

11 Using Story-Based Lessons to Promote Speaking Skills

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1 INTRODUCTION

At the time of this study I taught a Grade 9 General Education class whose spoken ability in English (after five years of study) remained low. Within the General Education curriculum, the coursebook *Our World Through English* did not provide sufficient opportunities for oral practice and, in addition, my learners had limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Motivated by the work I did on storytelling during the BA TESOL programme, I thus decided to investigate whether story-based lessons might provide a way of giving my learners opportunities to develop their spoken English.

2 STORYTELLING AND SPEAKING SKILLS

2.1 The Value of Stories

According to Fitzgibbon & Wilhelm (1998), storytelling has many advantages: it interests learners, reduces anxiety, and allows learning to take place more readily and more naturally within a meaningful, interactive communicative context. Baynham (1986) also notes that storytelling is a way for learners to express thoughts and feelings and to build confidence in communicating outside the world of the classroom. Ellis & Brewster (2002) also state that storytelling is a way of making authentic language accessible to foreign language learners.

2.2 Stories and Speaking Skills

There are a number of ways in which stories can promote speaking in language learning. Fitzgibbon & Wilhelm (1998) note that stories promote natural and enjoyable repetition of words and phrases. As Taylor (2000) says, repetition is important in helping learners remember and use new vocabulary. With children, stories also often have an imaginative or fantastical element to them. This arouses interest in learners and makes them more motivated to talk about the story (Cameron, 2001).

Many stories, too, follow a typical discourse structure (i.e. situation, problem, solution) and this structure is often predictable or can be easily recognized; this makes it easier for learners to follow the story and also to join in orally. The structure of a story can also provoke anticipation and suspense, and this too can motivate learners to want to talk about it.

Stories are also rich in vocabulary. They may use interesting rhythms and sounds which help learners to understand unfamiliar words and teach them pronunciation. Exposure to vocabulary through stories thus allows learners to increase their own productive use of the language and this contributes to their spoken ability.

Cameron (2001) also notes that stories often contain dialogues and these can be acted out and thus help learners develop their conversational skills. By repeating dialogues, learners can notice grammatical patterns in the language and this may also contribute to the development of learners' speaking skills.

2.3 Characteristics of Successful Speaking Activities

Given my interest here in promoting speaking through storytelling, I will comment briefly on some characteristics of effective speaking activities. Ur (1996) mentions four such characteristics: learners talk a lot, participation is even, motivation is high, and language is of an acceptable level. For learners to talk in a sustained way, the story needs to provide them with a rich context for communication and interaction. For speaking to be even, all learners, but especially less talkative ones, should be given opportunities to contribute orally. Motivation to speak can be fostered through interesting and enjoyable activities where there is a clear purpose for communication. What is acceptable in terms of language will of course depend on the particular learners involved and their level; the language learners produce, though, should be meaningful.

Harmer (2001) suggests some further characteristics. He says that successful speaking activities should connect the learners with authentic situations and expose them to real-time processing of language. Also, the activities should provide opportunities for spontaneous and private speech. Moreover, the oral exchanges should not be teacher-centered because if the learners only speak to the teacher, very few of them will get the chance to say something. Therefore, speaking activities should involve pair and group work so that learners can feel more relaxed. Moreover, there should be a minimum of teacher-correction so as not to undermine fluency.

3 METHOD

3.1 Research Questions

The aim of this study was to investigate the efficacy of story-based teaching in promoting speaking skills. Specifically, I investigated these questions:

1. What opportunities for speaking does the General Education English coursebook for Grade 9 provide?
2. To what extent do story-based lessons increase the quantity of speaking learners do?

3. To what extent do such lessons increase the quality of the speaking learners do?

3.2 Data Collection

Data were collected with a Grade 9 General Education class. This was a mixed ability group with 30 learners who were 11-12 years old and in their sixth year of learning English.

I followed an action research approach in this study as it offers a systematic and reflective way of introducing (and evaluating) improvement in teaching and learning (Sheerin, 1997). As I describe below, I worked through a number of cycles of research in which I planned actions, implemented them, and evaluated their results, using these to inform the next cycle.

3.2.1 Base-Line Investigation

I first conducted a base-line study to collect information from teachers and learners about the teaching of speaking skills in *Our World Through English*. I did structured interviews with five teachers (in English) and 10 learners (in Arabic) and asked them about the extent to which this coursebook promoted speaking. I also analyzed the speaking activities in a unit of material from the coursebook.

3.2.2 Cycle 1

I designed and taught a story-based lesson, using the story 'The Pan that Died' (Yanova, 2003). The lesson consisted of three activities, done before telling, while telling and after telling the story. The lesson aimed to use the language of the story as a vehicle to develop learners' speaking skills. The post-telling stage involved role plays, with learners in pairs acting out in front of the class different episodes from the story.

I designed an observation schedule and my regional tutor acted as an observer and completed this during the lesson. The design of the schedule was influenced by the criteria for successful speaking activities discussed earlier. It asked the observer to make notes about learners' interest and motivation, their participation during the different stages of the lesson, the types of oral interaction, the amount of teacher and learner talk, and whether the speaking in the lesson was purposeful, communicative and meaningful.

3.2.3 Cycle 2

Cycle 2 followed a similar pattern to Cycle 1. I once again designed a story-based lesson (this time using an adapted version of a story called *Akakro* – Abbott, 2003). The key language in this story was that used for making requests. I followed the same sequence of pre-telling, telling and after telling. The aim of this lesson was to expose the learners to more real-life speaking interaction, and to develop speaking skills such as pronunciation and speaking strategies such as turn-taking.

During the pre-telling stage, the focus was on preparing the learners for the story by introducing key language. The while telling stage included a number of activities

such as repeating words and phrases from the story, practising requests, asking and answering questions and predicting story events. Finally, the post-telling stage consisted of three activities - comprehension questions, role play and practising requests. A colleague observed the lesson and once again completed the same observation schedule used earlier.

3.2.4 Cycle 3

In the final stage of the study the lesson was based on an adapted version of a Russian folk story called Little Masha and Misha the Bear (Superfine, 2003). The lesson had the same three stages as those above. The story I used here, though, was based on exchanges between two speakers and I believe it provided a more suitable context for practising real life spoken interaction than the stories in the previous lessons. I audio recorded the lesson and transcribed it. Also, right after the lesson, I wrote reflections on it in a diary.

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Here I present and discuss the findings from each stage of the study in turn.

4.1 The Base-Line Investigation

4.1.1 Analysis of Coursebook

I analyzed the speaking activities in one unit of Our World Through English (OWTE) (Grade 9). The activities (see the Appendix) tend to involve drills and are focused on grammatical accuracy, with no obvious communicative purpose and limited opportunities for meaningful, extended oral interaction (e.g. learners' contributions are quite short). Learners do not have the chance to use spoken English creatively and are not encouraged to develop speaking strategies. These activities are fairly typical of those in the coursebook.

4.1.2 Interviews

Both the teachers and the learners I interviewed indicated that the OWTE speaking activities were not sufficiently motivating and relevant to the learners' needs. Teachers pointed out that speaking tasks were not designed for the purpose of developing fluency but focused on accuracy. Teachers and learners agreed that there was no scope in OWTE for learners to be involved in spontaneous speaking as they were only exposed to scripted and controlled speaking practice.

The majority of the learners indicated that they do not see any communicative purpose in the book's speaking activities, and said they spoke because they wanted to satisfy the teacher. As one learner explained, "I speak English because I want to get some more marks and to make my teacher happy". Most of the learners seemed to think that the approach to teaching speaking in OWTE was teacher-centred.

4.2 Cycle 1

4.2.1 *Observation Data*

The completed observation schedule for the first story-based lesson indicated that the learners found the story interesting. In the pre-telling stage, the learners were able to practise language related to borrowing (e.g. 'Can I please borrow...?'). In the telling stage, the observer indicated that learners had opportunities to exchange questions and answers with the teacher. Several forms of interaction also took place – learner-learner, teacher-learner, learner-teacher, and group work. The observer noted that the learners had more talking time than the teacher. The data also indicated that learners' participation was purposeful, communicative and meaningful since they used the language of the story to take part in authentic dialogues. However, the observer also felt that the speaking opportunities during the first twenty minutes of the lesson were limited and that the dialogues were a little too difficult.

4.2.2 *Reflections*

The lesson seemed to provide sufficient opportunities for learners to practise their speaking skills. The story was interesting and encouraged the learners to participate in different kinds of speaking activities. These activities helped the learners speak naturally and develop speaking skills such as good pronunciation (through hearing key vocabulary repeatedly) and speaking strategies (e.g. turn-taking in question-answer exchanges). Moreover, the story enriched the learners' vocabulary. The one area of the lesson that was less successful was the dialogues; the learners found these difficult to use in the role plays I set up in the post-telling stage. In the next cycle, therefore, I once again used role plays but adjusted these to make them simpler.

4.3 Cycle 2

4.3.1 *Observation Data*

The observer's comments on this lesson were also positive. He felt the learners were interested in and curious about the story and noted that there was a fair amount of participation by learners as they tried to predict the events of the story and to guess the meaning of words. The observer also indicated that, during the narration of the story, learners repeated and practised key words, phrases and structures. He also noted that, during the post-telling activities, the learners expressed their feelings about what they had learnt, gave their opinions, practised dialogues and performed a role play. Overall, the observer felt there was a clear communicative purpose to the speaking work in the lesson.

4.3.2 *Reflections*

The benefits of storytelling highlighted in Cycle 1 were also evident in Cycle 2. The lesson provided opportunities for learners to speak through different activities (though, perhaps I relied too much on practising dialogues and role play). Learners participated

and were interested in the work. Various forms of interaction were possible, among the teacher and learners. Language-wise, the story provided meaningful use and repetition of vocabulary. The learners also had opportunities to express their opinions orally. For Cycle 3, I decided to develop one further lesson, but this time to use an additional activity rather than just role play and practising dialogues.

4.4 Cycle 3

4.4.1 Lesson Transcript

The lesson transcript shows that there was constant interaction between the learners and myself. I first introduced the context of the story and its characters to arouse learners' interest. Then I told the story. This repeated key language and provided opportunities for learners to give their opinions (e.g. I asked them why they thought characters did or said particular things). The lesson also provided practice of language functions such as requesting, exclaiming, and appealing for help. Although, I initiated the interaction, learners used the functions they heard in the story in a purposeful and communicative way. During the post-story activity, they prepared and dramatized a scene using these functions. For example, one group produced this example, which uses exclamations and requests of the kind found in the story:

Ali: My father bought me a new watch yesterday.
Salim: Oh, really! May I see it please?
Ali: Yes, here it is.
Salim: What a nice watch!
Moh.: Will you show me the shop where you bought it?
Ali: Yes, of course.
Moh.: Thanks.

4.4.2 Diary

The reflections I wrote in my diary after this lesson confirmed the positive points shown in the transcript. I noted that the story “had been helpful for my students in overcoming their passivity” and that it “established a rich environment for interaction and effective participation”. One drawback I noted, though, was that while I was telling the story it was not possible for all learners to participate in answering the questions I asked. This was because learners answered individually and there were thirty learners in the class.

4.4.3 Reflections

The data from Cycle 3 provided further evidence that story-based lessons can be used to promote speaking skills. The story provided learners with interest and motivation to participate orally in all the activities. In addition, the story lent itself to follow-up speaking activities that exploited the language in the story. The dramatization activity was quite effective in providing the learners with a purposeful, communicative context for speaking. Furthermore, it seemed to provide an opportunity for spontaneous speech because the language used was not

controlled or fixed. The story provided opportunities to enrich learners' vocabulary since there was adequate repetition of key words and structures in the lesson and the learners were quite successful in using the vocabulary and structures during the speaking activities.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to address a practical problem in a specific context; action research was well-suited for this purpose, but I cannot claim that in different contexts the results would be similar. I must acknowledge too that, although I involved outside observers in cycles 1 and 2, I relied on my own analyses in cycle 3 and my belief in the value of storytelling may have influenced what I saw in the data. Overall, though, I do believe that this study shows that story-based lessons can be incorporated into the OWTE curriculum and that they are a valuable way of promoting speaking in English lessons. Stories motivated learners and, supported by various meaningful activities, gave learners opportunities to practise and develop communicative speaking skills. While, of course, not every speaking activity has to be based on a story, there is clear evidence here that stories can provide a very good way of promoting speaking among English language learners. I hope this study encourages other teachers, particularly in secondary schools, to consider using stories in their work as a way of encouraging their learners to speak more English.

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APPENDIX: EXAMPLES OF SPEAKING ACTIVITY FROM OWTE GRADE 5A, UNIT 2

ACTIVITY 4 *speaking*

1 Look at the box.

Questions: *What is ...? Where is ...? What are ...? Where are ...?*

Singular

What is that?
It is a crab.

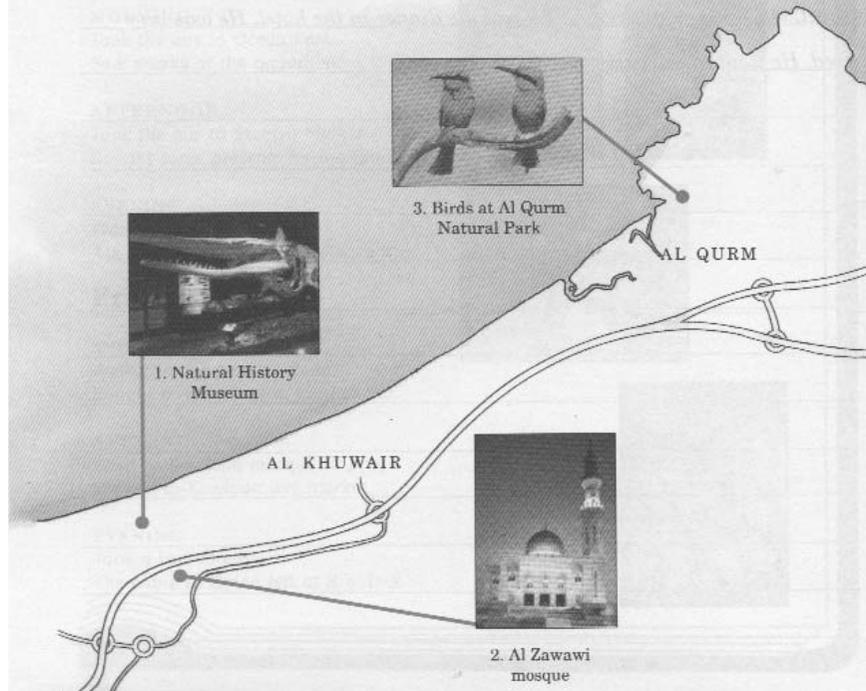
Where is it?
It is in Kowloon wet market.



Plural

What are those?
They are birds.

Where are they?
They are in Kowloon Park.



2 Look at the map of Muscat. Work in pairs. Ask and answer questions like the example.

What is in picture 1?

It is the Natural History Museum.



Where is it?

It is in Al Khuwair.

