



Jamie Keddie: Using story to teach English

Thank you for coming to my talk. I really enjoyed working with you.

You will probably agree that I didn't have anything original to say. Story is and story has always been an important part of our classrooms. It's there in the images, videos and texts that we select. It's in the anecdotes that we tell, and the experiences that we share.

Language and story are inseparable. Storytelling is thinking, speaking, listening, reading and writing.

Here are my 10 principles of story for language teachers.

1. Everyone is a storyteller

Human beings are creatures of narrative. Stories define us. We use stories to entertain, stories to strengthen bonds, stories to persuade, stories to sell, stories to understand the world, stories to communicate.

2. Everyone can collect their stories

Some people write down their dreams. I would encourage everyone to collect their stories. Whenever you recall a personal story, anecdotes or experience, don't lose it. Write it down in note form. Find a system – a note book or an app like Evernote. Create a story bank and choose your best stories for the classroom.

3. Language can become more meaningful when we turn up the narrative

It is common practise for teachers and course book authors to illustrate language points with examples. So, for example, to teach the present continuous passive, we might see:

The windows are being cleaned.

This could be pretty a useful example. But it's a bit dull, right? I would always prefer an example with a stronger narrative. Compare it with this one:

"Look, Howard's being eaten!"

Consider how interactive this sentence is. It is naturally intriguing. Your imagination is immediately switched on. You ask questions and you provide answers. You are forced to create story.

The example has a strong narrative. And the stronger the narrative, the more memorable the language.

Using story in the classroom means paying attention to the details – the little things that we can do to turn up the narrative; to allow students to experience the language in more meaningful and memorable ways.

Clip from Monty Python's The Meaning of Life here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1kftCx5-tA>

4. Everyone can develop their storytelling skills

There are as many ways to tell a story as there are human beings on the planet. Storytellers can appear confident and charismatic. Or they can be appear shy and humble.

And don't forget that some people are more suited for certain situations over others. Personally, I like telling stories to large groups of people. But most people will prefer a more intimate approach – sharing stories with friends over a beer or with students in class.

There is no 'one size fits all' approach. But once you find your unique storytelling voice, you can start to develop it.

5. Teacher-led storytelling is not necessary teacher centered

I demonstrated an story activity in which I started with the following situation:

On October 24th, 1901, a school teacher called Mrs Taylor got into a boat with two companions. They left the shore and rowed out to the middle of the river. Once there, they put a barrel over the side, and Mrs Taylor climbed in.

After screwing on the lid, her companions used a bicycle pump to compress the air inside the barrel. Then, they put a cork in the hole and pushed the barrel away from the side of the boat.

It was Mrs Taylor's 63rd birthday.

(Complete story text on page 5.)

From here, I invited you to ask me closed questions to work out what these people are doing and why they are doing it. If you were my students, I would have followed that up by distributing texts and inviting you to read the fascinating story of Annie Edson Taylor – the first person ever to go over Niagara falls in a barrel (*and survive!*).

This is what I refer to as *teacher-led storytelling*. The experience is interactive, students are (hopefully) engaged and, if we get it right, language learning takes place.

Images of teacher and learner centredness are vague and, therefore, quite unhelpful. It all depends on how you see things. So judge an activity or an approach on whether or not it is learn**ing** centred.



6. Use storytelling to develop your teacher talk

As we all know, it is important that teachers don't talk too much. But ultimately, teacher talk is essential, inevitable and expected. So as well as focussing on quantity, we have to focus on quality.

There are many techniques and micro skills that we can become aware of that will help to improve our teacher talk. These include the following:

- * Making good use of space (i.e. pause and silence)
- * Slowing down your speech
- * Making use of repetition
- * Grading your language
- * Using gesture to reinforce language

Teacher-led storytelling is a great way to develop your classroom communicative skills.

7. There is never just one story

During my session, I told you a story and asked a number of open comprehension questions which included the following:

- * Did you think about somebody that you know / used to know?
- * Did you judge me?
- * Did you bring yourself into the story?
- * Did you visualise?
- * Did you make any predictions?
- * Did you ask any questions?
- * Did you find a story of your own in my story?
- * Did you learn anything from my story?

Each person who hears a story, watches a film, reads a book, or listens to a podcast will answer each of these questions in a different way.

For any given story, individuals interact with it in very different ways. We make our own meaning. We deconstruct and reconstruct plots and storylines. We make predictions and ask questions. We personalize and adopt experiences as if they were our own. We visualize and create mental images. We look for meaning and interpret symbols. We judge protagonists and evaluate their decisions. We identify with characters and form bonds with them. We put ourselves into the story. We find our own stories within the story.

8. Your students are naturally curious about you

One thing that fascinates human beings is other human beings. And as the teacher, your students will have a natural curiosity about who you are. You may not have realized this before, but you may be the most valuable resource in the classroom.

Sharing stories with students does not mean trying to impress them. Often, the best stories for the classroom are the unremarkable ones – the simple everyday stories that are meaningful and worth sharing – the ones that allow use to remove our masks. After all, isn't this what many of us expect from our students.

9. Stories can be contagious

One of the best ways to find your own stories is to listen to other peoples'. And sometimes the most unremarkable stories can be the most contagious ones. I referred to my Macbook coffee disaster and the response that I got when I shared the story with my subscribers.

Click here to see the original post:

<https://mailchi.mp/jamiekeddie/about-my-new-story-course-a-mini-personal-tragedy>

Click here to see the follow up:

<https://mailchi.mp/jamiekeddie/about-last-weeks-post>

Share stories based around themes in an attempt to help students unlock stories of their own. Try any of the following:

- * Your scar or tattoo story
- * Your claim to fame story
- * The most valuable thing you ever lost or found
- * The naughtiest thing that you ever did as a child
- * Your disaster haircut story

10. Successful success: 10% performance, 90% preparation and reflection

For any given story, there are always many different ways in which it can be told. Become aware of how stories are structured. Pay attention to details: what is relevant and what is not? Look for ways to make your stories interactive (e.g. make use of narrative hooks). Let your stories evolve. And always ask yourself what you want your audience to take away from your story. The better you can answer that question, the more developed your story will be (but don't ever assume that your audience will take away your intended message – communication doesn't work like that!)

My Storytelling Membership

The ideas and stories that I shared in my session come from my **Storytelling Membership for Teachers**.

You can find out more here: <https://jamiekeddie.podia.com/storytelling-membership>

Although subscription is currently closed, I will be opening it up again soon to my Sunday Post subscribers.



Opening again soon

Annie Edson Taylor

Part one: The narrative hook

On October 24th, 1901, Mrs Taylor, a school teacher, got into a boat with two companions. They left the shore and rowed out to the middle of the river. Once there, they put a barrel over the side, and Annie climbed in.

After screwing on the lid, her companions used a bicycle pump to compress the air inside the barrel. Then, they put a cork in the hole and pushed the barrel away from the side of the boat.

It was Annie's 63rd birthday.

On the board, write the following:

1. *What is going on here?*
2. *Why?*
3. *What happens next?*

Go over these three questions one at a time. Encourage students to ask you closed questions to speculate about the story.



1. What is going on here?

Mrs Taylor is going over Niagara falls in a barrel.

Note that students may be able to work this out through a series of closed ('yes' and 'no') questions. No one had ever tried this before.

2. Why?

For much of her life, things had been comfortable for Annie Edson Taylor. Her father was the owner of a flour mill in a town in New York state. And although he died when Annie was just 12 years old, he left enough money to provide for the family.

Annie was educated and became a school teacher. While studying, she met a man called David Taylor and they quickly got married.

But things went badly from there. Her only child died in infancy. And tragically, her husband died in the Civil War soon after. Annie changed jobs many times. She moved from place to place. She opened a dance school in Bay City, Michigan. It could have succeeded but it didn't.

Over the years, Annie made many bad professional decisions. And as a result, her comfortable lifestyle gradually started to disappear. With little financial stability and with retirement approaching, the dreaded poorhouse looked like a possibility.

Desperate to avoid the poorhouse, Annie had a crazy idea: she would go over Niagara Falls in a barrel. No one had ever done this before. Success would surely bring fame and fortune. And this would mean financial security for life.



3. What happened next?

Annie had a special barrel made. It was constructed of oak and iron. Inside, there was a mattress to provide a protective cushion.

Annie hired a manager called Frank M Russell, a well-known promoter of local events. He communicated the event to the press. Annie claimed that she was in her forties.

On October 19th, 1901, the barrel was tested with a cat inside. The cat went over the falls. It survived.

Five days later, it was Annie's turn. A crowd gathered at the bottom of the falls to witness the event.

Inside the dark barrel, Annie started to pray. Strong currents pulled the barrel towards the roaring falls. And as it went, it banged and scraped against the rocks. Annie was thrown from side to side. The roar got louder and louder. And then, inside the barrel, Annie took the plunge.

Eventually, the barrel came out of the mist and into view. It was still in one piece. And despite the shock, the cuts, and the bruises, so was Annie. After being pulled out, her first words were:

“Nobody ought ever to do that again.”

Annie became the first person ever to go over the Niagara Falls and survive. Unfortunately, despite initial media attention, she didn't make much money from the stunt.

While Annie was recovering in a Canadian hotel, her manager – Frank M Russell – ran away with the barrel and tried to gain from Annie's success.

Annie Edson Taylor spent her final years posing for photographs with tourists at her souvenir stand in Niagara Falls. She died in poverty at the age of 83 years old.

Despite the lack of fortune, Annie inspired fourteen men and one other woman to go over Niagara Falls in similar stunts. Five of these resulted in deaths.

Here are some examples:

1911: Bobby Leach went over the Falls in a barrel. He spent 6 months in hospital, recovering from two broken knees and a broken jaw.

1930: George Stathakis went over the falls in a barrel along with his pet turtle. Although he survived the fall, his barrel got stuck and George died of suffocation. His turtle survived.

1951: William "Red" Hill, Jr. went over the falls in a rubber barrel. He was killed and you can see a report of the event here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAoCc82AG-E>

1985: Steve Trotter and his girlfriend Lori Martin went over the falls in a barrel. They survived and Lori became the second woman to perform a stunt like this since Annie Edson Taylor.

2003: Kirk Jones became the first person to go over the falls without any equipment and survive. He claimed that it was a suicide attempt rather than a stunt.

2017: Kirk Jones (see above) attempted to go over the falls again, this time in an inflatable ball. This time, he did not survive.

Teeth

Two old Scottish men in a rowing boat, in the middle of a loch.
 John and Rob.
 Old friends.
 They sit face to face.
 In silence.
 Fishing rods in hand.
 They haven't caught **anything yet**.
 Suddenly, John sneezes.
 He sneezes hard – so hard that **his false teeth fly out of his mouth**.
 They go over the side of the boat and ...
 Plop!
 They sink **to the bottom of the loch**.

Rob thinks that this is hilarious.
 He thinks that it is **the funniest thing he has ever seen** in his life.
 He can't control himself.
 He laughs hysterically.
 John is **not amused**.

An hour passes.
 Two old Scottish men in a rowing boat, in the middle of a loch.
 John and Rob.
 Old friends.
 They sit back to back.
 In silence.
 Fishing rods in hand.

Suddenly, Rob feels a pull. He's got one.
 He's caught a fish.
 He reels it in.
 He lands it.
 It's a big one.

But surely not!
 Can it be true?
 That inside the mouth of the fish are **some false teeth**. John's false teeth?

Rob taps John on the shoulder to show him what he's got.
 John takes the teeth out of the fish's mouth and puts them into his own mouth.
 Unfortunately, **they don't fit**.
 Apparently these aren't John's teeth.
 John throws them **over the side of the boat**.
 They sink **to the bottom of the loch**.

Poor Rob!
 (Why poor Rob?)

Note: The story is based on a short film which you may have seen before. If you watch it, you will find out why things ended badly for Rob.

<https://vimeo.com/5800357>

The story of the maverick fish

Once upon a time, a visitor visited an aquarium. She saw sharks, rays, clown fish, surgeon fish, a sunfish, an octopus, snails, hermit crabs and even penguins.

But the thing that got the visitor's attention was a shoal of little fish, swimming round and round in their tank. There must have been 1000 of them. And they were all swimming in the same direction.

For a few minutes, the visitor stood in front of the tank and contemplated the shoal. She marvelled at how incredible it was that these tiny individuals should come together and behave like a much larger creature with a mind of its own.

But just as the visitor's own mind was racing with Buddhist-rich thoughts, she noticed something interesting: a single, solitary fish, swimming in the opposite direction. Whereas the rest of the shoal was swimming clockwise, this little maverick was going anti-clockwise.

The visitor was both fascinated and confused. She wondered what could possibly motivate the fish to behave in such a peculiar way. And after a few minutes, she decided to look for an answer. She turned to the only aquarium employee in the area – a security guard.

The security guard seemed to know what the woman was going to ask even before she asked it. He smiled and nodded all the way through her question.

"It's fascinating isn't it?" said the security guard. "And do you know what makes it even more incredible? It's always the same fish – you can see that it has a tiny little dark mark just above its eye."

"But why does it swim in the opposite direction to the rest of the shoal?"

"Well, I have often wondered that myself. I have even asked the marine biologists who work here if they can explain. They are humble enough to admit that they don't know the answer. But do you know something else? I have had many conversations with many other visitors about that fish. In fact, if I had to guess, I would say that for every 1000 people who stand in front that tank, one person will stop to ask me about it."

Frankie 1, students 0

What is it about teenagers and practical jokes? When I was at school, we used to think that it was funny to leave notes on our teachers' desks. We would wait for the teacher to notice the piece of paper, pick it up, examine it, unfold it and read it. We would then wait in anticipation for a reaction.

The best note we ever left was this: *There is a piece of cheese on the classroom ceiling.*

Of course the reaction that we expected was for the teacher to look up at the ceiling and try to see the fictitious piece of cheese. At that moment, everyone would have to do their best not to laugh. Laughing would demonstrate that you were involved in the joke. And you wouldn't want that, would you?

Hilarious, no?

I don't remember how many teachers we played the joke on. But I'll never forget the day we left the note on the desk of Mr Francis, our cool history teacher. The lesson was almost over and we were starting to think that Frankie was not going to see the note. But then he did. He hesitated for a moment and then, very slowly, opened it.

There was a silence. His eyes stayed fixed on the paper. Then he walked over to the corner of the room and dropped the note in the bin. He returned to us and said, as calmly as possible, "Of course there is – I put it there."

We all looked up.