

# Oral Skills for Literature and the Extended Reading Programme (Conducting Workshops)

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## Introduction

Many teachers and parents instinctively know the value of storytelling in bringing up and teaching children. In schools, it is one sure way to teach literature as well as (more importantly) the love for literature. The extended reading programme will not be seen by students as extended reading comprehension exercises.

Unfortunately in schools today, storytelling is on the decline because of certain factors. Teachers find there is lack of time. There is the syllabus to complete, slow students to take care of, preparation of lessons, marking and the non-academic duties expected of teachers nowadays.

Many teachers have never told stories so they don't know where or how to begin. It is not a widespread tradition in our country. There are no role models to follow. And, in many teachers too, there is lack of confidence. In my experience, these "shy" ones do very well once they know what is expected.

Usually the expectations of uninitiated storytellers would make a perfectionist blush – they think a storyteller must have a mesmerizing voice that will hold the audience enthralled. No such thing! There will always be pockets in the audience who will be talking among themselves or looking out or dreaming their own stories.

Whatever the reasons, hopefully, with more information and the sharing of ideas, the obstacles will be brought down. In schools, there are many advantages to be gained from telling stories but how does one go about it?

One way is to attend workshops with a guide to show or lead you. Another way is to read about it. But reading from books is a problem. I find that, like grammar books, it only makes sense to

those who already know the subject. My suggestion, therefore, is to conduct a workshop of your own, if you want to learn storytelling.

What an idea! The blind leading the blind, you say. Not true. Non-teachers who have attended workshops have made very "informed" and relevant comments on the performances of others. Instincts are your best guides. You don't really need an "expert".

From the experience gained from several workshops I would say that with some guidance on what to do, the participants would have gained immensely even if they had been on their own. So, in the spirit of the multiplier effect, I hope the suggestions and guidelines given here will help teachers who are interested to form learning groups of their own.

I will deal with the objectives (to give readers an idea of what they can do and where they are going), some techniques in telling stories and using the voice – in telling and reading aloud stories. I have also included a section on how to judge storytelling contests (this will help readers look for the right skills in contests and indirectly focus their own skills).

## **Objectives**

How can storytelling help our students? They can do so in two ways: linguistically and non-linguistically. English teachers are more interested in the first but are aware of the importance of the second. Actually, looking at learning theories, it would be hard to separate the two.

## **Language**

Our main concern in school is language improvement. That is what the literature and extended reading programmes set out to achieve. Stories are motivating and students want to listen to or read them mostly because of the plots or characters. There is no appreciation of the language at this stage.

The content of the story is communicated through language. The vehicle (i.e. the language used) works to build the "child's sensitivity to various forms of syntax, diction, and rhetoric..." helping the child to "recognize patterns in language and in human experience" (Maguire 85,p13).

Garvie (1990) sees it as linguistic and psycholinguistic awareness – knowing the basic components of language and how these work in a system. She further thinks that stories will aid discourse awareness – knowing about cohesion e.g. cataphoric, anaphoric relationships; discourse facilitators etc.

In the case of well-known stories, the knowledge of the plot helps students to understand the language used. There will be much use of contextual clues.

A very important skill students learn is the use of paralinguistic or prosodic features in communication: the use of stress and intonation, the inflection of the voice, emphasis, changing meanings with changing intonation patterns. We are actually bringing in, indirectly, another dimension to the meanings of words. Words do not have only one literal meaning.

In the field of writing, stories can help stimulate the student's overall powers of creativity. Too often we complain that students don't know what to write about. Stories cover a whole range of subjects and skills, providing the student "with problem-solving and decision-making exercises..." and the "ability to form objective, rational and practical evaluations".

Where communicational skills, as stated in our syllabuses, are concerned, stories provide students with second hand experience to learn the social mores and accepted behaviour of their own culture or that of another. A major concern today is multicultural understanding and tolerance. Students learn to interact appropriately.

### **Non-linguistic gains**

As stated earlier, it would be hard to separate linguistic from non-linguistic gains. If we follow the schema theory, then we would believe experiential background aids the learner in predictive and comprehension exercises. It would be easier to move from the known to the unknown; and stories can enlarge the known parts.

A myriad of situations are met with in stories. Students learn thinking skills, acceptable social behaviour and morals. There is the story of a girl having to pick a white pebble from a bag which contains a black and white pebble, in order to save her father and herself (lateral thinking). Other stories exemplify the fate of bullies and boasters, those with pride, those without mercy and generosity, the honest and the law-abiding. All these lessons in life are learnt second hand through fictional or real characters and situations.

With so much to be gained, might it not be time to start thinking seriously about organizing a workshop?

## **The Workshop**

### **Where?**

Any small hall will do; the lounge of a house, a classroom. A big hall is a disadvantage because of the echo effects and the intimidating size.

### **Who?**

Those who have a sincere love for stories. Those who have an audible, though not necessarily "good" voice. It is erroneous to think that one should have a sonorous voice and excellent pronunciation. There was only one Richard Burton and he has died.

### **The size of the group**

How big should the group be? Do not worry. A group of 4 or more would be suitable. The less members, the more practice each member gets. Big groups do provide a feel of the audience but there will be less individual practice. Both have their advantages.

### **Materials**

Paper and pencil. If you can, these would be helpful: a simple taperecorder, a video camera/TV.

For those who know how to use the flannel board or would like to use pictures, then these should be brought. If one were reading aloud a story from a simple book, perhaps a "big book" can be used. This is a magnified copy of the original book which the whole class can see and follow as the story is being read.

Ambitious storytellers have tried using a tape recorder for sound-effects and mood music. Although I have seen commendable efforts using this method, the trouble doesn't seem worth it.

## Preparing the stories

Each member should prepare a story for telling. Choose a story that you like. Read the story once through to get the feel of it. Then go through to find areas which you might want to highlight in some way. Are there any, to you, memorable lines or phrases that you want to share with others? Are there lines with a certain rhythm or word play?

Practise in front of a mirror. Look yourself in the eye and tell that image the story. Telling a story in front of the mirror as if you are telling an audience a story, will serve no purpose because the minute you take your eyes off yourself, you don't see a thing.

When going about your normal chores, think of the story. See pictures, not words. Do not memorize the words and sentences but the plot. However, try to memorize "important" sentences or phrases. These are either famous lines (I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house down!) or phrases that you like (the elephant child had 'insatiable *curtiosity*') or sentences which express an idea better than any words you can think of.

With pictures in your mind, you will be able to continue a story even if you forget the words. Sometimes your story may even take a different direction if you forget the words but whatever you tell will still remain a story.

## Telling the story

It could be that when it is time to tell the story, you are fed up with it (because of all that rehearsal). Maybe. But experience tells me that when you have to face an audience, your adrenalin will surge through your body making the event exciting. Make it your duty (it IS your duty) to put enthusiasm in your voice and the way you tell the story. Learn to "fake" it in the workshop sessions if you feel jaded. Soon the faking will be substituted with real enthusiasm.

Good pronunciation will enhance a story but as long as you are intelligible, the communication is more important. So, forget about good pronunciation for the time being.

Forget about your hands. Your hands will gesticulate naturally if you forget about them. Never rehearse gestures. See the pictures in your mind and be engrossed in the world you have created for yourself. Your face will reflect this world you see in your mind. Will you look like a fool? Yes – to those who sit and judge. But to those who want to enjoy, they will drift along with you.

However, don't be over-engrossed! There is such a thing as being melodramatic. If you are swooning all over the place with self appreciation, you are more likely to make your audience feel embarrassed for you.

Look at persons in the audience and tell the story to each. Forget about addressing the audience as a whole. Communicate with individuals but don't forget to distribute your gaze. Do not pan from right to left like an oscillating fan but pick and choose as many individuals as you can.

Inexperienced tellers tend to be flustered by those who are not paying attention. They tend to focus on them and try harder in order to interest them. Forcing never works in storytelling. You may have a very stern face which you can turn on when you look at those not paying attention. Your ego is hurt because you haven't captured 100% of their attention. When all these happen, your mind-set is no more on the story. You have destroyed that magical web you have spun and this will be transmitted to the audience, 90% of whom were with you!

Your story may not have that fantastic universal appeal – especially when there are boys and girls. I have told *The Secret Garden* to a mixed group (part of a lesson). The boys were bored.

So, don't look at those who give you negative feedback. Look at the enthusiastic ones and draw strength from them. They deserve the best from you.

Should you sit or stand. It is up to you. Are your audience all seated on the floor? If so, being seated yourself on a chair is good. If you feel that you need to stand because that's your style, stand far from them so that they don't have to crane their necks.

What happens if you forget events in the middle of the story? You won't forget! But just in case you don't believe me, have a card with key words written down. If ever you forget, stop. Say nothing (no "Oh dear, I seem to have forgotten", or, "Excuse me a minute"! ). Stand quietly and try to remember without making screwed up faces or with hand to forehead, trying to massage the ideas back. If you relax, the memory will be restored. Otherwise, refer to the card or book.

When you are more experienced, you can ask the audience to remember that incident because you're coming back to it and then go on with the parts that you remember. Then come back to it later ("You remember I told you I was going to tell you what the giant said? Well, he said,...")

Wear comfortable clothes when telling stories. Avoid trinkets that distract – long dangling earrings which glisten and dance, bangles which jangle, long necklaces which you play with because you don't know what to do with your hands.

Common faults in the telling are: speaking too slowly, too fast, in too high a pitch, too softly, too loudly, mumbling all the extremes.

### Ending the story

Once you are coming to the end of the story, try to signal it in some way. Slow down when you are saying your last sentence, or bring down your voice, or make a gesture (putting your hands on your lap quietly, for example) - anything. It might be good for your ego to leave the audience wanting more but it would be an unsatisfying end if you finish when they aren't ready.

Some teachers like to ask their students, "Did you like the story?" This is more a habit than useful behaviour. You can tell from their faces whether they liked the story or not. I've seen the storyteller having to ask the question twice so that she got a loud unified "Yes!"

Please do not expect all stories to stun your audience. Many stories give them a quiet pleasure. They're glad they heard it. They enjoyed it. It is like finding something humorous but unnecessary to laugh out loud.

So, end your story and have a quiet moment before doing the next thing – which may be walking out, taking a drink, suggesting some activities, or, handing out souvenirs. Bauer (1977) suggests giving book marks (with the date and time of the next story session), or objects like pebbles, leaves or anything connected with the story. If you had started your story time by lighting a candle, invite one of the children to blow out the candle. One storyteller I saw started with a drink and he ended by finishing the drink he started.

### Peer-help

Feedback is the most important thing in training a storyteller. How you do it is up to you. The suggestions given below are for strangers who have got together.

When one participant in the workshop is performing, in the first stages, the rest of the participants will write down all the

things they liked about her performance. This feedback, on slips of paper, will be handed to her.

When confidence has been built, constructive suggestions on improvements can be written down. These are again handed to the performer.

Writing feedback down doesn't embarrass the performer. She is intelligent enough to take whatever advice she wants. She would choose whatever suits her personality. She doesn't have to justify anything to anybody.

The important thing is, performers get to know what others see – something she can't see herself, especially undesirable habits (punctuating every phrase with "okay" or "uh..er..", habitually running her hand through her hair, playing with trinkets etc.), pronunciation errors etc. I was once told by a friend when I was reading "Under Milkwood" by Dylan Thomas that she could hardly understand a word I said! It nearly killed me because I thought I was loud and good. Too loud and too clearly word for word, was the criticism. I learnt – but not too many people can stand being slapped in the face like that.

In discussion groups, allow each performer to bring up what she wants to discuss. The others should refrain from making comments on other things even if they think it is a major fault. The performer already has that on the written slips.

If a video camera is available, that would be ideal. Go through the playback of the performance many times. Once is definitely not enough. You see and learn. You also learn from the mistakes of others.

## **Techniques in Using your Voice**

Having a pleasant voice and good pronunciation will enhance the story. Here are a few pointers you can consider:

### **1 Breathing**

Breathe correctly to increase power and stamina. Breathe by using your diaphragm. Use your stomach to help you realize how your diaphragm works when you do diaphragmic breathing. Lie down on your back, hands at your side and knees raised. Let the knees rest against each other, but keep the feet apart, shoulder width, on the floor.



Put a book on your stomach and breathe in by raising your stomach. Feel the book lifting. When your stomach “bulges”, your diaphragm will come down to draw air into the lower parts of your lungs.

Concentrate on the movement of the diaphragm so that you can later make it go down without making your stomach bulge out. You will be relieved to know that using the stomach to breathe is bad and is only used in the beginning to sensitize you to the movements of the diaphragm.

Train stamina by bouncing your diaphragm. This happens when you laugh loudly and expel air out forcibly. For the exercise alternate between expelling air and breathing in using the diaphragm.

When it comes to storytelling, forget about the breathing. The exercises will make it a habit and you should consciously forget it – leave it to the subconscious. Otherwise, your story will suffer because of diffused concentration.

## 2 Voice quality and tone

A rich voice usually has very round and resonant vowels. Open your mouth and say “ahhhh”. Look in the mirror. Can you put 5 bunched-up fingers into your mouth when you say it? You are not opening your mouth as wide as you think you are. That’s why you should look in the mirror.

Practice saying “Ong” and draw out the nasal “ng” sound. Feel your bones in the face vibrating. Learn to “look” for that vibration.

From the “ahhhh” position, try not to make the cavity of your mouth smaller as you move to the other vowels “oo”, “ore”. As you move to the “ei” and “i” sounds, your mouth will want to become smaller. Let your lips do so but keep the inside cavity of your mouth as large as the vowel sound will allow.

## 3 Consonants

Practice your consonants. Make your tongue stay strongly at the positions they are at when you say your consonants. For example, your tongue would be behind your teeth when you say “t”. Press it there and then explode with “t t t t tahhhh” Remember, don’t go round speaking with such force in normal life – these are exercises to strengthen your vocal apparatus.

Do tongue and lip exercises. Open your mouth as wide as you can. Close it. Put out your tongue as far out as you can. Try to touch the right cheek on the outside. Then the left. Try to touch your nose, your chin. You won't be able to do so but the stretching is beneficial.

Make your lips vibrate by saying "brrrrrrrrrrr".

#### 4 Projection

Stand at one end of the room. Push your voice to the other end without straining your throat. Say "ahhhh" and then "eiiii" and all the sounds you are practising. Make a mental effort to push the voice to the other end of the room without shouting (this is called projecting the voice).

#### 5 Pitch-span

Practise expanding your pitch span. This is the difference between your high and low notes. A narrow span results in a dull monotonous voice. Learn to increase the span. Listen to yourself as you speak or read. Are you using high and low notes in a pleasant way. Self-monitor all the time. Get feedback by recording your voice. Ask your friends for feedback.

One exercise is to read a passage, alternating your voice from high to low with every word. You will sound weird but your objective is to get used to the feeling of high and low notes. Push your voice higher and lower. Make it more pliable.

With such exercises before your storytelling, you will find that you can articulate well with less effort. You will be clear and yet be relaxed. No strain. No unnatural enunciation of words. Your voice will be more interesting.

### **Judging a Storytelling Contest**

PRONUNCIATION – building blocks of the story

0 - 2            weak consonants  
                  lazy vowels  
                  wrong stress of syllables – too far from RP  
                  mistakes very obvious – obstructs the flow of the  
                  story

- accent quality is negative (cf. quaint accent)
- 3 - 5      some obvious mistakes but doesn't mar the story  
                  line  
                  nothing jarring  
                  mispronunciations now and then  
                  easily understandable  
                  could be jerky if words too well-pronounced
- 6 - 8      good pronunciation  
                  can be a model for others  
                  not jerky  
                  story is enhanced by the pronunciation –  
                  one's attention is more on story than pronunciation

USE OF VOICE/COMMUNICATION – the part which makes the story alluring and captivating.

- 0 - 2      monotonous  
                  voice is weak, not very audible  
                  swallowing of words  
                  ends of sentences lost  
                  voice not used to bring out meaning  
                  sounds like recitation without much understanding  
                  little eye contact
- 3 - 5      understandable – nothing great  
                  many opportunities missed where meaning and  
                  nuance could be brought out  
                  some variety in use of voice  
                  pleasant and strong  
                  attempts to use characterization of voice but not  
                  convincing – mildly jarring  
                  evidence of phrasing but not well-done  
                  few instances of using pauses for effect  
                  sounds slightly mechanical/stilted
- 6 - 8      voice is animated  
                  pleasant to listen to  
                  enthusiasm in voice

meaning and nuance brought out by inflections  
speaks TO not AT audience

## AUDIENCE

- 0 - 2 audience not with storyteller  
attention not drawn
- 3 - 5 audience listens quietly
- 6 - 8 audience obviously enjoying story  
attention captured

## GESTURES

- 0 - 2 looks rehearsed  
not synchronized  
stilted and self-conscious  
unnecessary gestures used  
generally very contrived
- 3 - 5 appropriate most of the time  
a bit too many and over-done  
some facial expressions – believable
- 6 - 8 gestures appropriate  
dignified restraint shown  
not so much showmanship as natural extension of  
meaning  
appropriate facial expressions

## OVERALL

- 0 - 2 bad choice of story  
not a storyteller  
mechanical memorization  
robot-like  
looks uncomfortable  
makes audience uncomfortable

- 3 - 5 story quite fitted personality  
passable as a storyteller  
has many positive qualities  
shows potential  
people would listen to his/her stories  
possibly too dramatic
- 6 - 8 story fitted personality and audience  
looks natural  
not contrived  
comfortable and relaxed  
audience drawn to his/her story  
shows appropriate restraint

The above checklist can be further refined and weightage for each section worked out. I feel, however, that this first draft gives the initial storyteller more information on what qualities to look for.

It should be clear by now that there are many skills which can be consciously developed. The untrained natural storyteller will be a better one when he can control his talents. The rest of us just need to work harder. The work will be worth it because there are those children out there waiting for well-told stories.

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