

Telling Stories: Drama Strategies for ESL Students

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I. INTRODUCTION

Through a series of accessible and enjoyable drama activities, the class will work together to informally dramatize a cultural folktale, recreating the story with their own words and actions.

Objectives

- To explore a cultural story through a series of drama activities
- To introduce how a story can be “written” without paper and pencil
- To inspire students to imagine and develop detailed stories
- To enhance oral communication skills
- To make participants feel comfortable creating and sharing presentations

Full Description

The storytelling and story building processes, as outlined here, combine to form a straightforward, step-by-step procedure. This process encourages students to create their own dramatization of a story by listening to, analyzing, and deconstructing it, then reconstructing it slowly through a series of dramatic techniques. Although many students could create a dramatization in fewer steps, the advantage of this process is that it gives students a chance to fully examine and understand the story while challenging them to extend the actions and interactions of the characters. Extending the actions of the characters makes the story their own, rather than merely a recreation. Making the story their own is important, as it encourages students to use and extend their communication skills both vocally and physically. It also challenges them to take the initiative by using their own ideas about how the story should be played out and contributing such ideas to their partners and the class as a whole.

By participating in this process, without ever writing the story down on paper, the students use language as a: discussion tool, brainstorming tool, and communication tool. Language is also used as a way to share ideas and presentations with other members of the class. Having the entire class involved in the dramatization of a single story has two advantages. First, no one student is spotlighted more than any other, giving all students a sense of comfort in the process. Second, spreading the task of the presentation amongst all students ensures that everyone contributes. This is a significant first step toward students feeling more comfortable creating and sharing presentations in small groups and as individuals.

The process as outlined is part of a scaffolding philosophy. If students play-build immediately after hearing a story, they are generally too overwhelmed to know where to start, what to focus on, and how to effectively communicate all parts of the story. Utilizing the steps outlined here before dramatizing the story gives students a chance to imagine and understand the overall story before diving into its intricacies. When they have come to a clear understanding of the story’s sequence, they are then ready to dramatize it, as they then know how the events of the story build on each other from beginning to end. Rushing this process cheats the students of a deeper understanding and results in brief, meaningless scenes with little action and undefined dialogue.

Finally, as the end result is an informal, in-class sharing, the process focuses more on the exploration of stories, language, and communication, as opposed to the purely technical skills of projection and posture which, though vital, are accomplished by students only after they are comfortable sharing informally.

Since parts of the process differ for different age levels, included throughout are both general descriptions of the strategies and instructions for using them with children in grades 3 and below.

II. WARM-UP ACTIVITIES

Warm-up activities are used to prepare students for the day's class or dramatic session. These activities focus student attention on the day's content or dramatic strategy.

Full Description

The following exercises establish a sense of ensemble while introducing the basic skills needed to explore a story using drama. The activities demonstrate how a group can work together to accomplish even a simple task and enjoy it.

Examples with Step-by-Step Instructions

These activities, along with others of your own, should be used each day before getting into the main story-building activities.

- **Clap/Rhythm**
 - ♣ Standing in a circle, students pass a single clap around the circle. Be sure the claps happen in order, focusing on listening and watching. Try this several times, challenging the group to get faster each time.
 - ♣ Participants clap simultaneously with their neighbor. The first two people clap together, then the second and third person clap together, and so on around the circle. The object is for the two people clapping to sound like one. Repeat several times, challenging the group to find a group rhythm and to get faster each time.
- **Who's the Leader?**
 - ♣ The class sits together in a circle. The instructor introduces the activity while leading simple, repetitive movements (e.g., slapping hands on knees, touching shoulders then head, clapping, knocking on the floor). The instructor encourages the students to mirror the movements. After the students have caught onto the premise of following the leader, a volunteer is sent out of the room. A second volunteer is chosen to be the movement leader. The movement leader begins a simple, repetitive movement with the rest of the class following along. The first volunteer comes back into the room and stands in the middle of the circle. That person must try to figure out who the movement leader is. The instructor challenges the sitting group to work together to avoid giving away the movement leader.
- **Walking in Numbers**
 - ♣ Students walk around the room, avoiding any physical contact. The instructor calls out a number. Students stick to each other in groups of that number. "Stuck" groups continue to walk. New numbers are called out periodically and all students regroup to match the new number. Any student not in a group is out. Any group not of the number called, either too small or large, is out as well. Play the game until only two students are left. The instructor will need to periodically remind groups to keep walking, as often they will stop in anticipation of the next number. By not stopping, students will not always be able to group with friends.
- **Group Lining Up Race**
 - ♣ Students split into evenly numbered teams and line up in straight lines facing the instructor. The instructor calls out specific criteria (e.g., height, hair length, birth dates, shoe size). The teams line themselves up as quickly as possible based on

the criteria. When finished, team members place their hands on the shoulders of the person in front of them. The team that finishes first is checked for accuracy. If they succeed, the team is awarded one point. The team that earns the most points wins.

- **Sculpting Partners**

- ♣ Students pair up. Pairs decide who is person “A” and who is person “B.” To start, person “A” is the leader and person “B” the statue. Person “A” molds person “B” into whatever they wish. “B” persons must hold their sculpted poses. After a designated amount of time, “A” persons circulate around the room and view the other statues. Person “B” then becomes the leader. For variation, pick specific character types into which the pairs must mold each other. Encourage students to avoid telling each other how or what to move.
- ♣ Once students have mastered working together, try this activity without touching and without telling each other what or how to move. The leaders place their hands just inches away from the part of person “B” they wish to move. Person “B” follows “magically” into the position person “A” is attempting to sculpt. Focus and concentration increase with the no-touching addition.
- ♣ Student pairs do the same exercise while standing at least 10 feet apart from each other. Again, no talking or demonstrating is allowed.

- **Object Transformation**

- ♣ The instructor shows the class a simple object, like a chalkboard eraser. The instructor demonstrates the activity by transforming the eraser into something else (e.g., candy bar, walkie-talkie, telescope) by the way they use it. Students name what the object has been transformed into. The object is then passed from student to student. Each transforms the object into something different and the other students must guess what it is.

- **Team Charades** (Grades 3 and up)

- ♣ Groups of 5–6 students sit on the floor in a line. A single object is placed in front of each group. At the instructor’s , one member of the group must transform the object into something else and demonstrate its use . The other members of the group guess what this new object is. When someone in the group guesses correctly, the next member of the group transforms the object into something different. The first group to successfully guess correctly what each member of their group has pantomimed, scores a point. Switch objects among the groups. Ask students not to repeat the ideas they used with the first object.

- **Pantomime**

- ♣ Pantomime is creating a reality where none truly exists. It is an important tool in exercising and challenging students’ physical abilities. Pantomime focuses students’ attention on clarity and economy of movement, preparing them for the more difficult task of adding words later.
- ♣ Small Group Action – Small groups either choose or are given a particular group action (e.g., crossing a river, hunting in the woods, spear fishing deep in the ocean, driving or getting on and riding a bus, building a snowman or sand castle, competing in a bike race, shopping in a clothing store, playing in the rain, planting a garden). The instructor challenges individuals within each group to find the variety of actions within the larger idea. Together the group creates a brief

sequence showing the action. Each group shares with the rest of the class, who guess what the actions of the group and individual students are.

- ♣ Small Group “Where” – Small groups either choose or are given a particular place (e.g., playground, classroom, camp, kitchen). The instructor should be sure the place is somewhere many different people might be doing a variety of different actions. Each individual within the small group chooses a person and action of that place. Together the group pantomimes the person and action for the rest of the class, who guess what the place is and what the actions of the individual students are.

III. STORYTELLING

The instructor, the students, or a guest orally share a story originating from one of the students' own cultures.

Full Description

This can be a wonderful opportunity for the instructor or an invited guest to model for the students how a story is shared orally. When the class experiences the story in this manner, it shares a common experience and gains a sense of the story that will guide the next few steps in the process. This common experience brings cultures together, as many cultures have particular ways and times to share stories. Establishing students as experts early on is a useful tool. When any of the other students are unsure about a particular part of the story or cultural aspect, they can seek possible counsel from the student(s) of that culture.

Since play-building should reflect how the students hear and understand a story, it is important they quickly take ownership of the story by creating a verbal outline after hearing it aloud. This serves three functions. Noting the main events (1) increases the student's sense of control, (2) anchors the story more deeply in their memories, and (3) encourages students to understand a story as a sequence of events from which they will be able to build a scene. Having the participants discuss and recount the story repeatedly throughout the process helps them to not only commit the story to long-term memory but also remember and include the small events, thus becoming active participants in the shaping and preserving of the story.

Step-by-Step Instructions for a Story

- **The instructor, a student, or an invited guest tells a cultural story.**
Avoid reading the story, as this leads students to rely on the wording in the book and to look for the "correct" way to explore the story or a character's words. If time is available, the whole class can collect tales from relatives and share them, increasing each student's personal connection to the process.
- **The class break down the story into an outline of the key events.**
Avoid writing the story down, as this makes it too definitive. Students' exploration of the story in class should reflect how they hear and understand the story, which happens only if they make the story their own. If students discuss and recount the story repeatedly, they not only commit the story to long-term memory but also help each other remember and include the small events, thus becoming active participants in the shaping and preserving of the story.

IV. AUTO-IMAGE

Auto-images are frozen statue-like images of ideas, objects, or creatures or they capture an action or reaction of a character. Auto-images are generally spontaneous creations by individuals.

Full Description

Auto-images are activities that concentrate on utilizing the whole body. In this step, students create frozen images, first as individuals, then in pairs, and finally in small

groups, based on prompts: various types of characters, actions, character interactions, or events. Because students are often uncomfortable physically expressing an idea, making the eventual leap into play-building and in-class presentations requires they have sufficient time to experiment with how to create and express ideas using their bodies. This step also establishes an atmosphere of fun and playfulness, taking the pressure off "being right" and encouraging the students to explore the different ways in which ideas can be expressed or created.

Warming up to the Strategy

- In a circle, a group makes images individually and automatically based on descriptive information provided by the leader. With each successive image, the instructor encourages greater exploration of levels and shapes and clarity of action.
 - a Characters and Actions (Individuals)**
 - Hero, police officer, teacher, student, minister
 - Playing at the beach, playing volleyball, fishing, playing a video game, riding a bicycle, reading in the library
 - b Relationships (Pairs)**
 - Best friends, worst enemies, teacher/student, parent/child, brother/sister
 - c Images (Pairs or Small Groups)**
 - Playing at the beach, encountering trouble at recess, hanging out with friends, playing volleyball, fishing, playing a video game, riding a bicycle, building a sandcastle, eating at a restaurant, reading in the library

Step-by-Step Instructions for a Story

- **Students will experiment with the various characters and actions of the story.** Once a story is shared, students "try on" the characters, actions, and key events suggested by the story, discovering a range of ways to portray a particular character or action. For example, in a Samoan story there is an eight-legged, winged, beast chasing a boy and his dog. The students create several different frozen images of the beast physically, first as individuals, then with partners or in small groups. There is little need, at this step in the process, for the students to share their experimentations with each other. This step is analogous to the initial drafts when writing an essay. Those drafts are for the writer, not the reader. The students, as individuals and in small groups, then bring select experimentations to life dramatically. They make their beasts breathe, make sounds, or move or fly about the room. Finally, students combine the characters, events, and character encounters with which they have experimented into a variety of on-the-spot tableaux (i.e., frozen physical images). An example might be to show what the boy and dog look like in a variety of situations: seeing the beast, running from the beast, being caught by the beast. This gets the students thinking about the pieces that make up the whole and offers students a safe period of exploration and confidence-building. Without thinking about it, they are developing a physical vocabulary they will draw on later when reconstructing the story in play form.

V. TABLEAU

Tableaux are group created frozen pictures based on an idea, theme, or key moment in a story.

Full Description

Tableau is an immediately accessible technique that gives students a high degree of control and demonstrates their understanding of the scene or story they are working on. Using their bodies, individuals, pairs, small groups, or the full group creates an image or “human statue” that communicates an idea or a single moment of action from a story or event. When done well, a tableau consists of bodies frozen in the midst of strong action suggesting what the characters are doing, how they are interacting with other characters, and how they are reacting to the situation. A tableau should have a strong point of focus and consist of a variety of levels, actions, and character intentions.

Warming up to the Strategy

♣ **Tableau** – Small groups of 4

- ω A team sport
- ω An activity at school
- ω Working at home
- ω A party

♣ **3-Tableaux Series:** Small groups tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end, using only three tableaux. Present with a set number of beats between images.

Step-by-Step Instructions for a Story

• **Students create frozen images in small groups based on key scenes**

Small groups of students each choose a specific scene or series of events from the developed outline. Each group then divides the characters, assuring that every individual in the group has a character even if the character is an inanimate object. (*Beauty and the Beast* and *Alice in Wonderland* both have animated objects that add significantly to the story.) The groups then decide upon the key events within their chosen scene and create tableaux showing those key events. The number of tableaux the groups create is flexible and depends on how well the students are working together and how easily they are taking to the process. At this point students should be encouraged to add elements that reflect their own understanding of the culture or enrich details of the story or characters.

Groups should work on only one tableau at a time to insure that the whole class moves forward at a similar pace. Each time they create a new tableau, the groups should review the others previously created. Encourage students to add elements that reflect their own understanding of the culture or enrich details of the story or characters. This step can be repeated as necessary. With each repetition, students discuss the shared tableau and evaluate how successful each group is at clearly communicating the actions of their scene and offer ideas for further exploration.

These discussions, used not only here but in subsequent steps in which the students share their developing work, are a key part of the process. The students will learn to evaluate and improve their own work by practicing the evaluation process, both as evaluators and as those evaluated. The instructor should be ready to lead the discussion, posing questions and encouraging students to think about what they see or are doing, and to guide the discussion, making sure the students don't get stuck complaining or giving short answers such as "It's good."

- **Tableau with Younger Students**

- ♣ Small groups of students (3 or 4 at most) create tableaux showing key events from the developed outline as the instructor prompts them. Each group divides the characters as they work (with inanimate objects as mentioned above). Encourage groups to add unique elements reflecting their own understanding of the story or characters. The class works through the whole story in this manner until each group has a series of tableaux showing the whole story.
- ♣ With the youngest students, volunteers may be asked to help create each tableau as the class works through the story, or the instructor can have the entire class create frozen statues of the characters as key moments in the story. In this manner all the students work through the story simultaneously. Additionally, the group can focus on specific moments in the story, having pairs of students show those moments through tableau.

VI. NARRATION

Narration consists of descriptive passages that accompany moving or frozen images. These passages are intended to accompany the images, not merely describe them, much like a picture book where the images and passages complement each other.

Full Description

Groups develop narratives to accompany each tableau created, resulting in a kind of "narrative slideshow." In the same way that the tableaux demonstrate students' understanding of the basic action of the story, creating a series of narrative statements to accompany the tableaux demonstrates their comprehension of the overall sequence of their part of the story. Creating the narration is a first step in the development of dialogue.

Step-by-Step Instructions for a Story

- **Students develop brief narratives to accompany the tableaux.**

The groups create brief narratives to accompany their tableaux. Either one student acts as narrator and the others share the tableaux, or the group divides the narration among its members. The narrators should be encouraged to put the narration into their own words, not worrying whether it is the *correct* version of the story. This step can be repeated as necessary. With each repetition, have students discuss the tableaux and narration and comment on how successful groups are at clearly communicating the events of the story (and possibly what key events may be missing).

- **Narration with Young Students**

- ♣ The class works together to create brief narratives to accompany the tableaux. Volunteers create and deliver narration that will accompany the tableau created by a different group. Each narrator should be encouraged to put the narration into his own words, not repeat words created by the instructor. When finished, one group shares a tableau as the volunteer shares the narration until the whole story has been shared. Repeat this with the other groups. Finally, the students will pantomime the actions of the tableaux for 5–10 seconds, experimenting with various possible ways the action might unfold. The instructor then narrates the story, asking for volunteers to tableau and pantomime key moments. The instructor narrates the story several times as warranted, to give all class members a chance to participate in the tableau.
- ♣ With the youngest students, volunteers can help the teacher share narration as warranted. Otherwise, the teacher will narrate the story as the students create the frozen statues. It is possible for students to work in pairs, showing key moments as the teacher narrates.

VII. PLAY-BUILDING

In play-building, student groups develop a scene focused on the interaction of the characters through dialogue and action. Participants create the scene without a script, instead building it through trial, error, and practice.

Full Description

Groups develop their scenes into full dramatizations by creating dialogue and action for their characters, focusing on the scene's sequence. Students should forget about the narration and tableaux, using them simply to inform the choices they make in building the story in play form. As with each of the previous steps, students need time to explore, experiment, evaluate, rethink, and implement their new understanding. Throughout, the instructor encourages risk-taking and imaginative solutions to problems through thought-provoking questions and challenges. When finished, the groups share their completed scenes. With every group sharing, the pressure on any single individual or group lessens. The success of the overall performance is dependent on everyone in the class, ensuring that everyone has a vested interest in helping each other do well.

Since the process builds verbal confidence in students, not rushing the process creates several possibilities for students to exercise language skills. As they work with their partners, they are actively using group discussion skills. When they share their ongoing work, they are practicing oratory skills. When they evaluate and offer suggestions, they are engaged in practical language use.

Step-by-Step Instructions for a Story

- **Students develop the scenes fully through action and dialogue.**

After exploring the story through tableaux and narration, the groups start over, developing their scenes into full dramatizations by creating dialogue and action, or *acting it out*. This process, which may need plenty of time, is challenging but ultimately very rewarding for young people. Give groups time to create scenes, and then practice them a few times on their own. Encourage them to incorporate their tableaux as single moments in their scene, giving them something to aim for. The scene will move through each tableau they created. This also insures they will continue to be physically active in the scene. When developing the words and dialogue, students tend to go for the easy and obvious first. This makes sense, since they are developing their English language skills. Therefore, it is important to let them explore the obvious. The development of dialogue and the actions created should focus on what the characters want to happen (even a fish caught on a hook wants to get free). To make sure all students contribute to a scene, challenge each to add a specific number of lines of dialogue (if they are an object, a sound, or noise of some sort). After all groups have mastered their scene, have them share so the class can discuss successes and offer each other suggestions for continued exploration. When the students share their developing scenes with each other, clarify for them that the work is not final and pressure is not on for them to get it right or perfect. Allow them to stop and restart as needed. This keeps an air of informality in the sharing of their developing scenes, letting them know there is plenty of time for them to get their scene into a state they like. Only then should the groups perform a

final in-class sharing of the story play. Throughout this process, the instructor should encourage risk-taking and imaginative solutions to problems by asking thought-provoking questions and guiding the students as they work.

♣ Examples of questions for the participants:

- ω How do you feel it went?
- ω Did you stay engaged throughout?
- ω Did you make strong choices?
- ω Did you build on the story or the character's intention?
- ω What moments were strong? What lines of dialog? Actions?
- Did your character give up on his/her intention? What else might your character do to achieve his/her goal?

♣ Examples of questions for the viewers:

- What parts of the scene were most interesting? Why?
- Where was it clear what the characters wanted? Where was it unclear?
- What other choices could the characters make to achieve their goal?
- Which parts were hard to understand?
- Finish these sentences:
 - I think it was great when they . . .
 - I was surprised by . . .
 - I think it might be better if they . . .
 - I did not understand when . . .

• **Play-Building with Younger Students**

The instructor narrates the story, having volunteers act out the events with the instructor pausing occasionally, encouraging the volunteers to fill in key lines of dialogue and action.

• **Facilitating the Play-Building**

- Encourage students to stay focused on the action and the character's intention.
- Encourage them to develop dialogue and action that is connected to the character's ultimate goal or intention. At the end of the development process and with each subsequent practice, ask questions to encourage them to find additional ways for their characters to achieve their goals. It is important in the initial phase of exploring improvisation not to spend too much time evaluating the content of the scenes, but to encourage further exploration. Evaluating the content will set up an atmosphere of right and wrong, stifling the kind of exploration that builds young people's confidence.

VIII. REFLECTION AND EVALUATION

Each time a group shares a developing scene, the whole class reflects on the choices made and how the sharing group might further develop their ideas.

Full Description

For the process to be fully rich it should be full of supportive questions and encouragement, persuading students to explore, take risks, discover, and apply those discoveries. Questions spotlighting character and conflicts will keep students focused and productive. When students can identify what their character is pursuing, they will be able to build the dialogue and action of their scene, clarifying the characters' needs, goals, obstacles, and creative ways to overcome obstacles, as well as the central conflicts of the story. The various characters' goals put them in opposition to each other, which fuels the development of dialogue and action.

Step-by-Step Instructions for a Story

The following questions can be used as jumping off points for creating questions suited to the developing scenes.

- ♣ Questions for the performers
 - Did you stay focused on the story or character? Why or why not?
 - Did you build the story together with your partners?
 - Which moments were the strongest?
 - What could you have done differently?
- ♣ Questions for those watching
 - What moments were the strongest?
 - Did the performers listen to each other as well as talk?
 - What could they have done differently?
- ♣ Open-ended statements can also help students reflect on choices
 - I thought I did a good job on/with . . .
 - I think it would be better if I . . .
 - I think (name) did a good job, because . . .
 - I think (group name) need to concentrate on . . .
- ♣ As the scenes become richer and more detailed, the questions asked should become more focused and specific.
 - Was the story clearly communicated?
 - What was missing or extra?
 - How might the performers clarify what their character is trying to achieve?
 - Did the words the performers used help communicate the story?
 - What else might the characters need to say to help clarify their goals or the overall story?
 - Did the physical actions seem consistent with the story?
 - Was there a nice balance of action and dialogue?
 - What might the group explore more?