



Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool to Learn English Language in Higher Education: Using Reflection and Experience to Improve Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this research study is to determine how educators and students at the university level are using storytelling to support the educational process.

This study provides a general framework about educational uses of storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English Language in the Higher Education and describes the different perceptions of people [Teachers and Students] at different levels.

A survey is used to collect responses from a group of educators and students in educational settings to determine how they are using storytelling for educational purposes. The results show the current situation of educational uses of storytelling and explore some of the benefits and challenges educators face in implementing storytelling in their institutions.

The purpose of our research is to investigate the impact of Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English Language in Higher Education and its academic achievements on ESL students. It highlights findings that address the following questions:

- 1. Is Storytelling beneficial for students to learn English language at university?*
- 2. To what extent do teacher and student prefer Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to teach and learn English Language in Higher Education?*

Introduction

Albert Einstein says "If you want your children to be intelligent, tell them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, tell them more fairy tales. When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for abstract, positive thinking."

It can be said that from the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21st century like other field of life, English Language Teaching (ELT) is explored and innovated. Due to these explorations teachers and students should be familiar with the changing trends of ELT. The changed trends have not left room for any of them to be guided by the fixed ideas and values. This allows pedagogy to make ELT to be flexible and contextual.

The pedagogical flexibility of teaching English language realizes that there is no single teaching method to be the best because students are very different from one another and so are teachers. For a teaching method to take place, it has to be appropriate for both the students and the teacher and for the subject matter as well.

What makes a method to be the best is related to many important variations in the teaching context. The variations can be language environment, class-size, language policy, cultural attitudes, linguistic and instructional objectives, classroom ethos, teacher-related factors like skill, autonomy training, and learner-related factors like age, previous learning experience, attitudes to learning, and etc.

There are as many as methods of teaching which are used by language teachers. These methods range from grammar translation method, functional approach, direct method, nativist approach, audio-lingual method, communicative method, oral structural situational approach, task-based approach, storytelling, etc. All these have own importance in their own places. They all have positives and negatives and none of them can be regarded as the best method in all the places of teaching English language skills, and for all instructors and students.

According to Brown, it is the context of the subject matter which may make a teaching method best or worst and impractical. [1994, p. 15].

Storytelling as a method of teaching can be best or worst in its own right. Again it is the context which makes this approach to be effective or ineffective.

The above mentioned discussion implies in order for schools/ universities to improve the learning of all students, different pedagogical strategies need to be employed. Using storytelling in the classroom is one of the methods to improve teaching oral language, reading comprehension, and writing. Because of the interrelated nature of the processes involved in reading and writing, storytelling can be an



effective pedagogical strategy that can be woven into instruction to increase students' competencies in all areas.

This paper will address how storytelling can be used as a pedagogical tool in the classroom to enhance teaching and learning of English language in the higher education and specifically in the department of English language.

What is Storytelling?

According to Champion [2003] Storytelling is an oral activity where language and gestures are used in a colourful way to create scenes in a sequence. Mcdrury and Alterio [2002] have written that storytelling is a unique way to enable learners to convey their human experiences through the language of words. Parkin [1998] gives special values to storytelling and he believes that there are many characteristics such as metaphors, legends, myths, and figures of speeches which can make storytelling to be used as a pedagogical tool for communication and teaching. According to Isabel et al [2004] storytelling is not a new method of teaching, it is used for as a powerful and promising educational means for teaching and learning. The results of the studies show that stories draw the learners' attention and thus can carry out certain messages more easily to them. One of the significant aspects of storytelling is that the words are not memorized, but should be comprehended by audience participation and interaction.

Many studies [e.g. Bloch, 2010; Davies, 2007;] have proven that the reason behind using storytelling is because it is a significant pedagogical tool to build speaking, writing, reading and listening skills in the language classroom. According to Haven [2000], one of the powerful and effective way to improve and develop language skills is using storytelling in the classroom, and moreover that activities where students participate in telling, writing, reading and listening to stories can motivate them to be active learners, developing within them a constructive approach towards English language learning. The results of the studies show that storytelling, as a folk art, is accessible to all ages and abilities. As a pedagogical tool, storytelling can motivate learners to explore their unique expressiveness and can heighten their capacity to communicate thoughts, emotions and feelings. In this respect, Pagano [1991] states that when we teach we tell stories about the world, some stories are scientific, historical, philosophical and so on so, from this opinion, teachers tell stories to students for many reasons: to present new material in interesting ways, to share practice experiences and to reveal aspects of themselves. Teachers should encourage their students to tell stories about events they have experienced and to make interaction between stories of the world and their own stories and they should also encourage students to tell stories about their special events.

Thus, one can summarize all these definitions in the following words: storytelling is the sharing of ideas and experiences through words and actions to communicate and make meaning about our lives and the lives of others.

Purpose of the study

This study aims to investigate the importance of Storytelling as a Pedagogical tool to Learn English Language in Higher Education in terms of perceptions, opinions and attitudes towards teaching English language. The results obtained may provide the interesting ideas and useful information for any Kurdish universities which intend to implement this approach as the studied conducted in the Kurdish universities.

Sampling

The sample of this study consists of 25 lecturers from five public universities in Iraqi Kurdistan namely, Halabja University, Sulaimani University, Salahadin University, Raparin University, and Zakho University, the participants were all instructors of English language. And 25 students from the fourth stage of the department of English language at the university of Halabja answered in the questionnaire survey. The gender distribution of our study is: Male 72% and Female 28%.

Methodology

In order to access the opinions and perceptions of the teachers, the questionnaire was decided to use. 50 copies of two different questionnaires were distributed to 25 English instructors from the departments in the universities mentioned above and 25 to the students of the fourth stage of the department of English language at the university of Halabja. All the fifty completed questionnaires were returned.



Data collection and analysis, findings and interpretations

Responses of the participants were analysed descriptively by calculating percentages and average scores, in order to determine what trends in the data suggested about the teachers' and student's attitudes and perceptions towards using Storytelling as a Pedagogical tool to learn English language in the department of English languages.

Teachers' Perceptions and Opinions about using Storytelling as a Pedagogical Tool to Learn English Language in Higher Education.

Q.1 As a teacher, have you had prior experience with using storytelling?

Results obtained from question one show that 28% of instructors are using story telling in their classes to help their students learn English language while 72% of the lecturers are not aware of Storytelling as a method of teaching.

Q.2 How easy did/will you find to use storytelling in the classroom?

The data received answers from question 2 shows that it is hard for the instructors to use Storytelling in their classes. 80% of the participants found very hard to use storytelling for teaching and learning English language. 16% of them found hard and 4% of the instructors ticked the question as normal to use this method of teaching. None of the instructors found Storytelling as an easy approach to teach English language.

The data received form question 1 & 2 tell us that there is a strong correlation between the prior experience of the teachers with Storytelling and the way they see the Storytelling as the methods of teaching. The hardness of this approach of teaching makes many difficulties for the instructors to use it.

Q.3 How much do you agree with TEACHING and LEARNING THROUGH STORYTELLING?

64% of the participants strongly agree that the usage of this approach is enjoyable. Almost all the participants agree that Storytelling may make classroom fun. 76% of the lecturers strongly agree that using this method of teaching encourages their students to write in English classes.

88% of them definitely agree that Storytelling is an important factor to improve the presentation skills of the learners.

60% agree that it improves students' research skills, 80% strongly agree that it may develop their organizational skills, 92% of the lecturers agree that Storytelling can be one of the best factors to improve one of the basic skills of English language. 80% of them agree that Storytelling is a good mean to enhance students' thinking skill which is badly neglected in the system of education in Iraqi Kurdistan as the students try to memorize rather than understanding the materials which are covered by their teachers and 84% of the participants agree that the best method to improve communication skills is storytelling.

Students

Q.1 Have you had prior experience with using storytelling?

According to the results, majority of the students in this research study didn't have experience with storytelling. In answer to the above question 84% of the students are not aware of Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English language, and 16% of them said 'Yes' to the question.

Q.2 would you like to see your teachers use storytelling?

The data from question 2 shows that students do not have enough experience with storytelling because their instructors have not taught them.

Q.3 In what subject would you like your teachers to use storytelling when teaching in the classroom?

In terms of students' preferences of subject choice, the results of this study indicated that students want their teachers to use Storytelling in the process of teaching and learning. Literature, specifically Drama and Novel are the most selected subject by students. Among the other popular subjects are communication, methods of teaching, psychology and even linguistics and grammar.

Conclusion

For thousands of years, educators, philosophers, scholars and teachers talked about the importance of Storytelling on the academic achievement and critical thinking of students. Pellowski [1977] found



pedagogy and storytelling as non-compatible and was found to be a major reason storytelling has yet to secure a place in public education.

Zipes [2004] countered that claim. He acknowledged that genuine storytelling pedagogy, as exemplified by Paley [1990], has the power to bring about critical literacy, critical awareness, and critical pedagogy. The historical debate continues right up to today.

The results of our study have found that Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English language in Higher Education leads to enhance language development, the results improve that Storytelling is an important educational key to learn both receptive skills such as reading and listening and productive skills like writing and speaking.

The data shows that both teachers and students in this research seem to be in general agreement about the value of storytelling. They also seem to feel a need to learn more about storytelling. Even though majority of the teachers do not use storytelling in the classroom at the time of the survey, but almost all instructors prefer to use it if they have a better environment like smaller class sizes.

Like teachers, students believe using Storytelling increases learning motivation and engagement levels and allows students to be more creative, and making more opportunity for self-expression as key factors in terms of motivational factors.

According to results, teachers and students agreed that learning subjects and new topics through storytelling is fun.

Teachers were asked about the difficulties in using storytelling in the classroom. "Big Class Size" is the highest ranked barrier that would keep teachers from using digital storytelling. This result is expected because there are many students in a classroom in almost all the public universities in particular in the departments of English language which does not match the process of teaching and learning of English language.

Most teachers reported that the best feature of storytelling as a pedagogical tool is to motivate learner to learn more about the subjects. In addition, being able share their ideas and work in group discussions.

Due to the lack of research studies on the Storytelling as a pedagogical tool to learn English language; results of our research are very valuable in paving a way for further research on the educational uses of storytelling.

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