

TOOLS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Language Development through Story-telling

Geeta Ramanujam



Every person is a storyteller even when she begins to narrate an experience, an anecdote or a news item. The storyteller is also the audience when she listens to the television, radio or a family member. All communication in the world evolves and revolves around stories. There are stories everywhere from bulletin boards, to bus-stands, railway stations, theater houses, homes, schools, colleges, pavements, roads, advertisements, families, schools, places of work and even in space. When we share our experiences and memories with family members and friends, they are full of stories.

So, naturally the need to communicate to each other becomes evident.

To communicate, language plays a vital role. The language of storytelling involves the skills of listening, recalling, and re-telling, which lay the foundation of the oral tradition. The four basic pillars of language development - Listening and Speaking, Reading and Writing - are contained in the treasure box of stories.

Stories instill a sense of wonder evoking imagination in the child from a very young age. A great treasure trove of folk tales in each culture is buried in our own backyards. It is our duty as a community to unfold this treasure and plough it back to the children so they can listen and feel the characters of the story and listen to the sounds of the teller.

Evolution of Sounds and Language Development

What are sounds? Atomic science and Einstein's theory have projected the conclusion that, at the level of the atom, all matter is the same. Objects appear different to the eye because energy produces vibration of different frequencies at various points.

Vibration creates sound. The earliest vibrations were felt by the saints - Rishis who became aware of it and called it *Sruti* or that which is heard. The oral chanting and tradition of the Vedas have been passed from one

generation to another without any written documents for the same. They have neither authorship nor copyright and yet the tradition continues even today through the ancient method of learning by the ear (called *Stotra*) in the Guru-Shishya tradition.

Why were they not written down? Some say that some sounds do not lend themselves to be accurately reproduced phonetically. They fall between two syllables and there are many such sounds in the Vedas. Our emotional response, and even the cosmic force which regulates the orderliness of nature, change with the differences in intonation.

How the modulation of voice could have adverse effects is told as a short story in the *Taittareeya Samhita* of the Vedas. The celestial craftsmen called *Tvashta* learnt a *Mantra Japa* by which he could create a son capable of destroying Indra. While chanting the *Mantra*, he erred in the intonation and accent of the sounds of words. This resulted in the creation of a son exactly contrary to his intention. Instead of asking for a son who would destroy Indra, he asked for a son who would be destroyed by Indra. The story goes on to say that eventually it turned out to be so.

Language is words spoken well and communicated with the right effect. Words which determine the intention of a feeling, emotion or an object can be effectively communicated only when it is transmitted in the right tone, emotion and accent.

Just as a person well versed in music can immediately identify a wrong note, a person well versed in language can identify a mistake in the spoken tongue.

At the Tokyo children's library in Japan, the chief librarian uses storytelling to help children speak Japanese slowly, with pauses contrary to how it is being spoken today.

If you listen to our radio and television channels, all regional languages seem to sound alike with an

accented English mix. We are evolving a totally new gibberish which is neither the English spoken as it ought to be nor the modern slang, but a new language which makes no sense.

There are more than 1,652 mother tongues recorded with the names of speech varieties that the speakers said they spoke. Linguists have classified these speech varieties or dialects under 105 languages in India alone.

Language for Teaching



Teachers need to be effective communicators and language forms the basis of all communication. Teachers need to balance the emotional and the intellectual quotient in children and this can only be possible when the teacher communicates well in the classroom.

Although we divide the school day into subject periods, the skills of language are used throughout the day. The receiving skills are listening and reading, while the sharing skills are speaking and writing. Speech has no purpose unless associated with listening. Listening needs to have pause and in the word "listen" is the word "silent." There are

nearly 40 different types of listening and one needs to understand what it is to observe and listen with body, mind and soul.

To be in communion means to share a mutual understanding or feeling, to exchange ideas for which storytelling lays the foundation. The words in a story like river, monkey or chocolates bring home different images to each of us.

Teaching is not just telling. Storytelling involves communication like showing, showing how, showing

why, evoking a sense of wonder and decorating words with the highs and lows that can trigger the imagination and create a thought process in the child.

Once this is established at the primary level, the child can lead an entire lifetime of talking and reading with ease and will express herself clearly, confidently and comfortably.

The "tales of the tongue" can have a deep impact on the child's ability to respond to circumstances and subjects around her.

How Do We Begin ?

To be a storyteller, you must first be a good "story listener." Listen to people telling stories. Note their language, intonation and stress on vowels, sentence formation, pause and flow. Observe the images, speech and mannerisms of the people around you.

The best way to become a successful storyteller is to keep telling stories. As you gain confidence and interest, you will begin to collect more tales, tape some and recall them at ease.

Take time to listen to your own stories. Become the character you are within. Try to exaggerate it. Create a character which is not you. Try to identify yourself with a character in a story. All this is possible when you are not viewing storytelling as mathematics, science, geography or history. It is not a subject to be learnt and learnt by heart. It is not going to reveal its secrets so easily to you. "Pause, Wait and Watch." This process will automatically affect a shift in your thinking skills. Be attentive to your friends and to the children and assure them that you are listening with your whole heart to them, by nodding your head or responding with hmm, I see, etc. When you have learnt to be a good story listener you can perhaps begin to think of laying the foundation of being a good storyteller.

What is the Purpose of Storytelling in a Classroom?

Storytelling enlivens a classroom and makes concepts much easier to understand. What normally would take five classes to understand can be understood in just one or two classes when explained or told through a

story. Most importantly, as children listen to you they pick up words, language, accent and inadvertently your pronunciation and tone.

When children listen whole-heartedly to a story about the measurement of the pyramids or experience an anecdote in history through a story, their whole being is alert.

Every word and sound you speak makes an impact on the child. Storytelling helps to lay the foundation of all learning.

What are the Tools Required to tell Stories?

The best tool is our own selves. Our own internal faith and strength creates the right atmosphere for telling stories. We need to believe in stories ourselves in order to create that faith in children.

Once upon a time two men argued about a chameleon. While one said it was blue the other argued that it was brown. So they went to a friend who had lived in that part of the jungle for many years.

He said that both of them were wrong and added that "the chameleon is black and I have it in my box." When he opened the box the chameleon appeared white. So, neither of them was right and yet all of them were right. So too in storytelling, some stories may be true and some false and yet they are all stories.

'The universe is made of stories not atoms', said a great philosopher.

So, once we believe in it, the story is transmitted automatically with the feelings we add to it, just as we add the ingredients for cooking and it becomes a lovely dish.

Our basic storytelling tools are :

- Body Language
- Expressions
- Voice
- Mannerisms
- Word Play
- Fluency in Language
- Vocabulary
- General Knowledge
- Presence of mind

It is very important for us then to read a story several times before we master its telling.

"Once upon a time there was a crow" is more easily read than told. For when you begin to tell a story, it should be told simply and clearly with the right intonation and sounds

In order to master this, one needs to :

- Choose the story to suit the audience. The best stories are those you are familiar with and have tried with your family and colleagues first before you venture to use them in the classroom.
- Learn to narrate it effectively.
- Practice it several times.
- See that the beginning and the ending is good.
- Ensure that it has clearly drawn out characters.
- Time your story.
- Read the story.
- Reread it aloud several times.
- Tell the story.
- Retell the story aloud.
- Prepare the expression, action, sounds.
- Personalize the story.
- Give it a last polish.

You are now ready to tell your story.....

'The Universe is made up of stories , not atoms.....'

Geeta Ramanujam is a storyteller, academician and consultant for several educational programs in India and around the world. She is a recipient of the Ashoka fellowship. She has trained over 49,000 teachers so far and has been a successful entrepreneur in Integrating Storytelling with Education as also to give a new dimension of Storytelling as an art form. She has been instrumental in developing an Academy for Storytelling - the first of its kind in India - which offers certificate courses in Storytelling. Storytelling is a spiritual and religious journey for Geeta and what she enjoys the most when leaving a workshop is that it has touched the feelings of the participants one way or the other. She can be contacted at geetastory@gmail.com