

How to Tell Stories in Classrooms

by Dr Wajuppa Tossa¹

Long before folktales were written down, they had been orally transmitted from generation to generation. The first and most important function of folktales is to entertain. While being entertained, listeners will certainly absorb valuable lessons inherent in the tales that also serve as the “repository of history, language, culture and values, and their spiritual functions.”²

The folktales from 12 Asian countries in this collection are meant for teachers to use for children’s entertainment. The “entertainment value” of these folktales serves as the door that opens the children’s minds to understanding the cultures of their neighbouring countries. It is important then for the teachers to “tell” the tales to entertain children foremost. That way, the teachers captivate children’s attention. However, it is important to note that “storytelling is relating a tale to one or more listeners through voice and gesture. It is not the same as reading a story aloud or reciting a piece from memory or acting out a drama—though it shares common characteristics with these arts.”³

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² Dorji Penjore, “Folktales and Education: Role of Bhutanese Folktales in Value Transmission” *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 2005 : 12 Summer, p. 47-73.

³ From the National Council of Teachers of English, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096. Tel: 800-369-6283 (Toll Free). Full text at <http://www.ncte.org/positions/story.html>.



Some teachers may feel intimidated because they may think they are neither traditional nor professional storytellers. Actually, storytelling is simple because it is merely a form of communication from the heart of the storyteller to the heart of the listener. As long as the stories come from the heart of the teacher, the children will receive them with their hearts. Thus, the teachers should be confident and begin telling the stories to children as soon as they have read and understood them. As Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald often states, “there is no right or wrong way of telling stories; your way is the best way.” For variety, some advice and suggestions on ways of telling the stories are also included here.

The first tip of telling these tales is to read the entire collection of the tales which have been neatly categorized in simple groupings of “Animals, Food, Nature, People, and Places,” followed by a reference to the countries of origin of the folktales. Some of these tales were written to be told (“tellable⁴”) and some were written to be read (“readable⁵”). The language used in “tellable” stories is polished, precise, and poetic. Oftentimes, simple poems, songs, and memorable phrases are added for the audience to echo or recite along with the teller when telling the tales. Included in this group are the introductory and closing stories, A Drop of Honey and Human Age, respectively, and the tales from Brunei Darussalam, Nokhoda Manis and The Mighty Babau. These tales are made ready to be told. If teachers read the stories a few times, they could retell the stories to the children right away as long as they keep the gist and structure of the stories. In telling this group of tales, the teachers introduce the pure art of storytelling to children; that is, the art of using voice and gesture in

⁴ Dr. Margaret Read MacDonald coined the term to refer to tales that have been written in a ready to tell manner.

⁵ I call this group “readable” tales to correspond to Dr. MacDonald’s term in storytelling.

telling the tales. It is also useful to teach the children to tell stories using this technique.

In teaching the children to tell the stories, the teachers need to emphasize that the children deliver the stories from their hearts and tell the stories directly to the hearts of others who listen to them. Children should be encouraged to take a role of a caretaker when they tell stories. They should be reminded that storytellers are not actors or stars on stage. They must instead try as much as they can to encourage the participation of the audience in the storytelling. When they do that, their storytelling is complete as the National Storytelling Network in the United States of America says.⁶

Storytelling is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener's imagination.

Another tip of storytelling techniques that teachers could introduce to children is the use of pause before telling a story to indicate to the audience that “something extraordinary is about to begin.”⁷ Then, begin telling the story with “special care” in the opening phrase. Be confident and deliberate when telling the story, particularly at the very beginning. The ending is equally important. The last phrase must be memorable, “careful, deliberate, and perfect.” After telling the story, another pause is important; “stand quietly for a moment to allow your audience to return to reality.”⁸

⁶ National Storytelling Network, USA. www.storynet.org/resources/knowledgebank/whatisstorytelling.html.

⁷ Wajuppa Tossa and Margaret Read MacDonald, *Folktales and Storytelling*, Ma hasarakham: Self Publication, 2008. pp, 2 and 5.

⁸ Loc.cit.

All other tales in the collection belong to the second group of tales. For this group of tales, teachers can still retell the tales orally. They may need to add songs, rhymes, and memorable phrases, along with gestures, in the delivery of the tales. After that, teachers could combine various techniques in presenting the stories to the children such as reading aloud, role-play, reader's theatre, drama, music, dance, puppetry, illustrations, short movie productions, and so on.

The techniques of reading aloud, role-play, music, and drama may be familiar to most teachers. Thus, I would like to introduce reader's theatre and others. Reader's theatre allows many children in the class to participate in the telling of the stories. Teachers need to write the chosen tale in reader's theatre script⁹. They may also teach the older children to write their own reader's theatre scripts or play scripts from the tales in this collection. After the teachers' revisions, the children could perform their own scripts.

Besides storytelling in the classroom, other activities could be incorporated into the use of these tales. For some stories from Indonesia, Brunei, and Malaysia for example, the teachers may use shadow puppetry in retelling the stories. They could bring the children to watch shadow puppet shows. In some cases, video-tapes of traditional puppet performances could be shown to the children. Afterward, the children will create their own puppets from hard paper for use in a performance.

⁹ For reference in writing reader's theater script the teacher may use Aaron Shepard's examples (www.aaronshp.com/rt/RTE.html) as well as those from other websites: www.teachingheart.net/readerstheater.htm, www.literacyconnections.com/Reader'sTheater.php, <http://bms.westport.k12.ct.us/mccormick/rt/RTHOME.htm>, to name a few.

Some of the stories could also be retold using the techniques of other traditional performances. The teachers could invite traditional performers to tell some of the tales in schools. In Thailand, there are various kinds of puppet performances from which the children could learn to recreate their own performances. In Vietnam, particularly in Hanoi, water puppet performances could be shown to the children and have the children recreate their own water puppet show. The teacher could videotape the children's performances and show these videos to other classes.

The last suggestion for the use of this folktale collection is to draw illustrations from the tales. Teachers could identify children with artistic talents in drawing or painting who could be assigned to interpret scenes from some stories. Afterward, the pictures could be used in retelling the stories in Kamishibai Theater¹⁰, which uses illustrated paper scrolls and cards propped on a small "stage" to tell stories. Apart from Kamishibai, teachers could teach children to make picture-books. All of these forms of arts could be incorporated in the use of this folktale collection.

In conclusion, the tales in the collection could be told as pure storytelling using just voice and gestures and as materials for other activities such as reading aloud, role-play, reader's theatre, drama, music, dance, puppetry, illustrations, short movie productions, and others. Teachers could begin by telling stories to children and then they could find ways to encourage the children to take part as the storytellers, actors, actresses, or producers of the artistic activities. After the children have taken part in the telling, listening, and acting out the plays, we can be sure that they have enjoyed and understood their own stories as well as stories of children from their neighbouring countries.

¹⁰ There are many websites on the use and the production of Kamishibai Theater such as www.kamishibai.com/PDF/kamishibaistage.pdf, www.kamishibai.com/history.html, and so on.