Story-telling

Mario Rinvolucri, Pilgrims

When I asked the plenary group how many people tell their classes oral stories, ~~as~~ tell stories rather then read ~~them~~, I was susppised to see that not more than a third of the 300 or so hands went up.

Ordinary conversation is full of snatches of narrative- we are forever telling each other stories. As children many of us have enjoyed privileged contact with a parent or grandparent through story-telling- the way of being with the adult through story telling was as important for me as ~~the~~ the content of the particular story.

The point of this plenary was to suggest to the participants that through oral stories their students ~~could~~ can achieve privileged contact with them and meet them in a new and different way.

It seemed vital to get everybody in the room into a mood where they could tell a personal story so I launched into the autobiography of my hair over the last fifty years. I started ~~with~~ by describing the realisation, at the age of 4 or 5, that my mother had kept a blonde lock of my new-born hair in a little casket ; this left me with mixed feelings..... As I worked through my hair experiences I could almost feel people in the audience thinking about their own parallel or very different feelings about hair. The moment I asked people to tell a partner the story of their hair, the great gym hall was ~~filled~~ filled with the sound of energised story-telling. There were some people who had partners who did not suit them or who did not want to talk about themselves this way, but most people really got into their tellings.

The above is an example of telling a story of your own with the express purpose of releasing parallel stories in others. Have you ever stolen anything? If you tell a group that has warmed up a story with yourself at the centre, in criminal role, plenty of the students will have theft stories to tell.

Have you ever succeeded in changing somebody else's mind, in winning them over to your point of view, in persuading them of something? If you tell the story of how you did this, the students will listen to you thinking ~~about~~ while about their own triumphs of the same sort.

Do you have a scar and a story to go with it? Show ~~them~~ the students the scar (if it's on a viewable bit of you) and tell the story. In a teenage class there are often more scar stories than you can cope with in one lesson!

Stories for beginners

You can use storytelling to give beginners a real leg-up in clambering aboard the new langauge. Imagine you are learning Greek and your mother tongue is English, also imagine to you can hear my voice :

"This is story about why i ghates and ta skilia hate each other. One day mia ghata was out walking and she met a skili. She greeted him 'maiow, miaouw' to which he replied 'woof- woof'.

To skili and i ghata became close friends, they became fili. They went everywhere together, they ate mazi they : slept mazi they hunted mazi. In fact they became inseperable fili ....."

(this is the start to lovely origins story from Madagascar, collected by Gill Hadfield)

If you are telling a story to rank beginners you narrate in the mother tongue and simply offer them a few key words that re-occur in the target language. To introduce the new foreign word you can do one the following things:

- introduce it in a context where its meaning can be guessed
- introduce the foreign word and gloss it in mother tongue
- introduce the mother tongue word and 'gloss' it with the foreign word
- mime the meaning of the new word
- do more than one of the above simultaneously so that the learners' brains are offered multiple stimuluses.

You may then tell the same story or a variation of the story using more foreign words and phrases. I find this a beautiful and smooth way of allowing children to acquire language, a kind of guided and speeded up version of Krashen's acquisition process. The technique works exceptionally well in UK primary schools with Urdu and Chinese speaking five year-olds who need to learn English.

The process of story-listening

Suppose you are working with intermediate students and you tell them a story , you may expect them to have all perceived, taken in , the same story. If you ask them comprehension questions after the telling

you presumably believe this.

My contention is that when you have told 30 people a story you have seeded thirty different stories in 30 heads and that intelligent language follow-up should draw on these differences.

I told a story about a Japanese ghost in the session and then put this battery of questions to several individuals in the group:

- as you listened to the story did you mainly have pictures in your mind or sounds or feelings ?

  if the individual said: 'pictures', then I followed up with these questions :

  - I don't want to know what you saw, just how you saw it- were your pictures colour or black and white or something else?
  - If they were in colour, was there a dominant colour?
  - Did you have moving pictures or were they stills ?
  - If they were moving pictures what sort of rhythm did they have? Were there frequent cuts and changes of angle? Did your pictures resemble the style of any film maker you know?
  - If you had stills, how many were there? How did you change from one to the next?
  - How far were you from the pictures you had- did they appear big or small, far or near? Did the distance change at all during the telling of the story?
  - Within your pictures, was perspective important- was there a big difference between near things and far things?
  - Was the texture of the surface of your pictures important to you- with a Van Gogh painting you can almost touch the brush strokes?
  - Where were you as you watched : in your picture, half-in, outside it?

What became evident was that the people who had mainly lived the story visually had created pictures with radically different characteristics from the same stream of sound they had received from me. The how of their pictures was very diverse. And this was without enquiring into the content, the what that they had imagined.

In this session we examined the visual characteristics of the images created by a group of story listeners. We could equally well have looked at the content of their pictures during the listening. The succession of feelings they experienced as the story proceeded would have been another good area for exploration. We could also have got people comparing overall literary interpretations and cultural meanings. But all of this work is based on the hypothesis that each story listener does radically different things to the stream of sounds that reach his ears, that the story's impact is far from unitary.

(The process approach to story-listening follow-up comes straight from the work of people experimenting with Neuro-linguistic Programming).

The session closed with Yaprak _____, a teacher trainer from Ankara, telling us a naughty version of the La Fontaine Ant and Grasshopper story. The session had started with with a Sufi tale told by a deep voiced US colleague. In story telling it is vital to hear different styles and different voices.

Dictation

Mario Rinvolucri, Pilgrims

Dictation does not have to be a one-way, teacher dominated business and there are hundreds of ways of using this age-old technique in ~~unexpected~~ unexpected ways. When writing our book on dictation techniques, Paul Davis and I asked ourselves a number of basic, simple questions like:

- who dictates?
- what does the student write on?
- does the teacher dictate all the text that goes down on paper?
- Does the student simply write down the text as the teacher dictates it, or does she alter it?

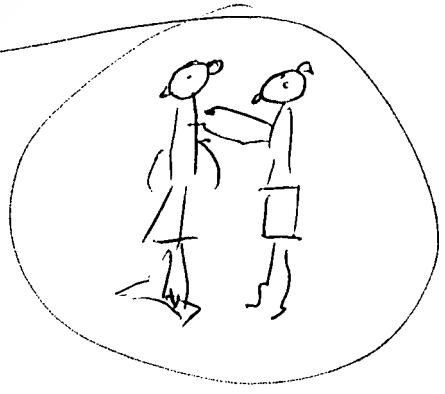
etc.....

In the plenary workshop we experienced exercises that in part answered the above questions.

Who dictates? Well it could well be the student who dictates.

What does he write on? Well he could write down words on his neighbour's back. In the workshop we all left our seats and took a partner. A rubbed B's back to get it ready for the writing phase. A then wrote the infinitive of an irregular verb on B's back. Sometimes A had to write the verb two or three times. Once B had understood, he turned A round and wrote the past tense of the same verb on his back.

What is the point of this exercise, apart from revising irregular verbs? You are interacting with another person in a new ways, you are discovering new aspects of yourself and them. Some people find they can read very well through their backs, while others find their back is relatively 'blind'. You are dealing with the target language in a new and memorable way. If you use back-writing with 11 year olds you have an energetic body-using exercise designed ~~to~~ to soak up some of the boundless energy of Turkish kids of this age group.



Does the teacher dictate the whole text that goes down on the student's page? The answer in a traditional dictation is yes, but there is no reason why the teacher should not dictate a sentence to which the student then reacts, so that they together produce a joint composition. In the workshop we created a story this way:

" Please take this sentence down: John met his history teacher in the corridor- PLEASE WRITE THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN JOHN AND THE TEACHER"

I then gave the participants three to four mimutes to write the dialogue they imagined between the boy and the teacher.

" Are you ready for my next bit? Please write: When John got home he dropped his books in the hall and called out ' hi, Mum '. His mother was preparing lunch in the kitchen. NOW PLEASE WRITE THREE OR FOUR SENTENCES DESCRIBING JOHN'S MUM.

The joint composition continued this way with the participants having to describe, create dialogue and invent an ending to the story. When the writing phase was over each person in the room had their own story woven around the core I had offered them. The natural follow-on was for people to get together in threes and share the stories they had created.

This joint story-writing technique can be used at almost any language level. With beginners you simply ask them to describe in single words rather than whole sentences or you may want them to express their creativity through a picture. The technique boosts learners' confidence because you are enabling them to weave their own cloth but with whole chunks of correct language that you give them. I get the feeling that by integrating the teacher bits into their own stories , they are effortlessly absorbing them and internalising them.

The next question we tackled in the workshop was : does the student just take down what the teacher dictates, or does she alter it? In a picture dictation the student takes down what the teacher says but spatially, not in words. People in the workshop drew this diagram:

- Trace a line across your page from left to right- draw the line across the middle of the page
- Above the line there are waves
- In the top left hand corner there is a sailing boat

- Draw a man lying on the sand in the bottom left hand corner
- Top-right hand corner- there is a swimmer in the water
- The swimmer is shouting " Help, help"
- Make a dotted line from the swimmer to the nearest point on the shore
- Draw a dotted line from the man ont the sand to the swimmer. Which is the quickest way for the man on the beach to reach the swimmer ?

open up

If you weren't at my session you probably need to produce the diggram yourself to be able to solve the problem!
The beauty of picture dictation is that students can give proof of their understanding of spoken instructions without having to use language to do it.

"Disobedient" dictation

In this exercise I dictate things which are true in my own situation but which may or may not be true in yours. Take down all of what I say that is true for you and change the rest. An example: I dictate ' I live in a house '. If it so happens that you live in a flat you write down ' I live in a flat '. In other words you write down the truth for you within the frame I give you. Here's a dictation of this sort about homes:

I live in a house
The house has three outside doors
It has nine doors inside, leading into rooms
There are 14 windows in my house
You can lock six of the doors in my house
My kitchen faces West, the setting sun.
My bedroom faces North.
The toilet and the bathroom are separate rooms
My house has an attic but no cellar.

After a dictation of this sort ask people to compare their texts with their neighbours and explain any difficulties they had remembering the details of where they live.

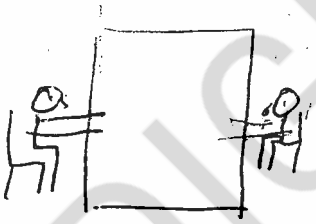
~~If you find that you come up with new things in the area of dictation~~ y don't you send them ~~in to the~~ Teacher's Centre ~~Newsletter~~?

If you have written off dictation as a tedious, old-fashioned, non-communicative area of language teaching, my plea to you would be to think again. The bit of exploration of the area that you will find in Paul Davis and my Cambridge University Press book Dictation is just a beginning. Why don't you experiment and share new ideas you come up with through the pages of the Teacher Centre Newsletter ?

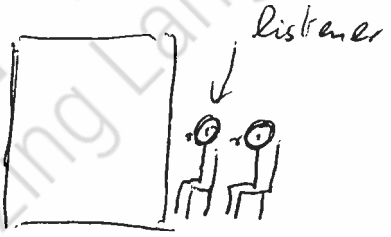
Empathetic listening

Mario Rinvolucri, Pilgrims

It's arguable that empathetic listening is the teacher's most important single skill. It is the ability to listen from the speaker's point of view , as far as possible from within her head, rather than listening as the other, the person facing, potentially the opponent. A lot of listening is done confrontationally, as if across a table:



Empathetic listening is listening from the same side of the table:



In the workshop we warmed-up with mimed introductions. For three minutes participants introduced themselves to a partner without speaking or writing any known language. The whole room was alive with gesture and mime.

This exercise is useful in breaking the ice but also in helping people to focus on the non-verbal aspect of communication. When you are trying to listen to a person in their own terms, it is vital to pay attention to all they are telling you with posture, gesture, facial movement, eyes etc....

Which does he like?

I asked the group to listen to me describing two cities , one of which I like and one of which I dislike. My task was to describe the places as neutrally as possible while the listeners were asked to try and read my preference from my voice tone, my visual signals and the ~~xxxxxIxproducedxx~~ things I was saying. Once the two descriptions were done participants got together in threes to decide which city I preferred. Then they had time for questions they wanted to put to me. The group voted and finally I told them which city was which.

This is a classic exercise for getting students to listen to the person of the speaker, not just to the verbal content of what she is saying.

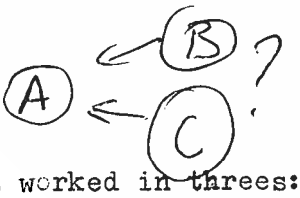
The person giving the descriptions of two whatevers, one of which she likes and the other she dislikes, can be the class-teacher, a teacher invited from another class, a student from a higher-level class, one of the students in the class itself. I have seen the exercise done with

two houses
" animals
" men
" women
" institutions
" films etc.....

If you use this exercise with your students you don't need to lecture them about empathetic listening - they'll be doing it quite automatically- they will be trying to hear the text from the speaker's point of view rather than just from their own. In so doing students learn a great deal about the speaker. In addition they pay very focussed attention to the words he uses and their meaning. The pure language learning task is enhanced by the additional ones.

Delayed Question answering

An important part of the listening skill for a teacher is to retain what has been heard for future use. Students will often give you significant bits of information about themselves which you need to mentally store. Students are both gratified and surprised when you remind them of something you remember them saying three weeks ago. To practise the listening and retention skill we did this exercise:



Participants worked in threes: for a timed minute B and C asked A questions about her teaching which she did not reply to . She simply mentally noted them - no writing was allowed. At the end of the minute A had as much time as she needed to retrieve the questions from her memory and answer them. In some threesomes B and C had to help A , in others A found she could remember all the questions herself.

This is a very complex exercise in terms of listening and paying person-attention. If you are A it is interesting to wonder whether you recalled B's questions and C 's equally easily. Did any

difference stem from the intrinsic interest of the questions or from the way you relate to B and C. Did you find yourself giving B and C equal eye contact during the interviewing and in answering did you look more at one or the other?

If you were a questioner did A encourage you to ask more by the way she listened? Did she receive your questions and the other person's questions with equal acceptance and warmth? Did you find yourself asking really A directed questions, or were these the questions you might have ~~expected~~ wanted some one ~~might~~ else to ask you?

The workshop was short and there was no way we could go into all the above questions. Another time, maybe.