CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.

Storytelling: A Productive Language Learning Activity

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Storytelling is very common outside English classrooms. Every day people relate what they did yesterday, last week or many years ago. Yet its value as a language learning strategy is rarely recognized. On a language level, stories typically employ the use of the past and present perfect tenses, sentence connectors of chronology, reported speech, and a rich array of descriptive adjectives. In terms of motivation, storytelling is an imaginative and creative endeavor for the speaker and, if done well, can captivate the listener. Because of this, they can be valuable tools for developing speaker fluency and listener comprehension. If the stories are written, they can be embellished with pictures, songs, collages, and so on. In this way they are in keeping with modern day multimodal language. However, using storytelling as a successful language-learning tool necessitates careful planning.

To begin, storytelling in the classroom needs some structure. One common approach is to have students relate either orally or in writing something that happened to them in the past. While this gives students something to talk about, students can be reluctant to share their experiences in a formal classroom setting. An alternative approach is to engage in imaginative storytelling. In order to do this, it is beneficial to provide students with a framework for their story. Morgan and Rinvolucri (1983) in their book on using stories in the language classroom provide a variety of ways this can be done. These include such things as giving students various pictures or line drawings that they must incorporate into an original story or giving them the beginning of a story that they must then finish.

Two techniques that are very useful for students of various levels are story cards and photo stories. With story cards, students are given or write three kinds of cards—character cards (e.g., a very shy man, a nervous dentist), place/time cards (e.g., on a roller coaster, in a bath tub), and event cards (e.g., an elephant escapes from the zoo, a picture comes to life). Students then draw one character card, one place card and one event card and use these to create a story. Not only is this activity very good for practicing the past tense and increasing vocabulary, but it can also draw on students' creativity and imagination. A second technique is to give students photos of one or more persons doing some activity. Students must then create a story relating what the person was doing before the picture was taken, what they are doing in the picture and what they will do

next. In the process they have to give the characters names and an identity. Obviously this is an excellent activity for encouraging students to review various verb tenses.

In addition to providing students with a framework for their story, teachers also need to consider how to actually implement the activity in the class. One choice teachers must make is whether or not to have the storytelling an individual or group activity. Telling a story individually allows students to pursue their own creativity; group storytelling allows students to share their grammatical and lexical knowledge in crafting a story. Another choice is whether to have the story spoken or written. Such choices depend on the language learning goals. For example, having the story written provides students with an opportunity to pool their grammatical and lexical knowledge to write the story. This provides a context for developing accuracy. Having students tell a story orally, on the other hand, encourages oral fluency. Whichever approach is taken, however, some kind of task should be given to the listeners in the class. For instances, if groups create a written story, these stories could be posted somewhere so that other students in the class can read them. After reading them, students would need to pick what they consider the best story and indicate why they chose it as the best story. Or if students tell a story individually to the rest of the class, the other students could write a short summary of the story. To the extent that teachers provide a task for the listener, storytelling can develops listening comprehension.

In short storytelling can be a useful technique for developing oral fluency, grammatical accuracy, lexical knowledge and listening comprehension. However, in order to achieve these goals, teachers must carefully provide structure for the story itself and give students a listening task when they are the audience. Given the popularity of storytelling in natural conversations, storytelling can be a motivating and productive tool to use in the language classroom.

Reference

Morgan, J. & Rinvolucri, M. (1983). *Once upon a time: Using stories in the language classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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