WRITE OR TELL THE STORY? – LINGUISTIC APPLICATION OF THE ONLINE TOOLS IN DEVELOPING WRITING AND READING SKILLS

The first part of the article is devoted to the presentation of a wide range of advantages of using the storytelling technique in language classes with students of different language levels and age ranges. Then, the author introduces the basic principles used in making the right choice of a story for individual groups of students. Another aspect discussed in the article concerns the effective preparation of the teacher for the presentation of stories and practical advice helpful in the course of telling the selected story to students. The author also presents examples of exercises that are worth using after presenting the stories, which are a further part of the lesson. The article ends with an example of multimedia tools that are helpful for writing, creating your own stories, as well as supporting both reading and listening to stories at different educational levels. She lists, among others, story generators, applications and online platforms presenting the wealth of linguistic resources needed to create interesting stories.

Keywords: literature, storytelling, writing and reading skills, education.

Tytuł: Napisać czy opowiedzieć historię – językowe zastosowanie narzędzi multimedialnych w rozwijaniu umiejętności pisania i czytania

Pierwsza część artykułu poświęcona jest prezentacji szerokiego wachlarza zalet stosowania techniki opowiadania historii na zajęciach językowych z uczniami na różnych poziomach językowych i przedziałach wiekowych. Następnie, autorka przybliża podstawowe zasady stosowane podczas dokonywania właściwego wyboru opowiadania dla poszczególnych grup uczniów. Kolejny poruszony w artykule aspekt dotyczy efektywnego przygotowania nauczyciela do prezentacji historii oraz praktycznych rad pomocnych w trakcie samego opowiadania wybranej historii uczniom. Autorka przedstawia także przykłady ćwiczeń wartych zastosowania po zaprezentowaniu historii, będących dalszą częścią lekcji. Artykuł kończy się omówieniem przykładowych narzędzi multimedialnych pomocnych zarówno w pisaniu, tworzeniu własnych historii, jak również
The use of literature in foreign language teaching has increased significantly over the past years. The materials and activities that derive from literary texts are a great aid to learning in that they appeal to the learners’ imagination, increase motivation and, above all, create a rich and meaningful context. The literature on a storytelling approach majorly stems from teaching literacy in the first language. It can provide a motivating and low anxiety context for language learning. Generally, we most often use literature while working with children, however not only teenagers but also adult learners may take a great advantage of well-selected stories, as well. According to Russel L. David:

Children’s literature will often have less complexity of plot, less profundity of psychological analysis, and more simple pleasures and pains than are found in adult writing; and it will, usually, have the security of the happy ending; yet in its creations of new worlds, its explorations of alien points of view, its subtle investigations of language and metaphysics, and its continual spiritual penetration, it gives us a creative country as ‘mature’ as the adult’s (2005, p. 38).

Among the techniques available to a teacher, storytelling is one of the most frequently used, not only with very young learners but also with mature listeners. Storytelling is an established part of the curriculum in a vast amount of countries, not only English-speaking, and stories are seen as an effective teaching tool, as far as developing foreign language skills such as reading and writing is concerned. The fact is that there are a number of good reasons for introducing a storytelling technique in a foreign language class that is found as useful in linguistic terms. The potential of it is to nurture emotional intelligence and caring communication. What is more, quality literature provides models for rich, natural language and variety of different registers. Susan Bassnett and Peter Grundy are of the opinion that “Literature is a high point of language usage, arguably it marks the greatest skill a language user can demonstrate.

Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language (1993, p. 7). Storytelling is an effective way to attract students’ attention and prolong their attention-span. This technique makes them focusing on learning, therefore they can be more active during the lessons and feel that English is an attractive subject.

First of all, English lessons give the opportunity to acquire new vocabulary items. Most of the new language in stories is perfectly contextualised and it is often read more than once so that the listeners have more than one chance to grasp the meaning. If a teacher supports himself with visual aids explaining additional information, the comprehension of the story, as well as the introduction of new words do not have to be a difficult task. The grammatical structures included in the story should be seen mainly as formulaic expressions which do not need grammatical analysis but which can be learnt in an ongoing way because they appear frequently in stories in appropriate contexts.

The second main advantage of focusing on literature, stories in particular, is the development of listening skills. Probably, for learners the most important will be training listening for gist which involves listening for the main idea or plot without necessarily understanding everything. However, other skills such as listening for specific information can also be developed through stories.

The next important benefit of using storytelling at school is the communicative exchange related to stories. Storytelling is an exercise which requires a real interaction between the storyteller (a teacher) and the audience (students). The storyteller can obtain the attention of the group at several points during the story. For example, by asking the listeners to guess the ending of the story, by getting them to suggest an alternative ending, by asking for a resume of the story up to a particular moment, by getting their opinion, etc. Interaction with an adult in a shared context is the decisive factor as in linguistic and cultural development. Storytelling fits into this interaction framework – the adult in this case is the teacher and the shared context is the story.

Stories are also motivating and fun, therefore can help develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language and language learning. They can create a desire to continue learning. If the story is interesting enough and is told in an appealing way, children will normally pay attention through to the end. Nowadays, motivation, and in general anything to do with factors which affect the emotions are considered crucial in all learning processes.

Moreover, storytelling is a unique way for learners to develop an understanding and respect for other cultures, and can promote a positive attitude to people from different lands, races and religions. In addition to this, it stimulates and develops listeners’ imagination, creativity and inventiveness because stories create magic and a sense of wonder at the world. Children can become personally involved in a story as they identify with the characters and try to interpret the narrative and illustrations. This imaginative experience helps develop their own creative powers.
Stories teach students about life and other people. Listening to stories several times can also help children to increase their memory. Furthermore, learners will be able to get wide knowledge from storytelling, e.g.: understanding of social aspects, practical overview such as experiences and relationships. Through the stories, children know about a variety of lifestyle, customs and cultures of different countries in the world. Because of the fact that each story always exist good characters and bad ones, students are capable of distinguishing between the right and wrong behaviour, learn the moral standards or moral values to orient their personality. Storytelling provokes a shared response of laughter, sadness, excitement and anticipation which is not only enjoyable but can help build up child’s confidence and encourage social and emotional development. Among other benefits we can list promoting a feeling of well-being and relaxation, increasing learners’ willingness to communicate thoughts and feelings and encouraging active participation and cooperation between students. Storytelling has always been with learners of at least the intermediate level and through translation or text analysis. Apart from the aforementioned advantages which also apply to language teaching, there are others which can be highlighted. One of these is the need for classroom activities which are meaningful to the learners, and which lead to greater learner involvement. There is clearly a great need to create activities in the foreign language classroom which most closely reflect the process of natural acquisition of language and we know that this process basically stems from the need to communicate. The element of fantasy in stories still holds some appeal for teenagers, but they prefer a more modern treatment of it as in science fiction. The learners’ greater knowledge of the language allows for more linguistic complexity both when listening to stories and telling or re-telling them. The use of stories with teenagers by no means loses its value but rather takes on a different focus which includes more complex stories and therefore more sophisticated activities.

In addition to the basic characteristics of stories, Gail Ellis and Jean Brewster (2002, pp.1-2) emphasise the fact that stories naturally stir learners’ interest and attract their attention. Thus, a well-told story is likely to keep learners focused on the content of the lesson so that they are also eager to take part in a number of follow up activities related to the story. Relying on stories, the teacher can link learners’ imagination to the real world. Being exposed to stories students can develop a range of learning strategies. This is because they can each time be required to do something else. On one occasion, learners can be asked to identify some characters or events while on another occasion they can be asked to get the gist of the entire story. As a result, they can process either detailed elements or the whole plot. Stories help learners develop empathy and emotional intelligence in general. Besides, they can also broaden learners’ horizons.

Last but not least, three important dimensions should be taken into consideration in which storytelling can add to the process of learning in the whole school curriculum:
1. Stories can be used to reinforce conceptual development in children (for instance, colour, size, shape, time, cause and effect, and so on).

2. Stories are means of developing learning. This major category covers:
   - Reinforcing thinking strategies (for example, comparing, classifying, predicting, problem-solving, hypothesizing, planning, and so on).
   - Developing strategies for learning English (for example, guessing the meaning of new words, training the memory, self-testing, and so on).
   - Developing study skills (for example, making, understanding and interpreting charts and graphs, making and learning to use dictionaries, organizing work, and so on).

3. Carefully selected stories can also be used to develop other subjects in the curriculum, in particular:
   - Mathematics telling the time, numbers: counting and quantity, measuring,
   - Science the life-cycle of insects, animals, outer space, how seeds grow,
   - History prehistoric animals, understanding chronology / the passing of,
   - Geography and the Environment shopping and shops in the local area, neighbourhood parks, sports and games, using a map, using the atlas, the weather and climates around the world, cultural studies,
   - Art and Craft drawing, making masks, hats, cards, clocks etc., making collages, making puppets,
   - Music and Drama singing songs, playing instruments, role play, miming

Making a decision which story to choose requires an ability to evaluate stories and recognize the students’ needs. The traditional way of learning stories is listening to them directly from the storytellers. On the other hand you may get familiar with the loads of stories reading them widely. It is a very good idea to read various types of stories, literary fairy tales, fantasies, romances, fiction, biographies, picture-books, modern tales, action stories, etc. While selecting the best story for the chosen group of students it is recommended to read the same story few times and in different versions, too. The teacher can only effectively present the story he likes and feels comfortable with. That is why he should select one that has the meaning for him. The very important issue is preparing the story appropriate for the particular group of listeners. We have to take their age, the language level and interests into consideration before finding the best one. Stories with simple structures, clearly defined theme, a thought-provoking plot, a consistent style, standardized characterisation, dramatic appeal, conflict resolution, interesting heroes and strong emotional content are highly welcomed. Teachers ought to avoid too long descriptions and too detailed explanations in the stories, as well as too many subplots, flashbacks or literary devices that can mix the flow of the story. The crucial point while selecting the best story is looking for ones with positive values: are funny, intriguing, full of compassion, great humour and are instructive. We should also learn something about social, historical
and cultural background of the story. The story must be put in the context and has universal contents. The feedback whether your choice was good enough will be the positive or negative reactions got from the audience. A well-selected story can help to shape learners’ attention and engagement in the tasks, which means that it constitutes a very important step to take for the teacher. In the opinion of Alison Davies (2007, pp. 10-11), there are four basic aspects which need to be considered. Firstly, we ought to remember that although students’ needs are the most important, the chosen story has to match the teacher’s preferences and personality. If the teacher feels good with telling a given story, he will be able to modify it in a good way, adjust the intonation or the tone of voice to make it even more interesting for students. Another factor affecting selection of a story for the lesson is whether or not the teacher knows students. This element refers to their thematic preferences, skills, abilities and general interests. Being aware of such aspects the teacher can make sure that learners will be attentive and focused on the input making the entire activity effective. The next aspect to consider concerns the flexibility of stories. This refers to whether or not the content of the story can be modified. If learners are supposed to provide alternative endings of the story it can lean on modifications. What is more, if a story is based on some universal principles and ideas it may be told in a different context.

Undoubtedly, the aspects discussed above need to be considered with reference to learners’ age, the number of students in the group, the specific activities which they are supposed to do in relation to the story, learners’ overall activeness on a given day and the like.

As far as preparation to telling the story in a professional way is concerned, the tip worth mentioning is: before telling the story learn it, that means make it your own. Read it aloud from the very beginning to the very end several times. E. Martin Pedersen, an university teacher from Italy, suggests that teachers should “Master the structure of the story: the beginning (introduction of characters, the body (building of conflict), and the climax (resolution of conflict)” (1995, p. 3). The storyteller may visualize the succession of scenes, as well as work on introducing atmospheric setting and character descriptions. It would be a good idea to create intriguing dialogues, note extra-ordinary expressions, word patterns and rhymes.

Another useful piece of advice is avoiding to memorize word for word from the story. It is better to learn the plot incident by incident. The teacher may prepare some key notes that will help remember the structure of the story, too. Using clue card outlines are also vital in preparation o storage of tales. However, they should not be used in telling.

The next point that appears to be essential is controlling the length of the story. If the story we want to tell is too long, we can simplify or serialise it, but should not be excessively modified or censored. What is more, time yourself during practice. Probably, the “story hour” ought to include various types of activities,
for example reading storybooks, listening to fairy tales CD, reciting poetry, playing games, singing songs, etc. besides oral story itself (See: Ibidem).

Furthermore, be careful of vocabulary children will find in your story. A vast amount of rich vocabulary items (i.e.: carefully selected adjectives and adverbs) will give colour and interesting texture to the telling. Nevertheless, you have to feel comfortable with used language and do not worry or panic when students do not grasp the meaning of new words because guessing is the part of learning a foreign language.

Before presenting your story in front of the audience, tell it aloud to hear your own voice, practice it several times to yourself, your family or friends to refine your storytelling style: “A pause and dropped voice are often more effective than shouting. Take poetic passages slowly; report conversation at natural speed; tell narration more rapidly, building toward the climax” (See: Ibidem). The storyteller often trains in front of a mirror to eliminate poor and not meaningful gestures or facial expressions, to see his body language and check if it is understandable enough. Practice makes perfect, therefore it will definitely make your story natural. Finally, a good storyteller should calm down, relax and warm up before the performance: breathe deeply, stretch your voice while introducing some simple vocal exercises.

Sometimes, it is relevant for comprehension, before presentation, to make some background comments on difficult vocabulary and phrases or the cultural assumptions and setting of the story. The teacher could share special real objects (realia) related to the story signal the beginning of “the story time”, for instance by ringing a small bell or lighting a fragrant candle. Our enthusiasm, creativity, joy and spontaneity will create a unique atmosphere and mood. Do not rush or rumble, do not be condescending or phonic, do not reveal nervousness or embarrassment. The audience must hear your every single word clearly and loudly enough, so concentrate on your voice in particular. What is more, maintain your eye contact with all the students gathered in the classroom. It is of utmost importance because it can help the storyteller not only to hold listeners’ attention, but also check understanding and give instant feedback. Take care of your hands and the whole body movement, present only natural gestures using them as vital aids. While presenting the story a teacher can also take some advantage of using props, but he should not exaggerate with the amount of them and introduce particular ones sparingly.

It is profitable to prepare the proper room for the story: quiet, well-lit and acoustically acceptable. “You can tell the story standing (for more freedom of movement) or sitting on a stool (for better eye-contact), before semi-circle of chairs or (for more intimacy) sitting in a tight circle on a carpet” (See: Ibidem). All listeners should see and hear you well, as well as have a comfortable place to stay during the whole story.

Małgorzata Sopotowicz and Magdalena Szulc-Kurpaska list some ideas of post-reading activities, not only for teaching young learners, but also older ones,
worth mentioning: asking the children about the moral of the story (with the youngest learners may be carried out in their mother tongue), encouraging students to retell a story in chorus (using a repetitive pattern and pointing to the particular sentences in a book), introducing cut-out stories to put it in the correct order (sequencing the plot), preparing puppets or masks for acting out the story (or suggesting a story-related art and craft task for the whole group), working with a role-play parts of the story in an very informal way, preparing a book-making activity (e.g.: a folded zigzag book or a lap book), sorting or classifying words into categories, practising an action song or rhyme related to the topic of the story, using picture dictation based on context of the story told, introducing pair work with information gap activities connected with the plot of the story (See: 2009, pp. 224 – 225).

Apart from telling the story we can read them, too. Following Jeremy Harmer’s point of view, “There are many reasons for getting students to read English texts” (2007, p. 99). Literature can be read by students extensively, away from the classroom, as well as at school classroom, especially while getting familiar with new stories. However, learners of all ages can read novels, web pages, newspapers, magazines or any other reference material, as for instance follow-up listening to a story activities. The most important fact is that teachers via telling great stories are able to encourage young people to reading for pleasure, i.e. “joyful reading” (Richard Day). It will happen if students have chance to choose what they want to read.

Summing up, told or read stories are of huge value in the entire arduous process of learning a foreign language. The crucial point is to create the encouraging conditions for students for getting to know the valuable world of foreign literature, which will allow them to develop other important language skills in the future, as well as their language autonomy (See: H. Komorowska, 2009, pp. 223 – 227).

**Exchanging of good practices**

In online sources there is a vast amount of recommended tools that can be of great help in developing the skill of writing short and longer written forms, for instance generators for self-creation of stories in English. In the Internet, we will easily find numerous examples of them, including:

**Story Dice**, a handy story idea generator, a creative tool for creating stories in English on your own².

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The classic story ideas generator is available for free and has over 50 options for each dice. It seems to be a fun diversion for parents and children, a handy tool for writers looking for inspiration to create their own story ideas. As a creative exercise, it is a brilliant way of giving our students’ imagination a workout. The tool is fully functional.

As far as usage of the tool is concerned, as we can see above, a particular learner gets five story dice, each with a random image on it. The task is quite simply to turn these prompts into a story. It is recommended to try to work with the order they appear on the screen but if a student finds it tough, he or she can introduce some changes. We also do not need to take the image literally. You can use the dice metaphorically or as representations of other concepts. You may just want to dive in as soon as you see them, working from left to right as you try to incorporate each image into your yarn. Or you may want to be more strategic and work out the ending first, using the dice to work out how you are going to get to your big climax. The learners should try different strategies to see what works best for them. There are lots of other ways the story dice can be used: as a regular creative exercise to develop students’ storytelling abilities, as a warm-up creative exercise in a group idea generation session, as a game to entertain children and help them develop their imaginations, as a creative prompt to inspire our teenagers writing or as a tool to build proficiency in a foreign language.
Storybird is an excellent online tool that teaches you how to create a cartoon story in a foreign language. 

It is a free platform where you can create electronic books, fairy tales or illustrated stories. Storybird is an application that will especially please younger children, aged 5-10 (primary school). Its advantage is providing a number of intriguing stimuli, allowing the development of the imagination and love of children to writing and reading not only in English, but also in their mother tongue. It has a database of professional illustrations that can be easily turned into beautiful stories. Storybird helps students focus on working on writing and reading in English. It has a wide range of sample stories of various formats that interest our students. We will find here, among others themed picture stories, poetry, blogs and comics. When creating their story, writers have at their disposal a huge base of illustrations by professional illustrators and graphic designers. Books in English are published by the portal. It is a simple, creative tool for anyone who finds books (both reading and writing) fascinating.

However, it turned out that the family has a "black sheep" - son Edward. The boy spent two-thirds of his day teasing. His room was a mess.

Matt told me everyone had been arguing over who should clean up. As usual, I had to reconcile them all, so I decided who would do the chore and what to clean. Matt was to dust the whole house and clean the floor. Richard was to wipe out the dust. Me and Charlotte took care of cleaning the kitchen and the bathroom.
Plot Generator is an inspiring and professional multimedia tool, presenting inexhaustible ideas and possibilities in sketching your own stories at every language and age level\(^4\). With the aim of practicing creating a plot of a film script or a story in English, when looking for ideas for an interesting story or a tale, we can confidently use the plot generator. In the resources of the website you will find tips for writing short stories, fairy tales, film scripts, hints of sentences that start and end our statement, a bank of attractive titles and meme patterns.

Plot Generator

Inspiration for your next novel, film or short story

Looking for story ideas? We’ll help you quickly draft a plot. Or if you’d prefer, sit back and let us write a short movie script or story for you.

Generate

- Short Story
- Movie Script
- Fairytale
- Story ideas
- Opening Line
- Twist
- Writer’s Block Cure
- Meme
- Drabble
- Headlines

Or Create A Blurb

- Freestyle
- Line by Line
- Romance
- Fantasy
- Paranormal Romance
- Crime
- Domestic Noir
- Horror
- Mystery
- Science Fiction
- Dystopian
- Vampire
- Bronte Sisters
- Summertime
- Smelly Trolls

Picture 5. Resource examples of Plot Generator
What is more, this tool is also very helpful when writing letters, poems, song texts, etc. By clicking on the selected icon on the *Plot Generator* page, you will discover a hint—a form template that helps in randomly filling in the content. Step by step, using the generator’s suggestions, the students independently begin to create individual written formulas.

![Plot Generator](image)

*Picture 6. Examples of creators of various plots*
Another effective and useful teaching tool connected with writing stories on your own as well as reading them or listening to them is the Storynory tool\(^5\). It is a simple and intuitive online teaching aid that can be used to work with students at different language levels.

![Storynory interface](https://www.storynory.com)

**Picture 7.** The interface of Storynory page

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Resource examples of Storynory

**Fairy Tales**
Classic fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen, The Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, Aesop, and others. This is where frogs chat to princesses, wolves huff and puff, and gingerbread men run away.

**Brothers Grimm**
The Brothers Grimm collected folk stories from German households in the 19th C. Some of their tales have dark undercurrents of psychology, others are romantic and amusing.

**Small Stories**
A collection of stories that are short and sweet and should appeal to younger children. You'll find some of the classic fairy tales and fables here.

**Original Stories**
Many of our kids’ stories are exclusive to Storynory. We have stories about frogs, princesses, pirates, witches, birds, dogs, and people.

**Katie, The Ordinary Witch**
Katie is an ordinary girl apart from one thing - she's a witch and can do magic spells.

**Bertie Stories**
Bertie is a very modern Prince, engaged to Princess Beatrice. He would like to be a secret agent, but muddles through life using his charm and terrible jokes. Oh yes, one little thing - he spent 8 years living as a frog on the pond.

**Wicked Uncle**
Uncle Jeff is not really wicked - but Mum and Dad think he is irresponsible.

**Lapis**
Lapis the cat speaks to us down the ages from Ancient Egypt. She is a magical apprentice to Amon the priest, and has a sister friend, Céo.
The very valuable websites that I recommend to familiarize students who try their own writing skills with are two effective tools that can help them focus on lexical correctness. Thanks to them, it is easy to find synonyms, antonyms, word definitions, examples of sentences with a selected word. Students can also listen to the correct pronunciation of a phrase and practice word formation.

![Home pages of the tools mentioned](image_url)

Picture 9. Home pages of the tools mentioned

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Picture 10. Examples of the use of the words “malicious” and “delight” in sentences
The examples of online effective aids mentioned above seem to be unfinished and definitely do not exhaust available Internet sources. There are a lot of useful others that can be found in the cyberspace easily. Whatever tools the teachers of students of all ages and levels introduce in their classrooms they will be relevant for writing various academic forms.
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