

Making Stories

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Why make stories?

Some people use more brain cells if they can be creative.

What better ways are there of developing fluency?

Story making and story telling are a natural way of using language for real purposes.

Are there better ways of revising and re-using language?

And what better way of integrating the four skills?

What better way of linking work in the classroom with the outside world?

Which language level?

Any level...you make something with what you have got. Isn't confidence 'to have a go' the basis of fluency?

Beginners benefit by experiencing their modest range of language being used to create something new.

Advanced learners benefit through the opportunity to refine nuances of ideas and hone their language skills.

Any effort for the teacher?

No preparation. No cost. No talent except giving value to what is created and considering that your cup is half full and not half empty.

The only other effort is controlling your desire to do it for them.

But the curriculum is already very full!

If storymaking does not provide the students with rich and relevant experience of using language and developing fluency in the four skills then don't do it...but feel sure that what you do instead is more effective.

Enthusiasm

Your enthusiasm for storymaking is important and the students mustn't feel that it is just a technique for teaching English.

Your encouragement to the students to 'have a go' and not worry about mistakes.

Language use and desire for accuracy must be a *consequence* arising from a desire to express and understand ideas and feelings.

Questions

Apart from enthusiasm you need to get them going and you may need to nudge them towards: finding fresh ideas; particularising the information they use; developing dramatic tension; keeping to a consistent plot.

Do this by asking questions.

Questions you ask to kindle the story into being

Beginners and elementary

For beginners and elementary basic questions you might ask and suggestions about what might be said are given below either as content words or as examples of what the student might actually say.

Intermediate and advanced

For intermediate and advanced students you might well begin by asking simple questions...but then follow them up by questions or requests intended to help the students to particularise.

T: Tell me more about....

T: Was it just grey or a particular kind of grey?

T: Give me a metaphor or a simile for her character.

Who is in the story?

Beginners and elementary

A man, woman, boy, girl, animal...

Name, age, appearance.

Intermediate and advanced

T: Tell me about her. Is she nervous or confident, an extrovert or an introvert?

And how does that show itself in the way she sits? Etc.

She is nervous. She has lost all her self-esteem. She still tries to give the appearance of being in control and sophisticated but she deceives no one, not least herself. She shows her legs beneath short skirts but her legs are not slim, she knows full well, her legs are knobbled sticks.

Character and consequent behaviour. Concerns and consequent actions. Relationships and consequent actions.

Where are they at the beginning of the story?

Beginners and elementary

Country: mountains, hills, forest, desert, fields, river, lake, sea, etc.

City, town, village, house, castle, etc.

Under a tree, in a hole, in bed, etc.

Intermediate and advanced

T: You say she is in York but tell me where, exactly. Describe the place for me in detail so that I can see it.

She is in an upper room in a Georgian house in York. There is a dormer window with one pane of glass missing and the other cracked, jagged like a trace of lightening seen against the grey, overcast sky outside.

When is it at the beginning of the story?

Beginners and elementary

Months of the year, weeks, days, seasons, times in the day.

Intermediate and advanced

T: Alright it is September but make me see it, smell it, feel it. Make it vivid.

St: It is early September, the time when swept up piles of fallen leaves are burning slowly and there is a chill in the air and children are going to school for the first day of the autumn term with their new school bags proudly carried on their backs.

What is the weather like?

Beginners and elementary

Its raining, snowing, windy, stormy, sun shining, etc.

Intermediate and advanced

T: It is going to rain, I understand the general idea but make it special, individual, a particular moment which I can see and feel.

St: The sky was overcast with heavy, grey, pillows of cloud sagging with the deluge about to fall. In the street below there was a stirring of air, a plastic bag lifted for a moment and fell, then turned and moved a few centimetres along the side of the curb.

What is the main protagonist doing?

Beginners and elementary

Hiding, sleeping, eating, cooking, reading, etc.

Crying, laughing, shouting, etc.

Intermediate and advanced

T: Show me how her character and concepts affect where she sits.

St: Her thin legs were crossed, her spine arched forwards, her head with its froth of blonde dyed curls filtered the smoke from her cigarette which she held in her slightly trembling fingers.

What happens then?

You ask questions to invite them or push them to say what happens next. Only use your suggestions for what happens next as a very last resort and if you do then give at least three possibilities.

Technique of asking questions and building the story

1. Ask the questions but try not to have in your mind a good answer...be open to any ideas even those which seem silly at the time.
2. Don't add ideas to make it better from your point of view.

3. Don't show special enthusiasm for one suggestion and none for another because this suggests that you have a hidden storyline which you want them to confirm instead of letting them feel it is THEIR story.
4. Don't ask closed questions: Is it a boy? Give lots of alternatives so it is a genuine choice. Is it a boy or a girl, or a man or a woman, etc.?
5. Don't correct mistakes but in your re-telling give the correct version.
6. Every so often re-tell the whole story.
7. Don't ask the students to re-tell the story while making it...this is worthy but damaging to the dramatic pace necessary for making the story come alive.
8. Remember: **you are the story collector not a guide** to higher qualities (at least, not on the surface!)
9. From beginners be happy with single word suggestions and from more advanced students expect phrases or full sentences.
10. The questions given above are not sacrosanct in choice nor in sequence! Begin with the weather or with a woman crying or a box.

What do you do with the story?

To create something and then to let it disappear seems such a shame! Ask the students to write up their version of the class story for homework. Publish the stories for others through books, posters, websites, plays, videos, audio recordings. The students will *want* to get their text to be as accurate as possible.

Don't select stories for publication! Publish all the stories or ask the class to vote on what should be published. No prizes! Competition and selection label losers as no good and fix the winners in roles they ultimately may not wish to have.

Further reading

Wright, A. (1995) *Storytelling with Children*. Oxford University Press
94 activities for use with most stories

Wright, A. (1997) *Creating Stories with Children*. Oxford University Press
71 ways of promoting story making

Johnson, K. (1981) *Impro*. Methuen
A book for actors and a source of inspiration for others.

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