
*Improving sub-skills and strategies
used in spoken narratives with high-
level learners*

Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. ANALYSIS	3
2.1 Personalization (Cultural and Individual)	3
2.2 Affective factors of speaking and storytelling	4
2.3 Interactive strategies.....	4
3. ISSUES	5
3.1 The absence of / resistance to personalization	5
3.2 Affective filters of speaking	5
3.4 The lack of effective interactive strategies	6
4. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING	7
4.1 Encouraging personalization.....	7
4.2 Lowering affective filters.....	7
4.4 Incorporating interactive strategies.....	8
BIBLIOGRAPHY	10

1. INTRODUCTION

Storytelling, retelling of an oral narrative from memory as oppose to reading it, is a craft as old as time and is arguably the original form of teaching. In some societies it is still the primary source of teaching. The genre of live storytelling has particular features that differentiate it from other narratives such as films, novels, short stories, etc. For these reasons among others, this simple narrative form has stood the test of time and resonates with people all around the world.

In regards to language studying, storytelling is unique in the way it activates both emotional and cognitive intelligences. It helps build vocabulary and exposes learners to new language structures or reinforces old ones. Future more, storytelling often creates a highly motivated and low anxiety context for language learners.

It is also worth mentioning learners as listeners. Because of its interactive nature, learners understand more, concentrate longer, and are more invested than other kinds of listening (Cooter, 1991).

These ideas are summed up well in the quote by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio who says “The problem of how to make ... wisdom understandable, transmissible, persuasive, enforceable...was faced... Storytelling was the solution - storytelling is something brains do, naturally and implicitly ... [It] should be no surprise that it pervades the entire fabric of human societies and cultures.” (2010,p. 220).

2. ANALYSIS

Three points to consider for this analysis are:

1. it is irrespective of the speaker’s role in the classroom i.e. teacher-as-storyteller or student-as-storyteller.
2. at times the listeners’ role will be mentioned because storytelling is a communicative interaction.
3. this genre is characterized by strong paralinguistic features (e.g. gestures, facial expressions, tone and pitch of voice), so they will be mentioned alongside the linguistic features, however they will not be the main focus.

2.1 Personalization (Cultural and Individual)

Storytelling gives insight into human behavior and different cultures; often while presenting some insight, moral or call to positive action. Some cultures, particularly in Asia and Africa, are steeped in the tradition of storytelling.

As storyteller Andrew Wright says: ‘Each culture offers stories representing its own values and perceptions and behavior and these can help individuals and societies to establish their sense of identity.’ (2003) In our globalized society, there is an increasing need to learn of cultures beyond our own, and to share with one another.

Storytelling also give individuals identity. It is usually done without a script, so it is never performed exactly the same way. The story changes with each telling. With each presentation the teller puts on his/her unique stamp. After that, the story also changes with each new performer who personalizes it.

2.2 Affective factors of speaking and storytelling

Affective factors are emotional factors that influence learning. They can be negative or positive. Negative factors are called affective filters (British Council).

When a story is told, not read, the words are spontaneously recalled, with crowd assistance, participation and interaction. Roney (1996) described this as a co-creative and a form of two-way communication. The relationship between the storyteller and the listener draws them together in an ongoing communication cycle that builds 'mutual confidence'. This lowers affective filters.

Also, each time the story is told, it is created anew for "*this* teller and *this* audience at *this* time in *this* place never to be duplicated precisely in the same way again" (Roney, 1996). Barton and Booth describe it as, "...a co-creative or re-creative act. As we retell a story, we resynthesise and restate ourselves, in our present versions.' (1990)

These characteristics underpin the three major motivational factors of

- building self-confidence in the speaker (and listener)
- experiencing success and satisfaction
- creating good class dynamics and relations (Ebata, 2008)

2.2.1 Fluency

Fluency refers to how well a person communicates meaning rather than how many mistakes they make in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary (British Council). It is a logical flow of speaking that appears to happen with little or no planning. However, in storytelling, fluency is gained by rehearsing several times.

Because the listeners' focus in a story is the content and the sequencing of events, storytellers usually focus more on fluency and conveying meaning without an overbearing concern for accuracy.

Also regarding fluency, in this genre the speaker has a relevant long turn of speaking. This extended turn is not usually found in other forms of casual, interactive speaking. As David Heathfield says, "when [learners] retell a story in or outside class, it is by far the most extended piece of uninterrupted speaking they ever do in the target language. Their self-esteem flourishes when they acknowledge that they are able to tell a whole story in that language. (2014)

2.3 Interactive strategies

Using different paralinguistic and linguistic devices, the storytellers are encouraged to create engaging narratives. This helps the audience interact with meaningful language. A

few of these linguistic devices include:

- Call and response: An understood exchange between the teller and the audience. The teller gives the call, or cue, and the listeners give the response. Both are set phrases or utterances.
- Predictable and repetitive patterns: This can reinforcing vocabulary and highly generative language structures.
- Audience interjection: Stories are personalized with interaction from the audience. This could be a description, a prediction, clarification, etc. These can even change the plot.
- Rich use of description and imagery. As there is no text or visual cues beside the teller, the teller uses vivid imagery as the audience is encouraged to mentally visualize the story.

3. ISSUES

This section will focus on the issues learners have as speakers while telling a story.

3.1 The absence of / resistance to personalization

The reason for personalization in a story is to motivate the teller, thus lowering affective filters and the anxiety. Some reasons a speaker may not personalize a story or resist are:

- Learners feel detached from the message of the story. A personal example happened while teaching teenagers from a particular belief/religion. When asked to present a story from another belief system, although there were no conflicting ideologies, they were apprehensive because the story was not taken from their familiar tradition.
- Learner may find the story offensive.
- Learner may feel uninterested to perform. There are moments when learners, maybe for personal reason or reasons outside the class, simply do not want to actively participate.

3.2 Affective filters of speaking

Speaking is said to be the skill that produces the most anxiety in foreign and second language education (e.g. Cheng et al. 1999; Kitano 2001)

- Horwitz et al. (1986,p. 125) explains anxiety as “the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system”. Regarding spoken language learning, three elements of anxiety have been recognized (ibid.):
 1. communication apprehension – discomfort and stress when speaking to or in front of others. May stem from the mismatch of learners preparedness and lack of linguistic competency to express their thoughts.
 2. fear of negative social evaluation – learners are afraid of losing face, appearing worse, incompetent or uneducated. Intensified by learners’ critical approach to errors and perfectionism.

3. test apprehension – anxiety in the context of examinations.

Anxiety can be separated into two parts (Alpert and Haber, 1960):

1. debilitating – negatively affects teaching and learning. Learner may become unwilling to participate, feel blocked, or even paralyzed when asked to take part in class.
2. facilitative – positively affects learners encouraging them to learn more and prepare.

During storytelling, anxiety may present itself in as psycholinguistic symptoms such as distorted sounds, issues with pronunciation, and forgetting of words or the sequence of the story. This greatly breaks down fluency. It can also manifest itself as physiological reactions such as headaches, sweating, increase heart rate or muscle constraint.

It is interesting to note, while anxiety was found at all levels, at higher levels it was concluded that the anxiety was facilitative as subjects showed an increase in performance and managed anxieties better at this level. (Powlak et al., 2015)

3.4 The lack of effective interactive strategies

As we have seen in the previous section, affective filters affect the paralinguistic elements of story telling (e.g. gestures, facial expressions, tone and pitch of voice). As this genre is strongly characterized by these elements, these affective filters then affect the interactive strategies and linguistic elements as well.

These issues can displayed as:

- Monotonous speaking.
- Disjointed thought, causing teller to forget the patterns or repetitive chunks.
- Being overwhelmed with the audience interaction, which leads to a disorganized retelling of the events.

Other issues not directly caused by affective filters may include:

- Dull imagery or limited descriptions due to a limited vocabulary.
- Unpreparedness, due to time, that leads into slow or halted fluency.

As mentioned before, in storytelling it is a communal effort between teller and listener. The teller has the role of starting this co-creating cycle. However, if there is a lack in the interaction on either side (here, specifically by the teller), this causes a problem in the communication feedback loop resulting in the storytelling experience losing its momentum and effective qualities.

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING

Bailey gives three key principles for teaching speaking to advanced learners (p.124, 2005)

- Help learners to combine fluency and accuracy.
- Encourage learners to take reasonable risks in speaking English.
- Provide opportunities for learners to notice the gap.

With these principles in mind, we will address the issues previously mentioned.

4.1 Encouraging personalization

Learners should be encouraged to share stories from their culture. Two reasons being:

- it gives the learner 'expert status', which bolsters confidence.
- the content is already known, so there is less focus on content, i.e. what to say, rather the focus is on form, i.e. how to say it.

But even before this happens, the teacher can celebrate the learners' culture with a story they can identify with.

David Heathfield had the experience of sharing a series of workshops in mid-Devon where a small community of Polish immigrant families settled to live long-term in the UK. Before the workshops, the Polish students faced great challenges integrating with the community. However, during the presentations Heathfield presented several Polish stories. This resulted in:

- "the local British-born students acknowledging, esteeming and wanting to know more about their Polish classmates' culture and language."
- The Polish students increase in confidence and self-expression (2014)

While in Saudi Arabia, a culture rich in storytelling, because of the learning environment and scheduling the learners were often unenthusiastic, regardless of level. However, they would become animated if a storytelling lessons was presented and based around an Arab context. At times, it resulted in them sharing and performing.

To create individual personalization, allow the tellers to modify the story as the wish and to add new details.

4.2 Lowering affective filters

Storytelling is an art form and a means of communication, so by their very nature oral stories are entertaining, for both speakers and listeners. Present storytelling as an enjoyable activity to learners. This helps give reason to the communicative task, as oppose to doing it just because. Also, this will help to create a positive atmosphere to lower affective filters.

Talk with your learners about their anxiety and fears, preferably in private. Pawlak at el. suggest forming a questionnaire to inform you about students' stressors. It would provide a discreet way to deal with the apprehension problem because if discussed in public it might intensify their apprehension. (2015,p.116)

4.2.1 Building fluency

This genre is categorized as extemporaneous speaking, as oppose to impromptu speaking, meaning it requires preparation by the teller as oppose to little or no preparation (Baily p.133, 2005). Extemporaneous speaking focuses on fluency with accuracy, which is one of our focuses at advanced levels (ibid.)

This preparation is achieved with repetition, which is key for fluency development (Bygate, 2001). With repetition, have varying task each time the material is reviewed. This is so learners will have reasons to engage while not getting tired of the material. J. Willis (1996) suggested a cycle consisting of an 'input phase', a 'rehearsal phase' and a 'performance phase'. As it relates to storytelling:

1. Learners hear a native speakers modeling or performing the story.
2. Learners then perform the story in small groups. They express themselves without worrying about errors; the teacher observes and provides feedback. Here learners are also encouraged to notice the gaps between them and the model.
3. Learners perform the story before the class, with the focus on all-round performance, including fluency and accuracy.

Another suggestion to help with fluency is encouraging students to block the story in sequential events. Narratives happen as a series of events, so blocking the events make it easier for the teller to recall. Blocking can happen by writing the gist of each even in order, mapping/drawing scenes or actually 'stepping through the story'; i.e. physically standing with the learner and stepping as each event is summarized (Heathfield, 2014).

4.4 Incorporating interactive strategies

Usually 'speech acts' are strongly focused on in short turns as Brown and Yule point out (p.20, 1983). However, because storytelling is interactive, the teller should be encouraged to use different functions with the listeners as they tell the story. Moreover, stories reflect real life, so tellers need to be aware of the happenings within the actual story and how to express them.

Encourage tellers to:

- use a call and response in the story to engage listeners during key points in the story. The call and response reestablishes the focus, after which the teller can continue. It can be used to signify the start of the story, get the listeners attention, or maybe excite an action from the listener e.g. whisper, or make a noise like a donkey.
- practice voice modulations, using of body language, and facial expressions
- use vivid descriptions during storytelling. This will draw on their use of descriptive language.
- Use a pause to set a quick predictive task. Instruct the listeners to whisper to their neighbor what will happen next.

- handle interruptions by acknowledging them and continue with the story as if no flow is broken (Heathfield, 2014).

Finally, fully exploit the text and extend speaking activity by having learners respond to the story and have a discussion. As no two listeners experience a story the same, so this is a great opportunity to use language of experience and opinion.

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