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The Effectiveness of Storytelling in Enhancing Communicative Skills

Nor Hasni Mokhtar*, Michi Farida Abdul Halim & Sharifah Zurina Syed Kamarulzaman

Centre of General Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Malaysia

Abstract

Storytelling is not limited to entertainment but can also be used as an effective teaching tool in a language classroom. This study is to identify the effects of storytelling on students' language aspects of communication skills and to evaluate the extent to which storytelling helps in enhancing students' communication skills. The findings show that storytelling has beneficial effects on reading skills by students being able to associate meanings and emotions with words. Students also develop their vocabulary and learn when and where to use certain words and phrases.

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1. Introduction

There is an increasing interest in the quality of graduates that Malaysia produces, as lately there are many discussions in the newspapers that address the marketability and quality of local graduates. Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) conducted a survey among its members in 1999 and found that 43.6 percent said they had staff with problems in writing and communication skills. The same survey conducted in 2003 showed an increase by 54 percent in those who complained of the same problem. In addition, it also reported that graduates lacked the ability to converse in English. In other words our students need to improve their English language proficiency and communicative skills in order to increase their competitiveness in the job market.

1.1. Statement of Problem

The Foundation English course, which is for students with Malaysian University English Test (MUET) score of Bands 1 and 2, has had drama as one of its components. As it is believed that drama is the ultimate integration of all the four language skills, in English language, one of the objectives is to acquire self-awareness, self-esteem and confidence. It is found that by going through the process of preparing and performing the drama, the students have gained confidence and are more comfortable with the language.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +0-6-013-340-0496; fax: +0-6-038-925-2976.

E-mail address: hasni@ukm.my.

However, it is noted that drama works well and meets the objectives only in Semester III which is when the students are not taking any other courses. It is found that this is not so in Semesters I and II as students are busy with other courses and they are hindered by other commitments. An alternative to drama has been considered, that is not so time consuming but will give the opportunity for students to be exposed to more or less the same things, which is storytelling.

Storytelling is the conveying of events in words, images, and sounds often by improvisation or embellishment (Shepard, 1996) (cited in www.timsheppard.co.uk/story/articles/html). Educators have been saying that the arts can play a role in student academic success and emotional well being. The art of storytelling is a great opportunity for student exploration. Storytelling is accessible to students of all ages and abilities. Storybooks can be found in bookstores or borrowed from libraries or friends. In addition, stories can be found from the internet, the most convenient and quickest way for students nowadays. “Storytelling ... costs nothing, is enjoyable, and can be used anywhere and at any time” (Zabel, 1991).

Storytelling needs no special equipment beyond the imagination and the power of listening and speaking to create artistic images. As a learning tool, storytelling can encourage students to explore their expressiveness and can heighten a student's ability to communicate thoughts and feelings in an articulate, lucid manner. These activities benefit the students in not only giving them the art experience but also in supporting daily life skills. As Harriot and Martin (2004) say, oral practice through storytelling increases speech and oral communication skills related to enunciation and articulation.

Consequently, Foundation English course has included storytelling as one of the components of the language learning activities in the classroom.

Thus, the purpose of this action research is to investigate the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing communicative skills in our Foundation English course.

1.2. Research Aim

The aim of this action research is to investigate the effectiveness of storytelling in enhancing communicative skills in Foundation English course.

The objectives of the research are:

1. To identify the effects of storytelling on the language aspects of the students' communication skills.
2. To evaluate the extent storytelling helps in enhancing the various aspects of communication.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What are the effects of storytelling on the language aspects of the students' communication skills?
2. What aspects of communication are improved / enhanced through storytelling?

2. Literature Review

Stories are interesting and motivating, thus attracting listeners and promoting communication. As storytellers, students have the opportunity to do it all – read, write, listen, and speak. The relaxed atmosphere and lively environment created by stories encourages the students to talk and discuss with each other. They have fun experimenting with voice, facial expressions, emotion, and gestures that make the story “just right” for telling. As they present their story, the art of listening becomes a two way street. By using good eye contact and body language these storytellers communicate with their audience. As students tell and listen to a story, they become caught up in the story and forget about themselves and their nervousness. They become more self-confident in expressing themselves creatively. The activities and skills that they learn will be used across the curriculum and throughout life.

Storytelling is said to have declined in western cultures until lately when it seems to be making a comeback. When we hear the word 'storytelling' automatically people will often think of children. But these people would be surprised to know that those fairytales that we grew up with were not originally meant for kids.

When we tell and listen to stories, we share experience and understand each other. We also share personal anecdotes, values and ideas. Sharing all these is best expressed in a story. The way our minds think is the essence of

the story. Therefore, to communicate effectively, it is important to engage people, break down barriers and ensure that they remember facts. In order to do these, telling stories in some form is essential.

Studies suggest that there are positive effects in intellectual, social and emotional development of students who are encouraged to use storytelling. As students engage in storytelling they learn to listen, to participate in and understand narrative discourse and create a path to more sophisticated use of language, reading and writing in their everyday lives (Mallan, 1992). This is confirmed by Brice, (2004) who said that storytelling/retelling of stories is a successful strategy to increase pragmatic oral skills, the ability to use language in specific contexts for specific purpose, leading to greater ability to write. (cited in http://ccb.lis.illinois.edu/Projects/storytelling/lis506a_lbp/litreview.html).

Storytelling is an effective tool in improving the oral competencies of students (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer & Lowrance, 2004). Becoming verbally proficient can contribute to a student's ability to communicate effectively and successfully. Negotiation, discussion, and tact are peacemaking skills. Being able to accurately express one's thoughts and feelings is important in everyday communication.

Both telling a story and listening to a well-told tale encourages students to use their imaginations. As Mallan, (1992) stated storytelling helps develop the imagination which in turn builds on problem-solving competencies. Therefore, developing the imagination can empower students to consider new and inventive ideas. In other words developing the imagination can contribute to self-confidence and personal motivation as students envision themselves competent and able to accomplish their hopes and dreams.

With all these in mind, this research is to explore the effectiveness of using storytelling as a tool to enhance students' communicative skills.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

For the purpose of storytelling, students were asked to read materials at their level of understanding. The goal was that the students read and selected a story and then learned to tell it. A collection of Penguin Readers had been made available at the campus library.

Penguin Readers are simplified texts designed to provide a step-by-step approach to the joys of reading for pleasure. They are published by Pearson Education Limited in association with Penguin Books Ltd. at seven levels from Easystarts (200 words) to Advanced (3000 words). Bearing in mind that the students are the MUET Bands 1 and 2 scorers, three levels have been selected which are Level 1 Beginner, Level 2 Elementary and Level 3 Pre-Intermediate. The emphasis for this activity is on general comprehension and enjoyment of reading in a second language.

At the beginning of the semester, students were informed of their task of consistently reading the Penguin Readers at the library. As the basic principle of extensive reading is that students should read a lot of easy materials, they were told to read at least a total of 800 pages of the readers (about 25 - 35 readers) by Week 6 of the 14-week semester. This came to about 4 – 5 titles a week. (Half an hour is the average time to finish a reader)

The students worked in small groups of three (maximum four students to a group where applicable) and decided on a story to tell based on all the short stories that they had read. Each group was to tell a story for about 15 minutes. One student would take about 5 minutes to tell his/her part of the story and would be continued by the next student until all three in the group had presented.

Each student should have read 12 books by Week 4. In other words a group should have about 36 different books to choose from as a story to tell in Week 5. The selection had to be approved by the teacher.

Data from teacher observations, and pre-intervention and post-intervention storytelling were collected to investigate the effectiveness of storytelling on students' language aspects of communication skills, specifically content, language and delivery. In addition questionnaires were also given to elicit information on students' perception of storytelling in language learning. Finally, focus group interviews with students were conducted as a triangulation to the data obtained through questionnaires. Audio/video recordings were also made as evidence.

The research sample was a class/group of students of about 30 who enrolled in ZZZE1002 Foundation English course in Semester I Session 2010-2011. The students were all local undergraduates who obtained Band 1 or 2 in MUET (Malaysian University English Test). The research was run in one semester.

3.1.1. Cycle 1: Tell it Ugly

Action: Students were asked to make a pre-self-assessment of themselves by filling in a prepared form of competency descriptors that included their reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities. The pre-test was given where the students were asked to tell their group's selected story the way they understand it.

Reflection: Based on the teacher's observations, the students were basically reading the story and it was clear that they did not fully understand the story and had difficulty in differentiating the main ideas in the story and the details that embellished the story.

Intervention: The students needed to be taught how to convert the literary tale to a tale suitable for oral telling by reducing it to a bare summary of the plot and adding in only as much detail as is necessary making the story their oral version. Literary devices, descriptions and phrasing were told to be avoided.

3.1.2. Cycle 2: Storyboard

Action: This activity required the students to visualize the story and draw the main scenes of the story on a storyboard. Only visual language was allowed – no word bubbles, no fancy artwork and no copying of illustrations from the book. When completed, the students retold the story by pointing to the different scenes and telling the story in his/her own words.

Reflection: As the students moved away from the text and illustrations in the book, the words they used to describe their images became their own. However the storytelling lacked the personal touch where the students needed to add in their own personalities to the story.

Intervention: Activities where students looked at the story outline and checked on language such as grammar and vocabulary were given. The activities also included choosing and deciding on suitable gestures, facial expression and body language relevant to the story.

3.1.3. Cycle 3: Bringing the Story to Life

Action: The students listened to an audio sample of a storyteller telling a story and watched a video clip of a storyteller in action. The students experimented with different voices to suit emotions and used facial expressions and body language to communicate those emotions. Another aspect of storytelling that was discussed was choosing and converting certain parts of narrative to dialogues. Students tried out and practiced in their group to see what worked and what did not. Students gave a storytelling presentation in Week 14.

Reflection: After the post test, which was the storytelling presentation, the students were asked to fill in a questionnaire assessing the whole activity of storytelling and also to fill in again the competency descriptors. In addition, some focus group interviews were held with some students.

3.2. Data Analysis

A qualitative analysis was done on all the storytelling presentations including the pre and post storytelling. The questionnaires and pre/post assessment forms were analyzed quantitatively while the interviews were in the process of being qualitatively analyzed.

Measuring improvement in oral presentation is not as easy as measuring improvement in writing, but this was made possible with video recordings of all the presentations of storytelling. Hence, a qualitative analysis on the storytelling presentations was made based on a combination of three teachers' ratings on the aspects of content, language and delivery.

4. Findings

Based on the analysis, this is the summary of the findings on storytelling (ST) presentations.

Table 1. Summary of Storytelling Presentations

	ST 1 (Pre)	ST 2	ST 3 (Post)
CONTENT			
Kept to original storyline	Yes	Yes	Yes
Main events identified	Yes, adequate	More background given	As before
Appropriate inclusion/ exclusion of details	Some omitted important details while some included less important details	More appropriate information and fewer insignificant details	No significant change
Coherence / continuity	Some are incoherent with minor gaps and no transitions	More coherent but still some gaps in the story	Better
LANGUAGE			
Avoiding the borrowing of phrases from the book	Mostly paraphrased at sentence level, however a lot of phrases were still borrowed from the book	Some improvement in wording	Quite bold with paraphrasing
Use of quoted speech /dialogues	Hardly any used; some dialogues in the book were even converted to narrative	Some dialogues used but not that vivid	As before
Grammar	Errors throughout but still easily comprehensible	Better	A bit better
Choice of words	Adequate to convey meanings, but some inappropriate connectors	Some improvement	Better connectors
Correct pronunciation	Some mispronunciations	Relatively okay, some errors corrected	Still a few errors
DELIVERY			
Smooth, well-prepared delivery	Reading with a few halts at difficult words, otherwise quite smooth	Still halting since not reading this time, some worse than before, trying to recall the sentences	Much smoother, occasionally glancing at notes but definitely not reading, for a few quite halting and often forgot lines
Fluent speech	No major problems articulating English words	Some improvement	Able to utter a lot more
Clear pronunciation	Not perfect but easily intelligible, uncommon words could have been more carefully pronounced	Much more intelligible	Much better
Eye contact	Mostly looked at notes, glanced at audience from time to time	Much better, due to use of pictures instead of notes, but still too much of unnecessary glancing at pictures	Much better with no pictures
Conveying of emotion through:			
Voice/ intonation	Adequate for the sentences spoken but none to convey any emotion in the story	Conveys a bit more than before	Some effort but too self conscious; made attempts to show variations in mood
Facial expression	Friendly facial expression towards audience, but none to convey any emotion in the story	Better, but still none to convey emotions in the story	Minimal to convey emotions in the story
Gestures & Body language	None to convey the story – both hands holding notes all the time	More gestures, due to use of pictures, but still none used to convey emotions	Ample and more appropriate
Use of props	None	Use pictures, some are even colored	A few props for some

4.1. Content

From the findings, it was seen that generally there was not much improvement for groups that had cleverly chosen a nice, cut-and-dried story. This meant that the story was good as it was; therefore the students did not need to summarize much or to embellish the story. Thus, not much work was needed content-wise. On the other hand, those that had selected a difficult story, a lot of effort needed to be put into working on the content. They had to

identify the important ideas and distinguish the important details from less important details. Furthermore, they needed to ensure the story still had continuity. For these groups, they made quite a considerable achievement even though they might not have performed as well. This can only be done if they understood the story well. This is in line with what Hamilton and Weiss (2002) say which is telling stories improves comprehension (cited in www.sue-black.com).

4.2. Language

In terms of language, overall, there was a slight improvement with each storytelling presentation. Even the weak students made quite an effort in paraphrasing the sentences and the sentences changed in every presentation. This proved that they did not memorize when presenting their storytelling. Of course, there were still errors made but they became less each time. Moreover, the students still had a little bit of a problem converting narrative into dialogues. It was noted however, that some of the books already had a lot of dialogues. However, in such cases, the students sometimes converted too much of the dialogues into narrative that the story lost its life. Still, the students demonstrated that they had developed the ability to paraphrase and improved on their expressive language skills.

4.3. Delivery

Initially, the students were quite self-conscious and used their notes to hide behind. However, during the second storytelling, they became more confident with the story and with themselves. And finally in the third and last presentation, they got more comfortable that they were able to use a little bit of other non-verbal language to communicate their story. The analysis indicated that telling stories helps students improve their self-esteem and build their confidence.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion from this study is clear. The students demonstrated progress with each storytelling in specific language skills such as vocabulary, comprehension, sequencing, and story recall. They also advanced in their communicative skills such as transferring of information and using non-verbal language.

The results of this action research led the teachers to realize the need for students to have extensive opportunities to hear and produce the target language and the need for teachers to include more guided practice activities with clear instructions. It also alerted teachers that the choice of story plays a role for the storytelling to meet its objectives.

6. Recommendations

Storytelling is effective in enhancing communicative skills. Activities such as learning how to tell a story by writing it down, talking about it, and learning to actively listen to someone else's story teach important language skills in meaningful contexts. The more teachers know about storytelling, the better they will be able to teach and model it for their students.

It is recommended that teachers provide a list of recommended stories that students can handle well, and give a demo of the whole process of storytelling task, and check the students' progress at every step so that the students are properly guided.

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