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The Power of Story in the ESL Classroom

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Abstract: Although considerable research has examined the use of literature in the second language (L2) classroom, there has been less investigation into the integration of learners' personal stories in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom. Following Wajnryb's (2003) categorizations of story as language learning, genre, and the creation of what she termed a 'storied classroom,' this study explores the ways in which learners' stories are used in the ESL classroom. Five ESL instructors and nine adult ESL learners enrolled in ESL classes at a settlement agency in Edmonton were interviewed about the practice, benefits, and challenges of incorporating personal stories into the L2 classroom. Participants perceived that story promoted language learning, an understanding of genre, and community building, while also enhancing authenticity, affect, and motivation. This article provides guidelines and recommends resources for using personal story in the adult ESL classroom.

Keywords: adult ESL, narratives, storytelling tasks, Canadian Language Benchmarks

Résumé : Malgré de nombreuses recherches sur l'usage de la littérature en classe de langue seconde (L2), peu d'attention a été accordée à l'intégration des récits personnels des apprenants en classe d'anglais langue seconde (AL2). En partant de la catégorisation des histoires faite par Wajnryb (2003) en fonction de l'apprentissage de la langue, du genre et de ce que l'auteure nomme « une classe d'histoires » (storied classroom), l'étude explore les façons dont les récits des apprenants sont utilisés en classe d'AL2. Cinq enseignants d'AL2 et neuf apprenants adultes inscrits en classe d'AL2 dans une agence d'établissement d'Edmonton ont été interviewés sur la manière, les avantages et les difficultés d'intégrer des récits personnels aux cours d'AL2. Selon les participants, les histoires ont favorisé l'apprentissage de la langue, la compréhension des genres et l'établissement d'une communauté, tout en rehaussant le sentiment d'authenticité, l'expérience affective et la

motivation. L'article propose des lignes directrices et des ressources afin d'utiliser les récits personnels dans les classes d'AL2 pour adultes.

Mots clés : AL2 pour adultes, récit, tâches narratives, Niveaux de compétence linguistique canadiens (NCLC)

As we learn more about the stories of the learners who walk through our doors, and the determination and resilience that they bring, how can we not be inspired? (Weinstein, 2004, p. 9)

People are 'storytelling organisms who, individually and collectively, lead storied lives ... and tell stories of those lives' (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). From the ubiquitous 'tell me about yourself' of a job interview to children imploring someone to 'please tell me a story' to the captivating nature of 'let me tell you a story,' we are surrounded by stories in our everyday lives. Story and narrative are also prevalent in language learning (Jones, 2001). Rinvolutri (2008) described storytelling as the oldest technique in second language (L2) learning; however, Eggins and Slade (1997, as cited in Gilmore, 2007) reported that, although over 40% of casual conversation consists of storytelling, it is 'largely unrepresented in language teaching materials' (p. 102). While there is substantial research that has examined the use of literature in the L2 classroom (see Paran, 2008, for a summary), less research has focused on the approaches, benefits, and challenges of using learners' stories in the language classroom.

The terms 'stories,' 'narratives,' and 'literature' are sometimes used interchangeably in the communicative language teaching (CLT) framework of second language acquisition (SLA) research. 'Story' is perhaps understood in the broadest sense, often referring to anecdotal storytelling, while 'narrative' suggests a veneer of formality (Conle, 2003; Kiernan, 2005). Wajnryb (2003) has suggested that as 'story moves from the individual, introspective domain to the social, more public domain, it emerges as a narrative text' (p. 12). 'Literature' is most often understood to refer to pre-existing written (and sometimes canonical) texts, although the definition of literature has broadened, especially among SLA researchers, to mean any text of imaginative writing that can be utilized by language learners, including poetry and other non-narrative forms. According to Wajnryb, 'experience is the raw material of story' (p. 8). While these stories emerge from the storyteller's lived experience, one's personal stories are not necessarily about oneself. In this study, we have defined learners' personal stories

as short, true stories told or written by language learners using the first-person narrative voice.

Although we are primarily interested in the teaching of ESL, much of the current research on story and language learning focuses on languages other than English. Care must be taken not to extrapolate results from one context to another, but we do believe, however, that adult ESL has much to learn from the broader research that is being done with languages other than English as well as from SLA research with younger learners. We thus consider all of these factors in the following literature review.

Background

Story, narrative, and literature

Weinstein (1999) explained that learner texts can be used in the ESL classroom to develop language skills aligned with learner-identified aims, to introduce themes and topics of interest to the learners, and to create a sense of community in the classroom. Taken together, these three components comprise 'learners' lives as curriculum' (Weinstein; see also Auerbach, 1996). Similar to Weinstein, Wajnryb (2003) identified three ways in which story can be used in the language classroom; that is, it can be used as language learning, genre, and a means of creating what she terms a 'storied classroom,' by which she means using 'story-telling for the purposes of building class cohesion and community' (p. 156). Further, listening to learners' stories will help instructors discover what is important to their students and can 'bring language learning to life' (Weinstein, 2006, p. 159).

Paran (2008) placed 'the relationship between literature and language learning [at] the intersection of two axes' (p. 466), thus creating four quadrants, each of which places varying degrees of emphasis on language pedagogy and literature appreciation (see Figure 1). The extremes of these two axes correspond to Wajnryb's description of story as language learning and story as (literary) genre. Paran identified a form of disconnect between teaching literature and teaching language and suggested that there should be a 'reciprocal relationship between literature and language awareness' in the L2 classroom (p. 484; see also Hoecherl-Alden, 2006; Shanahan, 1997). Because literature can be used to motivate and engage learners and to assist them in noticing connections between form and meaning, Paran concluded that 'literature does have something very special to offer to language

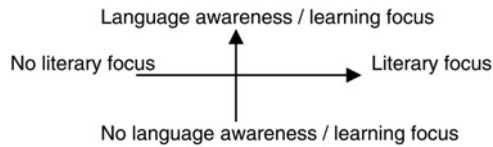


FIGURE 1

The relationship between literature and language (adapted from Paran, 2008)

learning' (p. 490). Learners' own stories can be said to provide a gateway to language learning (Weinstein, 2006).

Benefits of story as language learning

Learning to tell and write effective stories necessarily includes language learning as students increase their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Cortazzi and Jin (2007) tracked the progress of a group of young learners who were using keywords and story maps to tell and retell simple stories, both in their first language (L1) and in English (see also Morgan & Rinvolutri, 1983). They concluded that, as L2 learners are encouraged 'to tell their personal stories, this may help their linguistic and metacognitive development and give credibility to the voice of their experiences' (p. 646). The researchers suggested that a curriculum structured around storytelling would be beneficial to learning and argued for 'the potential of narrative learning: learning to tell stories better and learning in and through the telling' (p. 658).

Benefits of story as genre

Wajnryb (2003) described genre as declarative knowledge of narrative forms. L2 learners must be able to recognize story conventions in their new language; otherwise, stories may be misinterpreted and misunderstood (see also Ko, Schallert, & Walters, 2003; Weist, 2004). L2 learners who do not understand the forms, meanings, and uses of story may respond to a job interviewer who asks, 'Tell me about yourself' with the formulaic chunk, 'I was born. ...' Narrative structures are not static across cultures, and if ESL learners are to succeed in Canadian society, they need to gain awareness of conventions used in particular contexts (e.g., the workplace). Then, they will need to turn their declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge as they learn to

write and tell their own stories within typical L2 narrative structures (Wajnryb, 2003). To accomplish this, extensive practice is required (Jones, 2001; Kiernan, 2005; Ko et al., 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). Knowledge of story genre will serve learners well both in and outside the classroom.

Benefits of story as community building

Wajnryb's (2003) storied classroom, or the creation of a community in a language learning class, is an anticipated outcome of using personal stories in the classroom. Wajnryb identified a duality in the relationship between storytelling and classroom cohesiveness, suggesting that learners' stories establish interpersonal and intrapersonal connections and 'furnish the curriculum with a rich source of interpersonal material that accommodates and addresses the social impulse to interact' (p. 159).

Additional benefits of story

Using authentic texts can lead to enhanced motivation and positive affect for ESL learners. According to Guariento and Morley (2001), learners' own stories are a rich source of authentic material, which provides a genuine purpose, emphasizes real-world goals, fosters classroom interaction, and promotes engagement. 'The desire to tell our stories and be acknowledged in them' is a powerful motivator (Sauvé, 2005, p. 96). The inter/intrapersonal connections identified by Wajnryb (2003) in the storied language classroom can provide a strong incentive for successful language learning as learners engage with their peers. Other researchers and practitioners (e.g., Essig, 2005; Katsuhiko, 2002; Kazuyoshi, 2002) have reported that the sharing of personal stories can have a positive impact on language learning. Shanahan (1997) suggested that the 'affective loading inherent in language can be turned to the learners' advantage' (p. 168) by building on learner successes. Voluntary sharing in a safe and trusting environment can decrease psychological stress and foster a more resilient self-image (Hemenover, 2003). Personal stories can also be used to illustrate hope and healing, portraying writers 'as survivors rather than victims and as persons who ha[ve] shown courage and a capacity to endure' (Stepakoff et al., 2006, p. 930; see also Pupavac, 2008). Simply writing about ongoing personal challenges has been shown to lead to improved health (King & Holden, 1998).

Story and L2 learning

While the notion of using learners' personal stories in L2 classrooms may be under-researched, it is not new. In the late sixties and seventies, proponents of humanistic language learning advocated for greater integration of language learning content with the 'experiences and lives of the learners' (Moskowitz, 1978, p. 11). Moskowitz argued that relating language learning to the lives of learners can have a positive impact on learners and can create a spirit of cooperation in the class. To this end, she included suggestions for a number of tasks, many of which incorporate storytelling skills and the sharing of personal stories.

Story tasks

Tavakoli and Foster (2008) offered a broad definition of task as 'anything that classroom learners do when focusing their attention primarily on what they want to say to others or what others are trying to say to them' (p. 441) and recognized storytelling as a prototypical task. Willis and Willis (2007) identified seven categories of tasks, one of which being 'sharing personal experiences,' (p. 105) and they argued that much 'everyday conversation consists of stories' (p. 142) and that language learners need the tools to participate socially both in and beyond the classroom. Stories like other tasks 'invite the learner to act primarily as a language *user* and not as a language learner' (Van den Branden, 2006, pp. 8–9, emphasis original).

An effective way to engage learners in 'dialogue of current events or critical issues in their lives' (Auerbach, 1996, p. 91) is through the use of the Language Experience Approach (LEA), which entails learners dictating stories about their own experiences and the instructor writing them down. LEA therefore provides a bridge from the spoken to the written word, particularly for lower level proficiency or lower level literacy students. Being emerged in the meaningful context of their own stories helps students learn the new language (Johansson et al., 2000). Stories of their migration and resettlement experiences can also be passed on to children or grandchildren (Magro, 2006/2007).

Some researchers (e.g., Jones, 2001; Morgan & Rinvoluceri, 1983) have proposed using story frameworks, skeletons, or bare-boned stories to scaffold learning and to help learners formulate and tell stories. Welch (2009) proposed that shared kernel stories can become verbal shorthand for the full story in a learning community as members of the group come to know each other's stories. Baergen (2006) referred

to this phenomenon of shared, familiar stories as a ‘class refrain,’ which becomes part of the ‘shared repertoire’ (Wenger, 1998), a source of community coherence. The shared language generated can be used to promote the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Story and the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLBs)

In the *Canadian Language Benchmarks*, Pawlikowska-Smith (2000) acknowledges the importance of story. Stories and storytelling are integrated into Benchmarks 1–8 with increasing complexity and cognitive load. Table 1 provides some of the CLB competencies which include story for the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Specific, detailed performance indicators and conditions vary according to the complexity of the task and the Benchmark level.

Challenges of integrating learners’ personal stories and language learning

Sauvé (2005) cautioned against trivializing learners’ personal experiences by treating the sharing of stories as just another learning technique. While there are clear benefits to integrating learners’ personal stories in the L2 classroom, Norton (2000) identified examples of learners for whom the use of the personal was less successful. Some of the participants in her study did not engage in the activity and their failure to do so was made evident through their failure to listen to their classmates’ stories. Norton further asserted that teachers must be wary of ‘commodifying multicultural histories’ (p. 144). Having students prepare presentations on their histories is not the same as building a storied classroom. Learner storytelling, with no reflection on the intended purpose, process, and curriculum outcomes, is an abdication of the instructor’s role in the L2 classroom (Norton, 2000; see also Auerbach, 2000; Underhill, 1989). Moskowitz (1978) suggested that a merely superficial use of personal stories can, in fact, become impersonal if learners share only ‘factual, superficial data’ with one another (p. 15).

Weinstein (1999) found that some learners were reluctant to speak and share their own stories, particularly if they were new to the classroom community. Borrowing terminology from Wenger (1998), Norton (2001) referred to this silence as ‘non-participation’ and interpreted it as a valid choice. Some learners prefer learning English ‘in a conventional format, studying what [is] in their ESL textbooks’ (Weinstein, p. 29); for these students, visual images are beneficial in eliciting

narratives (e.g., Jones, 2001; Weinstein, 1999). Kirova and Emme (2008) found that using fotonovelas (or photo novellas; that is, using pictures to prompt stories by language learners) opened ‘new spaces for dialogue’ and had ‘the potential to change the author’s and the reader’s self-understanding’ (p. 53).

Learners should be given options for story creation and instructed to keep their audience in mind when planning and sharing stories. Voluntary disclosure of traumatic events in students’ lives may indicate a need for counselling or trigger vicarious traumatization (Cunningham, 2004; O’Halloran & O’Halloran, 2001), and instructors should be prepared to make follow-up referrals to health professionals in these cases. Constructive responses to the disclosure of such events can include, among other things, the generation of biobehavioural, affective-cognitive, relational, and spiritual self-care strategies (O’Halloran & O’Halloran); discussions of the stages of grief and healing; and/or the learners’ development of future hopes and plans to reconstruct their lives (Stepakoff et al., 2006).

Stories and storytelling in the language classroom can provide the means for learners to find their own voice in their new language, first by listening to others’ stories and then by telling their own. Some researchers (Benson & Nunan, 2004; Steinman, 2005) have argued that the traditional dyad of instructors and researchers must be expanded to a triad in order to include the crucial element that is currently missing – the learners’ perspective. As a result, the current study explores all three perspectives.

The current study

A case study approach was used to gather multiple perspectives from instructors and their students on the use of story and its perceived benefits and challenges in adult ESL classrooms at a settlement agency in western Canada.

Participants

Purposive maximum variation sampling was used to select adult ESL instructors who were teaching a wide range of ESL learners across a variety of proficiency levels. Student participants were selected from the instructors’ classes (see the sampling details in the Learners section below).

Instructors

Five female, experienced ESL instructors were interviewed in this study. All of the instructors taught at the same immigrant-serving agency and had used story extensively in their teaching. They taught at various levels, ranging from basic literacy to CLB 4 as well as in multi-level community ESL classes. Some of the instructors also had experience teaching English as a foreign language (EFL).

Learners

Nine adult ESL learners (seven women and two men) participated in this study. These newcomers were from China, India, Japan, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Singapore, and they spoke Mandarin, Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Japanese, Arabic, Urdu, and Cantonese. Eight of the participants had lived in Canada for 1 to 18 months ($M = 8$ months, $SD = 5.64$), whereas one had lived in Canada for considerably longer (36 months). Four students were enrolled in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) classes, and the others were taking an ungraded, community ESL class. Although we wished to interview at least two students from each of the instructors' classes, no interviews were conducted with students from Instructor 4's basic literacy class due to the learners' low level of language proficiency. Therefore, we selected and interviewed two students from classes taught by Instructors 1, 2, and 3, and three learners from Instructor 5's class.

Instruments

Separate, semi-structured interview guides were developed for and piloted with instructors and learners. Interview questions were based on the uses of story identified by Weinstein (1999) and Wajnryb (2003). The questions for the instructors focused on the following: demographics; reflections on purpose, techniques, and strategies for using personal stories; the time when and the ways in which stories were incorporated in classes; benefits, challenges, and recommendations for the use of stories; and suggested resources. Questions for the learners centred on demographics, the use of story in their L1, and their perceptions about telling and writing personal stories in the ESL classroom.

Procedures

Interviews were conducted at the settlement agency, outside of class time. The purpose and nature of the research were explained both verbally and in writing to all participants, and the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was guaranteed. Informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Open discussion toward the end of each interview was encouraged, allowing interviewees to ask questions and add additional comments. All of the participants answered all of the questions, but with varying degrees of elaboration. Instructor interviews ranged in length from 19 to 33 minutes ($M = 28$ min, $SD = 5.79$); those of the learners ranged from 12 to 22 minutes ($M = 17$ min, $SD = 3.82$). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and verified for accuracy by the first author.

The transcribed interviews were then coded for themes based on Wajnryb's (2003) taxonomy. An iterative process was used to categorize and thematically classify the responses to each question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). In several rounds of reading and analyzing the interview transcripts, salient and vital themes and quotations were (a) noted within each transcript, (b) confirmed or refuted in the other transcripts, (c) quantified, and then (d) classified according to Wajnryb's taxonomy. This method of multiple readings and constant comparison throughout the analysis process and after each draft of this manuscript ensured the consistency of the coding and accurate representations of the participants' words.

Results and discussion

All instructors spoke enthusiastically about the value of incorporating learners' stories in their teaching. Instructor 2 talked about 'everyday storytelling,' noting that learners may have 'something special to share,' and Instructor 1 commented that stories 'happen every day, they happen incidentally.' In the following section, we relate the instructors' and learners' comments on story to Wajnryb's (2003) framework (i.e., language learning, genre, community building). Then we discuss the participants' comments in terms of the benefits and challenges of using story in the L2 classroom.

Story as language learning: 'I think if I talk, this words is mine'

In the ESL classes taught by the instructors who participated in this study, story was seen as a medium through which to increase the

richness of the language learning experience. Instructor 4, for example, noted the benefit of 'using these personal stories to bring in so much [new] language.' All five instructors discussed the efficacy of learners' own stories in introducing new vocabulary. In addition to vocabulary acquisition, the instructors used learners' personal stories to develop other language skills and structures. According to Instructor 5, storytelling

also teaches right away [how] to make sentences. It's not only about verbs or nouns or tenses but expressing [meaning] in full and complete sentences. . . . They also learned that even if their vocabulary is quite limited, that even in simple language, they can express meaning.

Instructors generally focused first on meaning in learners' personal stories, paying attention to the mechanics of writing and speaking only after the clear meaning of the story was established and the learner was comfortable with the story format (or story grammar). Repeated emphasis on key story elements (such as setting, theme, plot, resolution) can provide a systematic approach to language learning from one lesson to the next. Instructors incorporated all four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in storytelling tasks in their classes. Some instructors emphasized oral stories over written ones, especially at the lower CLB levels. Instructors 2 and 4 utilized the Language Experience Approach (LEA) in their lower level classes. With these students, Instructor 4 commented that, by seeing their own words written, the learners 'made some connection to . . . the printed word.' This reflects Johansson et al.'s (2000) idea that a meaningful context enhances language acquisition.

Each of the instructors used planning and repetition with their students. Instructor 2 commented that repetition 'is a simple thing, but it works. . . . It gives them time to put [stories] together.' Student 6 reported that retelling stories was easier than telling a story for the first time. These comments are reflective of research that found that increased planning time coupled with task repetition can lead to increased vocabulary, greater accuracy, and a higher degree of fluency in the storytelling task (e.g., Essig, 2005; Jones, 2001; Ko et al., 2003; Lynch & MacLean, 2001; Willis & Willis, 2007).

Telling stories orally first before writing them down was seen to enhance the learners' writing. However, five learners, some of whom were at lower proficiency levels, preferred writing their stories first, suggesting that written composition allowed them more time to organize their thoughts and find the appropriate vocabulary. Two

learners expressed a preference for writing by hand, while three others took advantage of spell check software and online multilingual dictionaries to correct their work while using a computer. As Student 1 said, 'If I'm writing, I will think of more, but talking . . . sometimes my mind is faster but my mouth is slower.' This student also expressed her preference for oral storytelling by noting that reciting words aloud helped her fix new vocabulary in her mind: 'I think if I talk, this words is mine.' Student 4, who felt that she learned new vocabulary by listening, commented that 'when you listen to stories you can get, can take many words, new words.' This notion was echoed by Student 3, who commented, 'I usually get some words . . . words I don't know' from other learners in the classroom.

Story as genre: 'Everyday storytelling'

Learners' personal stories were incorporated in teaching the concept and structure of story, and some instructors established a framework for writing and telling stories in their classes. Students learned about story grammar: beginnings and endings, main and supporting ideas, and the sequencing of narrative. In the literacy class, Instructor 4 used the LEA to write stories dictated by the learners, and these stories then became the class readers, albeit in a very basic form (see Auerbach, 1996). 'It's amazing,' the instructor noted, 'it doesn't matter how often we read this story, it doesn't become old.' In this class, photographs from shared events were used to create picture stories with the text supplied by the learners (see Kirova & Emme, 2008).

All learners expressed familiarity with the idea of story in their L1 and identified a wide number of different genres they enjoyed reading and listening to, such as children's books, mystery, adventure, action, romance, tragedy, biography, folk tales, and oral histories. All students reported that they enjoyed telling stories about themselves and listening to stories about other people. However, few had had an opportunity to write stories in their L1. Student 6, in fact, recalled,

When I was little, in my school, I write some stories. But my mom discourage me. She tell me, 'You concentrate your studies, not story writing.' In my culture, it's different from here so I can't write.

During the interviews, in addition to answering the questions, Students 1, 6, and 7 wanted to tell or read some of their own personal stories. The

stories provided evidence that these learners had developed some understanding of the conventions of storytelling in English (see Wajnryb, 2003).

Story as community building: 'We share each other's stories'

All of the instructors identified community building as a key value in their classrooms. Instructor 1, for instance, talked about creating 'a sense of community, a place to belong.' Instructors 1, 2, and 5 emphasized the importance of creating a safe environment in the classroom, where learners can recognize their similarities and differences and feel comfortable in the group. Incorporating story into their classrooms helped these instructors create Wajnryb's (2003) storied classroom. Instructors identified values such as collaborative learning, the creation of connections with other learners in the class, and increased social interaction as characteristic of a classroom community. These same values have been similarly identified by researchers such as Auerbach (1992, 1996) and Weinstein (1999, 2004). Instructor 3 commented that 'we're human and we need to tell our stories. . . . I think that equips [learners] also so they can build community in the classroom.' Instructor 1 described a learner's story about Japanese beer gardens that precipitated a great deal of laughter in the class. This story became a kernel story or reference point (Welch, 2009) for the class and came up numerous times throughout the session: 'and we all know . . . and so they relate to each other better, so it's a development. It helps connect them, and it's more relaxed, it's more fun and it's of course personal.' A number of studies have identified such stories as a common characteristic of a learning community (Baergen, 2006; Welch, 2009; Wenger, 1998). Researchers have also suggested that reciprocal storytelling provides models for learners' stories (Morgan & Rinvoluceri, 1983). In line with this type of research, instructors interviewed in this study reported telling their own stories to learners.

Although some learners were unable to articulate the abstract concept of community, their comments indicated that they felt their classroom was a place where, as Student 1 said, 'we share each other's stories.' Student 7 stated, 'This is our classroom; we are just learning amongst us all.' Referring to another classmate, Student 2 was enthusiastic, saying, 'We love and enjoying her story.' Student 5 described her class as 'very close' and Student 9 noted that 'everyone works together.' These comments reflect Wajnryb's (2003) notion of classroom cohesiveness.

Authenticity: 'It's a real story'

Instructors identified authenticity as a key component of learners' personal stories, which were described by the instructors as immediate, relevant, intimate, and alive, qualities which correspond to the aspects of authenticity proposed by Guariento and Morley (2001).

Published literature can be used to elicit learner stories. Instructor 1 described how a novel study could lead to a discussion of issues raised in the novel, which in turn 'brings out the personal stories.' Instructor 4 reiterated this comment, suggesting that reading published stories provided 'an opportunity to create our own stories.' However, Instructor 4, who taught a basic literacy class, found that published literature was not always suitable for her literacy students. She commented that 'it's more for me the relevancy for the students.' Learners were eager to assert that their stories were genuine. 'It's a real story' was Student 6's comment after she read her story. 'This be true,' Student 1 declared.

Affect and motivation: 'Energy to think, to remember the words'

Researchers (e.g., Essig, 2005; Katsuhiko, 2002; Kazuyoshi, 2002) have recognized that story contributes to positive affect in the language classroom. All instructors and seven of the learners in this study, in fact, asserted that personal stories contribute to positive affect. Instructor 1 commented that stories developed 'a sense of ease and understanding' and Instructor 2 suggested that sharing stories brought 'confidence; [learners] have to be comfortable in the group.' Positive affect led to increased motivation, engagement, and focus on learning. Instructor 1 continued, 'They want to tell their stories. They want to share their culture; they want to know about each other.' As Wajnryb (2003) suggested, the development of personal relationships through the sharing of stories can be a powerful motivator. Other practitioners and researchers (e.g., Johansson, et al., 2000; Sauv e, 2005; Shanahan, 1997) have acknowledged the motivation that results from learners telling and writing their own stories. Instructor 3 commented that, with stories, 'We're just more alert, and [it's] not just very distant and abstract grammar rules. . . . I think there's a very strong motivation, which is very helpful for learning when you bring it to the personal.' These insights were echoed by Instructor 5, who suggested that using personal stories 'pulls learning out of the dryness and the discipline, and it makes learning fun.'

Learners, too, spoke enthusiastically about the ways that story engaged them in the classroom. Student 4 talked about the instructor giving 'energy to think, to remember the words and . . . the story.' Student 8 suggested that 'We learn easily from the stories,' while Student 7 commented that 'stories are one medium which attracts we people; . . . it is making classroom interesting.' These statements are reminiscent of the connection that Sauv  (2005) makes between the desires to tell stories and to receive recognition for them.

Challenges of using learners' stories: 'I face them straight on'

Although all five instructors were enthusiastic proponents of learners' stories, all of them recounted challenges associated with their use in the classroom. Instructors offered examples of issues that had arisen through storytelling in their classes: arranged marriages; natural disasters experienced by the students; the fear of rape in a student's country of origin; and religious, ethical, and moral issues such as organ donation. Instructor 1 emphasized that students took the lead in raising and discussing controversial issues such as these. This practice echoes a recommendation made by advocates of participatory education (e.g., Auerbach, 1992; Weinstein, 1999) that stipulates that learners should be encouraged to exercise choices about the themes and topics explored in the classroom. The students' selection and sharing of issues that arise in many people's lives, such as change, grief, and trauma, can promote individual agency among learners as they reconstruct their sense of self and come to understand their life histories (Harklau, 2000; Hemenover, 2003; Stepakoff et al., 2006). As Instructor 3 reflected, '[sharing] personal histories . . . can be empowering.' Instructor 1 commented that when a controversial issue arose in the classroom, it was faced 'straight on' and discussed with the class regardless of the subject matter. For example, Instructor 4 noted, 'we have shared bad news. . . . [I]f someone has died in Somalia, we recognize that bad news happens, too.' Despite the challenges posed by the storied classroom, Instructor 3 argued that 'if you were continually staying at the same kind of personal story, not getting outside of that box,' the learning would not be as enriching.

Researchers such as Auerbach (2000) and Weinstein (1999) have also stressed the importance of respecting learners' choices. Student 3, for example, commented that although they had all told their arrival stories in the classroom, 'I want to talk about my inside more detail.' One challenge noted by Instructor 3, however, was that when learners do not want to share, 'you have to respect people's silences.' This is in

alignment with Norton's (2001) argument that choosing not to participate is a valid choice. Respect for the learner was a common theme that emerged from all of the instructors' comments.

Limitations of the study

Although some low proficiency learners were not able to respond to the interview questions as articulately and as elaborately as the higher proficiency learners, they were nonetheless eager to discuss their storytelling experiences and were able to respond to all of the questions. We acknowledge that the views expressed by the small group of participants in this study cannot be generalized to apply to all ESL instructors and learners. Further research into the connections between personal story and L2 learning is required, particularly with regard to the systematic development of language structures and outcomes. However, the insights from the instructors and learners in this study clearly support the value of incorporating personal stories into the ESL classroom.

Implications and guidelines for the ESL classroom

Several second language researchers have examined the impact of personal stories on L2 learning at lower proficiency levels (e.g., Auerbach, 1992, 2000; Weinstein, 1999). Although Abrahamson (1998) wrote about higher education in general and not L2 learning specifically, he suggested that teaching through stories could be beneficial to all and argued that stories can 'provide a context for active learning and remarkable ownership of that learning by students' (p. 448). However, as our results indicate, storytelling in L2 classrooms must be introduced and used with sensitivity.

The following guidelines for the use of story have been compiled both from the literature and from the data collected in this study. It is recommended that instructors:

- respect learners and their right to non-participation (suggest journaling as an alternative);
- develop a sense of community in their classes so that students feel comfortable sharing their personal stories in a non-judgmental, trusting atmosphere;
- value the wealth of learners' personal stories and experiences;

- be willing to share some of their own stories with their students;
- start with low-risk activities (e.g., an image bank to generate stories);
- focus initially on meaning rather than form;
- identify elements of the stories that support curriculum objectives and outcomes, and use these elements as foci for language instruction;
- use planning and repetition to enhance story development and language learning;
- be prepared to deal with controversial or difficult issues as they arise.

To assist instructors in following these recommendations, we developed a list of selected resources endorsed by the instructors who participated in this study (see Appendix A).

Conclusion

For the small but enthusiastic group of ESL instructors and learners interviewed for this study, telling and listening to personal stories provided opportunities not only for enhanced language learning, an understanding of genre, and the creation of a new English-speaking community in Canada, but also for greater authenticity, affect, and motivation in the classroom. Recall Student 6, whose mother discouraged her from writing stories. Later in our interview, she read aloud a 300-word story that she had written for her ESL class. Well-composed and poignant, her story was about a young boy, uneducated and trapped in poverty, who lived in her parents' home in Pakistan. 'It is not,' she reflected, 'a story of a single boy. It is a story of thousands of children in my country. . . . I think what can I do for them.' When asked what she hoped people who heard her story would do, she had a ready answer: 'I hope they think about this matter, and maybe they want to do something about this, about poverty and child labour.' This ESL learner recognized the power of story and storytelling.

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Appendix A

Selected resources

- Gargiulo, T.L. (2007). *Once upon a time: Using story-based activities to develop breakthrough communication skills*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons. Although this book is designed for business communication and not for language teaching, it does contain some very good storytelling activities, many of which can be adapted to the ESL classroom.
- Maley, A., & Duff, A. (1982). *Drama techniques in language learning: A resource book of communication activities for language teachers*. (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This book focuses on drama and not storytelling, but the authors have some suggestions for incorporating personal stories into dramatic activities.
- Moskowitz, G. (1978). *Caring and sharing in the foreign language classroom*. Boston: Newbury House. Many of the activities in Moskowitz's book are dated, but well worth another look.
- Ray, B., & Seely, C. (1997). *Fluency through TPR storytelling: Achieving real language acquisition in school*. (3rd ed.). Bakersfield, CA: Command Performance Language Institute. Total Physical Response (TPR) has been used successfully in storytelling with lower level learners.
- Wajnryb, R. (2003). *Stories: Narrative activities in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. In this text, brief theoretical

sections are followed by examples and sample activities for using story in each of the three ways described by the author (i.e., story as language learning, story as genre, and story as a means of creating a 'storied classroom' [p. 156]).

Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). *Doing task-based teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. This is a practical guide to task-based learning and it includes some excellent storytelling tasks.

Writers at Work Series

Singleton, J. (2005). *Writers at work: The paragraph*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strauch, A.O. (2005). *Writers at work: The short composition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zemach, D.E., & Stafford-Yilmaz, L. (2008). *Writers at work: The essay*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This series comes highly recommended from one of the instructors in the study. The first book in the series, *The Paragraph*, is written for high beginner / low intermediate learners and focuses on personal topics.

TABLE 1
 Story and the *Canadian Language Benchmarks*¹

Skill	CLB level	Competency outcomes and standards; examples of texts and tasks
Listening	1	Listen to a story about someone and complete a simple guided text by filling in blanks with facts that you heard.
	2	Listen to short interviews about basic personal information between a student and a teacher.
	3	Get the gist, key information and important factual details in a story about a personal experience.
	4	Demonstrate comprehension of mostly factual details and some inferred meanings in a story.
	5	Demonstrate comprehension of the gist, factual details and some inferred meanings by listening to a descriptive or narrative text.
	6	Listen to a story that includes explanations and examples. Suggest an appropriate conclusion to a story based on inference.
Speaking	3	Tell a story about personal experience.
	4	Relate a story about an everyday activity in a coherent narrative (connected discourse).
	5	Tell a detailed story (e.g., historical, biographical).
	6	Tell a detailed story that includes reasons and consequences.
	7	Tell a story that includes future scenarios.
Reading	8	Tell a story, which includes an anecdote.
	1	Read a very short story about someone and complete a simple three to five sentence guided text by filling in blanks with the facts from the story.
	6	Read a story; retell or summarize the story.
Writing	7	Paraphrase main points of a story that includes a scenario; begin to read very simple adult fiction for pleasure.
	4	Describe an event or tell a story (e.g., write about coming to Canada). Write about your work experience in the past.
	5	Write a paragraph describing an event/incident, or telling a story from your experience.
	6	Write a detailed story or report an incident based on a series of pictures, a film clip or a personal experience.
	7	Write two or three paragraphs to narrate a familiar sequence of events from the past; to tell a story.
	8	Write three or four paragraphs to narrate a historical event; to tell a story.

¹Pawlikowska-Smith, G. (2000). *Canadian language benchmarks 2000: English as a second language for adults*. Ottawa, ON: Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. Also available online at http://www.language.ca/display_page.asp?page_id=254