

UDC 881:372.881

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Story reading as an effective tool of developing English language fluency

Abstract. In this article we share our experience of using short stories in language learning process in Kazakh groups. Our practice of using stories proves that they develop positive attitude towards foreign language and foreign language learning. Stories can be taken in different proficiency level classrooms – from beginners to the advanced. There is a big variety of activities teachers can do with stories. In order to achieve efficiency in the use of stories as a learning material the following conditions should necessarily be satisfied: the story should be carefully chosen; all the activities should be thoroughly prepared and well worked out; goals and objectives should be clear to every student; all students should be involved in each activity at every stage; teacher should do his best to make a story based lesson a challenging, instructive, educational and an enjoyable experience; successful implementation of the lesson plan depends very much on the ability of the teacher to create the positive, friendly and low stress atmosphere in the process of discussion. The teacher should encourage all the group students to be active and feel at-ease since story reading lesson is predominantly a student-centered activity.

Key words: storytelling, story reading, implementation, proficiency, context, fiction, translation.

Introduction

Stories are a vital part of human life. Since prehistoric times all cultures passed along through the oral tradition of telling stories, legends, fairy tales, parables, they have been an essential part of our humanness. We grow up with stories we hear from our parents, teachers, friends and just strangers we happen to come by in our live. And as adults we start creating our own stories. Actually man's life itself is a long and very interesting story, isn't it? Actually we are who we are through stories.

Through stories we learn about people, cultures, plants, animals, objects, places and all the other things around us. We also learn the roles we play in the lives of other people and things, and the roles they play in our lives. There is a power in storytelling. As Madeleine L'Engle wrote «stories make us more alive, more human, more courageous, more loving» [1]. We refer to stories – myths, legends, fairy stories, fables, parables and written fiction in particular short stories.

In this paper we are going to share our experience of using short stories in language learning process in Kazakh groups. Our practice of using stories proves

that they develop positive attitude towards foreign language and foreign language learning. Why short stories? In Abram's point of view a short story is «a narrative that can be read at one sitting of from one half-hour to two to hours» and is a very suitable material to use in classroom. Short stories can serve an excellent learning material for developing all five language skills: reading, speaking, listening, writing and translation [2]. Besides, reading and discussion, stories teach young people morals, life principles, they inspire and give meaning to their lives, help shape their opinions and sometimes find solutions to some intricate life situations. They provoke a shared response of various feelings as joy, sympathy, compassion, sadness.... Quoting Friere, «...teaching cannot be a process of transference of knowledge from the one teaching to the learner. ... Learning is a process where knowledge is presented to us, then shaped through understanding, discussion and reflection.» [3]

Methods

Stories can be taken in different proficiency level classrooms – from beginners to the advanced.

With great pleasure do they listen to and read stories, participate in the discussion of content and make inferences. There is a big variety of activities teachers can do with stories. In order to achieve efficiency in the use of stories as a learning material the following conditions should necessarily be satisfied:

- The story should be carefully chosen. The title and the content should motivate the students to read or listen to the story. It is good if the content of the story is a thought provoking one.
- All the activities should be thoroughly prepared and well worked out.
- Goals and objectives should be clear to every student.
- All students should be involved in each activity at every stage. Each student should be given an opportunity to express his/her opinion and ideas as well as share his/her life experience.
- Teacher should do his best to make a story based lesson a challenging, instructive, educational and an enjoyable experience.
- Successful implementation of the lesson plan depends very much on the ability of the teacher to create the positive, friendly and low stress atmosphere in the process of discussion. As a rule, only students with high level of proficiency feel confident to express their opinions and ideas, while students with low proficiency are reluctant to speak out. The teacher should encourage the latter to be active and feel at-ease.
- This condition concerns error correction. The teacher should encourage continued speech of students giving them 'the green light' not interrupting for minor 'local' mistakes so as not to discourage from attempting to speak. But 'global' errors should be corrected if they hinder comprehension of some aspects of the message. It will be right to do analysis of errors in the end of the discussion.

Implementing stages of story-based lesson

In the present paper we intend to share our experience of working with a short story «Going Home» by Pete Hamill [4]. As a rule, we start a lesson with providing information about the author of the story, the social and the historical context of the work and the purpose of the writer.

The story under consideration was written in October 1971 by the newspaper columnist Pete Hamill for the «New York Post». When we first read the story we were touched by the idea and meaning of a yellow ribbon, a wonderful tradition practiced by Americans. When America is involved in overseas military actions, US communities display

yellow ribbons to symbolize the hope that their sons and daughters will return home safely. From this story we learn about the fate of a worried, lonely man, Vingo by name. The plot of the story «Going Home» is centered around the idea of a yellow handkerchief which was a reminder that an absent father and husband would be welcomed home. Vingo, the father of three children, for violating a social norm was in jail and in the story he is returning back home after four years. He asks his wife to put yellow handkerchiefs on the big oak tree if she forgives his wrongdoing and takes him back. It is our idea that Pete Hamill has changed a yellow ribbon for a yellow handkerchief since Vingo has a quite different life story.

Using this story as a language material is beneficial not only from the standpoint of language instruction but it also can serve as 'developer' of young people. Reading Pete Hamill's story and discussion of its content encourage students to think about family values, social responsibility and personal relationships. We believe it advisable, especially, in intermediate level groups, to start a story reading activity with the pre-reading discussion of the idea of «home» since the title of the story is «Going Home». The goal is to raise the learners' interest, and help them identify what the text is about. Pre-reading exercises can take different forms, but mainly, they are learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. The teacher can put the following questions:

What does home mean to you?

How do you understand the meaning of the saying «Home is where the heart is»?

Can you give the Kazakh equivalent of the proverb «Home Sweet Home»?

These questions help introduce the topic, raise their interest in the story and prepare their minds for an interesting and useful story reading activity.

Prior to actually reading of the story text we introduce the key vocabulary: a list of unfamiliar words and word combinations, idiomatic expressions and set phrases. It is recommended to practice pronunciation of unfamiliar words and give their equivalents in the students' native language as well as set phrases and idiomatic expressions that may hinder comprehension of the content.

Reading

After the word study activity is thoroughly done the next stage begins – reading the text aloud. Students start reading the story aloud one after another. Reading aloud is a special skill in which improvement can be made in a short time. In this

activity special attention should be paid to the correct pronunciation of every word, to the sentence stress and intonation. During the reading, to see if the learners understand the language of the story, the teacher can stop the reading and ask questions. One very provocative question might be «What is going to happen next?»

Translation

The reading activity is followed by a translation activity. It is our strong belief that the storytelling activities should necessarily include translation of the text of the story. Although there still exists a controversy over the «should translation skills be developed or not?» dilemma among theorists of the English language teaching methodology, we consider translation to be an essential skill, preparing our students for real life situations in the epoch of globalization. Lately translation is recognized as the fifth skill and the most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding.

We live in the time of integration, communication and interaction with the outer world. The translation skill should necessarily be developed in our students. We consider translation to be an integral and inalienable part of a storytelling/reading activity.

Translation of the story will help students understand the nuances of the content, identify differences in structure and vocabulary of the two languages, clarify the peculiarities of grammar and word order and find the appropriate ways of transferring these features to the native language.

Students are directly exposed to contrasting language systems of the target and the native languages. The importance of translation also lies in learning by students the ways of translation into the Kazakh language of some grammar structures, word meanings, idioms, speech patterns and others, missing in the native language, e.g. modal verbs, articles, prepositions that do not exist in Kazakh. Translation activity develops the students' sensitivity to the stylistic characteristics of the text. Actually, translation is a creative process, which sharpens intuition, emotions and perception to the subtleties of meaning [5].

After reading activities

There is a large variety of after-reading activities that can be done at the lesson. In order to internalize the active vocabulary we have created different exercises based on a story. These are the gap-fill exercises, translation exercises, making sentences and giving contexts using the active vocabulary. The next activity which we often use is retelling of

the story. It is desirable that retelling of the story should be undertaken after a thorough vocabulary work.

The students start retelling the story in sequence reconstructing the events and facts in their own words and using the active vocabulary. Retelling, in our opinion, is one of the best ways of developing fluency. Fluency being one of the most complicated skills for the students to acquire and retelling practice can be a good reason and opportunity to do so.

It should be noted that retelling of the story is not an easy task for low proficiency level students. The teacher should ask stimulating questions about the content of the text so as to encourage the students to speak, express their ideas and opinions creatively. These are the key questions which are usually put:

- 1) What is the title of the story?
- 2) Who are the characters?
- 3) What happened at the beginning?
- 4) What happened in the middle?
- 5) What happened in the end?

While retelling the students also polish up their grammar and vocabulary skills and pronunciation.

After retelling the story we usually give our students the task to formulate questions about the content of the story. Questions play an important role in classroom management. Question-answer activity is one of the most powerful tools of effective foreign language learning. These are some benefits that teachers and students get from this type of work –improve students' question-asking practice, master the art of asking correct and good questions, motivate student learning and fuel curiosity, foster intellectual development, stimulate critical thinking abilities and assess understanding of the message of the story.

Usually, students ask different questions, as «Where were young people going?», «At what street did they get on the bus?», or «What story did Vingo tell the young people?»

Sometimes students put entirely unanticipated questions like «What kind of crime did Vingo commit?», since the main character was in jail for four years. «Did his three children know where their father was?», «Why did he write to his wife that she might find a new guy?», «Why didn't his wife write letters to him?». Of course, in the story there are no answers to these questions. Such kind of questions, as a rule, trigger very interesting and, in many cases, heated discussion among students. They try to make different kinds of assumptions. These questions demonstrate that the events described in the story and the fates of characters excite our students'

minds. It is not by chance that Kazakh students put such kind of questions because the subject matter of the story is worth caring about. It is our observation that discussion of the story predominantly centers around the family values, the idea of home, parents and children, family relationships. These notions are deeply rooted in Kazakh culture.

In our culture family is a close-knit unit. For us, Kazakhs, family consists of not only parents, brothers and sisters but also grandparents, aunts, uncles, all of who provide a vital support network in child care and child rearing. The children in Kazakh families are very attached to their parents. In many families it is not welcomed that children make independent decisions. In Kazakh families the role of fathers is tremendous. They influence the lives of the entire family. They are the moral protector and bread winners. They provide for the family by working, disciplining and nurturing his children. They take the most important decisions in the family. From early childhood children are brought up to respect their father, to obey him, to listen to his advice and instructions.

From this point of view, the story «Going Home» is a powerful story. It is an excellent resource for bringing students into discussion of many humane values and engaging them in thoughtful work. One more vital question the story raises is the topic of faith and forgiveness. Students learn about a wonderful American tradition connected with the yellow ribbon which is the symbol of love and forgiveness.

Here are some discussion points which can stimulate students to speak:

What do you think about the behavior of characters?

Who in the story shows a positive behavior?
Who in the story shows a negative behavior?

What is your impression of young people whom Vingo met on the bus?

Might there be something about the story that you might like to change? What messages, morals, and meanings do you get from the story? Is there a lesson to be learned from this story?

As a rule, we give all the students freedom to express their ideas. Discussion is the most interesting part of the story reading activity. The desire to express their opinions makes students purpose-driven, which, in its turn, stimulates the development of their speech skills and fluency. It is a well known truth that any communicative act is always purpose-driven, since it starts from a desire

to say something. So students try to formulate their personal opinions thus activating their grammatical competence and trying to use the appropriate to the situation words in their vocabulary stock. They do their best to organize their idea into a cohesive and coherent whole in order to communicate it to their classmates. This part of a story-based lesson is most effective for the development of fluency. As we take other stories we see that by and by they develop their critical ability to ask questions, they are able to speak out their personal ideas, they get rid of fear to make mistakes and become more confident to use spoken English.

Here we come to the part of our paper when we need to make a decision for ourselves related to the following questions: 'To correct or not to correct mistakes?', 'How to correct mistakes?', 'Which mistakes should the teacher correct?'

Our strategy concerning this important part of story reading / telling lesson is unconditionally, mistakes must be corrected. We are of the view that mistakes are inevitable in a foreign language learning process. The question is 'When, how and which mistakes should be corrected?'

As we have already stated the teacher should encourage continued speech of students not interrupting their flow of speech for minor 'local' mistakes so as not to discourage them from attempting to express their ideas. But 'global' errors should be corrected if they hinder comprehension of some aspects of the message. It will be right to do analysis of errors in the end of the discussion.

Conclusion

In this paper we wrote about our experience of using short stories in language learning process in Kazakh groups. The valuable point of using stories as a language material is that they develop positive attitude towards foreign language and foreign language learning. Stories serve an excellent opportunity for teaching a foreign language in a meaningful and pleasant way.

Using the story as a language material is beneficial not only from the standpoint of language instruction but it also can serve as 'developer' of young people. These are some benefits that teachers and students gain from this type of work – improve students' question-asking practice, master the art of asking correct and good questions, motivate student learning and fuel curiosity, foster intellectual development, stimulate critical thinking abilities and assess understanding of the message of the story.

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