

The Value of Story-Making Activities in the English Classroom

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Introduction

In this paper, we will discuss the findings collected from an open-ended story-making activity conducted with a group of Class eight students from a semi-urban government school in Aizawl, Mizoram. The activity was part of the Connected Learning Initiative (CLIX)-English, a project undertaken at the Centre for Education Innovation and Action Research (CEI&AR), Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. A group of students from the school were invited to work in pairs and write stories based on picture cues provided on a Technology Enabled Language Learning (hereafter, TELL) platform. Drawing from this field experience, we would like to suggest that imaginative, open-ended activities that involve students in crafting stories based on pictures and with a specified word limit per sentence, can hasten language learning. In our paper, we will discuss two such stories created by the students to illustrate our point.

Why Stories?

The use of stories in the English classroom is not new. In fact most school curricula use this pedagogy of teaching, especially when languages are taught through texts that are (sometimes stylized) stories. However, due to factors such as pressure to complete the syllabus, large student numbers, etc., most of the classroom activities primarily involve simply reading the stories and literary texts. There are limited opportunities for children to write stories.

We believe that a shift in approach towards making students creators of imaginative content can energize the language classroom.

Studies conducted on stories and myths reinforce their function as meaning-making devices. Karen Armstrong (2005) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1979), for instance, stress upon the relationship between language, stories and cognition, where interpretations of the world are authenticated through human language and (literary) representations.

Armstrong remarks on the way myths and stories about natural phenomena have shaped, and continue to shape, man's understanding of the world around him. "Human beings", she states, "have always been . . . meaning-seeking creatures" (Armstrong, 2005). Myths, Armstrong argues, provide structures of meaning that help man negotiate his relationship with the world around him. This act entails authenticating an individual's experience through words, thereby forging a relationship between cognition and language through stories.

Claude Lévi-Strauss argues likewise that myths, and the stories that comprise these myths, are contained within and communicated through language in written and oral traditions alike (Lévi-Strauss, 1979). These positions spotlight the centrality of language in stories as providing structures of meaning, whereby stories become, equally, vehicles of communication and comprehension.

Stories support self-actualization and communication of one's deepest desires. Mere

expressions of the self, however, do not comprise story creation; narrative is at the core of stories and narrative relies on thoughtful structuring of content. For H. Porter Abbott, the link between events that establish causation in a plot defines the nature of the story as a coherent meaning-making space (Abbott, 2002). A story's conflation of cognition and communication through verbal crafting therefore makes it a tool that is amenable to language learning, thereby transforming students from passive receivers to active producers of meaning.

The Story-Making Activity: An Outline of the Social and Pedagogical Context

In February 2016, the students of eighth grade of the Government High School, Chaltlang, a semi-urban school in Aizawl were invited to participate in an activity that involved making stories on a TELL platform. They were given a picture gallery on a tool developed by CLIX, in collaboration with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston, called the Open Story. There were approximately 50 pictures in this gallery, sourced from an online open platform called 'Story Weaver from Pratham Books'. The students were asked to work in pairs, choose pictures from the gallery and craft a story. They could record their lines on the tool, save their story on an offline platform and replay it as a slideshow movie. The Open Story tool allowed a maximum of 20 pictures per slideshow. It also restricted the text (caption) to 140 characters per picture, which included the use of punctuations and spaces. Though the students were not specified a time limit, we observed that they completed the activity within an hour. The activity was received with enthusiasm; the students stated that "they had never written stories before". By turning them into creators rather than mere receivers of stories, the activity had triggered their imagination. One student

remarked, for instance, that she enjoyed the activity since she could "write about [her] dreams". Further, the paired nature of the activity gave them the necessary confidence to collaborate at the ideation and content creation stages.

In the following section, we will analyse two stories written by these students.

Open Stories: Two Tales from Aizawl

The first story describes a young girl who eats a great deal of food and grows fat, and her subsequent reconciliation with the idea of beauty. This story was created by two girls and comprised seven picture slides to which the girls added narrative texts. Slide 1 depicts a girl eating food with a spoon. In the second slide, three young children are laughing, playing and dancing in circles. The third slide shows the picture of a girl standing before a mirror, gazing at herself. Her stance indicates that she is speculating. In slide 4, there is a bear with a happy expression. The fifth slide depicts a young child with her parent (mother). The parent appears to be scolding the child, who is crying. In slide 6, the earlier image of a young girl gazing speculatively in the mirror is reused. The final slide, slide 7, reuses the image of the three children playing and dancing in circles, and laughing. The accompanying narrative for the story (Transcript of video recording taken in Mizoram; trials conducted by Jennifer Thomas, Karuna D'Souza and Manoj Bhandare, February 2016) was:

“once there was a girl who loved to eat a lot of food/ everyday she eat more and more/ she was bigger than all her friends/ one day she look herself in a mirror/ she found that she was as fat as a bear/ she ran to her mom and told her about how she feel/ mom told her that, 'you may be happy on how you look../ she look

herself in the mirror again/ and notice that she was the most beautiful girl in the world/ then, she continued to live her life happily ... The end ..”

The story woven around these seven slides is an interesting study in language and self-expression through stories.

Let us first consider the contents of the story. The structure of the tale woven by the girls is cyclic, as is seen from the two slides that repeat within the narrative structure. The second slide, with the laughing and playing children finds an echo in the final slide of the story. The narrative movement is accompanied by the child's dawning self-knowledge after her mother advises her that she should take pride in herself, and that appearances do not matter. Slide 3, with the girl looking in the mirror, is complemented by slide 5 that depicts the girl gazing in the mirror once again, but with the newly gained knowledge that a) in the eyes of her mother she will always be beautiful and b) beauty and self-respect lie in her hands, thereby conferring agency on her. At the level of the plot, the story created by these girls is insightful, revealing their close engagement, as authors, with the theme. It is evident that individuality and subjective opinions shape the plot and narrative resolution. The intimacy of the contents with regard to the authors is a further indication of the intricate connection between stories, language and self-expression.

The second story, written by two boys, similarly, displays the students' deep engagement with their environment. Comprising six slides, this story begins with the image of an old man with a long white beard, red cloak and peaked hat (resembling a wizard), walking through a wooded area. The second slide shows the picture of a man wearing a hat and carrying a bag on his back. He is sitting on a mound of earth, watching a kingfisher perched on a

branch. Slide 3 depicts the lifecycle of a plant progressing from a seed planted under the ground to a sapling, shrub and finally, a big tree. In slide 4, the man is holding a flower in his hand and watching a bee (or butterfly) buzz around it. Slide 5 depicts the man standing with a camera, focusing and taking a photograph, all the while watched over by the kingfisher from the earlier slide. Slide 6 depicts an idyllic lake, with blue waters and green foliage surrounding it. The accompanying narrative for this story reads:

“One day a man was walking on a jungle/ he was so tired he sit down to rest he looked around/ and then he saw the beauty of the jungle/ and then he fell in love with the jungle/ then he took pictures of the jungle/ he spent his life saving the jungle from deforestation.”

(Transcript of video recording taken in Mizoram; trials conducted by Jennifer Thomas, Karuna D'Souza and Manoj Bhandare, February, 2016)

Like the earlier story, this one is also marked by a coherence in narrative. With nature as its predominant theme, each image and its connection to subsequent pictures displays an interplay of man and nature, and man's place in the world. While the first and last slides are extrapolated from other narratives, the four slides comprising the core narrative—the man pondering, his observation of plants, his admiration of the flower and his subsequent attempt to capture them through his lenses—comprise a coherent visual and a textual whole. Identifying and slotting these four images therefore become, in the first instance, an act of comprehension and interpretation by the students. The addition of two new slides, the one before and the one after the core slides indicates creativity, as the students contextualize the musings of the man surrounded by nature. The questions evoked by this story have a

philosophical potential, as they depict man's relationship with nature, his place in the world and his responsibilities towards his environment.

From the perspective of content, the story of the man and nature is well-crafted. The choice of certain words is, however, interesting. The use of the word "jungle", suggesting wilderness and danger, instead of the more colloquial "forest", may indicate a mismatch of word and intent. Equally abrupt is the use of "deforestation", a ponderous word in a narrative that is marked by simplicity. There are also grammatical errors and mistakes in punctuation and capitalization. These instances can be used as pedagogical footholds for language sensitization, by indicating to the students possible synonyms that are more appropriate to the context of the story, thereby resulting in crisper sentences.

Reflections on Story-Making: Pedagogical Implications

Several points come to light through this exercise on story-making in a language classroom.

First, despite their limited control over English, which is for these students, a second language, they were able to create stories of a sophisticated nature. One reason for the students' successful engagement with the activity was that with its non-academic, recreational implication, the story diffused the pressure-inducing learning environment and infused the learning spaces with imaginative appeal.

Second, the story-making activity shifted the locus of attention to the student as a creator of (authentic) content. While the classroom uses curated stories to teach language skills, a story-making activity requires students to turn into storytellers themselves, and learn the language as they make their own tales. As active

stakeholders in the activity, students can therefore take charge of their learning.

An analysis of the stories made by these children reveals that, despite limited command over the language, they were capable of interpretative thinking and were able to articulate their opinions.

A few pedagogical observations on the activity would not be amiss at this stage.

The pictures offered a stable scaffold for this activity¹. Porter Abbott (2002) observes that narratives are present in every creative act, be it a poem, drama, fiction or painting. Selecting pictures that depict an action can be one way of enabling discussions among students as they create plots for their stories. It would also contribute to the Krashenian comprehensible input that supports second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 1985). Also evident during the activity was an enactment of the $i + 1$ input that Krashen states is essential to motivate learners to reach beyond their learning levels and advance in language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Further, each picture in this activity offered a range of possibilities for interpretation. Paired work and discussions contributed not just by way of incidental language learning through discussion, but also by the sharing of ideas, which enabled the mobilization of language into articulate thought.

Open-ended story-making activities worked well with these students by triggering language output. We noticed that since the pictures led the story-making activity by providing visual cues to guide the students' imagination, further instructions were not needed to help them with their stories. In fact, specificity of instructions would probably have hindered their creativity.

The word and character limit set as a precondition in this activity was successful in helping students focus on the target language.

While regular classroom activities impose word limits on the length of paragraphs, it was seen that by imposing a similar limit on the length of a sentence, students were able to produce sharper sentences, and in one instance, even a lyrical sentence. It also made them pay closer attention to their thoughts, and the means to translate them effectively into words. Consequently, learning became focused and aimed at communication rather than the mere mastery of grammatical rules. For the teacher as well, scaffolding shorter sentences and offering feedback on them was easier, thereby leading to a more meaningful engagement with the language.

We would like to conclude with a final observation that while our activity was TELL based and multimedia intensive, it is possible to adapt it in a regular classroom as well. Picture cards and image series can be used for pen and paper activities, and student can work in pairs to interpret the pictures to create new tales.

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Endnote

¹ It is noteworthy that the same pictures (Pictures 3 and 5, and 2 and 7, in this story) generated different interpretations based on the context of the narrative. It was observed that other children in the school used the same picture in their stories for different

purposes. The picture with the mother and the child, for instance, was interpreted variously as a parent consoling a hurt child and a parent scolding a child, depending on the students' narrative. These instances highlight the way a visual trigger in an open-ended story-making activity triggers the imagination and motivates language production that is marked by plural interpretations.

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