

“Everyone has a story to tell: Learning English through Narratives”

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Abstract

The present study is about the use of Narratives in the classroom of English especially where English is taught and learned as second language. In India, tradition of narratives is really ancient. Fables used to give moral values amongst children. But their use for learning second language makes it more interesting productive and outcome is beyond expectation. ELT always strives for innovative practices in classroom to make it more result oriented. Narratives, that too from first language or from present situation make atmosphere interdisciplinary but bring productive results. My aim is to present my views for the development of narrative skills in teaching English.

Keywords: Narratives, Monolingual, Bilingual, Generation, Creative

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Introduction

We in India have a great deal of students whose first language is not English and who need continuous language understanding and assistance in order to access and learn total language curriculum. We have only a limited number of English proficient students but large number of students is really weak or poor in the understanding of second language. Students need English language learning and teaching at various levels to understand. For a second language learner, a teacher has to use listening, reading, speaking and writing all four skills. So that student will get opportunity to listen, extend, build and refine his/her oral as well as written language understanding. Out of these four, writing must be used frequently as it invokes students to use their creativity. Scientists have long known that human beings are storytelling creatures. For centuries, we have told stories to transmit information, share histories, and teach important lessons. While stories often have a profound effect on us due to emotional content, recent research also shows that our brains are actually hard-wired to seek out a coherent narrative structure in the stories we hear and tell. This structure helps us absorb the information in a story, and connect it with our own experiences in the world.

We all know that pictorial memory or listening has an added advantage, i.e. it invokes our imagination and increases our power of understanding. Recently, I came across Slovenia and its pattern of teaching ELT. Slovenia also teaches English as second language, their primary education begins at 6 and they introduce English in 4th standard means at the age of 10 to 12. Till class 3rd from Kinder Garden they have only limited schools who teach English. They have prescribed books of Narratives which help in ELT. These narratives are based on their cultural heritage translated in English. This study give a new aspect that our local narratives are so closely connected by us that they can be instrumental in making a drastic and positive change amongst students. This can easily be applied in other non-native English speaking countries like India.

In the 21st century English has become indispensable part of curriculum all over the world. Non-native speakers have to struggle and put more efforts to cultivate the crop of best English. Generally speaking, the process of teaching and learning English as second language is always a progressive and needs continuous upheaval. So, a great body of teachers always find it interesting to research on the innovative practices and find some uncommon way which can produce results. English has dominated all the other languages and its acquisition can give us opportunity of travelling worldwide, Employment whichever country we want, higher education to the university of our dream and above all the better and dream life. But teaching English as second language is a challenging task in developing countries where MT is like oxygen to students. If we try to identify the problems of our students in learning and speaking English, we come to know the following:-

- Lack of Environment of speaking in homes and social surrounding.
- Many people can't afford to visit other countries frequently so they are not aware of the frequent usage of English.
- Large size of classroom is also a big obstacle because teacher student Ratio is so high that teacher can't give so much attention.

- Many students are from rural background where they have least exposure to second language. So, they even don't understand skill of listening too.
- English is taught as a subject not as a language, so, students learn it to pass their exams not as proficient in language.
- Educational system and its short coming are also responsible for hindrances. Teachers have pressure to complete the course not to make student adequately fluent in the Language.
- Text books are also not interesting, informative and coherent to make students attract but they are outdated and inappropriate.
- Teaching method are not revolutionised as they have to be. We are still struggling for technologically smart classes.
- Curriculum is not overhauled as it should be according to the need of time.

Benefits of Learning a Second Language

Around the world today, there are more and more children and adults who, for personal, aesthetic, academic and professional reasons, are becoming multilingual. It is a fact that there are more bilingual brains on the planet than monolingual ones. Whether it is to find new literatures, friends or business markets, or to maintain a connection with the historic past of a heritage language, there are many reasons to learn second language. There are a number of advantages of being exposed to a second language, including cognitive advantages that can arise from achieving a particular level of proficiency in a second language. For centuries it has been acknowledged that learning about other peoples, their culture and language broadens the mind. Historically, individuals were exposed to languages such as Latin and Greek in school to give them access to a rich literature and to enable a deeper appreciation of the history and structure of the English language. This is in context to European countries. If we talk about our India we teach 3 languages at the school level Hindi (MT), English (SL) and Sanskrit, mother of all Indian languages.

The Effect of the Second Language on the First Language

Exposure to a second language can enhance the complexity of first-language syntax used; enhance language use skills (narrative strategies, reading and writing literacy skills in the first language, vocabulary scores) and enhance non-linguistic skills (divergent thinking, metalinguistic skills, attitudes toward others, mathematics scores and skills). Acquiring knowledge in a second language does not impede the ability to access that knowledge in the first language and there is no negative effects of the second language on the first language as accented first language speech or loss of access to first-language knowledge.

Narrative Definition

A story is taken as a synonym of narrative. A narrative or story is told by a narrator who may be a direct part of that experience and he or she often shares the experience as a first-person narrator. The word Narrate comes from Latin 'gnoscere' means 'to know'. But for us Indians, Narrative is rather older as we have 'Panchatantra', known as oldest narratives. Similarly in Indian families, where we have tradition of living in extended families, Grandparents narrate stories to grand children in the late evenings before sleeping. This gives a close bondage amongst them, as well they give moral

preaching's and sermons to their generations. So, children love to hear stories/narratives from the beginnings. As teachers we can use this interest to help students learn to write and at the same time meet most of the curriculum standards associated with writing skills. Sometimes he or she may only observe the events as a third-person narrator and gives his or her verdict. Narrative is a report of related events presented to the listeners or readers in words arranged in a logical sequence.

History of Narration or Storytelling

Storytelling is an essential part of human nature. Man is the only creature that tells stories. Man has been telling stories and listening to them since the time he learnt to speak. The storytelling began with oral traditions and in forms of myths, legends, fables, anecdotes, ballads etc. These were told and retold and were passed down from generation to generation and they show the knowledge and wisdom of early people. The basic theme of the stories was fears of natural forces, deeds of heroes, gods and goddesses, and they might be told to learn a lesson from an experience. Biblical stories have the primary purpose of teaching spirituality. Most biblical stories were performed in churches to convey spiritual messages to the masses. Similarly mythological stories are the treasure of every country.

Narrative in Everyday Life

The modern narratives have a broader function. After a close study of famous examples of Modern narrative, one would realize that such narratives do not merely entertain but serve as ways to communicate moral, cultural and political perspectives of the time. Moreover, narratives have contributed to achieving educational objectives in our life. Different forms of media are enabling people to express and record their real life stories and to share their knowledge and their cultural values across the world. In addition, many documentaries on television adopt a narrative technique to communicate information in an interesting way.

Narratives are the central means by which people make sense of their experiences. Their functions also include presentation of autobiographical memory, socialization of children into cultural membership, and mediation of ways of thinking about problems and difficulties. These functions are crucial for adult second language learners who are looking for ways to become 'meaningful' in the new environment since "person can only be a meaningful entity, both to himself or herself and to others, by being 'read' in terms of the discourses available in that society" (Burr, 1995: 142). A misunderstood narrative becomes an inappropriate presentation of self – or a sequence of events – and may result in cross-miscommunication.

And yet second language curriculum and classroom practices continue to privilege acquisition of linguistic, or, at best, pragmatic competence, and rarely focus on the teaching of narration. Several factors explain this oversight, including the perennial lack of time and the mistaken belief that learners who can construct 'correct' sentences should be able to string them together into narratives. Yet nothing could be further from the truth – learners who are very skilful at the sentence level may still fail to construct language – and culture – appropriate narratives because narrative competence is not tantamount to linguistic competence and does not fully correlate with measures of syntactic complexity or vocabulary size (McCabe & Bliss, 2003).

My pedagogy to make story telling my aid to teach:

Storytelling has tremendous benefits for classroom learning; I have noticed and experienced this lately experimenting with my undergrad students. This time, I want to explore those benefits, in particular how storytelling inspires students to learn English. The motivation for this comes from my recent experience of teaching to a heterogeneous group whose 80 percent of students learning English as a second language. In my graduate class last year, I had many students join with no English and as many again with very basic language skills. I was worried that I would struggle to engage these students as fluent English speakers and readers. I set aside my worries and started following my style for my new class these adaptations mentioned below:-

- I use to speak slow, putting more emphasis into my voice.
- I used more physical actions and sound effects to help associate universally recognised body actions as running, sleeping with new English words.
- I frequently asked the students to repeat key words and actions.
- I used more physical humour. Laughter was essential to breaking down the ice of language amongst my students.

After a few months of this, I started receiving some of the biggest surprises of my career. Firstly, a student from rural background who was in the listening phase of language acquisition began spontaneously writing her own fairy tales and requested to tell them – the first student storyteller. She was quickly followed by another student who had been enjoying herself as an actor in the stories but was always nervous about speaking English. Now she started telling short but lively stories that she had written. Several other students then started sharing stories, overcoming shyness and worries about publicly making mistakes.

Within a month, I had a list of students wanting to tell stories, and this continued for the rest of the year, right up to the very last day of term. Those first storytellers went on to make rapid SL progress in the wider curriculum, with writing and telling fiction remaining their favourite activity. Over the summer, I reflected on why storytelling had been so powerful in inspiring English communication. I concluded:-

1. Stories are innately part of human experience, in any language. Storytelling is the most popular genre found in all world cultures, regardless of literacy rates.
2. Children naturally inhabit fantasy worlds, and stories are a natural way for them to express language and emotion.
3. With a beginning, middle, and end, stories have a structure that creates a sense of achievement and discipline.
4. When peers appreciate your story, it is a big boost to confidence.
5. It's great fun seeing your friends act out your story using props. Fun is the best motivation.
6. Storytelling doesn't require complex, technical vocabulary. Think of silent films and comics. Sophisticated narrative can be understood with few words.
7. In the beginning, I don't bother about the student's spelling, grammar, and handwriting. A focus on these areas can easily demotivate and inhibit creativity. There must be freedom to take risks and make mistakes.

Beyond the Language Barrier:-

1. I use to support shy students and help them when they get stuck on a word. Any student who stands up to tell a story in English has made an incredible breakthrough.
2. I set my classroom up in a large shape to create a stage space in the centre so that everybody can see each other and have open, dialogic-style discussions. I am often asked, “How do you manage large class working in group if the tables are not grouped together?” but is as simple as – students move their chairs or sit anywhere they like.
3. Most of my students write their own stories, but some work together, which is wonderful for developing confidence in creativity. Some love to use posters and cards as imagination prompts or sequence aids.
4. Most students draw inspiration from their reading, so a book shelf is essential in the classroom. This year, two students worked together to tell a story in English, readers theatre style, which they were translating together from a Hindi book which they studied at school.
5. I play lots of language games that I either make up or gain from other storytellers and literacy workshops. They are easily available on search engines and we can learn in different workshops.
6. My favourite topic is about fashion, beauty love and family as I teach in all Girls College and girls are most interested in these topics.

Educators can create memorable learning experiences for their students by harnessing the power of storytelling in the classroom. A 2010 study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Science showed an intimate connection between the brain activity of speakers and listeners in conversation, demonstrating how the brain of an engaged listener “syncs up” with a speaker. By engaging students with compelling stories that impart important material, teachers reach students both emotionally and biochemically, increasing the potential for rich learning experiences.

Creating a compelling story with a coherent narrative structure requires attention to detail, descriptive language, and a beginning, middle, and end of some sort. Different kinds of stories produce different kinds of reactions: personal stories from the teacher’s own experience can help create and solidify strong bonds between educator and student, while stories of pure fiction may stimulate imagination.

Spending a little extra time on storytelling during lesson planning and actual classroom time keeps the learning experience highly engaging, creative, and truly, dynamically human. A story-filled classroom also encourages students to relate their own stories (whether factual or fictional), which helps grow their critical thinking, memory, and vocabulary skills.

Narrative, telling stories and anecdotes forms an important part of our everyday communication. Scholars agree that storytelling creates a learning situation. It allows our minds to think outside the box of our own experiences and to develop creative ways to problem-solve. It also allows us to identify with the theme and character of the story and to see their way of thinking. Through this process, one’s own errors in thinking tend to be realized. A number of professionals have linked storytelling as being relevant to learning, adult education and the incarcerated population. After completing the Scientific Learning family of products, participants can significantly improve their cognitive, language and literacy skills. Other benefits include:

Academic Achievement includes sounding out new words and spelling as well as attention span, writing, and math.

Clear English Language Communication includes oral fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, spontaneity, and ability to stay on topic.

Enhanced Reading Skills includes recollection of details and event sequence, ability to understand complex sentences, and confidence when reading aloud.

Better Listening and Understanding includes response time to questions, ability follows the flow of conversation, and humour comprehension.

Stronger Memory includes better retention and recall of phone numbers, event sequences, and details.

Improved Self-confidence includes participation in classroom and group activities as well as enthusiasm about school.

Conclusion

The outcome of the paper showed that narratives play a significant role in ELT teacher's effectiveness. As the MT helped in teaching second language in classrooms, similarly, narratives also play a dominant role. First of all the students feel connected to them they have idea of these narratives and above all they feel inquisitive in using them for understand second language. The use of narrative allows teachers to hear their students, their views and opinion on the situations and events that are happening in their lives. It exposes student to more in the imaginary world and think beyond their expectations. Their feelings and emotions help then to learn and express better. Sometimes narratives bring fun entertainment and liveliness in the classroom which bring teacher and student closer. Students feel connected and ready to hear their peer group and it not only rule out their hesitation of speaking, reading and writing but solve their problems too. To my surprise, our university added story writing skills in BA II Language classes and I am not exaggerating but narratives have changed students and their perspectives of life. I have already mentioned Grand parents and their storytelling of Morals and manners, which bring value education among them. They think outside the box and I think the role of a teacher fulfils completely when students start imaging moral values, good habits with the development of critical thinking. The teacher make students familiar with exposed world and Narratives are the most creative way to make students well versed in L2 with importing other benefits too. Be the teacher who tries, not the teacher who disappoints. I cannot wait to experiment with my students all over again!

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