

Enhancing Intercultural Communication through storytelling in EFL

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Abstract

Globalization and foreign languages learning nowadays are two inseparable things. Learning to communicate in a foreign language has become one of the most important things. Reasons of studying a foreign language have changed the perception and methodologies. Trends of learning a foreign language nowadays are inclining towards communication. In a monolingual or multicultural classroom environment, communication is one fundamental component. Foreign language learning and intercultural communication are two inseparable things.

As teachers we know that learners use all skills to learn. Techniques and strategies of teaching depend on teacher and learners themselves. But do we use storytelling in English Foreign Language classes? Is it used for pedagogical purposes? Can we use it to develop oral and listening skills? Can we use it to develop intercultural communication? These are some of the research questions that this paper deals with.

In this paper we will explore reasons and how to use storytelling as a means of enhancing intercultural communication in EFL/ESL classes. Storytelling may be a new concept for novice teachers and an informal technique for experienced teachers. In this paper we will discuss the potential of storytelling in enhancing communication in foreign language learning, taking in consideration the age and learner's language level.

Keywords: *storytelling, intercultural communication, potential pedagogical technique.*

Introduction

National Curriculum of Foreign Languages, in Albania is based on *Common European Framework of References for Languages*. This means that foreign language teaching is not any more a traditional option: learning for “culture” or learning for “knowledge”. The concept is used in another way: learning to communicate. The increased opportunities for communication among Europeans created a demand for oral proficiency in foreign languages.¹ Than, what options have we got as teachers and learners? The answer is very simple: differentiate methodology. From literature review, practical review there are different techniques that are used in English Foreign Language classes such as pair- work, group- work, cooperative learning, jigsaw technique, language games.

English language learning aims to provide learner with contexts that enhance communicative competence. Curricula of foreign language learning stresses the fact that students might be exposed to meaningful situations, contexts where students should develop communicative competence, intercultural competence, socio-cultural competence, discourse competence. This means that teachers based on curricula, prepare language syllabus providing students opportunities to study and learn a foreign language.

One of the things that teachers may choose to use is finding topics of students' interest and not basing their teaching just on textbook. Exposing students to authentic language, developing listening and speaking help students understand, analyze and appreciate language. In this paper we tried to bring in focus Storytelling, *how?* and *why?* to use it in English Foreign Language classroom.

Storytelling and intercultural communication

Storytelling is not a new thing. The meaning of the word “storytelling” is very simple and understandable. Storytelling is used in every culture to educate children with different concepts about life, learning, history, culture, education, and so on. Native American used storytelling to educate their children. In our everyday life we use books, oral communication, storytelling or legends to educate our children. Storytelling is used not just in native language study but even in foreign language study. The purpose is to tell something about an idea, a concept and so on. As an example we can mention the cultural corner in English textbooks in elementary, secondary or high school. The teacher introduces the reading part to

¹ J. Richards and S. Theodore Rodgers, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

students, but the teacher also uses all her / his knowledge to tell something more about that.

At university level, English students study different subjects. The lecturer does not explain only that information given in the textbook, as an example we can mention the subjects of English branch *Anglophone Culture* (2nd year bachelor) and *Language Teaching Methods* (3rd year bachelor). In each of these subjects, explaining a new method or an English custom or tradition, there is a history behind it based on the concept like: who studied it, what were the reasons and so on. In other words there is a narration point beside it. The teacher introduces other information in a form of storytelling to the students. In *Anglophone Culture* behind every tradition there is a story, a curiosity; in other words students are not provided just with a concept, but with different concepts.

Storytelling is provided in an informal way, but is present in every foreign language class. The teacher does not rely just on the textbook, but provides students with further information. The purpose of the paper is to explore how storytelling can affect English Foreign Language classroom learners' communication. Through the use of storytelling learners are motivated, they develop communicative competence, critical thinking, listening skill and fluency. Storytelling and extensive reading can be combined together to stimulate language learning, creativity and imagination. According to A. Wright,² learners relate stories to their own lives and imagination.

In everyday life more we listen and more we read, more we learn. The point is to give right instructions and have correct teaching procedures to have an effective language classroom. Pedagogically, storytelling is a technique that has potential if used in the correct way to help learners develop intercultural competence and communication. Exploring culture helps learners extend vocabulary, ideas, perception and creative writing as well. In such a way learners are motivated and lower the emotional barriers. Teachers can use storytelling to teach all the skills in an interactive way.

Methodology of using storytelling in English Foreign Language classes

As it was explained above there are different reasons of why to use storytelling. In this part we are going to present some procedures of how to use it in English Foreign Language classes. Learning a language becomes boring if the topics chosen are not interesting, if the learners are not too much motivated,

² A. Wright, *Storytelling with Children* (Oxford University Press, 1995).

collaborative and so on. According to Chambers³ storytelling is “a technique of teaching that has stood the test of time.”

If students are passive, teachers should give them the possibility of being active, in other words, to give them opportunities for using their sociolinguistic competences. Storytelling may become an effective technique not only if teachers use it, but even in case learners use it; being children of elementary class or students of secondary, high school and even university level as example: literature class, culture class. Storytelling helps learners with pronunciation, stimulate thinking, creativity. Teachers may use pair-work, problem-solving activities, information-gap exercises to help students explore language. As the process of learning itself is input and output information, storytelling develops students listening and speaking skills, providing cultural information and language knowledge.

How to choose stories?

If teacher want to use stories in their classes they should take in consideration some things such as:

- *age*
- *language level*
- *information provided*
- *language patterns*
- *skills practiced*
- *interactive activities provided*
- *the time*
- *the length*

A successful teacher has to choose stories taking in consideration the above mentioned criteria. While telling even pauses, intonation, speed are crucial for learners understanding. A combination of verbal and non-verbal communication is crucial too. Children can story-tell in a very special way in their mother tongue by using gestures. English teachers may help them perform in English in the same way.

From language learning methods, English teachers especially the novice ones, learn a lot about how to use methods, how to combine components of them, to have effective language classrooms, helping learners develop communicative

³ D. W. Chambers, *Storytelling and creative drama* (Dubuque: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 1970).

competence. One of the competences that a foreign language teacher should develop is to know very well the history and the culture of that language. For this reason a language teacher should be a good story-teller.

Procedure: Preparing the setting

Foreign language learner does not have the possibility to be exposed to authentic language. Using storytelling by non-native language teachers or even native teacher require using some skills. Providing children's with meaningful contexts, interactive activities is not easy. Before telling a story, an English teacher should follow a procedure. There are not written rules about it, but the practice and the experience help the teacher.

LEARNING THE CONTENT

Once the teacher chooses a story the teacher should learn its content. Once learning the content of *the story*, choose the strategies to retell it. Retelling does not mean learning by heart and memorize it word for word. We are different so the way we perceive things is different too. Storytelling is different too. While we read a book we enter inside it, we feel it, we become the character himself, we imagine the setting, and we live it. The same happens even with storytelling, as teachers we tell a story in our own voice, our intonation, our passion. The language teacher retells it in such a way to keep the audience in suspense, to feel the story to understand it in the same way, to know the chronology what comes next and what might be the end.

PREPARE THE SETTING

Teachers may choose posters, pictures, photographs, real objects to tell a story. They prepare the students or children for the story by defining the purpose, warming up the setting before performing. Some techniques of warming up may be: *Brainstorm key words of the story, show some pictures that can lead children to guess what they are going to listen to, using clustering to present words, ask some questions to let children predict the story.*

TELL THE STORY

After preparing the setting the teacher begin the story using verbal and nonverbal communication. Children's are helped to understand the story by the clues given to them.

MANAGE THE TIME OF STORYTELLING / STORY READING

It is very important to manage the time while teaching. In 45 min. class the teacher has to explain, to check, and to develop activities. If the teacher uses

storytelling in the same way the teacher has to manage time of telling, time of reading, time of interactive activities. If the time is not managed very well, the aim is not accomplished.

MANAGE VOCABULARY

It is important to choose carefully the vocabulary presented in the story. The students can acquaint the meaning of the new words immediately or if they want teacher's help. You can prepare flash cards to present new vocabulary to your children, you may choose even pictures or real objects to present it. It always depends on the story, age and language level. As a simple example we can bring stories presented at the textbook *Welcome to English*, by Elisabeth Gray and Virginia Evans. Stories in most of the cases from elementary level are presented through the use of pictures. In such a way children understand easily the meaning of new words.

LET YOUR STUDENTS PERFORM

Once the story is performed, let the children or students to choose a story to present it next time. This will help our language learners to develop communicative ability, which is even the aim of studying a foreign language.

PREPARE INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES

Using problem-solving activities help learners overcome difficulties, using language, using knowledge, collaborate with each-other. According to Shrum & Ghsan⁴: *students use a variety of learning styles, approaches and ways of interacting when learning a new language*. For this reason it is very important to provide students with interactive activities. The teacher may already prepare activities to make students practice vocabulary, grammar structures, listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. It depends on the teacher what he/she wants the learners to practice. According to H. D. Brown,⁵ the extend to which communicative techniques is used is a factor to overall proficiency level of the class. Teachers should always take into consideration even the time needed for these activities. Carefully prepared activities and clear instructions given to learners will help them meet their goals.

⁴ J. Shrum and E. Ghsan, *Teacher's Handbook Contextualized Language Instruction* (Boston, 1994).

⁵ H. D. Brown, *Teaching by principles: An Interactive approach to language pedagogy* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001).

Conclusion

Storytelling is not an unknown concept in teaching and learning a foreign language. Storytelling educates, motivates, develop critical thinking, creativity, imagination. Storytelling helps learners to reinforce skills. Teaching does not become boring but becomes interesting if the teacher dedicates special classes to storytelling. Through storytelling learners do not take just information, but develop competences and enrich their cultural knowledge. Creating a relaxing atmosphere in the classroom help students overcome emotions, help shy students, and help passive students and foster communication. While using storytelling teachers should take in consideration some important factors such as why to use storytelling? What are the advantages of it? What do students benefit? and the time, procedure and interactive activities that would involve students in appreciation of language and culture and practicing communication.

Not just the teacher, but even the learner can become a story-teller. What it is suggested in this paper is that storytelling can be used and adopted for different ages and language levels. It is a potential pedagogical tool to enhance communication in English Foreign Language classes.

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