The stories they tell

Yi Wang uses learners' stories for adult beginners' literacy development.

For many teachers in the ESOL community, it is not uncommon that learners are from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, but teaching is required to be inclusive. A potential challenge in this is finding 'right' teaching materials which cater for each individual learner's needs, especially learners with limited literacy. I encountered this when teaching an Intensive Literacy and Numeracy course (ILN, see Tertiary Education Commission, 2017) two years ago in a New Zealand language centre. In seeking a solution, I started to create my own resources using bits and pieces of classroom chats with students about their everyday life. As this turned out nicely interesting and rewarding, a learner-story-based approach took shape. Key to the approach is acknowledging what students bring into class, providing opportunities for their voices/stories to be heard, and helping them to build up competence and confidence to 'write/ speak up' their own stories in English.

The learners

The learners under discussion are groups of refugees and migrants who are living in New Zealand permanently and will be here for life. Geographically they are from various places in Asia, Africa and South America – China, Cambodia, Burma, Afghanistan, Syria, Morocco, Columbia, to name a few – the number of countries reaching 10 for a class of under 20 students. Their situations differ greatly, aged from early 20s to over 70, in all kinds of family roles including singles, parents and grandparents, families being together in NZ or with part of them elsewhere. With previous education ranging from professional degrees to zero formal schooling, their English is between pre-literate to CEFR A2. Many of these learners fall into Spiegel & Sunderland's (2006: 15) description as 'a basic literacy learner', who is 'still learning to read a short simple text and struggles to write a simple sentence independently.

Defining literacy

While the term literacy is much used to describe one's language competence, a broad definition of literacy highlights its close association with one's everyday life. According to UNESCO (2008: 18), 'A person is literate who can with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his (her) everyday life.' New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission (2009: 58) states similarly, emphasising the ability to apply language skills and knowledge to 'meet the varied demands of their personal study and work lives'; they then advocate for an Embedded Literacy and Numeracy (ELN) approach calling for multiple skills in one course so as to provide learners with 'the competence, confidence and motivation needed for them to succeed at work and in life' (Tertiary Education Commission, 2016). To conclude, it is perhaps fair to say that the primary role for an ESOL teacher is to help learners to tell own their stories.

What stories?

A simple answer to this question is ANY.

Each individual learner joins the class with a train of 'historical' stories, about themselves, their families, cultures, moving to a new country and so on. They also have current news to share (e.g. studying a new course or getting a driver's licence) as well as facing varied challenges (e.g. getting a ticket or not understanding the doctor). Apart from these physical or worldly matters, they also (unavoidably) encounter other cross-cultural problems, maybe causing mental

confusion or discomfort (e.g. cultural appropriateness of some questions). All these real-life situations and scenarios could be brought into class for discussion, consultation and further process; most importantly, these are truly valuable authentic learning resources.

The following is a list of topics I have discussed with my 'basic literacy learners', many of which were written up into stories – briefly or substantially – for students to further study or practise on (numbering not indicating sequence but for referencing purpose).

- #1. Our new class
- #2. Self and family
- #3. My work
- #4. Hamilton / Hillcrest / Wintec / my house
- #5. My Sunday routine
- #6. Term break – One-day trip to Auckland / My last travel to China
- #7. Special days and celebrations
- #8. Daily greetings (welcome back, day, date, weather …)
- #9. Weekly book reading
- #10. Picnic & shopping
- #11. Labour Day Weekend
- #12. Healthy food / lifestyle
- #13. Hearing someone sick
- #14. Someone being late
- #15. Enjoy your lunch
- #16. A new student Dion / Another new student Eliana
- #17. My language learning experience
- #18. A special class (different students on different tasks)

As shown, some of these topics are general 'old ESOL friends' (e.g. #2), some more specific and quite local (e.g. #4), some directly students' personal stories (#16), and some on really small episodes (e.g. #13 and #14). However,

they all can be made into proper learning stories, big or small, long or short, in the form of conversation or composition, depending on the purpose of learning and language/skills targeted. The following provides two examples on topics #3 (jobs, simple patterns, everyone included) and #14 (unexpected and unpleasant situations made into a happy learning story with many language points to pick up).

#3

Alice is a student in New Zealand, but she was a doctor in China. She worked in the hospital to help people with their health.

Nadia is a housewife. Blanca is a housewife. They are housewives. They work at home and make their home nice, so they are the homemakers.

#14

Today is 10 September Wednesday. We have English classes with Teacher Wang Yi. **However**, *she was late today* **because** *the lift in her office building was* <u>out of order</u>. *She needed the lift* **because** *she had many books and dictionaries, and they are very heavy.* **Because of that**, *she* <u>apologised</u> *to the class – she said, "I'm sorry I'm late", but the students were very kind and they said, "That's fine. No worries, teacher". So there was no problem, and everyone laughed.*

***Then,** Asha was late. She was late because she takes a bus to come to school every day but today the bus was late.*

***Next,** Luz was late. She was late because she got a sore arm, so she made an appointment with the doctor and she went to the hospital.*

*<mark>**Finally,**</mark> Mariamu was late. She was late because her son was sick.*

It's a sad thing to hear someone is sick or unwell. When that happens, **first,** *people often say 'I'm sorry to hear that.'* **Then** *they often ask 'What's the matter/problem?'* <mark>**At last,**</mark> *people say 'Take care, and get well soon.'*

Many people were late today, but we learned many useful words and sentences from their stories.

How are the stories developed, used and reused?
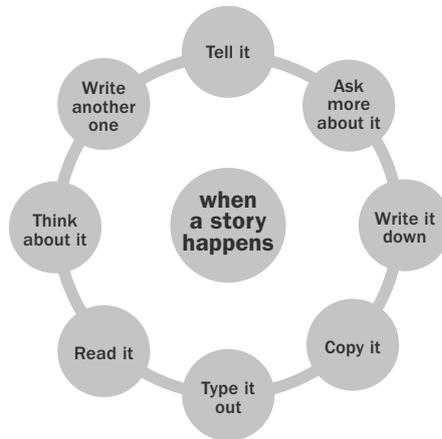
The flow chart illustrates a complete cycle from (someone) telling a story to (everyone) producing a new one. Please note not all stories necessarily go through all these steps, nor do they go in the given sequence – nothing fixed or linear, but a basket of options only.

■ Tell it

The story initiator could be a student (e.g. #13 when Luz came in late saying 'sorry I late because I sick') or me (e.g. #7 when it happened to be the Chinese Moon Festival). In the student's case, make them the centre and the teacher (using the whiteboard if necessary) and help them to make every point clear to everyone. For example, when a new student named *Mpundu* was introducing her two languages *Kinynrwanda* and *Swahiri*, we tried hard to 'study' the unusual words, syllables, pronunciation, and linking words 'one … the other …'.

■ Ask more about it

This is the key session for the whole class to co-construct the story where there are ample opportunities for students to ask questions, negotiate meaning and clarify points. Meanwhile, I stand aside facilitating the discussion; when opportunity comes, I 'lift' the discussion to an upper level. The extract below illustrates.

T: Where are you from, Mpundu?

M: I'm from Congo.

T: Where is Congo, everybody? Asia?

Ss: No, no, no. South Africa.

T: Ah … now do you have any questions about Mpundu?

S1:   Er … Mpundu (mispronunciation), do you have a family?

M: Yes … I have a family, I have four brothers and one sister.

Ss: Four brothers! How old? And how old are you?

T: Well, hang on … is this a good question? Do you have to tell people your age?

■ Write it down / Copy it

I write on the computer (use MS WORD for easy editing and tracking) and students copy onto their notebook. It may be the full story, or a frame with missing information for students to fill in, depending on the aimed length and complexity of the story. Key to this step is converting the verbal ideas to written language.

Here students diverge dramatically, with some copying almost at the same pace as me typing, but the slow ones forming letters/words like drawing pictures, spending minutes on a single sentence. This is not a problem; instead it creates opportunity to differentiate support in subsequent other activities catering for individual needs; for example, let the finishers move on to read aloud (independently or in pairs or threes) to practise pronunciation (often the fast writers are weak speakers), which in the meantime frees the teacher to help the slower ones. For those who cannot finish copying in class, they can either take a photo to continue after class, or a printed hardcopy is provided for them to back up.

■ Type it out

This is designed for digital literacy. Students have a computer hour every week, when they are asked (with written instructions) to transfer to MS WORD what they have copied or taken a photo of in class. One Drive is introduced as part of study skill training. Like copying, this is not an easy job for many students – especially the elderly and those who have received limited education – but provides a starting point.

■ Read it

This can be silent reading or reading aloud – individually or in pairs or groups as mentioned earlier – and frequent choral reading. Emphasis is laid on letter-sound matching, pronunciation, grouping words to meaningful units,

pausing, rhythm, stress, intonation, and recognition of full stops for sentences.

■ Think about it

Follow-up questions are designed to check students' understanding of meaning; commonly used items include gap-filling, true or false, short answer questions, question-answer matching. There is also considerable potential for targeted grammar practice (e.g. past simple for recounting weekend activities), vocabulary consolidation activities (e.g. identifying basic-but-easily-going-wrong words: *first/frist/fist*).

■ Write another one

After the story has been processed in varied ways, often in the end students are asked to produce a similar piece of work. Depending on learners' capabilities, this can be a full creative composition, a modelled one following the learnt pattern, or a framed one only needing some words substitution. This can be assigned as homework or as an extended activity for early finishers to work on in class or for all, plenty of space for flexibility and autonomy.

Below are two examples of students' final writing based on their initial thoughts followed by frameworks I provided.

Kiona: The most important festival in my country is Eid al-Fitr. Everyone gets up early in the morning. Then go to mosque to pray. When they finish praying, families and friends eat lunch together.

Iman & Samir: Eid al-Fitr is a special day for all Muslims. It's after Ramadan. It changes every year. Early in the morning, Muslims start praying Eid prayers. They celebrate by wearing new clothes, eating sweets and giving kids some gifts and money to make them happy. Also friends, relatives and neighbours greet each other, and all the family get together to have a big feast.

Described above is a complete cycle from a chat on an idea for the composition of a story. This is not the end, however, and the best bit of this approach is the stories' recyclability. The written-up stories, both the original models and learners' reproduction, are recyclable. A piece of *model writing* for one group of students can be used as *model reading* for another group, and stronger learners'

reproduction writing can be *an immediate second model* for their weaker peers – no worries of them copying others' work; when they seriously copy, copying is meaningful, and useful, at least better than not doing anything due to incompetence or lack of confidence. When learners are trusted and appropriately supported, their autonomy wakens.

What literacy needs are addressed?

Obviously, the language study and practice opportunities embedded in the story 'cycles and re-cycles' are enormous, involving multiple skills at all levels from forming a letter/making a sound to discourse analysis. However, it is not just about language; the most rewarding or worth-pursuing part for me is recognising learners' value – every single one's. By including them all in the stories, acknowledging everyone's contribution and showing appreciation of their culture, it is hoped that they all feel respected and cared for. It is also believed that genuine conversation and discussion enhances collaboration, peer support and class dynamics as well as building up teacher-student rapport, all of which working together makes a truly safe, friendly and supportive learning community. Although a semester's study this way may not make dramatic changes in learners' language ability, benefits can be expected in that after a few positive experiences of using an alien language to talk about their life, these 'basic literacy learners' are motivated and their confidence is built up. This should help to develop their competence and eventually lead to their success, at work and in life.

As this article draws to a close, I would like to tune back to three learners 'post-stories':

■ Students A & B, a Syrian couple who studied with me twice, 2018 on the ILN programme and 2019 at NZCEL Level 3

   '*We loved those stories. We learned a lot from them, and we used them at Level 1 and Level 2.*'

■ Student C, a single mum from Colombia on understanding it is OK for women not to answer questions about their age or marriage

   '*… Ah I see … Thank you so much, Teacher, [for] tell[ing] me this. People always ask me [these], and I [did] not know what to say …*'

The stories are going on. As I was finishing up, a Moroccan woman brought in the word '*kebab*', her Afghanistan buddy followed to clarify (with pictures) that Moroccan kebab is what we often label as '*sausage*', and a Colombian woman (first day joining the class) added '*tortillas*' (the wrap going with the '*kebab*' or '*sausage*') and taught us it should be pronounced as '*tor-ti-jjus*' (in Spanish) not '*tor-ti-llas*'.

I did not use to believe 'basic literacy learners' can do this, but as I listen to them more, now I do. They amazed me.

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