Deep Impact Storytelling

By Brad Deacon and Tim Murphey (Japan)

"Even today I can still remember your stories! Maybe you will not teach me again. But a teacher's saying can influence a person a long time, maybe one life." (Aki, a student, in her action log)

Introduction

There are many reasons why we want to tell stories in our classes. Stories provide students with opportunities to listen to language in context rather than in bits and pieces. Stories also introduce new vocabulary and language forms within rich networks of associations. Equally important, stories can have a deep impact on a person's construction of knowledge and self.

Stories, a form of narrative, help us to make sense of our world. Even in academic research, they have lately been given a higher status (see Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000 for an overview). As Aki's words (above) remind us, stories also have the power to reach deep within us into areas that regular teaching may not visit, thereby validating the language classroom for reasons that go beyond l language learning. Our students tell us and show us that they have changed beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors after hearing our stories. This deep impact makes language learning an enriching experience that students find intrinsically valuable.

In this article we briefly discuss why giving a course depth through storytelling is important. Then we describe some ways to help teachers deepen the impact of storytelling through language and thinking activities that include shadowing, summarizing, student retelling, action logging, and newslettering. Each of these activities could be applied to other classroom material as well. We offer them here as a system of activities because we feel that teachers seldom get to see how a group of activities can work together and be sequenced. Finally we want to share one "split" story and student reactions to it as a way of exemplifying our ideas. Part one of the story is below. Read it and think about it.

Part 1: Sir Lancelot and The Essential

Question

Note: We have read and heard different versions of the Sir Lancelot story, which we have adapted to our classes. One source is Revell and Norman 1997. You can adapt stories you hear for your particular classes.

This is a handout for homework. After hearing Part 1 of the story in class and interacting with others about it, students are given a copy. Their assignment is to retell this part of the story to a few people and then ask as many people as possible the question, "What do women want most?" They then write about what they learned in their action logs.

Many years ago, in England, there was a castle-town called Camelot. One day Sir Lancelot went out riding on his horse from Camelot. Sir Lancelot was not very smart and so he forgot to take his sword. Suddenly on a narrow path, the Black Knight appeared. The Black Knight was Sir Lancelot's enemy.

He said, "You have no sword. I could kill you easily now. But I am a playful fellow. So I will give you a question. If you can answer this question, I will not kill you. But you must promise to return here soon." Sir Lancelot said, "OK, I promise." The Black Knight then said, "The question is, 'What do women want most?'"

Sir Lancelot didn't know the answer. But he had lots of friends back at Camelot and they were always talking about women. He thought surely they would know. So he turned and started riding back to the castle.

Suddenly, on the path an ugly old woman jumped out and stopped him. She said, "I heard your conversation with the Black Knight. I know the answer to the question. Find me a husband and I will tell you the answer." Sir Lancelot felt she was right but said, "Excuse me" and he rode around her and went on to the castle.

At the castle he asked all the fellow knights "What do women want most?" They all had different answers, some said chocolate, some said money, some said diamonds, some said "me." Sir Lancelot was not very smart, but he did have good intuition. His intuition told him these answers were not right. His intuition also told him that the old woman he met on the path really did have the right answer.

Lancelot said to the knights, "The person who I think really knows the answer is an ugly old woman. But she won't tell me the answer unless I find her a husband. Would any of you marry her?" Immediately all of their heads dropped as if a teacher had asked a difficult question. But one of the knights, Sir Gawain, was a very nice fellow, and he stood up and said, "If it will save your life, I will marry any woman." So the two of them rode out to the forest. They found the old woman and quickly told her that Sir Gawain would marry her. Then Sir Lancelot said, "Please tell me, What do women want most?"

The ugly old woman said, "Women want _____."

Going deeper with stories

Stevick (1996, 1998) speaks of a "depth factor" in language learning in which certain kinds of teaching can reach into the emotional and affective realms of students. Students often write in their action log (see next page) about being moved by a story and shifting their beliefs after storytelling. For instance, after hearing a story in which someone makes a mistake, they may come to believe that mistakes are opportunities and evidence of learning instead of catastrophes: "Your story was so funny that I couldn't't help laughing. It showed me a new way of thinking. I was afraid and ashamed of making mistakes and of being laughed at, but now I learned how to take advantage of mistakes" (Yuka). Other stories may encourage students to take more risks in learning: "I learned believing in myself is important in today's story" (Hitoshi). Stories can lead students to be more aware of the limitations of their beliefs and can offer alternative ways of

being and thinking. Interestingly, these shifts are quite noticeable to us in later lessons as students become more active and enthusiastically engaged in class.

To experience this kind of deep learning, it is crucial that learners first understand the story, then have opportunities to share their reactions and perceptions with others. It is for these reasons that we do shadowing, summarizing, student retelling, action logging, and newslettering.

Shadowing

Shadowing is simply repeating language after someone either silently or out loud (Murphey 1995a; Murphey in press-a). When students do this silently, as they listen to a story, they are hearing the story twice: once from the speaker and once in their internal voice. This makes it easier to reproduce the story later. Beginners often shadow completely, while intermediate and advanced learners tend to shadow selectively. A quick demonstration with students helps to get them used to shadowing (see Murphey 2000 for video examples).

After students learn to shadow, we still find it helpful to remind them, "As you listen, remember to shadow my story because it will help you to relax and enjoy it more." Students regularly inform us of the value of shadowing: "Repeating was the most important learning for me. It helped me to remember" (Yuki). Teachers can encourage students to do it more by shadowing their own speech in a whisper at the beginning of storytelling and by chunking, or breaking up, their phrases in short bits and pausing to give time for students to silently shadow in their minds.

Summarizing

Before telling a story, we inform students that at the end they will retell the story to their partners by summarizing it in their own words. This gets them to pay more attention and to shadow more. Breaking the story into two or more parts as a "split story" (Deacon 2000) allows students to process smaller chunks more completely and involves them in imagining what happens next.

Summarizing helps students to show each other what they understood and where they had difficulties. Working in pairs or small groups increases the opportunity for each partner to fill in the blanks where the other may be struggling. A low-level pair may also simply overhear others retelling the story and borrow bits from them. As Aki says, "To teach my partner is good for my improvement in English. When I teach my partner, I can know my comprehension and I am taught by him or her."

In addition to providing opportunities to check comprehension, summarizing also allows for expanding one's views: "I couldn't't understand the story meaning at first but after talking with my partner now I can understand it and get different meanings" (Toshi).

Retelling stories outside of class

For homework we often ask students to retell the stories in the target language to others outside of class, translating it into their L1 only when needed. Then they tell us how useful it is. An Australian student retelling stories in Japanese in one of our classes reported as follows:

Telling a story is a good way to start a conversation and facilitate discussion. One of the difficulties of trying to converse in your target language is that often you can't express yourself

as easily as you can in your native language because you lack the words or grammar structures that represent your feelings and opinions. Therefore, potential topics of conversation are limited. However, with "storying," because you already know what you are going to say during the story and you already know the vocabulary and grammar beforehand, you are much better equipped to continue discussing the topics along the same line, and thus you can have a higher level of conversational interaction with your partners. To create interest in the listener in what you are saying, so that they respond interactively, you can stop at a crucial point and ask them what they think happens next. If you always have a story up your sleeve, you will never be lost for conversation topics and waste valuable interaction time in your target language! (Catherine)

Action logging

Teachers are limited in how much they can monitor a class of interacting students. To learn more about what students are thinking and how useful the tasks are, we ask them to do "action logging" (Murphey 1993, 1995b; Murphey and Woo 1999). In action logging, students evaluate classroom and homework activities in a notebook (see Box 1below for an example). They turn in their action logs regularly so we can evaluate our teaching and adjust the activities to make them more productive. Many students enjoy sharing their endings to split stories, which teachers can sometimes incorporate into subsequent tellings. They also ask questions and show evidence of changed beliefs and attitudes, which help teachers know how the stories are working. The students' reflections, stimulated by writing down their reactions, take the learning to a deeper level for both students and teachers.

Part 2: Sir Lancelot and The Essential

Question

So there were Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain in front of the old woman, waiting for an answer to the question, "What do women want most?" The old woman said, "Women want . . . [pause] . . . choice." Both Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain were confused by this answer but they accepted it. The old lady and Sir Gawain then went back to Camelot to get married. Sir Lancelot went to meet the Black Knight. "What is the answer?" said the Black Knight.

"Ch...ch...ch...choice?" said Sir Lancelot stuttering in fear.

"Damn! You got it right. How did you know?"

"Oh, I'm just smart," replied Lancelot.

Then Sir Lancelot rode back to Camelot. The old lady and Sir Gawain had just gotten married and they went up to the wedding room at the top of the castle. The old lady jumped on the bed, and Sir Gawain went to the window to get some fresh air. Suddenly, there was a very sweet breeze that came through the room, and he turned and saw that the old lady had turned into a young beautiful woman. "What happened?" he wondered.

The young lady explained that a wicked witch had put a spell on her, and the only way to break the spell was to marry a knight. Gawain was very excited and started toward the bed, but the young lady said, "Wait, it is not completely over. I can be beautiful like this only half of every

day. Do you want me to be beautiful in the day or in the night? The rest of the time I will be that old lady."

Sir Gawain thought long and hard. And

finally he said, "_____."

Note: After they tell the story to several people, students then ask them what they think Sir Gawain said and what they would choose.

Newslettering

"Newslettering" involves choosing comments from students' action logs permission to cite had previously been given) and putting them on a handout or Internet group letter anonymously (see Box 2 below). The newsletter is then given to the entire class to read, think about, and comment on in subsequent logs. Newsletters help the students build rapport and community and enable them to learn from one another. The newsletters create a mental playing field where many students' comments scaffold learning for each other (Murphey in press-b). Newsletter comments about storytelling allow students to notice how others interpret the stories and encourage students to "try on" other ways of thinking.

Putting it all together

Let us now review how we sequence these activities into a lesson and deepen the impact of a story. Below are ten steps for teachers to follow:

Before class

1. Prepare a story to share with the class. Stop the story at a crucial point to build suspense and curiosity. Practice it a few times on family and friends before telling the story in class.

Class One

2. Bring any props and prepared visuals. Pre-teach difficult vocabulary.

3. Remind the students to shadow silently. Write "shadow" on the board.

4. Tell the story until the stopping point. Let yourself get into the story. The easiest way to get others to respond emotionally is to do so yourself.

5. After you stop the story at the crucial point, ask students to summarize the story and to imagine what happens next. Circulate and answer any questions.

6. Finish telling the story. Students' Homework

7. Ask students to write action log comments on the story for homework. If not too difficult, ask them to retell the story to others. Perhaps give a handout of the story.

Teacher's Homework

8. Collect and read action logs, commenting where appropriate.

9. Select comments from the action logs and make a newsletter.

10. Return action logs and newsletters to students. Invite students to share action logs with partners and to read the newsletter together in class or for homework. Ask students to comment on the newsletter in their action logs for homework.

Class Two
11. Begin a new story and "recycle" it.

Note that the flow of the above steps goes from listening and shadowing a story to summarizing it, writing about it, and retelling it for homework. The material is used further when students get to read one another's action log and the class newsletter. This flow of activities recycles the material meaningfully with each different partner and allows deeper learning to take place. The activities flow incrementally from simple comprehension to progressively more ownership of the story, including the language used to retell it. By the end of the storytelling unit, students are commenting metacognitively on it. With meaningful repetition (Murphey 1995c), we find that, increasingly, students look forward to our stories, and we grow ever more curious about their reactions to them.

Part 3: Sir Lancelot and The Essential

Question
Sir Gawain didn't't know what to say for the longest time. It was hard to choose between night or day. Finally, he said, "I don't know, you decide!" And suddenly ZZZAGABOOM! Lightning struck the castle, and the young lady said to Sir Gawain, "You did it! You gave to a woman what she wants most: choice. Now the whole curse is off of me, and I can be beautiful both night and day for as long as I live!"

Part 4: Sir Lancelot and The Essential

Question
Note: This is an optional ending for continuing the story with advanced classes. Now some people say that's the end of the story and the beautiful woman and Sir Gawain lived happily ever after. But others say that Sir Gawain thought things over and he realized that the woman had had no choice when she married him. So he too came to think that choice was important, for women and men. So he decided to get a divorce and give her the choice of meeting him if she wanted to.

After telling this ending and asking students to take it home, one student commented on the deep impact in his action log as follows: I told my mother and father. They understood and said it was important for us to choose our own life…. You can choose your own way to live, so you should decide what to do. I thought it was a great story. I want to find my way, my choice, and my own color. I want to do what only I can do.

Conclusion

Storytelling engages our narrative minds in the service of language learning in the classroom. Tools such as shadowing, summarizing, retelling, action logging, and newslettering increase student comprehension, negotiation of meaning, and feelings of community. These intensifying activities allow learners multiple opportunities to respond deeply to stories and experience shifts in their beliefs and attitudes. This then leads to more lively participation in and out of class.

Teachers' choices for stories are endless. For example, stories may be based on personal experience, traditional fairy tales, or others borrowed from books such as those in the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series and Robert Fulghum's books. They may even be culled from the Internet. We often borrow our colleagues' stories and have made up some for specific purposes. Whatever the source of the stories, we find it crucial to practice telling them and to tell them with heart. We also notice that the more we tell certain stories, the more we realize, we become, in small and significant ways, our choices.

Note: The authors can be contacted at deak@ic.nanzan-u.ac.jp for a complete, reproducible version of the Sir Lancelot story.

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Box 1: Action Log

Class #4, December 21 E T = 90% E U = 90%			
	Interesting	Useful	Difficult
1. idiom review	4	5	5
2. 3 mind maps	4	5	4
3. Shadowing and summary	4	5	5
4. song dictation	3	5	5
5. stretch and song	5	4	3
6. finish Lancelot	5	5	3

Note:

ET = English Target, the amount of English the student expects to use during class, which is written in the action log before the lesson.

EU = English Used, the amount of English the student actually used during class, which is written in the action log after the lesson.

1 = least, 5 = most

Box 2: Sample Newsletter

Workshop Newsletter: Sir Lancelot and The Essential Question
Here are some of your action log comments on the split story:

• My family said this was a good story. I think so, too. My sister was pleased hearing stories, so I am also pleased and it is fun to tell stories.

• Both my mother and father laughed at the story. And my father hardly laughs at what I say. I was so surprised.

• I really enjoyed today's story. I have no idea why the old lady said "choice." I really want to know the end.

• I told my boyfriend and my sister. I told my boyfriend on the phone in English! Before I began it, I hesitated to speak English to him and it was a bit difficult to make him understand. But this was very useful for me…. This story is very strange and the riddle is very difficult. They and I want to know the answer soon.

• The story was long. I wanted to know the end of the story. I prefer to be beautiful during the day and ugly at night. But I don't know how this relates to "choice," the old lady's word. What kind of choice is important for women? I've no idea. I want to know!

• I told my parents. They were interested in it. When I stopped the story and asked the first question, they both answered "love." Then I continued the story. They couldn't understand "choice" and neither could I. It's strange. For the next question, night or day, they both said "day," because at night it is dark and they sleep.

• By the way, I think you are good at telling stories. I like your gestures and imitation sounds. That makes a story more interesting. When I listened to your story, I felt like I were a child. I can't wait for the sequel of the story!

• From your teacher: Sean Connery (007) said, "Women want an unexpected gift at an unexpected time."

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