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# Tales to Tell

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Preparing a lesson plan on “narration” cannot be considered simple since it involves various aspects of language such as tenses, logical thinking, chronology, clause connectors (time markers), or even plots, characters, climaxes etc. How do teachers prepare their students to be good story tellers or writers? Most of the time, we value the product more than the process which generates the product. However, students need some incentive. Giving students tales or stories to read can help them understand the elements of good narrative that will eventually enhance their ability in both narrative writing and story telling. This is because common tales and well-selected stories contain the important elements that serve as concrete examples for students to produce better narrative. In other words, using tales or stories as an input will provide students with salient examples of how to organize their ideas and make their stories interesting.

To prepare for a fun narrative lesson, just follow these steps.

## **1. Preparation**

- Story Selection: Select appropriate stories for your students.
- 1. Decide how many stories are needed. This depends on the length of the story, the number of students and time constraints.
- 2. Choose a story that is enjoyable and is of interest to the students. Folk tales or fairy tales should also be considered.
- 3. Consider whether the stories you select suit their proficiency by looking at sentence structures and length as well as vocabulary.
- 4. Think of time constraints. If you have a two-hour class, don't choose a lengthy story.

The following are sample stories that I have used with adult learners in my classes.

### **The Ant and the Cicada**

In the old days, ants and cicadas were friends. They were very different. The ants were hardworking, but the cicadas were lazy.

In the summer, the ant families were very busy. They knew that in the winter they would have to stay in their anthill. They wanted to have enough food for the whole winter.

While the ants worked hard, the cicadas didn't do anything. They sang and danced all day. When they were hungry, they could always fly to the farm and get something to eat.

One day, the cicadas were singing and dancing. They saw a long line of ants bringing food to their anthill. The cicadas said, "Stop, my silly friends. It's a very nice day. Come and dance with us." The ants said, "Don't you know about winter? If you don't work now, you'll have trouble later."

But the cicadas said, "We have strong wings. We can fly anywhere we want. Stupid ants!" And they continued to sing and dance.

In the winter, it rained all the time and it was very cold. In the anthill, there was singing and dancing. But the cicadas had nothing to eat. They asked the ants for some food. The ants said, "We thought you could fly anywhere. Now who is stupid and silly?"

The cicadas cried and said their wings were wet from the rain. The ants said, "We're sorry, but now it's too late. If we help you, there won't be enough food for us. Sorry, very sorry." And the ants closed their door.

The next day, when the ants opened their door, all the cicadas were dead! That's why we can hear cicadas sing in the summer, but in the winter they are silent.

Kasser, C. & Silverman, A. (1986). Stories We Brought with Us. Prentice Hall. New Jersey.

### **The Story of the Smart Parrot**

A man in Puerto Rico had a wonderful parrot. There was no other parrot like him. He was very, very smart. This parrot could say any word – except one. He could not say the name of the town where he was born. The name of that town was Cataño.

The man tried and tried to teach the parrot to say "Cataño." But the bird would not say the word. At first the man was very nice, but then he got angry. "You stupid bird! Why can't you say that word? Say 'Cataño' or I'll kill you!" But the parrot would not say it. Then the man got so angry that he shouted over and over, "Say 'Cataño' or I'll kill you." But the bird wouldn't talk.

One day, after trying for many hours to make the bird say "Cataño," the man got very very angry. He picked up the bird and threw him into the chicken house. "you are more stupid than the chickens. Soon I will eat them, and will eat you, too."

In the chicken house there were four old chickens. They were for Sunday's dinner. The man put the parrot in the chicken house and left.

The next day, the man came back to the chicken house. He opened the door and stopped. He was very surprised at what he saw!

He saw three dead chickens on the floor. The parrot was screaming at the fourth chicken, "Say 'Cataño' or I'll kill you!"

Kasser, C. & Silverman, A. (1986). Stories We Brought with Us. Prentice Hall. New Jersey.

In my **two-hour** class, four tales of this length are selected for **twenty low-level adult learners**. The criteria are:

1. The stories contain simple structures such as “*In the old days, ants and cicadas were friends.*” or “*A man in Puerto Rico had a wonderful parrot.*” Although there are some complex sentences like “*He could not say the name of the town where he was born.*” or “*Then the man got so angry that he shouted over and over,...*” they don’t interrupt the students’ understanding. Furthermore, no sentence is written in the passive voice.
2. The vocabulary is also understandable for beginners while there are some new words that they can learn as well, for example, *cicadas, hardworking, anthill, smart, silly, scream etc.*

## 2. Procedures

- Grammar Review: Review tenses that usually appear in a narration such as past simple. (Consider students’ needs; for example, the past perfect may be too complicated for beginners.)

In my class, I start by putting the title “Telling a Story” on the board and ask what kind of stories they like to hear or tell. Then, I ask the students what tense they use when telling a story. I write the answers on the board. For beginners, I focus mainly on past simple and past progressive. An explanation of past perfect is also given but not emphasized. The use of other tenses such as present simple in telling stories is not included in my class. Other teachers should also concentrate on past forms. As most students, even low-level students, have already learned these irregular past forms,

asking them to brainstorm irregular past forms is recommended. This serves as a revision of what they have previously learned. Don’t feel disappointed if students don’t know much about irregular past forms. Just keep in mind that they are going to learn more about them from the stories.

- Group Arrangement: Divide the class into small groups. The number of groups will depend on the number of stories you have prepared. For example, if I prepare four stories and there are twenty students in my class, I put them into four groups.
- Reading Assignment: Assign each group to read a different story. Students can freely discuss the content of the story and the difficult vocabulary with their classmates in their own groups. They are also allowed to look up words in the dictionary or ask their teacher. And they have to prepare to tell the story in English.

This stage is very important, and teachers play an important role as facilitators. During this time, I closely observe each group discussing what they have read. Students usually talk about what happens and difficult words they encounter.

1. Beginning with vocabulary is a good idea. Instead of giving them the meaning right away, encourage them to guess the meaning from the context, such as “*The ants were hardworking, but the cicadas were lazy.*” , “*He was very very smart. This parrot could say any word- except one.*”
2. You can now start talking about the things which occur in the story. I ask them to retell the story without looking

at the handout. Make sure everybody in the group takes turns retelling the story. At this point, I check their use of past forms and transitions. Repetition also helps them to realize their mistakes. For example:

*Student: "The cicada say 'you, stupid ant'."*

*Teacher: "said."*

*Student: "said."*

However, in my view, the pronunciation of /t/ and /d/ for certain verbs in the past simple tense, such as "worked", "helped" etc., is too demanding for beginners.

3. these stories contain excellent sample sentences to teach the use of the past simple and past progressive. I also have them focus on the present tense as used in quotation.
- Group Rearrangement: Choose one person from each group to form a new group. For instance, if there were four

groups with five students at first, there will now be five groups with four students who are going to tell four different stories. Each student will share the stories they have read with peers from other groups.

I normally control the activity by telling them to start with the same story and give them five to ten minutes for each narration. This is flexible, and everybody is allowed to ask questions if they don't understand any vocabulary or any points in the stories. Peer correction is also promoted in my class. Although they have already been corrected during the earlier stage, there is a chance that they will make the same mistakes again. Therefore, teachers should still pay attention to them.

- Comprehension Check: Give them exercises to make sure they understand all of the stories their friends have told them. The following exercises are provided as examples.

**True-False: The Ant and the Cicada**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The ants worked hard in the winter.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Cicadas like to sing and dance.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Cicadas can fly.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The cicadas flew south for the winter.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ Ants are hardworking.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Ants don't like to sing and dance.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The ants shared their food with the cicadas.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ An anthill is an ants home.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ Cicadas don't sing in the winter.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ The cicadas were hardworking.

**True-False: The Story of the Smart Parrot**

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The man killed the chickens.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ The man killed the parrot.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ the parrot killed the chickens.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The parrot finally said "Cataño."
5. \_\_\_\_\_ The parrot was stupid.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ The parrot could say many words.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ The parrot was more stupid than the chickens.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ Cataño was the name of the parrot.

### Variation

- Teachers introduce such elements as characters, climaxes etc. and instruct students on how significant they are.
- Students discuss what they have learned from the tales.
- Teachers assign students a piece of narrative writing. They write about any tales or legends they have heard; for example, Aesops stories. Teachers can also ask them to create a story of their own.

### How does this lesson enhance language acquisition?

1. Negotiation: The tasks promote negotiation in the target language among the students. They sometimes negotiate when they don't understand what their friends have said. For instance, based on my observations, when the audience became confused, they asked the tellers to repeat the difficult part again and from that point, negotiation in many areas, e.g. pronunciation, vocabulary etc. began. The following example shows negotiation in terms of vocabulary.

A: "What is a cicada?"

B: "A small animal that can fly...."

Sometimes students simply said "I don't understand" and the tellers had to carefully retell that part of the story again. It was obvious that they were more aware of the use of pronouns such as "he" or "she", vocabulary and tenses, especially past forms.

2. Peer Correction:

- Grammar

A: "Then he gone home."

B: "Went home."

When teachers give students tasks to complete, they must observe them closely for any additional mistakes they might make. Although students try to correct their peers, sometimes their corrections are wrong.

A: "The ants hardworking."

B: "They is hardworking."

Teacher: "They **were** hardworking."

Most of the time, students have difficulty in pronouncing an -ed morpheme. Teachers have to decide whether to focus more or less on it.

A: "The ants sung and dance."

B: "The ants sang and dance."

(They didn't pronounce /t/ which represents the -ed past form of "dance".)

- Pronunciation

A: "He ate the lice on his face."

(The student referred to "rice".)

B: "Lice?"

A: "Lice." (She tried to say it more clearly but it was still not clear.)

B: ???

A: You eat it.

B: Oh! "rice."

A: Yeah, "rice." (She finally pronounced it correctly.)

Well-selected tales are certainly valuable sources for narrative lessons. They not only provide learners with various grammatical points such as tenses and transitions, but also serve as splendid examples for students in terms of organization. However, the most important benefit of all is that these tales motivate students to read and tell more stories. Don't be surprised if your students say they tell the tales to their children in English and come to you to ask for more.