

Storytelling in an ESL Classroom

Storytelling in a multi-age classroom helps bridge language barriers

BY LILLIAN COLON-VILA



As a child, I sat on the porch with my family almost every night listening to stories. My grandfather, older relatives and neighbors sipped one cup of coffee after another and retold tales from their childhoods. Some were humorous and others made every muscle in my body stiffen. But through them, I absorbed history, customs and traditions of my family and our Caribbean island.

Storytelling made learning interesting and fun for me. When I became an ESL

teacher, I used storytelling as a tool to teach not only English, but history and science, too. Storytelling develops imagination, oral and written communication skills, encourages the art of listening and helps expand knowledge of story schema. It also helps me introduce lessons and books. In addition, it deepens understanding of self and others and enhances confidence and self esteem.

Welcoming ESL students. I always begin the semester by telling a story to ESL students. It's usually a simple one to welcome them to the U.S. and particularly to my classroom. Since I use the students' names and their native countries, I invent the stories on the spur of the moment. I use puppets, pictures, flashcards and/or the chalkboard to draw pictures as I go along.

I make it a point to share my own first day of school, too – how I stuttered, mispronounced the teacher's name and wished for the floor to swallow me. The students laugh and relate to my experience. The iceberg between us breaks and I can begin to teach.

Storytelling in language arts. I employ storytelling to help students develop accurate inflections, consistent expressions in the English language and facial and body expressions. Students must also listen attentively to capture the main idea and other details of the story. These elements have been introduced, modeled and practiced previously.

As an independent activity, I ask students

Activities for Storytelling

- Have upper grade students tell stories to younger ones.
- Tell a story, then hand out pictures or cards with short sentences and have students sequence the events.
- Have students write stories from spelling or new vocabulary lists.
- Use storytelling to convey facts and concepts.
- Have students research a story that has been retold from generation to generation in their families and share it with the class.
- Invite a parent or a member of the community to tell a story.
- Have a competition in your grade level or school on storytelling. Let students, teachers and parents participate. Choose a topic and have them write a story on that subject, or use well-known stories.
- Have students who need to make up work or need extra points write their own stories in the subject in which they aren't doing well and share it with the class.
- Have storytelling time at least once a month, especially for holidays like Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, Chinese New Year and Cinco de Mayo.

to choose a book and retell the story to a small group. Beginning ESL students retell a segment or describe a picture from it. Intermediate ESL students tell the story using little detail, yet including the main idea. Advanced students retell their book, including main ideas and as many details as possible. This activity gives all students an opportunity to practice intonation patterns, inflections, stating the main idea and providing details through listening and speaking.

To build appreciation of each other's cultures, I teach a unit on storytelling wherein we read folktales, myths or legends from each country represented in the classroom. From the U.S., I choose one African American tale, one Native American and one European American.

This helps students continue to develop the skills formerly mentioned and helps them feel proud of their heritage. They also discover that there are many similarities among us. Storytelling becomes a unifying element. Students learn it isn't restricted to one country, one race or one nationality.

Storytelling in science and social studies.

I use storytelling to begin science and social studies lessons, too. These subjects can be difficult for ESL level one or two students so I take the most important facts about the lesson and write a story.

For example, for a lesson in germs for elementary students, I made several pictures of germs in action, such as germs giving someone a cold. Then I shared a simple story I had created about germs that included information on where germs could be found, what they do and how to keep them under control. This helped students develop listening and comprehension skills in English and acquire some scientific facts.

In a lesson for intermediate level kids, I taught the importance of trees in our daily life. I tied this lesson to language arts, presenting words that denote emotion. Students learned those words as well as the

parts of a tree and the things trees provide.

I began the lesson by reading Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree* under a tree. To expand the lesson, I had the students investigate a tree native to their country or a tree considered very useful in their homeland.

Students had to gather the following information about the tree: name; height; width; fruit it provides, if any; location; for what purpose the tree is used in their country; and whether that specific tree could be found in the U.S. As an enrichment, they drew bar graphs, Venn diagrams and table charts to demonstrate the height and width of the trees.

For social studies, whenever possible, I dress up like the historical figure we're studying. I've been Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln and Pancho Villa among others. Again, I open the unit by telling a story. Sometimes I narrate a specific historical moment through the eyes of a soldier, a slave, a woman or a child. Other times, I recite a poem to describe the period.

To finish most units, I divide the class into small groups and each one presents a short story. Students have the opportunity to hone their oral skills as well as their reading and writing. This exercise also encourages imaginative thinking and stimulates creativity since students have to take historical facts and events and rewrite them to create their story.

It makes sense to acquire language and to develop students' oral skills using storytelling rather than boring repetitious drills. Young storytellers develop confidence and self-esteem by speaking before a group, and they'll learn to express thoughts clearly. ♣

Intonation, inflection and imagination improve when students hear and retell stories as part of language arts, science and social studies lessons



Agree upon a pressing nutrition question with your class. Then, call the *National Center for Nutrition and Dietetics* on its toll-free hotline and ask to speak with a registered dietician for an answer to your question. There are many prerecorded nutrition messages your class can listen to as well. 800-336-1655. The Center is at 216 W. Jackson Blvd., Chicago, IL 60606.

Lillian Colon-Vila teaches ESL science and social studies to a multi-grade class of sixth to eighth graders at Webster Intermediate School in Webster, TX.