

E-Storytelling for the Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract

Telling stories is as old as humans are, that's why as a language teacher I have discovered in the storytelling one of the most powerful tools of learning a language, in order to improve the communication skills and to inter-connect people around the world. On the other hand, as Jerome Bruner said, "education is a space built thanks to the stories that allow to give a meaning to reality and to us as a part of that reality" - it means, there's no significant learning if we don't build any story together. In that sense the language lessons bring an exceptional opportunity through their nature, based itself on narrating about us and our society while we learn about a new one. I'd like to introduce to the participants the tools and projects I've been using in the Spanish lessons in order to invite language teachers to teach and innovate on-line.

I began using storytelling in the classroom trying to bring humor and movement into the lessons. After some experiences, the students wanted to connect their works with other people abroad and that was the moment to explore the potential in the new technologies and e-learning. Thanks to the blog "cuentacuentosele" many students have shared their own stories with others through videos, audio, pictures etc. which I'd like to share explaining the objective, process and effectiveness. Nowadays, I research the power of ODL out of the traditional forms of lecturing, trying to build common stories between students of different countries. The project started selecting some legends and adapting them to other cultures. Once the students wrote them, they recorded and

uploaded the new version for the native speakers thereby sharing, in a metaphorical way, the actual problems and cultural needs of their societies.

Keywords

Storytelling, Second Language, E-learning, Interculturality

Introduction

Before delving into the importance of storytelling in education and its concrete application in the e-learning, it is necessary to define what it alludes to exactly in this communication. I refer to the term "storytelling" to the spectacle in which an accountant, professional or not, transmits a story to an active audience using body resources and narrative techniques. With active public, I mean a voluntary and receptive audience that produces some feedback during the process, consisting of gestures, laughter, responses or emotion-free communication. As for the story told, I do not only refer to stories structured as such, but to legends, short stories, anecdotes or any other genre with the characteristics that define it, which will be apprehended by accountant in order to connect the best possible with the public.

In this communication, I will first discuss the importance and adaptation of the storyteller to the educational context in order to move on to its implications in the foreign language class and how to include it in an international e-learning project using a blog.

Storytelling in an Educational Context

Storytelling in the classroom makes sense only if we start from the idea expressed by Bruner about education as a space that creates stories that connect us to the world and to ourselves:

“The goal of education is to help us find our way within our culture, to understand it in its complexities and contradictions ... Education is no more, no less, than a cosmos where understanding, explains and predicts behavior of the objects and the intentions, desires and beliefs of the subjects. That is, a space built thanks to the stories; stories and narratives that allow us to give meaning, and meaning to reality and to us in it. The challenge is to get our minds together. That is, the interests and meanings of the teacher are aligned with the interests and meanings of the student.” (Bruner 1997, p. 37)

From this point of view the storyteller becomes a multidisciplinary tool of great value that fits into a framework of activities for a holistic learning. Now, what are your specific contributions to the student as part of a group?

Through genres such as theater, including puppets and shadow theater, dramatic dance and professional storytelling, these representations challenge the community by questioning their leaders, by deconstructing their most sacred values and beliefs, representing the most typical conflicts and suggesting some solutions to them, and are usually based on the current situation, in the known “world” (Turner 1982, p. 11). It means, the story-telling allows the representation of situations or social conflicts, traditions and cultural constructions and the questioning and reworking of them through drama.

Connecting *storytellers* on line

The anthropologist Van Gennep uses the expression “rite of passage” to refer to the rituals that accompany the individual or a group in a social status change and those

associated with seasonal changes. The term has come to be used in anthropology in relation to the rituals associated with vital changes. Within the rite are distinguished three phases: separation, transition and incorporation. “The separation represents detachment from the ritual objects of their previous social status. In case of members of a society, it implies the collectively movement from all that is socially and culturally involved in an agricultural season, or from a period of peace as against one of war. In the transition, objects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few of the attributes of the previous cultural state”. The third phase includes “phenomena and actions which represent the return of subjects to their new, relatively stable and well-defined position in the total society (...)”. For those taking part in seasonal rituals, there is no change of status, but they have been ritually prepared for a whole series of changes in the nature of cultural and ecological activities to be undertaken and of the relationships they will have with others (Turner 1982, p. 24).

In the context that concerns us, the anthropological contribution of these changes serves as a framework for understanding the symbolic transformation that takes place in the language class. The process that the participants carry out has many elements in common with the one described above. In a simplified parallelism, the transformation of the story is part of the separation of the symbols of the culture of the target language to move to a stage of transitional creation in where the group debates and builds deciding the permanent elements and those that will be included by consensus. It is passed from one culture to another, from one symbol to another, from one story to another, from one group state to another. Finally, the students move on to the incorporation phase. The new story defines the group thanks to a collective creation which includes elements of a foreigner culture and their own. At the same it connects them, first

in the classroom and second in a virtual space. The group grows and evolves thanks to the story and the new story is part of the group's story and its evolution.

Within this process the symbols of social and cultural dynamic systems are very important, in which the meaning separates and unites through time and in which the form is altered. As Turner Said: "I cannot regard them merely as 'terms' in extemporal logical cognitive systems" (Turner 1982, p. 22). In consequence, the symbols of a society in a given story can move to another altering its meaning and disconnecting from its cultural interpretation and even universal. By transforming the tale "symbols, both as significant sensory vehicles and as a sets of meanings (signifies) are within a multiple variability, the variability of conscious, emotional and volitional creatures who employ them not only to give order to the universe they inhabit but creatively to make use also of disorder" (Turner 1982, p. 23). And this is so because apprentices do not transform with the will to create a new story meaningful for their society, but symbolic for their group.

This process of transformation reaches its peak in the exchange of stories created with students of their culture of origin. In that contact, traditions are mixed creating a creative synergy capable of transferring time and space. That is, if the implementation of the project were restricted to the classroom work of a group in a given country, a culturally meaningful transformation could be carried out for the students. However only when it is shared on line both groups become aware of the needs that have led to the transformation of the story and the changes become a pretext to dialogue fostering linguistic and cultural learning.

An E-learning Project: Indohispanic Legends

Although this proposal can be carried out with native students, we focus here on its

development in an intermediate level language class, in particular Spanish as a foreign language, being susceptible of being modified and adapted to other contexts.

The legends chosen in this practical case have to do with appearances, religious beliefs and places. The selection took place taking into account its great diffusion, the fascination for the wonderful of both cultures and the taste of the students to know specific places in another country by way of cultural trip.

The activity consists of three parts: a) reading and understanding of a legend from another culture in the foreign language b) re-elaboration of the legend including elements of the student's culture c) exchanging the legends on line. This requires the collaboration of two teachers from two different countries to guide students on this trip. In this specific case, the chosen groups are Indian and Spanish, and the selected materials the Spanish legends of the Holy Company, The Lanzada beach, San Andrés de Teixido and The stone of Shake; and the Indian of Vetoba, Shani, Ganesh.

The teacher will divide the students into groups and distribute one or two pictures associated with a series of words below. For example, San Andres de Teixido: dead, alive, respect, animal, solitude, apostle Santiago, envy, visit, God, pilgrim, cliffs; La Lanzada beach: pregnant, nine waves, midnight, moon, hermitage, dawn, virgin, August, ritual, fertility; Santa Compañía: spirits, dead, night, circle, group, hiding, white, darkness, lights, fear; The shaking stone: move, heal, pilgrimage, virgin, faith, under, guess the future, magic, ship, stone.

From the words, the students will try to guess the story of the legend in a group and stage it for the rest. No matter what the precision or the correctness with respect to the original is; the aim is to stimulate the imagination and to work in a team, to learn new words and to create an atmosphere in which the drama helps to

connect with the rest. Then the teacher will tell the legend using his voice, body movement and objects if necessary. The involvement of the teacher in the process is fundamental so that their presence is perceived as part of it, since it belongs in this case to the culture of the legend.

After completing this first part, the students will go to the stage of the transformation of the original text. For this the teacher will provide a phrase to each group with the end of the legend, and from which the students will create a new one picking elements of the original. For example, for the legend of San Andres de Teixido the end will be: “that's why in India cows are sacred”; for La Lanzada Beach: “and that's why Indians have long hair”; for the shaking stone: “and that's why Indians like to dance in Bollywood; and for La Santa Compañía: “and that is why Indians like spicy food”.

From there, the group enters the creative process connecting their reality with a more distant one, appropriating alien symbols to explain their own realities. If it is done for the first time, it is advisable to choose an easy topic and provide an easy end. The teacher will upload the video in a blog as we can observe in www.espanolenpune.com or www.cuentacuentosele.blogspot.com inviting the international partners to give a feedback on line and to propose other stories to be transformed.

Conclusions

The human being needs to recite tales and the story-telling is the most basic formula to interconnect students from different countries. The legends allow establishing a bridge between the two cultures stimulated by the creative work of the team. This turns the experience into a process of symbolic transformation, and thanks to the new technologies, enables real and egalitarian

exchange with a strong emotional involvement of the participants.

To conclude and in light of the experiences shared in this communication, shared storytelling online opens the door to another way of learning. From here I would like to invite all teachers to carry out similar experiences and to share them on the net, creating parallel channels of analysis and evaluation for teachers.

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