

10 A Comparative Study of Storytelling Strategies in Grade 1

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Basic Education curriculum for English in Oman promotes storytelling as a strategy for teaching young learners. Teachers are advised to tell stories by reading these themselves or by playing them on a tape recorder. There is, however, no provision for the use of video in telling stories. Given the value of stories in teaching English to young learners, and my belief that using video can enhance the benefits learners get from storytelling, the purpose of this study is to compare oral storytelling by teachers with storytelling using video.

2 STORYTELLING IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

2.1 The Characteristics of Stories

Cameron (2001) identifies a number of features of stories which are suitable for language learning:

- a typical discourse structure, such as identifiable characters, a clear plot, a series of events, a resolution of a problem and elements of surprise;
- a dialogue or narrative, which offers natural repetition of phrases and patterns of language, that can assist comprehension and help children learn grammar by picking up these phrases and patterns indirectly;
- simple grammar, vocabulary and sounds that support children's learning;
- imaginative and enjoyable content, which stimulates interest and captures children's attention.

2.2 The Value of Stories

Brewster, Ellis & Girard (1991) and Slattery & Willis (2001) list a number of ways in which stories are valuable in language teaching. They are motivating and develop in learners positive attitudes to English. They promote social and emotional

development by making learners feel sad, happy and excited. Stories also allow teachers to introduce and revise language (Wright, 2003) and to develop learners' awareness of pronunciation, intonation and rhythm. Additionally, stories can stimulate learners to respond and exchange ideas in follow up activities; as Wright (2003: 8) notes, "stories often naturally lead to the use of the four skills in related activities". Stories are a key source of comprehensible input for learners, and can also help learners relax while learning, thus lowering what Krashen (1982, in Lightbown & Spada, 1999) calls the affective filter.

2.3 Strategies for Storytelling

Ellis & Brewster (2002) suggest a number of strategies for use by teachers when they tell stories, and I considered these in conducting this study:

- learners can be asked to sit on the floor around their teacher;
- the pace of voice, volume and tone should be varied;
- the teacher should point to the illustrations and ask the learners to do so too;
- learners can be involved in repeating key vocabulary and phrases from the story;
- teachers should use facial expression, miming and gesture to help learners understand the meaning of the story;
- pauses can be inserted into the story to create tension and build anticipation in the learners;
- different characters should have different voices, as far as possible;
- the teacher should maintain eye contact with the learners;
- the story should be repeated several times.

2.4 Using Video in Storytelling

According to Allan (1985) and Harmer (2001), using video can help learners focus their attention not only on listening to the foreign language but also on seeing moving pictures; as Harmer says, "we can observe how intonation can match facial expression" (p.282). Gallacher (2004a) and Hemei (1997) also say that video exposes learners to non-verbal aspects of language such as facial expression and body language. Also, because many learners often associate video with entertainment, the use of video in storytelling can motivate learners to pay attention. Philips (1993: 126) adds that "video can promote speaking skills [and] provides an excellent source of input for topic-based work".

There are, though, potential problems with video that teachers should be aware of. According to Harmer (2001), video activities need to be selected carefully in order to create an obvious purpose that is different from watching television at home. Videos also need to be of good quality (in both picture and sound) and all learners should be able to hear and see the story. It is also important that the video does not go on for too long, as the learners may become bored. Another requirement is that the story is accompanied by activities, otherwise the learners will simply sit and listen passively (Gallacher, 2004b).

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

The aim of this study was to compare the efficiency of a video presentation of the story 'Rosie's Walk' to an oral presentation by the teacher of the same story. The specific research questions I examined were:

1. Which approach is more effective in enabling the learners to understand the prepositional phrases in the story?
2. Which approach is more effective in enabling the learners to use the prepositional phrases in the story?
3. Which approach do the learners find more interesting and enjoyable?

3.2 Participants

The research was carried out in two Grade 1 Basic Education classes. These learners were in their first year of learning English and were 6-7 years old. Each class had 24 learners, boys and girls of mixed abilities, and they were arranged into six groups. The curriculum being followed was English for Me.

In each class I chose one group of learners to focus on. Each group consisted of five learners, boys and girls. I used assessment information, my knowledge of these learners, and comments from other teachers who taught them to select learners in each group who were of the same ability. This was to make the two groups I was going to compare as similar as possible at the start of the study.

3.3 Data Collection

This study was a small scale experiment which combined quantitative and qualitative data. Blaxter, Hughes & Tight (2001: 74) write that "the experiment consists of an experimental group which is exposed to the intervention under investigation and a control group which is not exposed". In this study, I taught the story 'Rosie's Walk' to two Grade 1 classes: Group A were the control class who were taught the story in the conventional way, through oral presentation by the teacher; Group B were the experimental class who were taught the story using video.

'Rosie's Walk' is the story of a hen named Rosie who goes for a walk across the farmyard. A fox slowly follows her and tries to catch her. Rosie is not aware of the fox and every time he is about to pounce on her something happens to him. At the end of the story Rosie arrives home safely without knowing that the fox had been following her.

To assess the relative effectiveness of the two storytelling strategies I collected five forms of data.

3.3.1 Observation

As Bell (1999) and Burns (1999) point out, observation is a good way to find out what people actually say or do. I designed an observation sheet and this was used by a colleague to make notes about the verbal and non-verbal responses of both the control and experimental groups during the storytelling.

3.3.2 Route Test

The route test was a picture of the farmyard on which the learners had to draw the correct route Rosie followed to show their understanding of the story (and of the prepositional phrases in it). Each learner's drawing was scored for accuracy and total scores for each group were calculated.

3.3.3 TPR Test

In this test, the learners in each group were required to perform actions in response to instructions I gave them (TPR stands for Total Physical Response). The instructions contained the same prepositional phrases as the story (e.g. go under the chair, go over the bag, go past the cupboard). Each learner's individual performance was scored and totals for each group were calculated.

3.3.4 Story Retelling

Individually, the learners were also asked to retell the story. I gave them a model of a farm which contained the places mentioned in the story, and asked them to tell the story again. The learners were video recorded by a colleague while they retold the story to me. The recordings were transcribed and learners' use of the prepositional phrases analyzed.

3.3.5 Interviews

Finally, a week after the storytelling I interviewed each learner from both groups individually. I asked them two questions: (a) are you interested in the story? why? and (b) can you remember where Rosie walked? I asked the questions in Arabic; the learners answered the first question in Arabic and the second in English. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Observations

In terms of their verbal responses, Group A (oral storytelling) participated more in saying words and phrases during the story than Group B (video), who seemed to find it difficult to repeat most words and phrases they heard. Both groups, though, enjoyed the story and asked to hear it again. Both groups, too, asked authentic questions about the story. For example, Group A asked questions such as "Is the fox going to catch the hen?" while Group B asked "Why the hen didn't run from the fox?" Both groups were able to explain the story in Arabic.

In terms of non-verbal responses, there was much more participation by Group A than Group B. Group A made gestures and clapped when the hen reached her house safely; they imitated the characters' actions and were excited during the story (e.g. they jumped up and down happily). There was much less evidence of such reactions in Group B; most of these learners watched the video silently and with concentration.

4.2 Route Test

Table 1 gives the results of the route test. The maximum score was six marks and the table shows how many learners in each group got a particular score. The total marks show that Group A did better than Group B on this test.

Table 1: Route test results for Group A (oral) and Group B (video) storytelling

Marks	Group A	Group B	Total A	Total B
6	3	1	18	6
5	1	2	5	10
4	1	1	4	4
3	0	0	0	0
2	0	0	0	0
1	0	0	0	0
0	0	1	0	0
			27	20

4.3 The TPR Test

The TPR test contained 12 actions which the learners were asked to perform. These were:

- | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------|---|-----------------------|---|----------------------|
| A | go under the chair | E | go through the chairs | I | go through the bags |
| B | go around the table | F | go past the table | J | go past the cupboard |
| C | go across the carpet | G | go under the table | K | go across the mat |
| D | go over the bag | H | go over the books | L | go around the chair |

The results for this test are given in Figure 1. This shows, for each instruction, how many learners in each group performed it correctly (thus the highest possible score was 5 as there were five learners in each group).

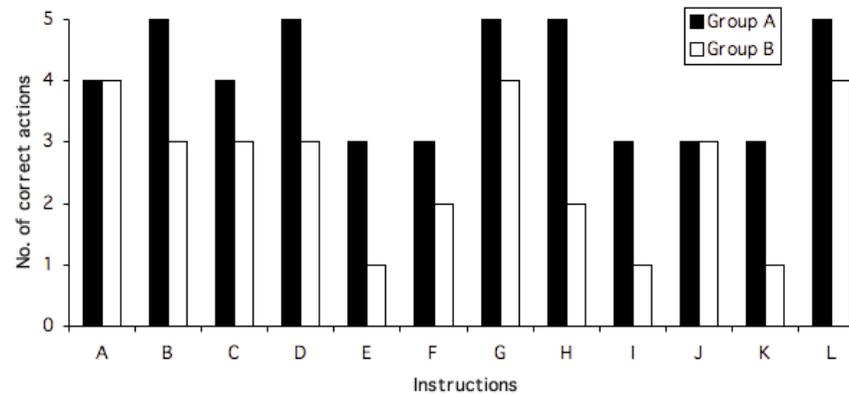


Figure 1: Results of TPR test

All learners in Group A performed five of the instructions correctly, while on none of the instructions were all learners in Group B correct. On none of the instructions did more than two learners in Group A make mistakes; in Group B, this occurred five times. Group A, then, clearly did better on the TPR test than Group B.

4.4 Story Retelling

Table 2 gives the results of the analysis of the transcribed videos in which learners retold the story.

There are three features on which noticeable differences between the groups emerged here. First, Group B learners hesitated much more than Group A in retelling the story. Second, Group A produced more than twice as many accurate phrases as Group B. And third, the teacher had to prompt Group B 73 times compared to 30 times for Group A. Together, these findings indicate that Group A were more successful at retelling the story than Group B.

Table 2: The results of the retelling the story test for both groups.

Features	Group A						Group B					
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	Total	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	Total
Hesitation	4	4	0	3	5	16	1	11	6	15	11	44
Self-correction	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	2
Accurate phrases	4	5	5	6	4	24	3	4	3	0	1	11
Wrong pronunciation	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1
Mistakes	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	1	4
Teacher prompts	3	5	6	8	8	30	6	22	11	18	16	73
Incomplete phrases	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	1
Phrases in wrong order	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1

4.5 Interviews

The first interview question asked the learners about how interested in the story they were and why. All learners in both groups said they liked the story and gave a range of reasons for this, such as the colourful pictures or the actual events of the story.

The second interview question asked the learners to recall where Rosie walked. Three learners from Group A remembered the hen's path and produced five prepositional phrases, one remembered four, while the fifth learner remembered just one. In Group B, two learners produced three prepositional phrases, two remembered two, while the fifth learner was unable to recall any. Overall, then, Group A were more successful at recalling the story.

5 DISCUSSION

I started this study with the belief that storytelling through video would be more effective for language learning purposes than oral storytelling supported by printed materials. The results of this study, however, do not support this belief. Group A, who were taught using oral storytelling by the teacher, performed better on every measure used in this study to compare the effectiveness of oral and video storytelling strategies. During the story, observations showed that Group A were more involved and participated more fully by repeating words from the story and using gestures. On the route test they scored better than Group B, and the same was the case on the TPR test. In the story retelling activity, Group A needed less prompting, hesitated less, and produced more accurate phrases than Group B. Finally, in the interview a week after the stories had been taught, Group A recalled more prepositional phrases from the story than Group B. On the basis of these results, I must conclude that oral storytelling by the teacher, supported with print materials such as Big Books, was more effective in helping the learners understand and use prepositional phrases than teaching the story through video.

A number of factors may have influenced this outcome. My voice, when I told the story to Group A, may have been clearer than the sound on the video when the story was presented to Group B. My voice would have also been familiar to Group A learners, while Group B learners had to adjust to a new voice. The video, too, may have promoted passivity among Group B by making them concentrate on the story and not encouraging them to participate orally or physically, as Group A did when I told them the story. In fact, my use of gesture will have given Group A support in understanding the story that Group B did not receive. Another telling factor with Group A may have been that I prepared a big book which illustrated the story and which was displayed on the board; this allowed learners to see the whole story, whereas with video they could only see the part that was playing and needed to process information much more rapidly.

5.1 Limitations

Some limitations of this study need to be considered when these findings are interpreted. Although I did my best to make the two groups I compared similar in ability, it is possible that there were differences between them which influenced the results. Another phase of the study, then, where the treatments were reversed (Group A taught through video and Group B orally) would have provided stronger evidence about the relative effectiveness of the two strategies compared here. Also, I assessed one story, with Grade 1, focusing on one particular aspect of language. Examining other stories, with other classes and other language points may produce different results.

6 CONCLUSION

This study is a good example of how classroom research is a valuable way of testing our beliefs as teachers. The results certainly surprised me, given my beliefs in the value of using video to tell stories and as a result of this work I feel more

positive about the value of traditional storytelling strategies in promoting language learning. I remain convinced that video has much to offer our learners too, and will continue to explore ways in which I can use it to make storytelling an enjoyable and beneficial experience for my learners.

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