

*This is the introductory chapter to **Storytelling**, by Juan Jesús Zaro and Sagrario Salaberr. From the series **Handbooks for the English Classroom** (Macmillan Heinemann ELT).*

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Theoretical background**

The use of literature in foreign language teaching has greatly increased over the past few years. The materials and activities that derive from literary texts are a great aid to learning in that they appeal to the learners' imagination, increase motivation and, above all, create a rich and meaningful context. Among the techniques available to the teacher, storytelling is one of the most frequently used, especially with beginners and false beginners. Storytelling is an established part of the curriculum in both English-speaking countries and many others, and stories are seen as a first-rate resource in the teaching of the child's own language.

Recent studies<sup>(1)</sup> show that while four year-old children are generally capable of telling stories in snatches (the type of story in which the child passes randomly from one event to another, leaving out key facts as understood), six year-olds can include the cause and effect relationship between different events. They can even implicitly recognise three of the main features of storytelling - the location of the action in space and time, the main plot and the final outcome. As children grow, they become increasingly able to identify other aspects of storytelling and little by little to produce them. Their ability to follow and so enjoy stories also increases with age. Sometimes, children's desire to tell a story is the best indication of how much they enjoy it. However, understanding cause and effect is by no means the only reason that storytelling is useful in linguistic terms. Other reasons for its use are:

- *The development of listening skills.* Possibly the most important of these skills is listening for gist which involves listening for the main idea or plot without necessarily understanding everything. Other skills such as listening for specific information can also be developed through stories.
- *The acquisition of new vocabulary.* Most of the new language in stories is perfectly contextualised and it is usually repeated more than once so that the listener has more than one opportunity to understand the meaning. If additional information is also given to help learners with the comprehension of the story (as with visual aids for example), the introduction of new words need not be a huge task. The grammatical structures introduced in the story should be seen mainly as formulaic expressions which do not need grammatical analysis but which can be learnt in an ongoing way because they appear frequently in stories in appropriate contexts.
- *The development of the child's literary competence.* By that we mean the child's ability to understand and enjoy literature which involves a range of strategies and skills acquired over the child's life mainly through extensive reading. However, many of these skills can be developed through specific activities. It can be said that the use of stories introduces the child not only to stylistic conventions such as reported speech, metaphor, emphasis, etc, but also to narrative conventions such as the time-space relationship of events, repetition, ellipsis, etc.
- *The communicative exchange involved in stories.* Storytelling is an activity which requires a certain level of interaction between the storyteller and the audience and between the individual listeners. The storyteller can obtain the collaboration of the audience at several points during the story. For example, by asking the listeners to guess the ending of the story, by getting them to suggest an alternative ending, by asking for a résumé of the story up to that moment, by getting the

audience's opinion, etc. Interaction with an adult in a *shared context*, to use Bakhtin's term<sup>(2)</sup>, which is familiar to the child is the factor described by Vygotsky<sup>(3)</sup> as decisive in linguistic and cultural development. Storytelling fits into this interaction framework - the adult in this case is the teacher and the shared context is the story.

- *Motivation*. If the story is interesting enough and it is told in an appealing way, children will normally pay attention through to the end. Nowadays, motivation, and in general anything to do with factors which affect the emotions are considered crucial in all learning processes.
- *Stimulation and development of the imagination*. The interactive nature of the story, the recreating of scenes and characters and the ideas in the story mean that few other activities can encourage the child's creativity and inventiveness in the way that storytelling can.

## **Storytelling in foreign language teaching**

### *The teaching of English to children*

Storytelling has always been seen as an aid in the teaching of foreign languages although this has nearly always been with learners of at least intermediate level and through translation or text analysis. The recent interest in using storytelling techniques with lower level learners is for a number of reasons. Apart from the aforementioned advantages which also apply to language teaching, there are others which can be highlighted. One of these is the need for classroom activities which are meaningful to the learners, and which lead to greater learner involvement. There is clearly a great need to create activities in the foreign language classroom which most closely reflect the process of natural acquisition of language and we know that this process basically stems from the need to communicate.

Recent proposals on content-based syllabuses have developed out of this need. The selection of vocabulary, structures and activities in these syllabuses is based on a certain topic or area of interest to the learners, or there is a strong focus on using all the opportunities for real communicative interaction in the classroom (*here and now* activities which involve spontaneous use of the foreign language, *classroom language*, etc). This need has also led to the inclusion of resources such as games, stories and task-based activities as a central and not complementary part of the syllabus. As stated earlier, all this is designed to stimulate the learners' interest in communicating in a meaningful way, which in turn helps the learner internalise the language.

Storytelling can be linked in the same way to the hypotheses on the learning/acquisition of language put forward by Stephen Krashen<sup>(4)</sup>. For example, much of the language used in stories includes many of the features that Krashen refers to as *comprehensible input* - simplified utterances which can be understood by non-native speakers. These utterances have a lot of repetition and clarification, deliberate rhythm and reference to things close by. The language of stories is full of recognisable characteristics which are deliberately highlighted and easy to imitate (rhyme, onomatopoeia, rhythm, intonation) which may be useful when expressing oneself in the foreign language. The comprehension of the story can also be made easier by the use of visual aids, gesture, mime and even appealing to the learners' previous knowledge of stories.

Lastly the story is by its nature fundamentally a listening activity which fits in with the *silent period theory* as recommended in the early stages of language learning by several experts such as Krashen and Terrell in *The Natural Approach*<sup>(5)</sup>. It can also be used as a reading activity and be followed by different exercises which relate to other skills such as speaking or writing.

Research into the teaching of foreign languages to children has led to proposals on classroom practice

which recommend that language is presented in such a way as to promote acquisition. This process is based on, among other characteristics, the constant supply of the aforementioned *comprehensible input* which gets progressively more complex as the learners' command of the language grows. This research would suggest that syllabus design for this stage of language learning should be based on a selection of activities and tasks which generate the use of language rather than the target language dictating the activities and tasks. Once the respective departments or teachers have decided on the aims for each group or level, storytelling can then be built in to feature strongly in the course.

#### *The use of stories with other learners*

Storytelling can also be widely used with other groups of learners such as teenagers and adults. Although it is always very difficult to say which are the main topics or areas of interest for teenagers. It seems clear that they prefer working with contemporary stories which relate to their world and the world around them and even prefer inventing their own stories to listening to those designed for children. The element of fantasy in stories still holds some appeal for teenagers, but they prefer a more modern treatment of it as in science fiction. The learners' greater knowledge of the language allows for more linguistic complexity both when listening to stories and telling or re-telling them. The use of stories with teenagers by no means loses its value but rather takes on a different focus which includes more complex stories and therefore more sophisticated activities.

The fact that storytelling is closely linked to certain attitudinal factors should not be overlooked. Firstly, motivation that comes from the use of stories can help to create a positive attitude in the learner towards the foreign language, which is vital in creating a more permanent good attitude towards language learning in general. Secondly, the activities based on stories develop an attitude of co-operation between learners and at the same time help them feel confident in using the foreign language. In this book, we have endeavoured to include activities and tasks which require the collaboration of everyone to set them up and carry them through.

#### *The teacher as storyteller*

This book aims to encourage teachers of English to use stories in class. The telling of stories from personal experience or imaginary stories is the basis of communication between people in that it is an everyday activity and is nothing out of the ordinary. It is true that to tell stories in a foreign language is different but in whatever situation a story is told, it should be done in a natural way. This helps the process of storytelling to become accepted much more quickly than other activities which manipulate language and have no real meaning. If storytelling is carefully set up and carried out with conviction, it can become one of the best forms of language input. This is of overall value in language learning terms in that it helps the learners to retain the target language more easily. Storytelling is a relaxed and entertaining activity and so it can become enjoyable for everyone which in turn creates a better attitude in the learner towards learning and using the language.

Any teacher with an acceptable command of the language can tell stories in English. Storytelling should not be seen as a chore but as an activity which appeals to the imagination, allows experimentation with the target language and encourages co-operation. When telling a story, you need not be limited to the stories in this book, but can improvise, modify words or even events in the stories, adapt the text to suit your world and that of the learners. Feel free to speak in your own language when you think it necessary, especially in the pre-reading stage. Remember that the time spent telling stories should be relaxed, fun and informal. This can be achieved by changing the layout

of the classroom, sitting in a circle and taking on a new personality - that of a storyteller who invites the listeners to become involved in the story and try to follow it. It is invaluable to create an *atmosphere for storytelling*, in other words those touches which mark and characterise as different the time spent on stories.

One way of telling stories is simply to read them aloud or listen to pre-recorded tapes. However, storytelling in its true form only takes place when the story is told to the class face to face when the storyteller can use illustrations, visual aids and even mime and gesture to help comprehension. We feel that storytelling takes on its true value if the stories are told directly to the class, as this reflects how stories are used outside the classroom. This does not rule out the use of a combination of pre-recorded cassettes and books for some of the stories told in class. That way, interested learners can hear or read stories whenever they want. Most of the stories in this book have as a basic activity what is known in the task-based approach as *semantic mapping*. This is the use of diagrams and maps which draw together the key elements in the story, the relationship between them and the order of events. The diagrams are presented in a clear, visual way and the maps are intended as a guide as much for the teacher-storyteller as for the learners who will use the maps to follow the story and the retell it. The class should also try to maintain the relaxed atmosphere mentioned before when it is their turn to tell the story. As far as linguistic progress is concerned, we feel that getting the class to tell stories should be seen as a fluency-based rather than an accuracy-based activity. Errors should be seen as an inevitable part of the learning process.

Finally, our intention is to provide models for which you can design your own activities using your own choice of stories. To help in this, we have included five different models in order from the simplest to the most complex, followed by various activities listed in the final glossary, which in most cases apply to all stories. The stories are divided into three stages called *Before you read*, *While you read* and *After you read* and are designed to be used in class in that order. However, we suggest that the activities in the *While you read* stage should not be done when the story is told for the first time but during the second reading. This is unless the text is particularly difficult, and the opposite is recommended in the notes (as in *The Lizard and the Damsel*).

The final chapter, *The learner as storyteller*, has suggestions on how to get the class to tell stories of their own. The ultimate aim, as we have said before, is for learners to make progress in English in an enjoyable and motivating way but at the same time to create a positive attitude towards other learners and towards the language itself. We hope that our modest work helps to achieve this.

### Notes

1. Toolan, M. J. (1988) *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London: Routledge) p.194.
2. Bakhtin, M. (1973) *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press).
3. Britton, J. (1987) 'Vygotsky's contribution to pedagogical theory' *English in Education*, vol. XXI, no. 3 pp 22-26.
4. Krashen, S. (1985), *The Input Hypothesis* (Harlow: Longman).
5. Krashen, S. and Terrell, T. 1983), *The Natural Approach* (Oxford: Pergamon).