeling and what they would like more or less of. You, the teacher have every right to participate in this process too and to share your own feelings with the group. After these reflections, a programme can be planned for the following week considering everyone's views.

A point that is likely to be raised in such a session is that the learners appreciate having the opportunity to listen to good examples of authentic English. In our attempts to reduce teacher Talking Time, we tend to overlook this and put the emphasis on the students doing all the talking. One way of considering their wishes is to use of Storytelling as one of the most interesting and captive method of teaching English.

Whenever people meet, they tell stories to each other since time immemorial. Storytelling is an oral tradition and because of the issues, which have been worked through by the telling of the stories, storytelling has

contributed to the creation of the great epics of the world. The storytellers themselves have been described as the bridge to other times and ancient teachings and the telling of the stories helps to keep these teachings alive. Future generations will learn from storytellers and apply the lessons of the stories to their own lives.

As for the Educational skills, storytelling includes all four skills of teaching learning strategies: Listening, Reading, Speaking and writing.

REFERENCE LIST

1. Dvalidze N. Berman M., (2012). Teaching English through story-telling, Shota Rustaveli State University publication (ISBN 978-9941-412-96-7)
2. Hunt, D.G. (1999). Georgian Folk Tales, Tbilisi, Georgia: Mirani Publishing House.
3. Berman, M. (2000). The Power of Metaphor, Carmarthen: Crown House.
4. Berman, M. (2005). The Shaman & the Storyteller, Poway's: Superscript
5. Ramsden, P. (2003). Learning to teach in higher education. London: Rutledge Falmer.
6. Music from the republic of Georgia – for more information about Georgian choral music, visit www.georgianharmony.org.uk and / or www.maspindzeli.org.uk