

Beyond Barriers: Unlocking EFL Students' Potential through Storytelling

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Received: 19 March 2023 ; **Revised:** 15 May 2023 ; **Accepted:** 14 September 2023

Abstract:

The aim of this study is to identify the importance of integrating storytelling in EFL classrooms. It describes the researcher's own experience to explore the potential of the educational storytelling with her first year students at the department of English at Dr Tahar Mouley university-Saida; the course is entitled Research Techniques during the academic year (2021-2022). In addition, this research paper seeks to uncover the advantages of storytelling in relation to the basic skills needed in an EFL classroom mainly in promoting critical thinking and self and group reflection in preparing projects. Based on library research method and field observation, the researcher has noticed an engaged and inspired teaching/learning atmosphere where a sense of authenticity was raised and an emotionally conducive environment was established. Hence, teachers need to integrate storytelling through delivering good and captivating stories as well as inciting students to create their own.

Keywords: Storytelling; critical-Thinking; EFL learning.

1- Introduction

It is commonly known that the most significant matter in teaching is the appropriate choice of the technique, method or strategy which should meet learners' needs who should be active in the learning process. In order to describe our today's teaching situation amid the actual huge changes where teachers are asked to bridge the theory-practice gap and to respond to the desired professionalism, I may refer to Frost's words which can really depict the previous mentioned state ('woods' is substituted with classes and 'I' with the teacher): *These **woods** (classes) are lovely, dark and deep, But **I** (teacher) have promises to keep, And miles to go before I (teacher) sleep, And miles to go before I (teacher) sleep.* Although, teachers' of English situation these days is an alleviating one because it offers a wide array of innovative tools that aid them in their profession and help them respond to the needs and interests of the new type of learners to learn differently. It is a challenging one too where teachers have to review their ways of producing and

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transmitting knowledge since perceiving teaching as knowledge transfer has been countered by views that cherish instructors' broader role to delve deeper with the complexities of learning and the societies they serve and to reflect upon the necessary competencies needed for that.

Accordingly, discussions on how students, the future qualified citizens; can involve themselves in their societies' welfare, and to reflect upon the broader and deeper meaning of human life persist to hover over the academic scene. Parker Palmer (1998) the American writer and activist who focused on issues in education, community, leadership and social change evoked that classes need to be a greater community, they need to be 'nurtured and life-sustained', he added "The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require" (n.p). Ergo, if we wish to knit this fabric of community and to save our classes from being trapped in such ennui, it is recommended to find solutions in order to avoid the sense of *disconnection* we often experience in our EFL classrooms and we need to tap into the sense of community that Palmer claimed. Simply we need to motivate ourselves and our students to talk and to narrate.

In view of that, classes should become spaces of active inquiry and authorship rather than being dedicated for knowledge delivery. Educational storytelling becomes a convenient tool where both teachers and students can use or create stories to introduce a specific subject or reinforce understanding of a given idea. Its uses and applications have expanded rapidly, particularly in the field of education. Students should be enabled by their teachers to synthesize, infer, conceive, and create new cultural, social, literary and historical knowledge so as to craft their own life stories or interpret others stories. (Same author, 2021)

Therefore, this study aims to uncover the full potential of integrating stories in educational settings. The genesis of this research paper is inescapably situated in a particular context, and made from the vantage point of my own practice since I am incorporating storytelling in the course of *Study Skills* destined for First year students in the department of Literature and English Language at Dr. Tahar Mouley university-Saida/Algeria. The immediate catalyst for this venture was my reading to Rina Benmayor- Professor of Oral History, Latina/o Studies, and Literature- about her digital

storytelling workshop where she produced her own story in which digital storytelling has become a main feature of her "Latina Life Stories" class. Her students, who were predominantly of Mexican heritage wrote their own autobiographies and produced their own stories. Also, what inspired me was that they become authors in their own right, inscribing their own identities and life experiences through storytelling. The main purpose of the present study is to determine the L1 students' opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the critical thinking skill at Research Techniques course. In line with this aim, the following research question was addressed: What are the L1 students' general opinions about the use of storytelling to develop the critical thinking and increase their immersion in their course? It is expected that the suggestion introduced in this paper will contribute to future research in creating constructivist learning environments with storytelling. Stories can be the adequate remedy to heal our classes which are beset by the loss of a feeling of connection and closeness between teachers and students, and even with the world beyond the academia.

2– Literature Review and Related Work

It is commonly agreed that the magical effect of a tale can enhance learners' emotional, intellectual and moral faculties, in other words it can shape their personalities. Likewise, Licia Masoni (2019) pondered that telling stories in a foreign language allows speakers to feel that they can exist in a language other than their own which can become part of who they are and affect their identities. Especially nowadays, stories are transmitted and exchanged thanks to modern technologies which can serve any tutor in teaching his learners; how to be with others, how to take criticism, and how to learn.

Furthermore, Ruth Wajnryb in his book *Stories: Narrative Activities for the Language Classroom* (2003) called teachers to enact a kind of a 'storied classroom' "A managed unit of time in the language-learning classroom during which some aspects of a story or stories are made available as a learning resource...The story can start the lesson and serve as a motivator; or it can be the goal toward which the lesson is steered" (p. 2) especially those who wish to avoid the sense of disconnection they often experience in the EFL classroom. They can do so in order to motivate students to talk. A 'storied lesson' can be achieved through exploiting stories in the service of language teaching. Catherine Heinemeyer who is a lecturer in Arts at York St John University and a storyteller argues that oral

storytelling offers a rich and much-needed channel for intergenerational dialogue with young people. She echoes that telling and listening to stories is certainly very crucial in young people's lives. This can enable them to learn from others' life experiences, to shape and be shaped by the world around them as well as negotiating their changing social roles and relationships. In a few words, I perceive storytelling as a string that holds stories together in which storytellers (teachers or students) can string together and their ideas, skills, thoughts and principles succinctly. Each story revolves around a selected theme and commonly has a certain perspective. I refer back to Ruth Wajnryb words which expressively clarify the worth of stories, he considers that:

The value of stories, however, goes beyond the entertainment they offer. Beyond the immediate pleasures of exposure to stories, the uplifting, exciting, moving or thought-provoking qualities of a good story contribute to an educated person's intellectual, emotional and moral development. The effect of story—one might say, its 'magic'—is to offer an infinite well of vicarious experience with the capacity to transport the reader/hearer beyond all boundaries of time, space, language, ethnicity, class or gender. (2003, p. 4)

Also, it may be a good idea to refer to Matteo Stocchetti since he dedicated his investigations to decipher the spheres of critical approaches to communication, education and media. He recognizes storytelling's value in human life in general and teaching in particular and accentuates that both of the story's features and the telling's conditions are of paramount importance in performing important emotional and cognitive functions at individual and collective levels. Stocchetti claimed that both 'the narrative' requires the 'telling' because an 'untold' story is simply a non-story and resumed educational storytelling's major goal in the following expressive words:

first of all to make people aware of the fact that the ambivalent nature of the power of storytelling supports influential efforts to control its subversive potential in education and elsewhere. Other critical competences, such as recognising the moral and social implications of alternative stories, assessing the impact of particular stories on particular relations of power, and even the capacity to create stories that can

effectively support a more emancipative social order, depend on this awareness. (2016, p. 17)

In other words, storytelling is not only about telling an isolated story but it is about sharing and connecting, contributing and collaborating. It is about the skills to transform stories and to create meaning.

3– Stories in the Language Classroom: Why?

In an attempt to discover storytelling's advantages, many studies have been conducted to investigate its effectiveness in many disciplines including the EFL classroom and have greatly increased our understanding of its role in the acquisition of a foreign language. Cristina Aliagas-Marín and Ana M. Margallo construed that oral storytelling is “the art of telling an ephemeral story through a three-fold partnership of mutual influences between a storyteller, a listener and a spoken story.” Teachers can create, tell or retell a short story that can be a traditional tale, a personal narrative or an instructive tale.” (as cited in Matteo Stocchetti, 2016, p. 91) Much has been written on the subject that storytelling enables students to learn actively considering the nature of human beings as storytellers and that stories are everywhere, teachers can use storytelling as a teaching method in English classrooms. Storytellers as being teachers/students need to look for the appropriate and memorable stories with an interesting subject matter and an effective style of narration so as to attract learners' attention and motivate them to take part in classroom activities. No one can ignore as it was resumed by Javed Sahibzada et al. (2020) that stories are playing significant role in individual's or groups' personality development in which experiences are going to be shared and EFL students will be enabled to build mutual understanding.

It is worth mentioning that storytelling is one of the most powerful forms of communication at our disposal in which the storyteller's (teacher, student) self-awareness, visual imagery, and cultural knowledge are going to be improved. Stories provide entry points for all and they contain embedded values which can improve students' motivation in the language classroom which in turn activates creative thinking and results in a highly energised language learning experience. According to M. Green (2004), stories can serve many functions especially in “sparking students' interest aiding the flow of lectures, making material memorable, overcoming students' resistance or anxiety and building

rapport between the instructor and the students, or among students themselves.” (p. 3) Further, a great story can help alter perspectives especially in persuading the audience to act in a way that helps the ‘storyteller’ achieve his/her goals. It activates the imagination and taps into the essence of our humanity.

Also, H. RABAHI and N. Ghounene (2022) conducted a study to explore teachers’ and learners’ attitudes towards teaching English Language through storytelling. They found that the use of storytelling is beneficial in developing learners’ cultural awareness of the target language and both teachers and students showed positive attitudes towards the approach. The results also revealed that the students were more motivated towards reading the stories and acquiring a new vocabulary. According to Smeda et al. (2010) storytelling is a pedagogical tool that has been used in education to convey knowledge from one generation to another for ages, even in modern times. It emerged as a new innovative tool which can be employed as a supplementary means in EFL classes.

In the same line of thought, teachers can infuse stories in their lessons either for moral or didactic goals. F. Kalantari & M. Hashemian construed that storytelling is an efficient strategy as it proffers EFL learners with a lot of interesting and enriching input in the early stages of language development, because it. Furthermore, regarding personal narratives; Licia Masoni (2018) revealed that the learner becomes ‘the leading expert’ when he/she narrates a personal narrative, he/she accomplishes the first stage of language learning and feeling free to express his/her knowledge in which he/she is going to filter his/her L1 culture through the foreign language.

To the researcher’s best knowledge, the main advantages of using stories are creating a comfortable atmosphere in the class. Teachers and learners can be actively and sincerely engaged with the stories and contribute to them because they can proffer a heightened sense of interaction, motivation and awareness which can free the learners from the parapets of the classroom. The sharing of stories builds greater confidence in students’ fluency and mastery of various skills like: vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, listening and pronunciation.

It is noteworthy to consider another element which is the phase ‘after’ sharing narratives in EFL classes where responsibility for providing feedback to the story is of paramount importance as Nicholas et al. pondered that teachers should be “prepared to make follow-up referrals to health professionals” (2011). Teachers may struggle to choose

which kind of feedback they can give; feedback to the content of the story, as well as its form, when to put boundaries and how to respond to certain stories especially in situations where students may share traumatic experiences because they may feel empowered to express what often goes unexpressed in their native languages.

H. İnal and A.Cakir (2014) investigated the effects of stories as contexts on vocabulary recognition and retention. They found that using a story-based vocabulary teaching technique may proffer learners and teachers with versatile benefits, it can enhance students' language skills and their intercultural understanding as well as it gives students a great opportunity to infer the meanings of the unknown words from the context. In research conducted by Kadek Trisna Kusuma Dewi (2021), integrating a storytelling technique can be an effective solution to be applied in order to enhance students' critical thinking (HOTS) and boost students' ability to communicate. Besides, Farzaneh Kalantari & Mahmood Hashemian (2016) reported that storytelling is a powerful strategy in the early stages of language development, as it affords EFL learners with a lot of interesting and enriching input.

Based on those previous studies, it can be concluded that storytelling can be a great solution to enhance students' skills mainly in reading, writing, speaking and creative thinking.

4- Experiment and Interpretation

In an attempt to take advantage of the undeniable fun and enjoyment in stories, I tried to include stories in different classroom activities. It was opted as a pedagogical approach used in *Study Skills subject* for (40) first year students (L1) during the academic year (2021-2022) at the Department of Letters and English Language, Saida- University- Algeria. The lesson was about 'How to deliver successful oral presentations' either by using audio visual aids or storytelling. I shared a very expressive quote by Matthew Dicks from his book '*Storyworthy*' (2018) about how to become an effective storyteller and to uncover the hidden architecture that lie behind every well-told story. He provided a granular bit of wisdom that is both applicable and memorable:

You need not spend time in jail or crash through a windshield or have a gun jammed against the side of your head to tell a great story. In fact the simplest stories about the smallest moments in our lives are often the most

compelling. We all have stories. You may not believe this yet, but you will. You just need to know how to find them in your everyday life and then capture them for future telling. (p, 28)

Students were free to choose the topic they want to deal with either individually or in pairs. They opted for the following ones: **Self Development and Living Positively, Gaming : a Curse or a Blessing, violence against Women, Autism, The Impact of Social Media on Humans' Psyches, Femicide, violence, The Japanese Anime ...etc** some students have prepared visual presentations using PowerPoint software, others used written notes to be guided while presenting and some other students succeeded to create stories using characters and places from their own experiences or imagination. They rose to the challenge and allowed their imaginations to run free, they practised telling their stories to each other and they bravely performed in front of their whole group. Students were provided with the necessary tips regarding the content, the form as well as the way needed to deliver a successful presentation. They were asked to open with a story that appeals directly to the audience interests (their classmates). The story they need to craft should be about a problem that affects the listeners, making sure there is an emotional component that reinforces the message. Also, they were introduced to the concept of story map “visual portrait of a story” (VPS) developed by Brett Dillingham. Mapping allows the character to transform and change to make the story meaningful. During this process of telling about the growth, even the listener can undergo changes. The map consists of: elements of a beginning “call to adventure”, elements of a middle (conflict, consisting of problem/solution, tension/resolution) and elements of an end (closure). Also, Rob Biesenbach proposed in his book ‘Unleash the Power of Storytelling: Win Hearts, Change Minds, Get Results’ (2018) five basic steps to create a story: the audience, the goal, the challenges, the character and resolution.

Furthermore, students were informed that in order to influence the audience and grab its attention, the storyteller/narrator should pay attention to his/her pitch, tone of voice, gesture, pronunciation, emphasis and some other speech features and above all showing emotion in order to trigger listeners' emotions. The examples bellow are two stories told by two students to introduce their projects. The first dealt with: **Gaming : a Curse or a Blessing** while the second was about ‘**Autism**’:

Students1:

'The other day, I was sitting with my best friend in a garden overlooking a beautiful fountain. Then, suddenly a teenage boy sat beside us, his eyes were red, his hands were shivering and he could barely grab hold his PSP. We were utterly shocked by the view, he was like a zombie, for this reason, my friend asked him' you are good pale' he did not even answer but instead he gave us a creepy look that we only see in horror movies. In that moment, without hesitation, we ran away and escaped with our lives fearing that he might hit us. Later on, we knew that the guy was suffering from insomnia and that he spent his days playing PUBG without any sleep' (M. Hachmaoui)

Student 2:

When I was about three or four, people suspected that I have autism because of the misconception in generalizing the traits of having autism as if it was the common cold. My mom would always hear comments about how I am too quiet, antisocial, hate physical touch unless it is someone I know and trust and don't make eye contact when speaking. So because of all the mentioned people would immediately say 'oh she must be autistic'. When I grew up and got interested in reading about neurological disorders I was told the story by her and my brother. That is what inspired me to talk about it in today's presentation' (R. Saidi)

We found that personal narratives had a prominent role in the EFL classroom especially in Study Skills subject. Students enjoyed the fact of sharing their personal accounts and opinions that often do not get voiced in institutional settings in the language of instruction, they were able to bring the outside inside regardless of proficiency limitation. Students often find themselves having a greater voice in the foreign language than in their own. Even the listeners were interested to hear their peers' stories; they were willing to listen attentively and provided reinforcement with body language. They have even participated in the performance through sympathetic laughter and nodding. A kind of connected exchanges were enacted in which the storytellers succeeded to transmit entry points to the audience to pass on a feeling of intimacy between self/storyteller and listener.

Although further analysis of students' narratives is required and would unearth much more data, my preliminary examination reveals how much these students were able to achieve, in terms of harmony and sharing of ideas, through a foreign language. Interestingly, all the students revealed that they were very interested in the subject and they confessed that they are in need of more similar occasions, in order to feel less 'isolated' /less 'alienated', they learnt to talk to each other where listening becomes no more an issue. Spontaneous interaction and collaboration were achieved in a natural way.

5. Conclusion

In an age of increasing strategies and approaches towards teaching English as a foreign language, a claim for new visions and approaches to its teaching is made especially to cope with nowadays emerging realities and needs. In view of that, this research work aims at raising both teachers' and learners' awareness towards the importance of instilling the culture of storytelling. The latter offers a gateway into students' personal experiences and an opportunity to connect more deeply as a class. Offering students the opportunity to tell a story that was waiting to be told, and to see the change that story can bring has the potential to transform their relationship with the language. Thus, using a storytelling approach may nurture EFL learners' imagination and creativity in an enthusiastic milieu. Hence, a call to implement storytelling in different teaching instructions is recommended since it can give learners full chances to express their values, hopes, fears and dreams.

Accordingly, workshops are needed to train teachers in realizing a beneficial integration of storytelling as well as to equip them with the necessary skills to aid their learners in producing exceptional artefacts, to build and share ideas and stories. Also, they can become skilled in achieving a successful transition from the oral to the digital world through mastering the necessary skills to integrate digital storytelling meaningfully into the curriculum. Yet, they should be well-trained in storyboarding and/or scripting. In a few words, let us use stories, let unleash their power to inspire, teach, clarify, and mobilise as Rob Biesenbach echoed "stories are all around us. We may not recognize them, but they're there — just waiting to be found, shaped, and shared." (2018, p. 11).

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How to cite this article by the APA style:

Mokeddem Hayat , Kohil Mouna, (2023). **Beyond Barriers: Unlocking EFL Students' Potential through Storytelling**. Humanization Journal for Research and Studies. 14 (01). Algeria: Djelfa University. 143-154