



Therefore, since English teaching is not bound to any one domain of content or format, I suggest that we use stories in the classroom to teach English, especially listening. For language skills to improve, it is not necessary to tell a story and then have students do drills or activities on it, stories are so meaningful that just the telling of them results in learning. We are, after all, natural language acquisition machines, so by providing our students with powerful, meaningful content, a fair degree of acquisition will occur on its own. Whether follow-up activities increase the degree of acquisition, or instead, end up diluting the story experience, remains to be seen. I do suggest however, that you give the students some opportunity to reflect on and respond to the content of the story, whether to you to each other.

As for choosing stories, some work and some do not, depending on the kind of students you have. If stories are a framework for the affective and stimulus of moral development, then stories with meaningful moral content for each particular audience should be chosen. The story should relate to some dilemma the student is facing, such as how to choose a partner, how to relate to peers, or how to become autonomous. Folk tales rarely fit these criteria, since the messages they give were designed for completely different physical-social environments. They tend to give moral codes like “stay out of the forest,” “obey the chief,” and so on, which usually do not fit our students’ lives.

As for how to tell a story, the same techniques apply as in public speaking or self-presentation: make eye contact, change your voice throughout, use pauses around important ideas, and especially, use different voices for different characters. I am surprised at how many teachers tell me that they are not good at telling stories, because I suspect that this is just a matter of practice, as it has been for me. A story should be told five times before using it in front of an audience.

In conclusion, tell stories. Use them as linguistic devices to teach your students English, but better yet, as affective devices to touch their hearts and clarify their worlds.

### References

Sanders, B. (1995). *A is for ox: The collapse of literacy and rise of violence in an electronic age*. New York, NY, Vintage Books.

Getting back to explanations, isn't this how 90% of our teaching is done? Our classrooms and textbooks are filled with rational, logical, but barely meaningful explanations. We activate cognitive schema. And yet our students, especially our students, are not just cognitive beings, they have affective needs as well, needs that help them figure out how to live their lives: What is right or wrong. Who they are. How they should act. Psychologists term this aspect of growth, moral development, and it is the single greatest task our students face at that age. Moral development is partly served by information, but mainly from experience. Since a story is packaged piece of experience, a framework for the affective, it touches their hearts and needs in a special way.

There are other ways stories are powerful too. Research, by Jerome Bruner and others, has found that people are more likely to acquire and retain information presented in story format than in any other. In fact, Harvard has a "memory improvement" course where they train students to embed details in stories in order to remember them longer. It seems that our brains have evolved in a way that we are better able to process information given in stories than in other formats.

There are a number of possible reasons for this tendency. First, as mentioned before, stories activate both sides of our brain instead of one. Second, as Sanders points out in "A is for Ox" (Sanders 1995, p.3), the United nations has cataloged over 3000 languages in the world, but only 78 have writing systems, and only six of those are international. Human culture has for the main part of its history been oral, not literate, and stories are more central to oral than literate cultures. Finally, throughout most of human history, youth were educated by listening to stories.

Imagine tens of thousands of years in which the experienced elders told stories around the campfire to youths. An old man might tell the young hunters about the time a bear chased him and his brother, and how his brother got eaten because he jumped into a river instead of climbing a tree. The youth who could process that information, retain it, and then call upon it when chased when encountering a bear themselves would be more likely to survive than the youth who couldn't, and in this way evolution has favored a brain that can process stories.

How does this story make you feel? Touched? Angry? Educated? Then, why? If you were moved by something in the story, maybe it was Johnny's neediness. Maybe you had a similar experience as a teacher, or maybe you were even like Johnny once. Most likely, you were reacting to something you are unaware of, because, the same way words activate verbal schema, stories activate emotional schema. In short, stories provide a framework for the affective: emotions, experiences, values, things you feel, things that you don't really have words for.

Imagine that instead of the story, you had heard this, instead:

“It has been well established that teacher-student dynamics have an important effect on motivation. Three factors have been identified in regard to interaction with children:

- a) individual recognition adds to t-s relationship building
- b) physical contact, such as hand-holding, leads to t-s relationship building
- c) teacher perceptions of instructional and relational acts are rarely the same as student perceptions”

How does this make you feel? The same as the story? Probably not, because this is not a story, a framework for the affective, it is an explanation, a framework for the cognitive. I gave you chunks of cold information, which activated your cognitive schema, but not your affective schema.

Why do explanations so rarely move us while stories do? It might be because the sterile symbology of words and more rational cognitive processes reside mainly in our left brain, whereas feelings and global intuitive concepts reside in our right brain. Explanations are processed in the left, but since they have so little visual, experiential, emotional data, they do not activate the right. Stories do, and so activate both sides, which might also explain why adult women tend to respond to emotional stories more strongly than men do. They have a higher degree of crossover between their right and left hemispheres, and words are more activate emotional responses more readily in women than in men. I should say, though, that I suspect this phenomenon is as much culturally conditioned, as much as genetic.

# **The Power of Stories: Cognitive, Affective, and Developmental**

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## **Abstract**

Using storytelling as a classroom technique, for teaching English or other subjects, has long been noted for its effectiveness. After all, throughout most of human history, education was conducted through narratives. Evidence also exists that our brains have evolved in such a way that framing information in a story format leads to a higher degree of comprehension and retention. However, the power of stories goes beyond linguistic efficacy. For young adults, whose greatest psychological task is moral development, stories provide a forum for valuing and internalizing moral constructs, and forming a personal identity.

Imagine someone told you this story:

“At around Thanksgiving time, an elementary teacher in America gave her students big pieces of paper and asked them to draw a picture of something they were thankful for. The next day, the children brought in their pictures and she showed each one to the class. One child drew a picture of a TV, and another, a picture of a farmer. But the picture Johnny drew, like the boy himself, was a little more unusual. Johnny, smaller than the other kids his age, rather fearful, and always sitting off by himself, had drawn a childlike picture of a hand. The hand was huge, so big, in fact, that it covered the whole paper.”

“The teacher showed the picture to the rest of the class and asked them if they could guess whose it was. One child raised her hand and said: "I know. I know. It's a giant's hand, because it is so big." Another child said, "I think that it's God's hand." Then the teacher asked Johnny, "Johnny, whose hand is this?" Johnny looked down, murmured a bit and the teacher asked again. He then answered, "It's teacher's hand." The teacher paused for a moment, but then understood. Since Johnny was so shy, she sometimes took him to recess, holding his hand.”