

Storytelling and Folk Tales in the ESL Classroom

Interview with *Regina Ress* - Author Storyteller and Actor

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Would you be surprised to hear that storytelling is one of the oldest and purest art forms in the history of humankind? In all probability, you may not! If you would, that indeed would be a surprise!

Storytelling represents the most direct communication one can think of between a teller and a listener, or a whole audience! There is the ever enchanting story, the engaging teller, the almost mesmerized audience and the interplay between them. Would you ever forget the kind of stories your grandma glued you to and before you knew, the bowl of spinach you hated to eat had disappeared into your mouth! Storytelling does entertain, challenge, teach and, indeed, transform.

And... as you would vouchsafe for, storytelling (and of course *storylistening*) is lots of fun!

Storytelling and English Language Learners

Based in the oral tradition, storytelling is uniquely suited for the language classroom. Language acquisition begins with listening and speaking. Story, too, begins orally/aurally. Traditional storytelling often has repetition and rhythm, along with audience

participation such as “call and response” and predictions. Storytelling enhances the practice of the “four skills,” teaches vocabulary, functions and grammar while encouraging cross cultural awareness and personal expression. Reading and writing, brought in as extensions, can then lead back to more storytelling.

Storytelling has long been recognized as an effective medium for teaching/learning ESL (English as a Second Language). A story workshop focuses on telling stories and weaving creative, communicative classroom activities with them. Folktales, the content of storytelling, could be ably used to support the practice of the LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing) skills; teach vocabulary, functions and grammar, while encouraging cross-cultural awareness and personal expression. Let the goal be teaching a subject or finding ways to relate to and engage the children, we may well explore educational and enjoyable activities using story and storytelling.

It is in this wonderful world of storytelling that **Regina Ress** (Regina), the protagonist of this piece of writing, lives. She has led workshops at The NY Open Center, Omega Institute, The National Storytelling



Conference, National TESOL Conference, at Bedford Hills Women's Correctional Facility, as well as for international storytelling festivals in Rio de Janeiro and Madrid. She has taught school residencies and professional development workshops through Arts Horizons and Young Audiences NY. She teaches English and presentation skills for foreign students at Santa Fe University of Art and Design, graduate courses on Storytelling in the Classroom for New York University's Program in Educational Theatre and Program in Multilingual/Multicultural Studies and for the US State Department's International Visitor's Program.

Regina holds a certificate in TESOL from the New School University and taught English at Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation for 10 years and summer intensives for foreign students at

Santa Fe University of Art and Design. She has presented workshops for the Literacy Assistance Center of NY and for the US State Department's International Visitor Program for English teachers from abroad. She teaches a workshop on storytelling in the ESOL classroom for the Multilingual-Multicultural Program at New York.

Who would be better to telling stories about storytelling than Regina, who offers workshops for parents, teachers, after school staff and other child care-givers in using story as a way to explore with children the world and themselves? As I have personally found in one of her workshops, storytelling could be highly informative, incredibly participatory and awesomely funny.

On being informed that there would be a workshop on 'Storytelling in the Language

Classroom' on 3rd February, 2017 between 6:00 and 7:30 pm at the Andhra Mahila Sabha, 109, Luz Church Road, Mylapore, Chennai, India, I was more than curious to put my hypothesis that storytelling is a worthwhile medium in the language classroom to test. I always believed that storytelling dynamically engages students in the act of language learning. It is appropriate for all ages and accessible to all levels. In this very hands-on workshop, participants engage in a wide variety of activities which support a creative, communicative language classroom. We will create stories, tell stories, sing stories, analyze stories, and have lots of fun while learning.

I did attend the workshop and the experience was highly enriching, and that motivated me to request the master storyteller for an interview, which she graciously accepted. The excerpts of which are what this article is all about.

SHE WAS NOT AFRAID: Stories of Brave, Fascinating and Funny Females-Human and Divine

New York City (NYC) based storyteller, Regina Ress, weaves classic myth, ancient legend, and her own personal stories that celebrate the openhearted yet, powerful; feisty yet compassionate Feminine. Her stories take us on a journey through time and space, from ancient Egypt's Goddesses to modern NYC's homeless, with stops in Borneo, Hawaii, and other fascinating corners of the world.

Excerpts from the interview with Regina Russ.

In the classrooms, particularly in the language classrooms, people are talking about storytelling as a methodology to impart language skills. First, what exactly is storytelling?

When you narrate an incident in a dramatic manner either (a real or imaginary story) then it becomes story telling. You use language to tell a story. You listen to someone telling a story or someone listens to your story telling. Though they may narrate the same story there is a difference in the way it is narrated. It is told from their perspective. Then it becomes authentic material. Story telling helps with both listening and speaking skills. In order to be a good story teller, you have to be a good listener too.

Can storytelling be seen as an art? Or is it a science? For example, if we say it could appeal to the cognitive structures of students, perhaps, one could suggest that there is something of a neuro or related study that lurks in storytelling, then storytelling gets the dimension of a scientific outlook?

Scientists are busy studying what storytellers do. When a person tells a story or listens to a story, some part of the brain lights up in both the speaker and the audience and this brings in an element of empathy .

If it's an art, for example, how grandma stories engage us so much that we at times forget our physical pain or change our attitude towards spinach, etc., can this be a viable method for the classroom? What I am trying to convey is that all teachers can't be effective storytellers.

Human beings are hardwired storytellers and, in fact, communicate with each other through storytelling. Not everyone can stand in front of an audience and tell a story but every one can tell a story. You don't have to be dramatic. You can tell a story in a calm manner and get your message across. It is more like theatre where there is no right or wrong way of doing things unless it happens to be a literary story, then there are elements which need to be adhered to.

Can storytelling be taught? That is, if it is considered an effective way to engage learners, teachers should be good storytellers. And, if they are to be effective storytellers, they have to be trained in storytelling? I am just asking about the feasibility or viability of training the teachers in storytelling.

Yes. It is possible to train teachers. You can teach the craft and art. You can teach them how to use the voice, sensory details and how to exactly work the craft. If the story teller can relate to the audience, then it becomes a successful performance. In the traditional method of story telling, there is audience participation. It connects the speaker and the listener. It is experiential. It takes place in the mind and heart. It can be quite engaging. If you can hold the audience's attention through your performance, you are a successful story teller.

It is possible to begin with short and simple vocabulary like what is seen in Panchatantra. The narrative doesn't insult the intelligence of the listener. Both children and adults get the meaning on very different levels. When some one uses the exact same word that you

used to tell a story, appreciate it. If they are a little apprehensive, you could ask them to draw a simple picture and explain it. Once they are involved in the narrative, they will get over their stage fear.

Given the current trends in the growth of ICT, and the emerging generation of learners who are more into visuals, how effective could storytelling be in the classrooms?

Children are willing listeners and participants in any story telling session. But their participation would be more when you choose the right kind of story to tell.

Is there any study on the impact of storytelling on learners?

There have been case studies on the effectiveness of story telling to improve the students' vocabulary, impact in the ESL/EFL classrooms to mention a few. Story telling is taken quite seriously in the west. Stanford, Duke University to mention a few are offering courses in Narrative and story telling. There is a Masters' Degree being offered in Narrative Medicine in Columbia University.

From your experience, can you tell me at what level of learners, storytelling will be more or less suitable or effective? Or is it that irrespective of learner levels, storytelling could be suitable and effective?

If the correct kind of stories are chosen then you would have an authentic use of language. There is no particular level to be successful.

Please suggest a few ways and means to implement storytelling as a methodology in the language classrooms.

Start by doing. Start telling stories. You don't need a lot of fancy equipment. You only need to have a good repertoire and a very creative imagination.

How effective could storytelling be in subject content classrooms as opposed to language classrooms? Or, more pointedly, is there any way of using storytelling in science classrooms?

You start off by showing a picture of the rings in the tree trunks, videos or clipping of various kinds of trees in various zones like tropical, temperate etc. You can present a story from the point of view of the tree. You can talk about what kind of animals inhabit where - habitat (monkey and the alligator) why animals have certain characteristics etc. Stork and the fox story and so on. Geography can be taught using a map and telling stories about how people travelled from one place to another. How they made it safely across seas or encountered problems. You can tell the story of the five little ducks that went out to swim and only four came back. Thus, you can teach maths at the primary level.

It appears that the effectiveness of storytelling depends largely on the

imaginative and creative as well as communicative capability of teachers. If you agree with this, then, will it be too much to ask the teachers to use storytelling in their classrooms, assuming that other environmental factors such as class schedules, the usual timetables, etc., are taken care of?

One could use story telling as a tool. For eg one could use irregular verbs- finish telling the story then explain the rule.

One could begin with telling folktales and move onto grandma's tales. Repeat the story half a dozen times, then write it down. As you go along, you can keep adding one more detail. You can work with a partner. You can tell the same story to four different people and ask them to repeat it. You can ask students to act out dialogues. You could use role play for producing authentic language. One person could tell the story from one character's point of view. Another could do the same thing from a different point of view.

Even differently abled children can be encouraged to use language through story telling and role playing. Music and songs can be used as part of story telling.

Thanks a lot, Regina, for your time!

That is the end of the story!