



Utilizing Bilingual Story Telling in a Learner Centered L2 Classroom

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Abstract

In the post-pandemic classroom, social withdrawal and dismissive reaction to explicit teaching methods are posing a challenge to language instructors. Will traditional language teaching disappear, considering the competition from online language apps such as Duo Lingo and Babel, or is there a way to connect with our present-day students that will regenerate excitement and engagement? What will draw students back into a physical realm that embraces active learning and interaction with humans, not Avatars? This presentation proposes that an effective way to re-engage students is by utilizing a community engagement, learner-centered model in the L2 classroom. One example of how Penn State Berks has integrated this two-fold approach is through bilingual storytelling. This paper describes the concept of merging a Learner Centered Classroom (LCC) with Community Engagement (CE), and the process of applying them to L2 learning. To successfully utilize bilingual storytelling in a language acquisition classroom, this paper will discuss the effect of a Learner Centered Classroom Approach when teaching L2, review Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS) as it relates to the theory of comprehensible input, highlight effective storytelling practices in the classroom, and finally, offer experiential evidence of the impact that bilingual storytelling has both on students learning the L2 language as well as on the students to which the stories are told.

Keywords TPRS, Engagement, Learner Centered Classroom

1. Introduction

The influence of social media has revolutionized ways to capture people's attention. Language apps such as Duo Lingo and Babel, and the social media platforms Tik Tok, Instagram and Snapchat have snatched students' attention to the point of excluding all other methods of acquiring information. Thus, in post-pandemic teaching, it is essential that instructors utilize teaching methods that will draw students away from their electronic devices. This paper proposes that an effective way to command attention in an L2 classroom is by utilizing a community engagement, learner-centered model in the L2 classroom. Penn State Berks has integrated this two-fold approach through community bilingual storytelling in all levels of its Spanish classes.

Penn State Berks is located in Reading, PA. Reading is the 4th largest city in the state. Census data from 2022 reports that the average household income of Reading residents is \$43,842, with a poverty rate of 39.87%. 66.5 % of Reading's population is Latino or Hispanic [1. World Population Review, 2023]. The city of Reading is home to the Reading School District, comprised of 19 schools and 17,659 students. The school district's minority enrollment is 90%, 85.7% of which are Latino or Hispanic. 69.2% of students in the district are economically disadvantaged [2. [usnews.com/Pennsylvania](https://www.usnews.com/Pennsylvania), 2019]. Furthermore, the Reading School District is home to one of four Regional Migrant Education offices in the state. Thus, it makes sense to provide L2 Spanish learners with language immersion, real-time experience, and real-life language exchange with heritage speakers while at the same time providing service to our Latino/Hispanic community.

2. Using a Learner Centered Classroom (LCC) Approach in the L2 Classroom

The Bilingual Storytelling Project at Penn State Berks started with one school in 2018, and has since expanded to five schools in the Reading Area School District. As of this writing, it continues to grow with two more schools waiting to be onboarded. The project began when faculty noticed that area children did not customarily go the public library for story hour because the stories were offered only in English, and many of the children did not speak English. Since the instructors were also searching for new language teaching and learning connections, they decided that a real-life experience that served the community at the same time was a perfect opportunity. Therefore, Penn State Berks students, and faculty, decided to perform dramatized, bilingual readings for elementary and middle school children at their schools. Stories are read in English, Spanish, or in both languages.



From the perspective of a foreign language class, bilingual storytelling is a high impact practice. It compels students to enact the four core skills that they must conquer in any language class: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. With bilingual storytelling, students utilize their language skills while learning cultural competencies and experiencing firsthand issues involving diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Rather than an instructor explicitly teaching these concepts, students learn how to think, solve problems, and generate hypotheses on their own. This type of learning forms the core of the Learner Centered Classroom.

Bilingual storytelling aids in language learning because it communicates information in an interesting and engaging way, which is more effective than just simply hearing plain facts. Facts are twenty times more likely to be remembered if they are told as part of a story [2. Bearden, 2022]. The meaningful context of the story and the continuous repetition of phrases allows both storytellers and listeners to achieve mastery of the vocabulary. The images in the books and the readers' dramatizations contribute to imprinting an indelible image in the minds of the participants.

In addition to teaching language skills, bilingual storytelling enriches social and cultural awareness and builds empathy because it opens doors to new cultures & traditions. Storytellers and listeners are introduced to worlds, customs, and traditions previously unknown. They gain an understanding that people have the same wants, needs, and fears, and therefore, the "other" may not be as different or strange as one once thought.

Providing student-centered activities that furnish target language input in a meaningful and authentic way is at the core of LCC pedagogy. Mary Ellen Weimer, a key promoter of LCC, defines five key changes to the practice in her book, *Learner Centered Teaching* [3. Weimer, 2013]. Bilingual storytelling meets at least three of those five principles:

1. *Directly engaging students in the work of learning* – students select a story that best fits into the content of their class. They also select which characters they wish to portray. The professor serves as a guide in the process, but students must learn to collaborate with one another and seek pronunciation and/or translation help in the foreign language as needed.
2. *Collaboration* – is a particularly important aspect of this project. Without it, the project would flounder. Students learn quickly that collaboration is essential to performing the story in front of a live audience. If students do not coordinate and collaborate, for example, by sharing of their time at rehearsals, the story would be missing characters and plot lines, and the children who have been anxiously awaiting a storytelling event in their native language would be terribly disappointed. Realizing how their part impacts everyone else is a valuable lesson learned in collaboration.
3. *Encouraging students to reflect on what they are learning and how they are learning it* – students assist the professor in selecting the story only after they have learned about who their intended audience is, and about the environment in which they will present their story. A post-performance reflection session is conducted, in the L2 language, to discuss the successes, failures, and lessons learned from the project. Students who participate in this project return often, asking to participate again, even if they have completed their course of language study.

Shifting to an LCC pedagogy is becoming the new paradigm in the L2 classroom, fueled, in part, by the 2017 "Can Do" assertions put forth by The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL), *LinguaFolio*® (LF®), and its European predecessor, the European Language Portfolio (ELP). They advocate for increased student participation in the learning process because language can be more effectively acquired when the learners are situated in a communicative environment [4. <https://www.actfl.org/educator-resources/ncssfl-actfl-can-do-statements>].

Yet, LCC pedagogy may prove to be a bit too chaotic for certain instructors. They cannot imagine a classroom without rote repetition, verb conjugations, and vocabulary charts; however, LCC is effective and produces results. One can easily access a wide array of scholarship on the topic, but let us look at one recent example. In 2022, Li and Li offered a comprehensive literature review in which they cite several examples in support of the notion that students enrolled in LCC or flipped classrooms are more motivated, more engaged, more likely to participate in the lesson by asking and answering questions. More importantly, they are more willing to use the target language. [5. Li Z. and Li J., 2022]. Since Li and Li's article does not offer specific details on LCC pedagogy, the next section of this paper will examine TPRS, an LCC method which speaks directly to bilingual storytelling.

3. Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS)



As illustrated, innovation in language learning does not necessarily have to come from futuristic technology; innovation can come about by turning to the past, with the ancient practice of storytelling. Bilingual storytelling provides a highly motivational way to learn a new language because it presents vocabulary and grammar via a non-threatening, stress-free platform. The story's context allows students to stretch their imagination and enables them to comprehend constructs beyond their current level of language production.

Dr. Stephen Krashen terms the phenomenon of comprehending language just beyond one's linguistic competence as "comprehensible input." Dr. Krashen is a leading expert in the field of linguistics, and theories of language acquisition and development. In his book, *The Natural Approach: Language Acquisition in the Classroom*, Dr. Krashen asserts that students learn an L2 language more naturally when instruction is delivered with context and meaning [6. Krashen, 2000]. Bilingual storytelling offers meaningful interaction in the target language among the participants which is then reinforced with images and repetition. The active exchange adds dimension and perspective to the story as opposed to simply memorizing meaningless, generic, vocabulary lists. Storytellers and listeners produce communicative language without necessarily focusing on grammatical structures. Thus, in Krashen's terms, the student acquires the L2 language in the same way as he/she did when acquiring the L1 language.

Comprehensible input is at the center of a TPRS lesson, which can include a story that is drafted spontaneously in the class by the students (albeit with instructor guidance), or it can be a published story suggested by the instructor and agreed upon by the class. In either case, the story should target the vocab and structures the instructor feels is appropriate to the curriculum.

Since not all students will initially comprehend the totality of the story, the instructor should offer a variety of activities to ensure that comprehension can be successfully achieved by all students. This can be done by asking simple yes or no questions, then progressing to more content based questions once the group masters the basics of the story. The instructor can also task the students with asking questions or adding elements from their own imagination to the story. The result is that students will enjoy creating all kinds of scenarios for the characters in the story. The more fun the story becomes, the more students want to add to it. Without realizing it, students accomplish all this story telling in the target language. What is important here is not the correct employment of verb conjugations or grammar; rather it is the comprehensible language output that will eventually lead to proficiency in the target language.

When students enjoy classroom activities, they will participate exponentially because they are motivated. The drive is not necessarily to score an "A", but to explore and participate in the activity that caught their attention. High motivation, or the "affective filter", is a component of TPRS that is common in Krashen's theories [7. Patrick, 2019]. Because students have selected the stories themselves, they are interested in the content. They become very familiar with the structure and meaning of the story, which helps boost their self-confidence. Rehearsing the story lowers their anxiety level as they become familiar with the story as a whole. High motivation, low stress, and self confidence lead to successful acquisition of a language through an enjoyable and memorable experience.

The motivation storytelling provides does not necessarily end at the conclusion of the story. When the storytelling is turned into a performance, students can add yet another dimension by creating their own activities to accompany the telling of their story. These activities could be in the form of a word search, a crossword puzzle, or a matching game. Each activity makes an impression on their brain to help participants remember the new words and constructs at hand. This last step in working with the story allows learners to use their imaginations as far as it will take them. They may even create innovative substories to accompany the original narrative, enticing further language production. The result is an extension of comprehensible input and output far beyond the initial level of language competence.

4. Impact

The impact that bilingual storytelling has both on students learning the L2 language as well as on the students to which the stories are told can be measured in several ways. For Penn State Berks, one successful measure is that schools repeatedly invite our students back to perform these stories and another is that the storytellers themselves return annually to participate until they graduate.

Bilingual Story telling empowers children whose first language is not the predominant language of the society in which they live. It can lessen social inequities by promoting a sense of belonging and reducing anxiety because the stories enable linguistic and cultural development for both the storyteller and the listener. It helps both listeners and storytellers engage in conversation about the differences and similarities in each other's customs and traditions.



For marginalized children, bilingual storytelling promotes a sense of belonging when stories that relate to their situation become part of the daily routine. For the storytellers, dramatizing and recounting the stories as opposed to memorizing linguistic and cultural content, evokes a range of emotions, which in turn, builds empathy. By minimizing the alienating effects of difference, participants can relate to one another, breakdown barriers, and build trusting relationships.

Finally, it merits mentioning that Bilingual Storytelling addresses the UN's Sustainable Development Goals of Quality Education (4) and Reduced Inequalities (10) by providing access to traditional literary pieces to children in their native language, and in their school. Bilingual Storytelling also addresses the UN SDG of Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (16), in that the stories are enjoyed in safe spaces and carry peaceful messages of tolerance and global governance.

5. Conclusion

In an era of fierce competition for our students' attention, bilingual storytelling is a high impact practice that grabs student attention much more than memorizing vocabulary and verbs. In an L2 Learner Centered Classroom, bilingual storytelling affords the students control over the delivery of the lesson. Control in the hands of the learners reduces anxiety, serves to promote a sense of belonging, and enables linguistic and cultural development to occur in a manner more akin to the way one learns these constructs while growing up. Bilingual storytelling places the responsibility of learning squarely on the shoulder of the students who embrace the pedagogical method, enjoy the experience, and acquire language and cultural skills they will not soon forget.

Utilizing bilingual storytelling as a community engagement opportunity elevates the language acquisition beyond a language lesson into an empowering experience that builds empathy and understanding as the stories lessen social inequities by engaging students in conversations about the differences and similarities in each other's customs and traditions.

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