

Chapter 1

Introduction

Storytelling began many years ago as oral tradition before people could write and before printing (books) and the internet were available. Stories communicated in interesting ways can enhance people's understanding and disseminate valuable shared meaning. Stories also entertain, influence, teach and inform. Anyone can benefit from sharing stories and everyone can become a good storyteller if they know and practice the strategies involved in such telling. Conversational stories are contained in talks and they are ever present in every day exchanges. Thus, this study hopes to investigate the use of conversational storytelling techniques to develop English Language skills.

Developing English Language skills

The teaching of English Language centers around four main skills: Listening skills, Speaking skills, Reading skills and Writing skills. Language teaching and language learning, always concerns the teaching and learning of these four basic language skills. Educators of the English Language would usually centre their teaching on these main skills. In developing the English Language skills priority cannot be given to any one skill since the teaching of one skill is related to other language skills. The teaching of speaking skills would involve a listener – listening skills and in teaching reading, if journal writing is involved then the writing skills would be incorporated. However, in language teaching and learning the four basic skills are inseparable; at times all these skills can be incorporated in one language activity simultaneously.

Speaking means talking, communicating, conversation making and discourse. It is a linguistic activity, which, like language itself, consists of several elements. Sounds (pronunciation), words and their parts (morphology and lexis or semantics), structure (grammar and syntax), conversation and utterances (discourse), usage and its rules (discourse, pragmatics or semantics), fluency (speech, confidence, coherence, speed) and topicality (themes and ideas), are all part of the study of speaking (Jassem and Jassem, 1997).

Teaching speaking especially to second language learners is often considered to be one of the most difficult aspects of language learning for teachers to help the students with. In producing speech, each speaker must speak on his own, individually, and ideally he would need someone to listen to him speaking and to respond to him (Brown and Yule, 1983). Language produced during English lessons is usually evaluated by the teacher for its correctness, either with respect to pronunciation or to grammar or both. Language learning experience based on notions of 'correct responses' may enable students to improve their pronunciation and improve their ability to produce short structured responses in familiar dialogue slots. On the other hand, this type of practice does not prepare a student to produce an extended response, to take a 'long turn', since he has no practice in producing extended responses.

Spoken Language

In teaching a second language or in acquiring a second or third language, there is no secure, tried-and-tested, teaching tradition to lean upon (Brown and Yule, 1995). Model structures of spoken dialogues with a few 'spoken expressions' thrown in, is insufficient to enable learners to become competent second language speakers. When it comes to

teaching the spoken language there is no influential description of spoken English which has the grammar rules as in written English. Furthermore, spoken English appears very varied and is very different from one area to another even in its country of origin.

In a study by Brown and Yule (1995) it was found that most native speakers of English produce spoken language which is syntactically very much simpler than written language. Their findings show that conversations can be produced by using simple noun phrases, very few subordinate declarative structures and an interrogative structure to ask questions with. These features seem to characterize typical spoken language. The sentences produced during conversation are also incomplete sentences and the use of interactive expressions like 'well', 'oh', 'uh huh' are used in everyday conversations, especially by the listeners. Thus, limited syntax is required for adequate performance in producing the spoken language since speakers repeat not only words (and related forms) which they themselves have introduced but forms which have been introduced by previous speakers.

The production of spoken language is relatively undemanding, in terms of syntax and vocabulary. Thus students should be encouraged to talk from a very early stage since the level demanded of them is much less stringent than that of written language. For example in teaching modals where students are taught to express themselves politely, concern should be more on producing a polite manner of talking, a polite voice quality, a polite smile, than to produce complex modalised expressions which may sound 'odd' for young learners. The problems in teaching spoken language primarily concerns on-line production and the question of how to find meaningful opportunities for individual students to practice using a rather minimal knowledge of the foreign language in a flexible and inventive manner, than with linguistic complexity.

Conversational Storytelling

Conversational stories are contained in talks and they are usually composed by a number of clauses, whereby only some will directly be linked to the story world. These types of storytelling may be interrupted by talk which has nothing to do with the telling and may be resumed after the interruption is completed. The resumption is signalled by apologies and reinitiating markers or discourse markers ('So', 'well', 'where were we?'), none of which are of the story world (Polanyi, 1989). According to Labov based on his research (cited by Tannen, 1982), in telling a story the speaker must first answer the "withering question" - "So what?". In other words in conversational storytelling, the speaker's main job is to make clear to the audience or listener what the point of the story is. Speakers normally communicate the point of the story especially their attitude towards what is being said - by means of "evaluation" - external or internal evaluation.

When the teller steps outside the story to poke the reader verbally and say, "Hey, here's the point", for example with comments such as "When he said that, I felt awful", it is external evaluation. Internal evaluation is not so obvious. It resides in all levels of verbalization such as expressive phonology, speeding up or slowing down, repetition, lexical choice and so on. Direct quotations are a common form of internal evaluation. By quoting or by putting words in the mouth of the characters, the teller communicates what happened from inside the story. Thus, by deciding what words to put in the character's mouth, the teller actually builds up the story towards the desired point, to answer the "withering question" - "So what?" (Tannen, 1982).

Storytellers and Listeners

In conversational storytelling there will be a teller and one or many listeners. The main purpose of introducing a story is to secure the listeners' interest, to gain control of the floor and ensure understanding. While the teller shapes remembered materials into a verbal performance in accordance to the context, he should also anticipate interruptions in the form of questions and comments from listeners. By doing so, the recipients may seek to redirect the story line, to reformulate its (story) point or even become co-tellers of the story. This can only take place if the listeners can understand and evaluate the story they hear rapidly enough to respond appropriately to it, with matching stories of their own (Norrick, 2001).

Conversational storytellers employ strategies in order to forward the 'point' of their stories to the context of the situation, especially if the story is one told in response to a story by another person. Some people are natural yard spinners, while some who are not successful in judging whether a story is "worth" telling, might risk losing their face for taking up the time and misjudging the impact of their story towards the listener (Polanyi, 1989). Storytelling will enhance rapport between participants if the evaluations coincide and response stories demonstrate parallel experiences from listeners. Personal stories also serve to entertain listeners especially if they are funny. Conversationalists use stories for argumentation or to illustrate a point whereas third-person stories are told to inform one another of events and to express their feelings about them (stories).

Statement of the problem

In national schools, lately there is a lot of emphasis in spoken English Language. There have been major changes in the national examinations especially in the language oral examinations held for Form Five school leavers. The oral English Language examination which was conducted by outside examiners has been internalized so that students would be examined by their own language teachers so as to provide a more conducive environment for the students. Moreover, other students from Form One to Form Four are also tested two to four times in a year. Why is there a sudden emphasis in spoken language?

In verbal production of the English Language in national schools in Malaysia, students lack awareness of spoken language features. Students need to understand and use the correct language in context. Other than that students are also shy to speak in the target language in case they make a fool of themselves. Lack of confidence and embarrassment if they speak in broken language in public can contribute to a language barrier which can cause communication breakdown between teachers and students or between students and students. On the other hand if the students are given language features that could be used in context, they would be more confident and motivated to converse in the target language.

This study was undertaken to investigate the use of conversational storytelling techniques to develop the students English Language skills, mainly speaking and listening skills. Speaking in a second language is not easy. Knowing what to say, which words to say at a particular time needs practice. The use of interactional skills involves making decisions

about communication, such as: what to say, how to say it and whether to develop it, in accordance with one's intentions while maintaining the desired relations with others.

Purpose of the study

One of the aims of the National Philosophy of Education and the Education Act of 1996 is: the use of English to interact with people (Curriculum Specification, 2000). The ability to speak in the English Language is crucial in order to access and gain knowledge. Furthermore, this language plays an important role as the medium of communication globally. Thus, the main purpose of this study is to investigate the use of conversational storytelling techniques to develop English Language skills, especially speaking and listening skills.

It is hoped that the storytelling techniques exposed to the students will help them to communicate using the target language by telling or retelling stories about their personal experiences or stories that they have seen (movies or programmes in television) or stories read or heard from others. Thus the objective of this study is to investigate whether conversational storytelling techniques can develop the students' speaking and listening skills.

Research questions

This study believes that if students are exposed to conversational storytelling techniques, they (the techniques) will help to lower the students' 'filter' and 'anxiety level', thus enabling them to communicate better in any social interaction.

Therefore the research questions investigated are as follows:

- 1 What narrative patterns are preferred by students during conversational storytelling?
- 2 How do listeners respond in conversational storytelling?
- 3 What conversational storytelling techniques are useful in helping to develop students spoken or listening skills?

Definition

In researches, conversational narrative (Norrick, 2000), oral storytelling (Polanyi, 1982) and oral narrative (Dickson, 2003 and Ukrainetz, 1998) are used to refer to conversational storytelling. Even though the terms used by researchers differ, technically they refer to the same field. The act of storytelling always suggests or implies an interaction with audience/listeners. Telling a story suggests that someone is listening to that story. In conversational storytelling, Ervin-Tripp and Kuntay (1997) posit that a story is part of a discourse and the storyteller a participant in an interaction. As such some of the structural organization of the story is directed to its function in a particular conversation. Narrative patterns show the organisation of the narrative structure. In the study of narrative patterns, emphasis is usually on the typical narrative form pioneered by Labov.

According to Norrick (1998) in natural conversation, no single participant can control the course of the narrative but a listener is important as co-author and the role of co-narration in determining the structure and point of a narrative. Stories that arose in the course of natural every day talk, is referred to as stories in conversational (Norrick, 2001). Norrick used listener, auditor, recipient and audience more or less interchangeably in the everyday senses, in his research.

In a storytelling, listeners act verbally and attend to the ongoing interactional which concerns participant relationships. Research on listener verbal behaviour has dealt with how listeners retain their status as listeners without taking over the role of “main/current speaker”. According to Cassell, in conversational storytelling, stories are considered to be “specific, affirmative, past time narratives which tell about a series of events which did take place at specific unique moments in a unique past time world” and are told to others to make a point or transmit a message (2000-2004, cited from the internet).

Significance of the study

This research was carried out to investigate how conversational storytelling techniques can help students improve their proficiency in the target language. Most students whether they are from vernacular or Malay medium schools can speak in their mother tongues but using another language which some students consider a foreign language to convey their thoughts might be a problem. Thus if they are exposed to conversational storytelling method it would help to promote confidence and positive attitude and enable the students to talk in the target language effectively.

Limitations of the Study

There are ample stories around in the form of folktales, fairytales, Aesop’s fables, legends, mythology, anecdotes, the parables in the Bible, the Pancatantra tales of India and the tales of Nasaruddin. Exposure to the stories alone is not enough. Learners should be able to ‘acquire’ the ability to produce stories by telling their personal experiences or retelling other people’s stories. This study was carried out during English Language

lessons during school hours. Thus the 'lessons' would only be carried out when all the students were present in school. A classroom was used to carry out the experiment but data was collected in an enclosed room for recording purposes. Only audio-recording was done in order to investigate the research questions. Only 42 students who are of average English proficiency were used for this study. Thus the findings from this study cannot be generalized as representing all the average ability students in the school.