

The *Storied Lesson*: Short Stories in the Classroom

Cecilia Silva

Tohoku University

Abstract

Stories happen all the time and everywhere and can serve as a powerful resource because of their appeal as a highly naturalistic means of teaching. The basic condition for this is that the text of the story provides the potential for "comprehensible input," that is, language is within the range of access of the learner. This workshop proposes activities with very short stories, and the suggestion is to lead students to go beyond the stories. This work has three main parts: (1) Stories for beginners, (2) Stories for intermediate level students, and (3) Stories for advanced students. All the levels share one common aspect: students are the authors of the short stories. However, in case of beginners the focus is on language for language learning and on the learner and his/her beloved ones. In case of intermediate and advanced students the focus is on the text as narrative.

Stories as a Means for Teaching Language

Stories allow us to organize our perceptions of the world into meaningful patterns. Through the stories we speak about the world not just "the way it is" but rather the way we see it, the way we would like to see it, or the way we would like other people to see it. Language is a powerful channel between the world and the stories (Wajnryb, 2003, pp.1-19).

Willis (1996, p.11, cited in Wajnryb, 2003, p.6) mentions three notions -exposure, use and motivation- to explain the reasons for using stories in the language class.

- a. *Exposure* - The text of the story provides an amount of "comprehensible input" within the reach of the learner. This input can be conveyed to the learner in several ways: a teacher or a student reading aloud, a group of students sharing stories, groups of students working on a core text and expanding it in different directions according to their own ideas.
- b. *Use* - In the class, activities that accompany, precede or follow the story give learners further opportunities to use the language. Working with stories involves framing (warming-up, getting learners ready for the story or for work with it), focusing (engage students in activities related to the story), and diverging (following their own imagination and ideas learners expand the stories).
- c. *Motivation* - The story itself is a source of motivation and stories also invite to make

associations with personal or cultural matters.

A Framework for Working with Stories

This framework includes the following three components: experience, story and narrative text. Human experience is the moment, the event, or the portion of life we want to talk about. The experience is the raw material for the story. The story is the person's or groups' reflections and it is still part of the inner world because it has not been represented in a text yet. The narrative text is the representation of the story in the real world: it is the result and the product of several textual decisions related to communicative purposes. Figure 1 shows how this framework was used to design the activities for the workshops in the Lao American College.

Level	Experience	Story	Narrative text
Beginners	Landmarks in my life	"I remember the most meaningful events in my life"	Visual and textual resources for representing events, characters, and feelings, and sharing those experiences with an audience: colleagues, teachers, and schoolmates.
	Somebody is far away	"I remember somebody who is far away"	
Intermediate	My favorite character	"I think of my culture and choose a character"	
Advanced	My favorite legend	"I think of my culture and choose a folk-tale"	

Fig. 1. Connecting experience, story and narrative text.

This workshop has three main parts, divided in accordance with the level of students the activities are intended for. In case of beginners the author proposes several warm-up activities to refresh and enlarge learners' vocabulary before they produce their own stories. The activities are detailed below.

1. Personal experiences for beginners

The focus here is a particular kind of anecdote that can enable learners to appreciate the narrative receptively and, as it may easily be connected to students' lives, produce stories by themselves. Therefore, before students produce their own stories there is a series of activities for practicing simple grammatical structures, conversation, and vocabulary.

Far away - by Sonia Trejo

Sonia: *"I always write stories about my family because I don't have them here, only my husband and two brothers-in-law. I think of them every day because they are very far away in El Salvador"*

(To the students: this story is about someone far away. Do you know someone far away?)

1.1 Rewrite the story in the correct word order

"remembering I my because daughter am Today

.....

She it is. is years today. her old eight birthday

.....

I don't have feel my here sad children I."

.....

1.2 First impressions

- a. Where do you think Sonia's daughter is?
- b. Why do you think Sonia is away from her family?
- c. Do you like this story? Why or why not?

1.3 Talk it over

- a. What do you think will happen to Sonia in the years to come?
- b. What do you think will happen to Sonia's daughter?

	YES	NO
I live far away from my family		
I live near my family		
I live far away from my friends		
I live near my friends		
I write letters to my family		
I write letters to my friends		
I call my family on the phone		
I call my friends on the phone		
I visit my family		
I visit my friends		

1.4 Play with words

- a. Write words related to being "far away"

- b. Complete these sentences:

I feel happy when

I feel angry when

I feel homesick when

I feel sad when

I feel surprised when

1.5 Sharing stories: tell about your friends and family.

Who lives far away? Where do they live? How do you keep in touch?

Student's name	Who?	Where?	How?		
			Letter/e-mail	phone	visit

The following activities (1.6, 1.7, 2 and 3) were accomplished by participants in the workshops at the Lao American College.

1.6 Landmarks of your life.

This exercise is meant to use students' experiences as a "getting-to-know-you" activity to practice simple past tense. The teacher introduces the idea of a landmark as a memorable building or place and from there extend the concept to refer to memorable past experiences. As an example the teacher shows a chart with *her landmarks*: I was born in . . . , I graduated from university, holiday in Africa, first son was born, etc. Students are allowed time to draw their charts individually. Then participants work in pairs to tell each other about their charts. Afterwards, participants sit in a circle and are encouraged to show their charts and make questions. The teacher takes a back-seat role and only intervenes if necessary to clarify the meaning of words.


1.7 More ideas to tell and write: bring in a picture of someone you care for and who lives far away. Tell about that person.

If possible, in the previous class ask learners to bring one picture of somebody that is very important in their lives. The teacher shows a chart with a picture of her beloved person and a text about that person. Participants write a text about the person they chose. The teacher proposes a structure for the text: description of the beloved person, what he/she does, where he/she is, why he/she is so important. Students seat in a circle and are encouraged to share their charts with everybody.

2. Short stories for intermediate students

This part of the workshop exploits a combination of cultural and personal dimensions of narrative. In this case, the teacher presents a text about a famous character.

My favorite character in my country

	<p>This is Mafalda. Mafalda is 7 years old and lives in Buenos Aires. Mafalda is short, pretty and has brown hair. She is very nice and very intelligent. Mafalda goes to school every day. Her favorite classes are English and Spanish. She wants to be a translator and work at the UN. She loves The Beatles and hates eating soup.</p>
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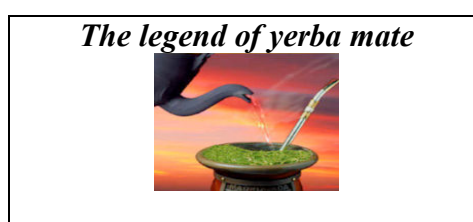
The text written in the chart the teacher shows may be very simple. The author suggests the following activities:

- Writing. Cloze activity. Participants receive another text, longer, more detailed, and without verbs.
- Writing. In groups students choose a famous character of their country so as to write about him/her. The author suggests bringing to the class pictures of famous people pasted on cardboard.
- Speaking. Ask about the character! Groups share the texts they wrote: other students ask questions and the group members reply with facts or just invent the answers.

3. Advanced level: think and write.

In this part of the workshop participants construct stories based on their cultural treasure. The author suggests the following activities:

My favorite folk-tale in my country



- a. Listening and reading. Strip story. The teacher prepares a legend in several strips, students work in groups and put the strips in order while the teacher reads the complete story.
- b. Writing. The teacher prepares big cardboards with illustrations of legends of the students' country. Each group of students chooses a legend and explains it.
- c. Speaking. Each group shares with the others the folk-tales members wrote about.

Conclusion

The basic idea the author had in mind at the time of deciding the activities for the workshop was to guide students beyond the stories. Actually, the stories are just excuses to wake up the imagination and use the language by building our own stories. One suggestion for teachers: allow yourself to get involved together with the learners, teachers' stories also need to be told, and students are very interested!

Recommended Reading

Taylor, E. (2000). *Using Folktales*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wajnryb, R. (2003). *Stories. Narrative activities in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Weinstein-Shr, G. (1992). *Stories to Tell our Children*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.