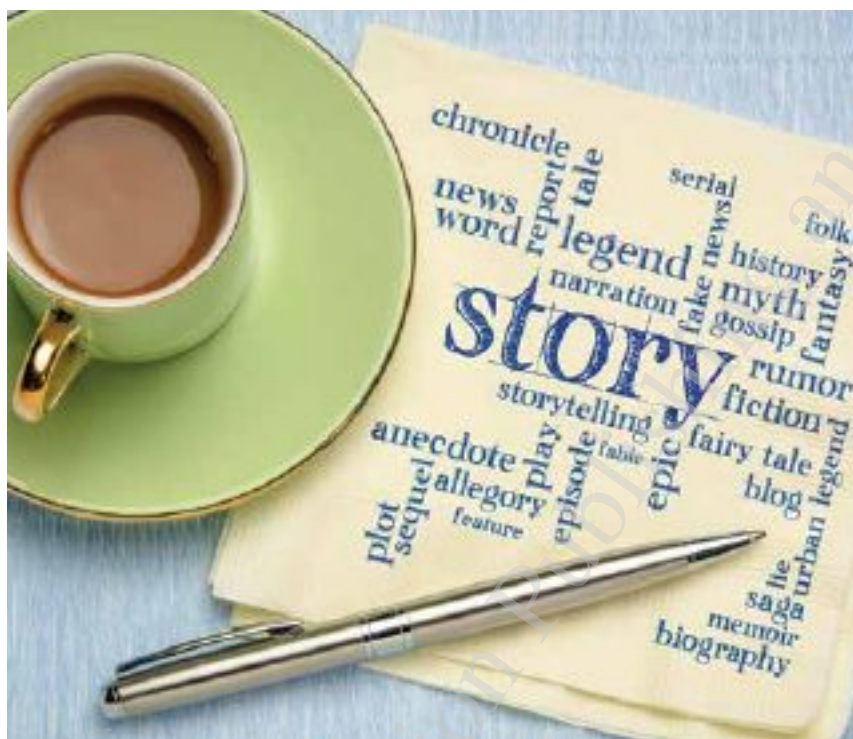


When is a story not just a story?

Jeremy Harmer shows how to maximise language learning through stories.



We live by stories, we live through stories, we survive because of stories, and of course we alter truth through the stories we fabricate (fake news, anyone?!). Stories are an integral part of human existence, whether they serve to warn us of dangers to avoid, alert us to local culture and custom, entertain us, or just bind us together into the social groups that we humans like to create. Indeed, according to one writer on the topic (Cron, 2012), the human brain is 'wired for story', the mechanism and neurons just waiting for their input to fire up synapses and set the grey matter bubbling with energy. Lisa Cron goes further and suggests that stories – especially ones we hadn't expected – help us to re-

wire the brain's circuitry and are, on a general psychological level, powerful developmental tools. Stories, after all, are where we teach our children about safety and danger, joy and fear, fairness and inequality.

We tell the stories all the time, whether it's about something that happened to us in the supermarket, a bad date, something we saw on the TV or some family drama or emergency. Not only that, but we tell our 'best' stories again and again – though hopefully not to the same people! And the fact is, we LIKE stories and we respond incredibly enthusiastically to good storytellers, 'hanging' in that particularly British (?) idiom, 'on their every word'.

Using stories in language teaching

We use stories in language learning classrooms, too, for two good reasons: the first is to provide context for language we wish students to be exposed to. At its most basic level this might involve, for example, a situation from which we elicit six sentences about what a character did yesterday. At higher levels stories allow us to show language in action, and in particular how it all meshes together using features such as lexical repetition, tense mirroring, linkers and cohesive devices in what we hope is a coherent way.

So far, so good. But the other major reason for using stories is to engage our students with the power, emotion, excitement and beauty of the tale we are telling. As with life, so with learning! The sight of a primary teacher sitting in her chair surrounded by her young students, faces raised in rapt attention as she tells/reads a story is a common (and uplifting) feature of the day's end at many British primary schools. If we can provoke that 'rapt attention' in our language learning students, at whatever age and level, we have achieved quite a lot.

Dual track

I want to suggest, however, that stories, especially, are more than just vehicles for student engagement or examples of language in action (though they are, as we have suggested, both of those things), but that in terms of language learning they offer a kind of unique *dual track* possibility for language acquisition

and learning. I want to show how they can be used to provoke and ensure language *learning*. Speaking personally, I love telling a good story and perhaps, driven by the needs of the ego (see Harmer, 1995), relish opportunities to make my students listen, hopefully with awe, to the tale I am spinning. But when and if I calm down, I try to remember that my job is not to just entertain – or feel good about myself (sic). My job is to teach language (however we might interpret that verb!). In the classroom, after all, I am a language teacher first and foremost and always.

I was reminded of all this recently when I had the pleasure of working on a book about storytelling with my friend and colleague Herbert Puchta (Harmer & Puchta, 2018). Our collaboration allowed us both to really delve into a topic that has been part of both of our language teaching realities for a long time. Most importantly, it forced us to confront that basic question: how exactly do stories help students to learn languages? Do we treat them like classroom listening or reading texts and pepper them with exercises (Are these statements true or false? How many of this or that? When? What?, etc.)? Or is there something about this engaging genre which suggests different approaches? Our conclusion was that yes, we do need to consider stories differently, and we

came up with our own metaphor to help us organise our thoughts. It goes something like this: firstly (in our dual track approach), stories seed our lives, they take root and grow, both in terms of content and language. And when the magic works, the students (in this case) can branch out from what they have experienced into both linguistic and content expansion. This, after all, is the kind of thinking that underpinned (and continues to underpin) Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis (i.e. Krashen, 1985 and since!). It was the idealistic hope that given the right kind of input and tasks 'Language learning will take care of itself' (Allwright, 1979: 170) – a strand of thinking that drove one part of an emerging communicative approach.

Branches

It is indeed true that students can and do 'pick up' language from rich input and participation. After all, not everything that is taught is learned and not everything that is learned has been explicitly taught. Good stories, well told, provide exactly the kind of rich input for language 'getting' of this kind.

To give you an idea of what I am talking about, let us consider the terrifying story of a woman called Katrin Bosse, a German 35-year-old, whose hand became trapped inside a

train door (she was outside the train) with the result that she got dragged off the platform and on a terrifying 75-mph nightmare ride until a call to the driver caused him to bring the train to a halt so that she was able to open the doors and she was saved (Bosse, 2019). Katrin had tried to help another passenger who managed to leave the train and who, herself, had to watch from the platform as Katrin was dragged away. Other people saw it too and it was only when the woman managed to find a company official that the driver was called and stopped the train, thus saving Katrin's life. Thinking the passenger was on the inside of the train the driver was horrified to find her lying outside on the track once the doors were opened.

Told well, the story of Katrin Bosse is totally compelling and provides many 'branching' opportunities:

- We could stop the story at various points and ask students to predict what comes next; in order to do this they have to pay close attention to the words we are using, and they will reuse them, to some extent, when they make their predictions.
- After hearing the story (which we can tell in our own words) students might want to read it. They then retell the story from Katrin's point of view, or the POV of the woman on the platform, or maybe from the driver's point of view, or others on the platform, or people on the train, etc. They will necessarily reuse language they heard in the story.
- We could get students to write a page from Katrin's autobiography – or the autobiography of others involved in what took place.
- Students could create a TV interview with people who were involved.
- Students could tell their own frightening 'saved' stories.
- Students could research any aspect of the story: how train doors work, what safeguards there are to prevent this kind of thing, survival rates, etc. They then have to present their findings to the class.



In all of these suggestions the hope is that the task will create a wonderful and productive connection between the student's processing of the story's content and the language of the story so that almost by 'osmosis' language learning 'takes care of itself'.

“After all, not everything that is taught is learned and not everything that is learned has been explicitly taught. Good stories, well told, provide exactly the kind of rich input for language ‘getting’ of this kind.”

Harvesting

Except, of course, often it doesn't. On the contrary some students simply don't seem to absorb language unless their attention – their conscious attention – is drawn to it. Yet neither of us want to reduce stories to grammar-drill fodder. And 'find words in the text that mean ...' may not help them to process language either if they are not both cognitively and emotionally engaged. Wouldn't it be better if we were a bit more imaginative about this! Here are a few ways we hope to achieve this (see the worksheet on page 48):

- Sentences from the story are chopped up into three parts and turned into an A, B, C matching exercise. Students have to tease them out. This forces them into close cognitive contact with the language and the ways it hangs together.
- Sentences from the story are offered in a random order. Students have to put them in the correct 'content sequence'.
- Students are given a paragraph (or paragraphs) from the text. They have to choose three words or phrases they (individually) would most like to put in their 'suitcase' and take away with them. Such 'suitcase language' puts the learning responsibility onto the student, emphasises their own crucial role in what's going on and allows them to have a wonderful emotional/cognitive engagement with words.
- We can take sentences from the text and remove words from each. Students have to put those words back in the right place. Such 'collocation' exercises force students to pay special attention to the way words interrelate.

In each of these exercises the students are obliged to engage with the story itself and, crucially, with the language that is in the story. Their conscious attention is necessarily drawn to exactly how the language works and how it interacts with itself (the lexicogrammatical relationships that bind it together). It is possible, of course, that we might achieve the same result by turning the story into a kind of grammar drill or word identification exercise. We like to believe, however, that the kinds of exercises suggested here have a slightly different effect; what is taught may not be learned and vice versa (see above), but what students find themselves cognitively engaged with provides them with the raw material for their own powerful learning.

Conclusion

That stories have the potential to engage students both emotionally and cognitively is not surprising and it is certainly not new to suggest such a thing! One of the concerns that myself

and Herbert Puchta were driven by, however, was how to maximise stories for language learning without reducing them to shallow-process language exercises. Our answer is to put forward a branch-harvest 'dual track' approach which, on the one hand, encourages students to 'get' language almost without thinking about it whilst on the other consciously draws their attention to the language they have been exposed to.

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Away from ELT Jeremy is a practising musician and writer/composer and a performer of poetry among other things.

Worksheet (based on the original story)

1. Using phrases (in sequence) from boxes A–C make sentences from the story.

A

Back in Gernersheim,
My biggest fear was
The door opened, and
The gap narrowed
The train driver
Using the last bit of

B

but
I tumbled
strength, I reached
that my strength wouldn't
the woman I had been trying to assist
thought

C

for the button by the door and
pressed it.
I managed to hang on.
last and I would fall to my death.
onto the gravel tracks.
that someone had trapped their hand.
was desperately looking for help.

2. Read these sentences from the text and put them in the right sequence for the story.

- A. A passing driver took me to a hospital in Gernersheim, where I spent two days recovering.
- B. At first the train pulled me along on my bike.
- C. Eventually she found a station attendant, who called the control board.
- D. I had to tense my legs to avoid falling off.
- E. Instinctively I reached for holds.
- F. Still on my bike, I stuck my hand in the closing door to keep it open for her.
- G. The door opened and I tumbled onto the gravel tracks.
- H. The train hurtled round a curve at 75 mph.

3. Read this extract from Katrin Bosse's story. Which three words or phrases would you most like to 'put in your suitcase' and take home with you?

The train hurtled into a right curve at 75 mph. The gap narrowed, but I managed to hang on. My whole body was trembling with fear. I had to tense my legs to avoid slipping off. My biggest fear was that my strength wouldn't last and I would fall to my death.

Back in Gernersheim, the woman I had been trying to assist was desperately looking for help. Eventually, she found a station attendant, who called the control board. They alerted the driver, who stopped the train. The process took seven minutes.

I felt the train slow down and stop, then heard the 'shh' sound signalling the release of the doors. Using my last bit of strength, I reached for the button by the door and pressed it. The door opened and I tumbled on to the gravel tracks. I was still wearing my backpack, my sunglasses, even my jumper around my waist.

The train driver thought someone on the inside of the train had trapped their hand. When he saw me, he almost fainted. A passing driver took me to a hospital in Gernersheim, where I spent two days recovering. I had cuts and bruises all over, but otherwise was physically fine.

4. Rewrite the sentences and include the word on the right in each case

- | | |
|---|--------|
| A. My wrist was clamped by the door, with my hand inside the train. | entire |
| B. I kicked it away and was dragged the platform. | along |
| C. I forced myself to focus trying to survive. | on |
| D. As a I was fit and nimble. | result |
| E. With my right hand, I let go my trapped arm and tried to pull myself into the gap. | of |
| F. I was still wearing my backpack, my sunglasses, my jumper around the waist. | even |
| G. The train driver thought someone on the of the train had trapped their hand. | inside |