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Story telling: the language teacher's oldest technique

Submitted by [Mario Rinvoluceri](#) on 19 November, 2008 - 09:09.

In this article Mario Rinvoluceri explores a range of story telling techniques that he uses in the classroom and gives some insights into why these techniques are effective. You can read the whole text or click on the links below to find out about an individual technique:

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Why story telling

Can I open this article by asking you about listening to stories in your own experience? When you were small:

- Where did you tend to listen to stories?
- What time of day was it, typically?
- Who told you or read you stories?
- How did you react to the stories?

Now you are older:

- Have you read or told stories as a parent?
- What are your feelings in the parental role?

The point of these questions and the answers you have given them in your mind is for you to realise how you yourself relate to stories. My impression is that most people relate pretty strongly to stories experienced in early childhood. Let me tell you an anecdote that illustrates this:

*I was teaching a micro-group of three or four business men. They were all at elementary level. My boss at the time was quite firm with me 'none of those childish stories of yours with this group... we don't want*

*them all going home in disgust.'*

*For a couple of weeks I heeded his words and then decided that the best possible way to teach the past tense was the story of Little Red Riding Hood.*

*I was well into the story, at the point where the wolf is about to eat the little girl up, [What big teeth you've got granny!] when the Italian marketing manager, a man in his early 30s, shouted: 'Fermati!' ('Stop!') I asked why he'd interrupted me and he said that this was the point at which his three year old daughter always begged him to stop the story. She could not bear the next bit!*

Can you think of a more powerful way of teaching this guy English than with a text that had him living two roles, that of himself as a child and that of himself as a parent? The power of the story lies, of course, in the text but also, and centrally, in the relationship between the teller and the students.

My claim is that story telling is a uniquely powerful linguistic and psychological technique in the hands of a language teacher which s/he can use with people of any culture (though the story needs to be culturally appropriate) and with people of virtually any age.

The power of story-telling lies in the fact that the teacher is in direct communication with the class, she is not dealing with 'third person' text, by telling a story she makes it her own. The Italian marketing manager was reacting to the girl and wolf story as told by Mario and, simultaneously, to his own telling to his little daughter.

#### Mixed language telling

There are, of course, many different ways of telling a story to a group. One of the most powerful ways with a group of beginners is to tell the story in the way that follows: (In this case the target language is Modern Greek):

*There was this man and he seemed very agitated. This **andras**, this guy, he went round and round the **kipo** behind his house (**kipo** is a garden) looking for something. The **andras** got down on his hands and knees and started scrabbling around in the border underneath the **triandafila**, the roses.*

*Now the wife of the **andra**, his **yineka**, happened to be in one of the upstairs rooms of the house. The **yineka** looked out through the bedroom **parathiro** and saw her **andra** searching for something in the border under the **traiaandafila**.*

*She asked him what he was doing. 'I'm looking for my house keys' her **andras** shouted back.*

*'Did you lose your house **klidia** down there in the **kipo**, in the border under the **traiaandafila**?'*

*'No' said her **andras**, 'I didn't lose my **klidia** here under the **traiaandafila**, but the light is so much better here!'*

I hope the text construction was logical enough for you understand all the Greek words without having to strain too much. Bi-lingual stories of this sort are magic with small kids and people at this stage of linguistic brilliance (3-8), lap up and 'interiorize' the new language without realizing what is happening in their minds. When the story has been told half a dozen times with more and more target language words being used in each telling the whole story is told in the target language and the learners have the giddy sensation that they have understood everything.

#### Multi-voice storytelling

A technique I really enjoy is telling a story with the help of the listeners. Let me show you how this goes:

- I ask a couple of learners to sit either side of me and a bit back from me, all three of us facing the



This sandwich story creative writing technique is, I think, an outstanding one for the following reasons:

- Half of the final text is in fully correct English, the parts dictated by the teacher
- Half the text is the students' own free invention
- Psychologically the student appropriates the teacher's part and feels it to be his own because of his own creative input
- All of this boosts the student's linguistic confidence

Two history, one fiction

Think of two incidents from your life that you are happy to tell the class and mentally prepare to tell these as brief anecdotes. Also dream up something that might have happened to you but which did not. Prepare to tell the made-up anecdote with the same conviction as the two real life stories.

- Come into class and simply invite the students to listen to three different things that happened to you some time ago.
- After the telling explain that two of the anecdotes were real life happenings while one was fiction.
- Group the students into fives to decide which was the 'imaginary' story. Tell them they will have to justify their choice.
- After a few minutes in the small groups ask students to give their views to the whole class.
- Take a vote on which the made-up story was.

Students tend to really love lie-detecting especially when the teacher is the 'liar'.

Your story-telling techniques?

Over the next few weeks we have a chance to find out a lot more about how we teach our vary varied groups of learners from Greenland to South Africa and from Vladivostok to Madeira by way of Harbin, Hanoi, Auckland and Singapore. I would love to know how you use stories, who with and, of course what stories. Hopefully we will see a real coming together of story-teller language teachers from across the globe, a very large and very small place at one and the same magical time.

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