

Student storytellers

David Heathfield recommends retelling a tale using different techniques.

If you regularly tell stories in class, your students will soon want to become English language storytellers, too. You can invite them to bring in short folk tales to tell. However, it is a good idea to help them develop their fluency and confidence first by getting them to retell a story that *you* have told them.

Providing them with a simple framework, some effective strategies and a short folk tale to retell is an important step on the way to helping them become autonomous student storytellers.

Students want to hear stories and sometimes want to tell them ... there is no better way of developing fluency than storying.

Andrew Wright

When students are first invited to retell stories, they naturally tend to imitate the way *you* have told them. They will try to use the same structures, vocabulary and voice patterns. However, retelling the story in another person's words is limiting. Every one of us has our own individual storytelling voice. When we tell a story, we are not reciting a script, so it is useful to establish the fact that clear communication is more important in storytelling than accuracy. Every time a student retells the same story, it will increasingly become his or her own.

When they are retelling a story, students already know *what* they want to say, so they can focus their attention on *how* to get the listeners to understand and

enjoy the story; but language learners are unlikely to be fluent storytellers in English straight away. They may struggle to communicate, and hesitate when striving to get the story across. However, in their desire to convey the story, students often manage to make up for limited vocabulary by expressing emotion, using mime, gesture, facial expression and, importantly, their imagination.

The soul never thinks without an image.

Aristotle

Mental imagery is given free rein when we create a safe and comfortable atmosphere in which students can listen to stories openly and retell them freely.

When different students in the same class retell the same story, each student's experience of that story will be different. This is in part because of mental imagery: how the students see the story.

What my students have said about retelling a story I have told them is revealing:

- Some students describe what they see in their imagination as being like a series of still images; others say it is like a film.
- Some see vivid colours, while others see it in black and white.
- Some see true-to-life scenes and others see fantastic animation.
- Some students talk about remembering the rhythms and cadences of their teacher's voice, while others do not recall the voice at all.

The Snake's Tale

A poor shepherd led his sheep into the countryside to graze. There he took out his flute and began to play. Within moments, a snake appeared and the shepherd became afraid, but the snake raised its head high off the ground and began dancing to the beautiful tune he played on the flute. When the shepherd finished playing, the snake disappeared into its hole in the rocks and returned with a gold coin for the shepherd. The poor man picked up the coin and returned home, but he told no one about the dancing snake.

The next day, he returned to the same place to graze his sheep and played the same tune on his flute. Again, the snake danced and, when the shepherd finished playing, the snake left and came back from its hole with a gold coin. Day after day, the shepherd played for the dancing snake and kept the secret from everyone. However, one day the shepherd had to travel to the city, so he called his son to him and told him what he must do.

That day, the shepherd's son took the sheep to graze in that same place and began to play the same tune on his father's flute. The snake came and danced and, when the shepherd boy finished playing, he was rewarded with a gold coin.

The next day, the boy returned with the sheep and played upon the flute. As he played, the shepherd's son thought: *'Why should I get just one gold coin when the snake has so many hidden away? If I kill the snake I can take all its gold.'*



When the snake danced close to him, he picked up a stone and threw it hard at the snake. He wanted to kill the snake, but the snake was too quick and only lost the end of its tail. The snake quickly turned and bit the shepherd's son, killing him with its poison.

When the shepherd returned from the city he learnt that his son had been killed by the snake and was full of sadness. At the same time, he knew that his son had not done as he should.

The next day, he returned to that place with his flock of sheep and began to play on his flute. Soon the snake appeared, but it did not dance. *'Why do you not dance?'* asked the shepherd.

'No longer will I dance. I will never dance again until man has learnt to be true. You can no longer play as before and I can no longer dance as before, because when you see me, you will remember your son, and when I hear your flute, I will remember my tail.'

- Some imagine hearing distinct sounds as they retell the story, such as trickling water or birdsong; others hear no sounds at all.
- Some students are physically involved in the action of the story and imagine they are in the shoes of the central character: running, hiding, fighting, and so on. Others feel they are *outside* the story, watching the events happening.

People's sensory experience is different at different moments in the story, too, and is determined by a multitude of factors, such as their emotional state and whether the events in the story remind them of personal experiences.

So when you tell the story to your students at the outset, be aware of your body language, your voice and the

sensory descriptions you give, and allow for the fact that the students will all find their own way of imagining and retelling the story.

How potent is the fancy!

Geoffrey Chaucer

Focusing on mental imagery in storytelling makes a positive difference to the students' ability to remember and retell a tale. In fact, it is the most effective way for students to fully learn what the language they are hearing and using means.

When retelling a story, students will revisit the imagined world of the story they created when they were listening. They will go inside that world, imagining the characters' appearance,

their ways of moving and speaking, as well as other sensations in that story world, such as sound, smell, taste, movement and temperature.

A useful technique involves getting the students to map a story they have just been told by doing a short sequence of sketches. This map then acts as a visual prompt for the retelling. The students themselves choose what to draw and do not need to show anyone else. There are instructions for a story mapping activity on page 12; these can be used with any short folk tale. The example above is *The Snake's Tale*, which was told to me by Nafeesa Hajir, a Kurdish woman I taught at INTO University of Exeter. You can find a video of me telling this tale to international learners of English on *YouTube*.

Student storytellers

Students often comment that, when they retell a story, it is the longest piece of uninterrupted English speaking they have ever done. Naturally, when their teacher and the students themselves acknowledge this achievement, student confidence rises. A potent technique indeed!

To cut a long story short ...

Retelling a tale is an effective language learning activity at all levels, provided a 'can do' atmosphere is created. Students will soon realise that the more times they retell the same tale to different people, the better their storytelling becomes. Students need opportunities to practise if they are to become confident classroom storytellers, and they will succeed if you put both teacher and student storytelling at the heart of your teaching.



A story mapping activity

1 Learn the story yourself.

When you have read the story for the first time, take a blank sheet of A4 paper and quickly sketch a sequence of about six images that will help you to retell it. The first image might show a stick figure man who is playing a pipe while a snake dances. There may or may not be sheep nearby. Put arrows between the images to make a simple 'story map'. Only spend three minutes doing this: it should be rough, just like the sketches your students will do. The first time you rehearse telling the story, hold the map in your hand as a prompt. Then put it away and tell the story again.

2 Tell the story to your students.

Explain to your students that they are going to retell the Kurdish story you are about to tell them. As you tell the story, imagine following your story map but don't have it in your hand.

3 Help the students learn the story.

Give out sheets of plain A4 paper and ask the students to spend a minute drawing the dancing snake while they think about the story. Make it clear that

no one else need to see what they draw. Then invite them to talk in pairs about the snake they imagined. They can choose whether or not to show each other their drawings.

Point out that most people see clear pictures in their imagination when they are being told stories. Explain that one way of remembering the events of a story is to do a story map by drawing a limited number of images as a sequence of very quick sketches linked by arrows. Let the students know that you drew six sketches when learning *The Snake's Tale*, and only show them the back of your sheet of paper at this stage so you don't influence what they draw. Tell them that they can learn to retell the story by each doing their own six-sketch story map, which no one else will see. Tell the story again and suggest that the students close their eyes and notice images while they listen.

Before, the students had one minute to draw the snake; now, they need to do six images in three minutes on the other side of their sheet of paper. Some students will probably finish with time to spare, while others will need to be encouraged to draw more quickly.

4 Get the students to tell the story in pairs.

Next, put the students in pairs, sitting face to face, and get them to take turns to tell their version of *The Snake's Tale*, glancing for reference at their own story map, but without letting their partner see it. It's a good idea for the student

feeling more confident in each pair to go first. The listeners give full attention to their storytelling partners and prompt them only if they request it.

After all the students have told the story for the first time, show them your own story map, making it clear that there is no single correct way of mapping a story. Ask the pairs to talk about how useful story mapping is for remembering the story. If they want to at this stage, they could show and talk about their own story maps and compare them with yours.

Some students may benefit from hearing the story from you again before you ask them to tell it a second time to a different partner. This time, they put away their story maps and imagine seeing the pictures they drew as they retell the story.

5 Extension activity

Encourage your students to retell the story to people they know outside the class – and to be prepared to report back in the next class on what those people say about the story itself and about the way it was told. **ETp**



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