

Story Telling as a Language Teaching Device.

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The art of story telling must be as old as the Homo Sapiens or at least as old as when man first began to talk. It demonstrates his instinctive desire to observe, to imagine, to create, to compare, to crystallise abstract thoughts, to draw parallels, to record events, to praise, to condemn, to teach, to imitate and, perhaps most gratifying of all, to entertain.

Through the art of story telling man has been able, long before the advent of writing, to pass on the wisdom gained by experience. It is the great link between us who avidly read the daily newspapers, magazines and novels and who are glued to our television sets for hours at a stretch, and our remote ancestors at the dawn of history. Just like our modern storytellers, our prehistoric ancestors could spin a tale around a fire and provide a pleasant escape from the daily routine of seeking food and shelter. How much poorer would mankind be if there was no Iliad, no Arabian nights, no Ramayana or no Adventure of the Monkey God?

That story telling is one of the most basic of human desires can be seen by the fact that every single community in the world civilized or primitive, rich or poor, developed or developing has many story tellers who enjoy the respect of their fellow beings. Unlike the great trade secrets of modern industrialists which are so jealously guarded, every community in the world has shared its greatest stories with pride. Does not the tale of Sinbad the Sailor belong to the whole world, and look how the Ramayana has become the common treasure of practically all of South and East Asia? How many of us even remember that Aesop was a Greek: don't his animals belong to each of us individually? And certainly Red Riding Hood, Snow White and Cinderella have no nationality – they all belong to that greatest kingdom of all: the land of fantasy and magic, the land of Indera Kayangan.

Besides lifting us from the everyday world of mundane events, the art of story telling has a great many practical uses. Through this great art man has been able to pass on the wisdom gleaned from experience from generation to generation. Because of it, we have been able to gather a vast collection of knowledge not only about the complexity of the universe but also about our conduct towards other living beings. Through story telling various nations have moulded a set of social values, and man's progress through history has been recorded, directed and sustained.

So we can say at this point that the art of story telling has two valuable uses: to entertain as well as to instruct. It is as useful and necessary today as it was when man first set himself apart from other animals by using his superior intelligence to develop his powers of imagination and memory.

All of this however would not have been possible without the development of another of man's greatest assets – language. It was through language that man was able to formulate his thoughts and then to express them. By using language therefore, man was able to find some order in the bewildering complexity of the universe, he was able to fathom the apparent confusion behind man's behaviour. And most important of all, having used language to seek a meaning in human existence, he was able to use the same language to formulate stories that would pleurably inform his fellow beings of these great thoughts. The greatest religious teachers of the world unveiled the most profound truths about existence and the universe through the simplest of stories – the parables, the Jataka tales, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and so on. There is no doubt that the greatest teachers who passed through this world were also the greatest story tellers.

The art of story telling is no mean achievement. It requires a skilful command of language, a vivid imagination, the ability to provide pleasure, to demand concentration, to provoke serious thought and to encourage reflection. By the use of language alone, a skilful storyteller can take his listeners far beyond the realm of daily routine, to raise them from the physical to the spiritual plane of existence.

As I mentioned earlier the art of story telling has been used by the greatest teachers in history. We too can use it with great effectiveness in our own classrooms for a variety of purposes, one of the most important being to provide a link between concrete language on one hand and abstract reflection on the other. But I must hasten to add that the primary function of any story telling exercise is to entertain. A story must provide pleasure both in what is said as well as in how it is said.

Some of us are gifted with an instinctive flair for story telling. But the rest of us should remember that it is certainly an art that can be acquired provided that we are genuinely interested in and enjoy using a language, that we enjoy the story we are telling, and that we care for the human beings who are listening to us. Given these prerequisites we can use the art of story telling to great advantage in our classrooms. Far too often, the sad truth is that many language classes today have been turned into torture chambers in the care of teachers who use as their instruments of torture regimentation, rote learning, drilling, repetition, all designed to kill the spark of individual spontaneity that is the natural heritage of every child. I am not qualified to deny that in some that spark may be brighter than others, but I am convinced that every child has it.

Through story telling we can make language teaching become the joyous activity that it is to the child who learns it in his natural surrounding – the home. Through story telling we can encourage that excitement which goes into the development of vocabulary and structure. And let us not forget that the function of language is to help the user to gain ideas by *listening*, to formulate new ones by *thinking* and finally to share these ideas by *speaking*.

Modern educationists all agree that the greatest part of the activity in any classroom should be generated by the children themselves. The function of the teacher should be to create the atmosphere where this becomes possible and to shape the progress of the class without exerting any unnecessary pressure. It is here that the teacher becomes an artist rather than a mere craftsman.

And this brings me to the second part of this paper: How to conduct a storytelling class to develop the use of language with maximum participation by the children themselves.

In the early stages it may be necessary for the teacher to tell the story. Then various games can be devised to encourage children to use and practise their language skills. Story telling can either be used to practise language skills in general or to reinforce a particular language item e.g. the passive tense, plurals and so on. To do this, individual pupils can provide one sentence each to develop the story paying particular attention to the language item being practised. To add variety, they could also try to tell the story backwards, and this can lead to hilarious situations. Another useful exercise is to have the teacher retell the story but leaving blanks in each sentence for the pupils to fill in. This is particularly useful with weaker pupils.

Role playing can also be exploited in the story telling exercise. For this a number of pupils can be assigned different roles to play the characters involved. The teacher (or a selected pupil) tells the story, but each time a character is required to speak, the pupils join in. This is particularly useful in teaching direct speech patterns.

Role playing then naturally leads to creative dramatics where the children in a class are encouraged to develop a script from a story.

So far we have been discussing how to use well-known stories as an aid to language teaching. It would be useful also to stress at this point that at least the plot of the story should be familiar to the children so that they can concentrate on the language activity being studied at any stage.

Besides the exploiting of familiar stories, we could also consider the use of language in the creation of new stories by the pupils. Just as in Creative Dramatics, this is not an impossible task if we regard it as a group activity with each pupil in the class contributing a little bit to the whole effort. The whole exercise could start as a game. It is called: *The Yarn*. Here are the rules:

1. Any number of pupils can play this game. The first pupil starts a story about anything he wishes. The leader then points to another pupil who must immediately step in and continue the story from the point where the last player left off. This is continued until the story has been completed or until the leader calls a halt. My own experience has been that in the initial stages pupils will create the most fantastic situations. This does not matter so long as the teacher is satisfied that the pupils are using language correctly and they are enjoying themselves. Later on perhaps they could be persuaded to concentrate more on building good stories which could be written down in the composition class.

2: *Rumour Clinic*

A short story is selected in advance. Seven volunteers are called for. Six leave the room. The story is told to the seventh, with the rest of the class listening. Then another volunteer comes in, and the first volunteer tells the story he just heard from memory. Then another volunteer comes in and hears the story from the second volunteer and so on. In this way the story is passed down the line. Typically it gets shorter or more distorted each time. After the last volunteer has finished his story the original is read again. The class could then be called upon to discuss who distorted which parts of the story.

Less advanced pupils could work in pairs rather than singly so that they could help each other out.

3. Give out printed copies of a story to the children and ask them to write down what they thought it was meant to explain. Less advanced pupils could explain the literal meaning of a fable or short story. More advanced ones could be invited to show how it relates to the world around them.

4. Retelling fables and stories from foreign lands with a Malaysian flavour paying particular attention to the details — which characters, animals, trees, natural phenomena need to be changed to localize them.

5. Relate a story and ask the pupils to discuss its moral. Alternatively provide the moral and ask them to supply a story to illustrate it. With less advanced pupils use this as a group exercise.

6. Give the pupils a short newspaper article on something interesting like a robbery, a murder and so on. Then ask them to retell it with more details —providing names, places, motivations, colour, shapes, number and so on. It can be treated as a group exercise. Later each pupil could rewrite his own version of the story.