

Storytelling in ELT to Enhance Listening and Speaking Skills of Disadvantaged Learners

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ABSTRACT

How stories can be used in this Digital Age for effective transaction of language is a question any educator would like to have the answer for. This paper focuses on storytelling tools that can help young learners pick up listening and speaking skills in disadvantaged learning environment. Story as a pedagogical strategy can be modulated and used to help these underprivileged learners turn opportunity into achievement. Special emphasis based on a study carried out in Kerala among the five tribes of Wayanad has also been included.

INTRODUCTION

In this digital age, where the classroom is constantly evolving, the art of storytelling still remains a strong tool for ELT. Story strikes at the root of the learner's consciousness, making some level of emotional connect which reinforces the concept that is being transacted in the learning environment, without the learner being fully aware of it. Humans are storytelling animals (Gottschall 18). People continually experience life through story structure as narrative offers both a way of knowing and remembering experiences. Story is a powerful structure for binding together seemingly isolated events in a meaningful way. Human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make choices according to narrative structures (Benjamin 12). The creative yarn woven of verbal material draws its sustenance from the human psyche, better known as the memory and imagination based on human experience. As long as there is a story, life seems to be all right.

With the pandemic hitting the human populace, classrooms have evolved into fluid entities spread across digital space and time globally and locally. Hence, it becomes a priority to identify the disadvantaged learner, who in terms of available infrastructure or other learning support mechanisms, lags behind his/her peers. As a closer analysis, a particular study in Kerala is quoted as an example. For the purpose of this paper, the term disadvantaged would specifically refer to this group under the study. However, it also includes the broad spectrum of negative circumstance that deter the progress of knowledge procurement.

The Disadvantaged Learner

The term disadvantaged has been used to include socially, culturally, economically, psychologically, locationally, environmentally and educationally backward pupils. The method to overcome this backwardness is a two-pronged strategy: one, working towards their academic growth and language development and two, working with them for their empowerment, which is considered a long-term goal. As an ELT professional, the focus is on the former aspect, especially in developing the English language usage and comprehension. Among the four pillars of a successful ELT programme such as the people involved, materials, methodology and monitoring, the first three are considered in this contextual study.

It is necessary to first identify the clientele in an ELT programme and then on the basis of a need's analysis design, develop a package suitable to their behaviour and linguistic needs. Understanding the target group and its ethos helps learning transactions become more effective.

Socially backward in the Indian context applies to scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and most backward castes. Economically backward are those who live below the poverty line or borders of the same. The parents of such learners are generally either small scale or tenant farmers or unskilled or semi-skilled labourers. Educationally backward implies parents who are illiterate or neo-literates. Siblings' educational attainment in such cases is also mediocre. They are

generally first-generation learners. These students receive little guidance and counselling in terms of choice of schools, programmes and method of study. At the tertiary level, most of them drift in and out of college which is a sharp contrast to their privileged counterparts whose education and career are planned meticulously by their parents.

As Foucault argues that what counts as knowledge is determined preponderantly by those who have power and conversely the 'dominant castes' and classes play a decisive role in discursive formation (Simons 190). Secondly, these students receive little educational assistance from their parents and siblings, particularly when it comes to learning English. Thirdly, the poor educational climate at home in terms of discussions and debates, reading habits and materials, bed time stories and media exposure minimizes their chances of acquiring English language and knowledge.

A study was carried out in Kerala among two hundred English language learners from the five tribes of Wayanad, namely, the Paniyan, Adiyar, Kattunaickan, Kuruman and Kurichiyar. After analysing the findings of the study, J Bennichan (95) established that the Socio-Economic Status (SES) of the students directly affects their success in learning.

SES of Tribal Learners and their Achievement in English Language Skills

	Skill Score	SES-1	SES-2	SES-3
Pearson Correlation	1	.876	-.460	.367
Sig. (2-tailed)		.051	.436	.544
N	5	5	5	5

The score of literacy skills is directly proportionate to the SES score of all tribes. Students with a supportive socio-economic background advance in language skills and those from weak socio-economic background tend to lag behind in literacy levels. SES- I considers elements such as parent's education, family's land holding status, house ownership status, electricity, TV, phone, newspaper, gas, vehicle etc. SES-2 includes the negative factors such as alcoholism, smoking, tobacco chewing, gaming, drugs etc. Psychological factors consider encouragement for study, aim in life, joy to learn, opportunity to travel, awareness about society, respect by others, respect by teachers, recognition by friends, respect for other communities, attitude towards hard work, saving for future, happiness in the family etc. SES1 shows high correlation to their literacy achievement (.876).

It means learning of tribal students are strongly influenced and affected by the family's SES. Those with a higher SES did better in the test, while those with a poor SES did badly. SES-2 shows the negative effects of social habits like alcoholism, smoking, tobacco, gaming etc. These are negative variables; hence the coefficient is -460. The psychological variables get a coefficient of .367, again, to show the positive correlation of students' psychological background influencing their learning achievement.

Home-based environment factors negatively influence their studies, and as a result, and they lag behind in languages, and academics in general. In the context of Wayanad, where parents are least educated, the government agencies and educational activists have a lead role to play. They need to understand what benefits and what hinders the learning process of the tribal students. At least to a limit, teachers can create an academically favourable environment. Stories do play a major role here.

Stories as Tool for ELT

Since these learners lack basic competence in English, they find it very difficult to understand even simple texts. This is where the role of stories as ELT tool plays a key role. Teachers can design tasks and activities that focus on issues implicit in the story and the narrative at deeper levels. An experiment carried out as part of delivering alternative ESL programmes to children from minority cultures in New Zealand and Australia showed that narrating of anecdotes and personal experiences by children has been used as a spring board for discussing deeper issues that are slowly brought into the open by teachers through a continual process of questioning and reframing of issues (Perrow 2008).

Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn. According to Benjamin, the usefulness of a story, in one case, may consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a

proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers (Benjamin 14). For a story to be assimilated within a listener's psyche there must be a state of relaxation. When the rhythm of story seizes the listener the gift of retelling comes all by itself. This is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled.

Many of the disadvantaged pupils are enveloped in a cocoon of silence as they are poor articulators because of their linguistic impoverishment in English. The art of storytelling includes exercises like filling in the gaps with word suggestions and at later stages creating stories of their own using given key words. Initially stories that are narrated should carry simple words and the teacher can gradually shift the literary gears to a higher plane depending on the speed of comprehension of the learners. The closer the theme of the tale is to their daily life, the faster the assimilation of meaning occurs thereby speeding up the learning process. Textbooks may cite examples based on general experiences and incidents whereas an indigenous teacher can adapt the material to the immediate life of the learners to aid faster comprehension.

Any scaffolding activity involves the following key stages: (a) getting the learner interested, (b) simplifying the task (c) inviting participation, (d) providing direction, (e) modelling the task response (f) organizing guided performance, (g) eliciting independent performance.

Analysing the story as a key tool one can capture the interest of the learner if the tale is related to their immediate life. Complicated details in the story may be substituted with simpler incidents. Questions like 'what would you do if you were the character?' can invite participation from the listener/learner. If the story gets carried away too far from the central theme it loses its purpose so a timely intervention on the part of the teacher helps in providing direction. Task related to the story helps organize guided performance on the part of the learner and later on enables the student to build and narrate stories on their own. At points where the student fumbles for English words the teacher may offer key terms but one must see to it that the frequency of such assistance is reduced by repeated narrations.

CONCLUSION

Stories serve as a significant ELT tool as they connect on an emotional level and the content leads to some kind of appropriation by the learner who makes it a part of their general linguistic content. Repeated narrations with modifications add to sharpening the listening and speaking skills of learners especially those from underprivileged backgrounds. Adaptation of storytelling techniques in English classrooms, vis-a-vis the disadvantaged learners like the tribes, would result in more efficacious ELT practices. Storytelling provides a conducive mental framework for the development of a healthy and balanced psyche which in turn aids and forges knowledge gathering, accumulation and dissemination.

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