

The joys of storytelling... put to good use

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The greatest pleasure of my childhood was when my mother or father would tell me a bedtime story. I used to snuggle up eyes shut, totally enraptured by the images they evoked and which I still remember today.

Storytelling is how ideas were passed on from one generation to another before writing had been invented. Human beings have not really changed that much since 17,000 years ago when unknown artists painted stories of what they were witness to on the walls in the caves of Lascaux: we are all fascinated by stories.

Teaching English in primary school is an arduous task for many reasons. First and foremost, due to the limited number of hours allotted: one or two hours per week in the first two years and three hours in years 3-4-5, it is extremely difficult for students to acquire the grammatical-lexical-phonetic basis that is essential for elementary communication. However, an appropriate use of storytelling is a great help because by involving the children through their imagination, we have their undivided attention without having to 'fight' for it. Learning becomes a pleasure. Stories create emotions, and – to quote Daniel Goleman¹, "Emotions guide our attention... We are motivated by positive emotions and what we do feels more meaningful and the urge to act lasts longer."

Storytelling emulates the process by which children learn their 'mother tongue', although in a more concentrated and targeted fashion. Children benefit from imitating the intonation and pronunciation of the storyteller and effortlessly understand sophisticated vocabulary in context. From a psycho-neurological point of view, the language children acquire is directly stored in their lower brain, almost in the same fashion they acquire basic linguistic notions during infancy thanks to their emotional involvement.

But how can an overworked Italian teacher of English tell stories in the most effective way? And which stories are the most appropriate?

I have met many Italian teachers of English who were too shy, too insecure of their language skills to 'dare' tell stories to their class without the aid of a written text in front of them. They often ask me, "How do

you do it? How can you remember all those words?" I usually suggest they begin with a story they know very well, a story from their childhood, such as *Little Red Riding Hood* or *The Three Little Pigs*. They can adjust the stories to the levels they are teaching, perhaps adding details every time they re-tell the story.

And this brings us to the importance of re-telling stories. A story told only once is a story doomed to be forgotten. Going back to childhood memories, all of us had a favourite story that we never got tired of hearing, over and over and over. The same mechanism is still alive in children today. If they like the story, are attracted to its rhythms and intonation, they will want to hear it again and help you tell it. And that is your ultimate goal: the children re-telling your story.

Every concept you put across must be corroborated by an appropriate gesture, intonation, rhythm. If you watch David Heathfield telling the story *Juan and the Magic Tree* on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKJuVKGEMCo>), you'll see him shaking a tambourine to accompany a sort of chant the Magic Tree says when silly Juan wants to cut it:

*"Don't cut me, I'm a magic tree!
I'm a magic tree, Juan. Don't cut me!"*

The chant is irresistible. Try it!

A last bit of advice: all professional storytellers practise in front of the mirror to check their attitudes, gestures, etc. When I have a new story, I must confess, I do too.



¹ Goleman, Daniel, *Focus the Hidden Driver of Excellence*, New York, Harper Collins, 2013 and www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9yRmpcXKjY