



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2008 Volume II: Storytelling: Fictional Narratives, Imaginary People, and the Reader's Real Life

Storytelling as a Strategy to Increase Oral Language Proficiency of Second Language Learners

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Preface

I am writing this unit because of the desperate need for more oral language instruction. Today more than ever students are coming into school with insufficient language knowledge. Our students' oral language skills are not developed enough to support the curriculum and objectives we teachers are pushing so hard. They require formal language instruction before they can be expected to become fluent readers, writers, and thinkers.

This unit is a focused, intensive unit on storytelling. Storytelling is the strategy I use to help obtain oral language proficiency among second language learners and students with deficient language skills. Storytelling gives the students the daily practice they need in order to advance their language skills. This unit will help the students understand how telling stories and story structure enable them to express themselves more clearly. The students will also learn through storytelling that their ability to listen to others will increase, expanding both their vocabulary, knowledge base and sentence structure.

Background

I teach second grade at a dual language school focusing on international communication. Demographically, the majority of my students are of Hispanic and Black descent. Many of the students at John C. Daniels speak Spanish as their dominant language. It is through our dual language program that students learn English or Spanish as a second language. As a result, in the early grades, many students' oral language skills in their second language, more so than in their primary language, are far below grade level. When I formally tested my student's oral language level based on the MONDO oral language assessment, I found that some of my students scored at a Kindergarten level. Students at this level have difficulty following simple instructions and understanding texts read to them. The majority of my students scored at a beginning First Grade level, meaning they have difficulty comprehending texts above a DRA level of 6 read in class. Only a few of my students scored on a second grade level, in part because many of my students learned to read in Spanish. I found these results alarming.

How can I, as the teacher, force a curriculum onto these students who have not yet acquired the necessary fundamental skills to understand and tackle it successfully? My answer to this question is that I can't and we as teachers need to make an adjustment in our teaching to account for this. Much of the curriculum we are expected to follow is intended for students who are on grade level. Based on the assessment data I have for my classroom- which is that the majority of students fall below grade level in oral language, leading also to their deficiencies in both reading and writing- the second grade curriculum proves to be too advanced. Many of the books have vocabulary and structure that are too complex for their academic level. I see this a lot in my classroom where my students are able to read at a higher level than they can speak and function. One example of this is a student in my class who is able to read at a DRA level 12, yet his oral language level is so low that he can't structurally put a sentence together well enough to ask me if he can use the bathroom. Another example I see in students who have low language skills is that they "look" like fluent readers when you listen to them read, but when it comes down to comprehension questions and being able to retell what they have just read, they can not do it. They do not have the language skills or background to support a clear understanding of the story. Much of this discrepancy can be addressed if we as teachers take the time to focus on formal language instruction. We need to remember that you need to be able to speak and listen in order to read, write, and think.

Storytelling is perfect strategy to use with the students at my school because it also fits in with our international communication magnet theme and will honor the students' cultural roots and individuality. The students at my school have rich heritages and it is through this unit that they will be able to express themselves and learn about the diverse backgrounds of their fellow classmates. Because this unit is focused on second language learners, my partner teacher who teaches the Spanish component will be working with the students who are learning Spanish as their second language, while I am working with the students who are learning English as their second language.

Oral Language

Oral Language is what gives children the foundation for literacy development. English language learners (ELL's) need and require daily language practice. It is through listening to other people that they gain much of their vocabulary and sentence structure. By listening to other people they also learn the context in which words are used. These children require not only listening to others but also a safe and comfortable environment in which they can practice the skills that they have learned. Children must learn to speak and carry on conversations before they can become active readers.

Formal language instruction is needed to assist our students to achieve the proficiency necessary to become successful learners in the classroom. In order to do this we need to bridge the gap between the informal language spoken at home and the formal instructional language they hear at school. To do this, students need language instruction so they can learn to speak appropriately and to listen. Oral language instruction will help students to be fluent and understand structured academic language.

Storytelling is a perfect avenue to explore when looking for ways to develop the oral language skills of second language learners in a classroom. This unit will encompass many of the techniques and strategies used to increase language skills as stated by Crevola and Vineis (MONDO 2005). For example this unit will:

- Develop personal relationships among all the children.
- Provide daily opportunities for language development.
- Create opportunities to interact regularly on a one to one basis.
- Challenge students to talk, think, and explore their knowledge of the world.
- Support students as they develop the language and learning strategies necessary to articulate and extend their interactions with the world.

Storytelling

Storytelling has long held an important role in history. People have passed down stories from generation to generation. It has served as a way to explain and understand the world. There are many different types of stories, which are told for many different purposes. Stories help explain different phenomena, cultural beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and much more. In this unit we will be focusing on folktales and traditional stories arising from the students' heritages.

Storytelling has many key values for both the individual telling the story and the people listening to the story being told. Among the values that storytelling instills in its participants as stated by Margaret Read Macdonald, in *The Storytellers Start-Up Book*, is that it "hones our literary and imaginative skills. We improve our ability to listen, speak, imagine, compose phrases and create stories" (Pg. 101). Macdonald continues on in her book to say that storytelling broadens our awareness of our own as well as other cultures, allows us to understand ourselves better, gives us a sense of belonging to a group and increases our vocabularies. Jack McGuire lists the benefits in his book, *Creative Storytelling*, by stating, "The specific educational and social benefits to storytelling from a child's point of view are numerous and well documented" (Pgs. 13-14). Some of the values McGuire touches upon are helping a child recognize patterns in language, stimulating a child's powers of creativity, providing a child with problem solving and decision making activities, strengthening a child's capacity to form objective, rational and practical applications, assisting a child to develop skills in dialogue and cooperative interpersonal behavior. It also familiarizes and introduces a child to symbols, and traditions of different cultural heritages shared among the people around them. There are tremendous gains to be made through storytelling as a strategy to increase the oral language of second language learners in particular.

Goals and Objectives

During this unit students will be given the opportunity to have daily language practice in the safe and relaxed environment of their classroom. This daily language practice will allow the students to interact on a personal level with both the teacher and fellow classmates. The students are able to gain language knowledge from their participation both as speakers and listeners. These personal interactions are meaningful because the students are able to interact with one another, carry on conversations, and hear significant rules being modeled involving sentence structure. Each lesson within the unit will focus on a particular aspect or skill set of storytelling, each week building upon the last in complexity. The skills learned in this unit will help to develop the students' oral language, which is necessary to become successful academic learners in the classroom. This will further prepare the students to effectively take on the second grade curriculum.

In this unit students will meet the following objectives:

- Students will develop vocabulary through listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- Students will listen to and respect the opinions of others about written, oral and visual texts.
- Students will listen to, read and respond to texts about and from many cultures and times.
- Students will recognize values and beliefs included in a text.
- Students will determine purpose, point of view and audience, and choose an appropriate written, oral or visual format.
- Students will use oral language with clarity and voice to communicate a message.
- Students will use strategies to generate and develop ideas for speaking, writing and visual activities.
- Students will read, listen to and tell stories from a variety of cultures, and identify the similarities and differences in the way language is used.

Strategies

Week 1, Day 1

This unit on storytelling begins with the teacher. In order to become successful teaching a unit on storytelling I had to be comfortable telling stories and had to become a storyteller myself. After all you wouldn't become a

football coach if you didn't know how to play football. There is no need to be nervous about this; there are many resources (as listed under my teacher references) available to help you become an effective storyteller.

To introduce the unit on storytelling I begin by becoming a storyteller myself and I tell the students an intriguing, exciting story. I make sure to model all the important components of a great storyteller that I expect to see from the students during this unit. To do this, first I choose a folktale that I love. The story I tell my students is *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. I choose this folktale because it is one that I remember hearing and loving myself as a child. It has strong characters and a clear storyline that is easy to follow. Before I tell the story I make sure that I practice it a few times. This story is fun to tell because you can change your voice to fit and portray each character. Then, I give it my best effort and tell the story to my students as if I were a professional storyteller. It is exciting watching the students listen to my story and seeing their ears and eyes perk up with excitement as they listen.

After telling the students my story I introduce formal storytelling to them. I begin a discussion with the students and ask them a series of questions. I start out by asking them what storytelling is. In my own research I came across Esme Raji Codell's website where she suggests a good way to tell your students about what storytelling is. She says, "I tell them that in Africa, there is a saying: Every man dies two deaths. The first, when his body dies. The second, when the last person remembers him dies. Stories, too, die when the last person who knows the story dies. So the trick is not only to know the story, but to make people remember the story, so it will live on and on." After telling the students this about storytelling we discuss what she means. I also ask the students what makes a good storyteller, how do you become a storyteller (I let them know that some people's job is to be a storyteller), and why stories are important? Once I have spent some time discussing storytelling, I tell the students that we are beginning a unit on storytelling. I tell my students that by the end of this unit they will all become storytellers.




Week 1, Days 2-4

As the students' first opportunity or trial with storytelling, I partner the students up into pairs. I put one student with high language skills and one student with low language skills together in a group. This allows for the higher skilled student to act as a model for the lower skilled student. This is meaningful for the lower leveled student because they are able to hear correct sentence structure in a safe environment made up of his or her peer. This will allow the student to feel confident in producing and attempting oral language.

I have learned from past experiences that for my students' first time speaking in front of an audience (the class), they always feel more comfortable with a buddy or friend at their side, taking a bit of the attention off themselves. In order to do this I use a series of books by Mary Anne Hoberman entitled *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You*. These books are filled with short stories in dialogue form. One student reads the left side of the page and the other student reads the right side of the page, taking turns. Anything in the middle they read together. Each part is color coded so the student knows what line is his or hers. These stories are great because they are very short, including fairy tales, scary stories, stories from the 21st century and more. They are perfect for the students' first storytelling experience because they are simple, and fun and they can be told with a partner.

After each pair of students chooses the short story they would like to perform out of this series of books, I tell the students the objective of the lesson. In this lesson the students will be focusing on the important mechanics of storytelling. These include speaking in a loud, confident voice that their audience can clearly hear, making eye contact with the audience, speaking fluently, and becoming involved with the story through

props, emotions, and actions. At the end of the week, on Friday, each pair of students will have the opportunity to tell their story to the class. Before the pairs begin to practice I hand out a rubric to each group so that they can see how they will be assessed. I score the students by giving either a 0,1, or 2 for each category. An example of a rubric I use is as follows:

Name: _____ Date: _____ Title of the Skit Performed _____	0 Needs Improvement 	1 Room to Grow 	2 Excellent Work! 
Voice- Did you speak clearly and loudly enough so everyone in the audience could hear you? Did you speak to your audience and NOT into your paper?			
Eye Contact- Did you look at the audience as you were speaking? Could the audience see your eyes?			
Fluency- Did you stumble over a lot of your words? Were you speaking at a good pace- not too slow and not too fast?			
Actions- Did you use expression and get involved with the story? Did you change your voice to fit the character? Did you use any props?			

During the week I allow the students time each day to practice reading the skits together with their partner. I allow enough time for each group to read the skits at least three times through and discuss with one another how they can become great storytellers as they tell the story to the class. The students, as they practice, each have a copy of the rubric in order to focus their attention on the objectives of this lesson. As the students are practicing their stories, I circulate around the room, spending time with each group continually focusing each group on the mechanics of storytelling that we are focusing on this week. I go through each of these mechanics with the pair, checking for understanding and asking the students what they are doing to make sure they are addressing each category. At times I need to model these mechanics and get involved with each pair, to increase the students' understanding.

My students get very excited with their skits and it gives them a sense of ownership over their story if they have a copy of it to take home and practice. I make copies of the skits so that they can take them home and practice them for homework. I tell the students that hopefully by Friday they will not need their paper any more to tell the story. Some of the students are able to perform their skits without the script in their hand.

It is important to allow the students sufficient time each day to work on their stories. This gives the students with low language skills more confidence and the daily practice they need in order to learn to tell the story. This activity is great for increasing oral language because it allows the students to create a personal relationship with a fellow classmate. This gives the students with low language skills the opportunity to hear

correct sentence structure, learn vocabulary, and practice using language in a safe and comfortable environment.

Week 1, Day 5

On Friday, or the last day of the week, it is storytelling day. This is the day the students will finally be able to tell their stories to the class and begin the process of becoming storytellers. Before the students tell their stories I always make sure to go over respectful behavior. I remind the students to be polite, and tell them that there is no talking during storytelling because in storytelling the audience also plays a very important part. The audience has the role of listening and learning. I also remind the students that it is polite to clap at the end of a performance. In addition, before the storytelling begins I go over the rubric one last time to focus the students on the objectives of the lesson. I try not to make it seem like I am grading the students because this is supposed to be fun, not an intimidating activity like a test.

As each pair tells their story I fill out a rubric for each student. This allows the student to see where he or she needs to concentrate and what he or she can do to improve his or her storytelling. I also allow the audience to give the students constructive feedback. I call on two or three students and encourage them to tell the group something they learned, what the group did well or something they think the group can improve on.

Before concluding on Friday, I always ask the students if anyone would like to share anything that they enjoyed or learned. I ask if there is anything, as a pair, that they need to improve on, what they found difficult and what they enjoyed. Lastly, I tell the students that next week we will continue our unit on storytelling and be able to choose a story we would like to share with the class.

Week 2, Day 1

The second week of storytelling takes more preparation time on the part of the teacher. I pre-select stories the students will use this week for storytelling. The students will be given the opportunity to choose a story from the pre-selected books that they will be using for this week's storytelling experience. I chose a wide variety of books for the students to look through. Each of the stories has simple language, strong characters, and a clear beginning, middle, and end. The students begin this week of storytelling by reading the different stories until they find a story that they love or have some connection with. There are many websites online that are great resources to use when choosing books for storytelling such as, <http://www.planetesme.com/storytelling.html#storytellingbibliography> and <http://www.augusthouse.com/>. I give the students time the first day to choose the story they want to tell and to get used to the story. The students should have enough time to read the story twice silently to themselves and once out loud. I allow the students to take the story home to read and practice the story for homework. I let the student know that this is the story they will be using this week as they continue the quest to become a storyteller.

Week 2, Day 2

Graphic organizers can be very helpful tools when learning to tell a story. In this lesson the students use a graphic organizer to clearly layout the story structure and to use as an aide when telling the story (see below for graphic organizer). Today, the students spend time filling out the graphic organizer. This graphic organizer will help the students see how the story is broken down and what the important elements are to include when telling a story. In each space provided on the graphic organizer, the student needs to draw in the story element. This graphic organizer also acts as a visual aide for the student when telling the story.

Week 2, Days 3 & 4

During centers this week the students continue to work on their stories. On Wednesday and Thursday I pair each student up with a different partner and have them practice retelling their story to their partner using the graphic organizer as an aide. The students who are listening to the story also have a job. They fill out a rubric as their partner tells his or her story. Once the student is finished telling his or her story their partner shows him or her the rubric. The group then has the opportunity to discuss the rubric and the listener can tell what he or she thinks was done well and what he or she thinks can be improved on. Before the students get into their groups I remind the students of the mechanics they focused on last week (voice, eye contact, volume, fluency, actions) so that the rubric or expectations are fresh in their minds.

The students continue to take their stories home and practice telling them to their families at home. I tell them that if no one is around to listen to their story they may want to tell their story in front of a mirror for extra practice.

Week 2, Day 5

Students will be working in groups of four or five students today. Each group is assigned a section of the classroom. Today students will be telling the story to their group that they have been working on this week. This will act as a practice session so that each student will see what he or she did well, what was improved on from last week, and what he or she can make further improve on. One at a time, each member of the group will stand up and tell his or her story. The rest of the group will act as the audience. I again remind the students how a good audience behaves prior to starting. After each student has a turn telling his or her story, I allow time for questions and comments pertaining to each story. Peers usually act as good teachers as long as they know the difference between negative criticism and constructive criticism. This should be taught prior to this lesson. I make it a rule that the students must begin by saying a positive comment. I also remember to allow time at the end for a whole group discussion. I ask the students if they learned anything new today in storytelling and allow time for positive comments. I then ask the students how the graphic organizer was able to help them become better storytellers. Continuing the discussion, I ask how they think they could become better storytellers and what types of qualities make a good storyteller?

* Now that the students have been working on storytelling for a few weeks it is a good time to invite a professional storyteller to come into the classroom. This is great for the students to see, so that they have a clear model of what a true storyteller is and the qualities that they possess.

Week 3, Day 1

This week the students will be working on and coming up with their own stories to tell. These stories will be true stories coming from their own lives, including family history, traditions, personal experience, a time when they got hurt, a vacation, a favorite relative, etc. To begin this lesson I model a story from my own personal experience as an example. The example I use is a story about my two brothers and me. In this story I make my brothers strong characters with distinctive personalities. There is a clear beginning, middle, and end to the story, giving it a simple structure. This makes the story easy to follow and understand, yet exciting to listen to. After I have told my story to the class, the students are usually very talkative, each student wanting to tell his or her own story relating to family. All of this talking is not bad. The students are actually practicing telling stories to each other. I give the students a few minutes to talk to their friends and tell each other their stories before moving on.

Next, I tell the students that this week the stories we will be telling are true stories about our own lives. With the students' help I make a list of the different types of stories they can choose to tell this week. After generating a list and giving the students many options, I give the students two minutes to silently think of and choose a story to tell. Once the students have come up with a story I ask them to think of the beginning, middle and end of their stories so that it is clear in their minds. Then, I have the students turn and talk to their neighbor, telling their stories. When both of the partners have had a chance to tell their story, I have a discussion with the class. I start by asking the class if they used any of the techniques they have learned about storytelling. Then I ask what techniques they used and how they were helpful. If time allows I have the students fill out the graphic organizer used previously as an aide for future use.

The students' homework tonight is to go home and talk to their families. The students need to come up with a story relating to their family. The story might be how their families came to New Haven, a special cultural tradition they may have, a vacation they have gone on, etc. I have the students take home a storytelling graphic organizer that they can color and fill out to help them tell the story the next day in school. On the back of the graphic organizer I write a letter to the parents explaining the unit on storytelling and telling the date of the storytelling festival coming up.

Week 3, Day 2

I divide the class into groups of three and the students take turns telling the story that they did for homework last night. When the students are finished telling their stories to one another I allow time for group members to ask each other questions, and to tell what they did well and what they could improve on. Next, we all move to the carpet. I tell the students that today's focus will be using the five senses when we are telling our stories. To begin, I start by asking the students to raise their hands if they can tell me one of the five senses. Once the class has named all five senses we take time to discuss each of these senses, one by one. We also talk about how using the five senses in our storytelling can help improve our stories and make them more exciting. After we have discussed the advantages of using the five senses to elaborate and make our stories more descriptive, each student returns to his or her seat and takes out his or her graphic organizer.

Using their graphic organizers, the students' job is to look at each box and add a sense to the box. The students first need to write the name of the sense that can be used to enhance their story at the top of the box; then at the bottom of each box they need to write how they used it, either through something they smelled, what they heard or saw, what an object felt like or what they said. When they retell their stories again they will add in these details, making their stories more interesting and descriptive. I allow the students five more minutes to retell their stories again but this time using their five senses.




Homework: I ask the students if they know what props are, then I tell them that props are used to help people imagine, understand, and get a better image of a story. Next as a group we come up with a list of items that are props. The students need to go home and find two or three props that they can use tomorrow to help to enhance their stories.

Week 3, Days 3 & 4

The students will continue working on their family stories, now adding the props that they brought from home to help tell their stories. Students can work with a partner, when they finish their centers, practicing telling their stories including both the five senses in their stories as well as the props that they brought from home.

Week 3, Day 5

This is the class storytelling day! The students will take turns telling their stories. I will use a rubric to score the students, adding in both the five senses and the use of props.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Title of the Family Story Performed _____	0 Needs Improvement 	1 Room to Grow 	2 Excellent Work! 
Voice- Did you speak clearly and loudly enough so everyone in the audience could hear you?			
Eye Contact- Did you look at the audience as you were speaking? Could the audience see your eyes?			
Fluency- Did you stumble over a lot of your words? Were you speaking at a good pace- not too slow and not too fast?			
Actions- Did you use expression and get involved with the story? Did you change your voice to fit the characters?			
Five Senses- What did you hear, see, smell, say and feel?			
Props- Did you use visual aides to help tell your story?			

Week 4, Days 1-4

This is the last week of the storytelling unit. The students this week will be able to choose one of the three stories they told in the past three weeks to share at the family storytelling festival. The students' parents, guardians, and relatives will be invited to attend the festival during the school day on Friday. The festival will be held on the school stage. The students will be able to use a microphone and become a real storyteller.

This week will be spent practicing and getting ready for the big day. To do this there will be a storytelling center, giving students time to practice and get their stories ready. Once the students have chosen the story they want to tell, the students will need to work on making it better, adding the five senses and props to the story. We will have a "dress" rehearsal on Thursday on the stage to get the students comfortable and ready for the festival the next day.

Week 4, Day 5

This is the big day, the storytelling festival. To make this as professional as possible I create a program listing the individuals who will be storytelling. To begin the festival, I invite a professional storyteller to come into the school and perform for the start of the festival. After the professional storyteller is finished each student performing tells his or her story taking turns on the stage. After the students have finished telling their stories I allow about fifteen minutes for food, drinks and mingling. To end the festival each student is awarded a

storytelling certificate, making them an official storyteller.

*Because John C. Daniels is a dual language school and not all of the parents speak either English or Spanish a translator will be necessary in order for the students to tell the story in their second language and still allow all the parents to understand what is being said.

Connecticut Literacy Standards

Standard 1: Reading and Responding

Students read, comprehend and respond in individual, literal, critical and evaluative ways to literary, informational and persuasive texts in multimedia formats.

1.3 Students select and apply strategies to facilitate word recognition and develop vocabulary in order to comprehend text.

- Students will develop vocabulary through listening, speaking, reading and writing.

1.4 Students communicate with others to create interpretations of written, oral and visual texts

- Students will listen to and respect the opinions of others about written, oral and visual texts.
- Students will share opinions and judgments based on texts heard, viewed or read.

Standard 2: Exploring and Responding to Literature

Students read and respond to classical and contemporary texts from many cultures and literary periods.

2.1 Students recognize how literary devices and conventions engage the reader.

- Students will identify the elements of a genre and interact with the text.
- Students will read or listen to a text and explain its appeal.

2.2 Students explore multiple responses to literature.

- Students will develop and discuss multiple responses while reading, listening or viewing texts.

Students
recognize
and
appreciate
that
2.3 contemporary
and classical
literature has
shaped
human
thought.

- Students will make connections between characters' lives and the real world.
- Students will listen to, read and respond to texts about and from many cultures and times.
- Students will compare and respond to text about multicultural experiences.

2.4 Students recognize that readers and authors are influenced by individual, social, cultural and historical contexts

- Students will recognize values and beliefs included in a text.
- Students will describe how the experiences of a reader influence the interpretation of a text.
- Students will discuss the influence of culture, history and ethnicity on themes and issues in literature.

Standard 3: Communicating with Others

Students produce written, oral and visual texts to express, develop and substantiate ideas and experiences.

3.1 Students use descriptive, narrative, expository, persuasive and poetic modes.

- Students will use oral language with clarity and voice to communicate a message.

3.2 Students prepare, publish and/or present work appropriate to audience, purpose and task.

- Students will determine purpose, point of view and audience, and choose an appropriate written, oral or visual format.
- Students will use strategies to generate and develop ideas for speaking, writing and visual

activities.

- Students will begin to revise texts for organization, elaboration, fluency and clarity.
- Students will publish and/or present final products in a myriad of ways, including the use of the arts and technology.

Standard 4: Applying English Language Conventions

Students apply the conventions of standard English in oral, written and visual communication.

4.1 Students use knowledge of their language and culture to improve competency in English.

- Students will read, listen to and tell stories from a variety of cultures, and identify the similarities and differences in the way language is used.

Resources

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Storytelling Graphic Organizer

Characters	Setting	Problem	Beginning
Middle	End	Solution	Ending/Author's Message

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