

UNESCO Story Circles in a TESOL Context

Thomas Fast

English Language and Literature, Notre Dame Seishin University, Okayama, Japan

[Abstract] Story Circles is a methodology developed by Dr. Darla K. Deardorff (2020), originally as an UNESCO tool for helping people of diverse backgrounds to understand each other better. Story Circles help participants develop intercultural competences such as listening for understanding, cultural curiosity, critical thinking, empathy, self expression and reflection. They can be utilized in a variety of settings, including ESL and EFL classes of varying ages and abilities. Story Circles have also proven during the COVID era, to be a successful method for collaborative, online international learning (COIL), particularly in the absence of pre pandemic opportunities such as study abroad. Story Circles provide language learners with a supportive structure to engage in deeply meaningful conversation and allow them to communicate otherwise hidden aspects of their lives to others and listen to people of other cultures tell their personal stories as well. After reviewing the literature on the importance of storytelling in intercultural contexts, the author will briefly introduce the Story Circle format and provide instructions with additional considerations for conducting Story Circles in a TESOL context. Readers will come away with a greater understanding of the importance of imparting students with storytelling skills in another language, as well as the knowledge to conduct in person or online Story Circles with their own students.

[Keywords] language learning, storytelling, oral personal narratives, UNESCO story circles, global competencies, intercultural communication, COIL

Introduction

This article promotes the use of storytelling as a tool for language and global competency development in a TESOL context. It introduces UNESCO Story Circles and explains how the methodology can be used in TESOL settings as a means for students to gain cultural knowledge and empathy for others, and improve their thinking, listening, and speaking skills. Based at a private university in Japan, the author has facilitated multiple Story Circles for over one hundred university students from around the world, both face to face and online through the Global Conversations Network, organized by DePaul University.

What are Story Circles?

Story Circles is a methodology developed by Dr. Darla K. Deardorff, originally as an UNESCO tool for helping people of diverse backgrounds to understand each other better. The program involves bringing together people from diverse communities to share their personal stories and experiences with each other, in a safe and non-judgmental space. The concept of Story Circles is based on the idea that storytelling is a powerful tool for promoting empathy and understanding among people from different cultures and backgrounds. It is based on the assumptions that:

- a) Every person has a personal experience that can be shared.

- b) We all have something to learn from others.
- c) *Listening for understanding* is transformational.

(Deardorff, 2020, p. 18)

Intercultural competencies are defined by UNESCO as,

cognitive (knowledge), functional (application of knowledge), personal (behavior) and ethical (principles guiding behavior) components... ethics and consideration of human rights. Skills... include observation, listening, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting, relating (including personal autonomy), adaptability (including emotional resilience), the ability to be non-judgmental, stress management, metacommunication... and creative problem resolution.

(2013. p. 12-13)

Story Circles help participants develop the above intercultural competencies. Story Circles can be utilized in a variety of settings, including ESL and EFL classes of varying ages and abilities. Story Circles have also proven during the COVID era to be a successful method for collaborative, online international learning (COIL), particularly in the absence of pre pandemic opportunities such as study abroad.

Why Teach Storytelling Skills to Language Learners?

Storytelling is the act of using a narrative structure, vocalization, expression, and mental imagery to communicate and connect with listeners (Dyson and Genishi, 1994). This article refers specifically to oral storytelling (not reading aloud), about one's own life experiences, customs, values, etc.

Storytelling skills should be taught because stories are one of the "oldest forms of human communication" (Lucarevschi, 2016, p. 23). It is "a creative human experience that allows us to refer to ourselves, to other people, to cultures... through the language of words" (p. 26). Bruner claims that, "in the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives." (2004, p. 694). In other words, our life stories inform us, not only of our past, but also how we should act in the future (Dörnyei, 2014, Nguyen et al, 2015).

A review of the literature on teaching storytelling skills in a TESOL context reveals a number of articles about autobiographies or *written* narratives, but little about personal narratives told in a social setting. Storytelling is most often mentioned in the context of younger learners. The assumption seems to be that older learners are in need of more "practical" skills (e.g., language for daily life or to pass high stakes exams).

Nevertheless, it is common knowledge that when our students interact with people of other cultures, they are often asked to explain their own culture and talk about themselves (i.e., tell their stories). Students with good storytelling skills will find it easier to fit in, make friends, and be more persuasive in general (Boris and Peterson, 2018). In thinking of how to tell about past experiences to people of other cultures, students will also have an opportunity to reflect on their actions and their values through the cultural lens of their audience.

sense of accomplishment which in turn leads to greater confidence when communicating in the L2 (Dörnyei, 2014, Lucarevski, 2016). UNESCO Story Circles provide language learners with a supportive structure to engage in deeply meaningful conversation and allow them to communicate otherwise hidden aspects of their lives to others, which can lead to greater empathy and cultural understanding.

Organizing a Story Circle

The following is a summary on how to organize a Story Circle. Instructors wishing to incorporate Story Circles into their lessons should also refer to Deardorff's [*Manual for Developing Intercultural Competencies: Story Circles*](#) (2020), which can be purchased as a practical hardbound book or downloaded for free from the UNESCO website. The steps below are taken from the Manual.

First, determine who will be participating. Obviously, the more diverse the group, the more potential there will be for intercultural learning - but even among seemingly monocultural groups, there can be less obvious diversity of age, life experience, religion, etc. Participants should be invited to discuss a stated topic (see below) for the explicit purpose of developing intercultural skills, (e.g., listening for understanding). Sessions are led by **a facilitator who does not participate in the actual Story Circles**, as it could affect the power dynamic within the group. Instead, the facilitator provides instructions, examples, guidance and facilitates only at the beginning and end, when all members of the session are together in one room.

Next, decide where the Story Circle will be held. If it will be online, the 'circles' will take place in break out rooms. Make the space as welcoming as possible (physically, mentally and emotionally). For physical spaces, you may want to include flowers, subtle music, food, etc. Eliminate any barriers (e.g., desks and tables) inside the circles.

Regarding content, Story Circle sessions are centered around two prompts: A 'get acquainted' prompt for the first round, and an intercultural competencies prompt for the second. A first round prompt could be:

Please tell us your name and the story about your name. What does it mean? How did you come to have this name?

A second prompt might be:

What is one of the most positive interactions you have had with a person(s) who is different from you, and what made this such a positive experience?

The second-round prompt should be based on the specific pre-set goals of the session, in consideration with the appropriateness and context for the participants. The purpose of the second prompt is to have participants reflect on their own personal experiences with people who are different from them, then begin to see different perspectives in a shared group experience (Deardorff, 2020).

Regarding the process, Story Circles are structured to allow for everyone to speak and be heard equally. The session begins with the facilitator welcoming the full group of participants. In twenty minutes or less, the facilitator should: Review the Story Circle process with the participants,

develop ground rules with the group (especially the importance of maintaining confidentiality and speaking only truths from experiences), and provide model answers for the two prompts.

Once this is done, students will divide into circles of 4-7 participants and take turns answering the first prompt in a set time limit (a minimum 2 minutes for the first prompt and 3 minutes for the second prompt per participant). A designated person must be assigned to make sure no one goes overtime. Participants should stay in the same circle for the entire session, and no one should speak or ask questions out of turn. They should also be reminded of the following:

- Be yourself.
- Maintain Confidentiality.
- Speak from your own experience only.
- Be genuine and authentic.
- Keep your sharing simple, clear, and focused.
- Uphold positive intent.
- Be comfortable in your own style (i.e., sit, stand, use gestures)
- Talk with others in your group as a fellow human.

(Denning, 2005)

Once everyone has responded to the first prompt, the process is repeated for the second prompt. After both prompts have been answered by all participants, there is a “flashback round” where each member has 15 seconds or less to share the most memorable points from the second stories of each person in their circle (e.g., if there were five participants, then each participant would have one minute to explain what they heard from the other members). Note, that the flashback round is not an opportunity for discussion, rather it is intended to be reflective and demonstrate the participants’ abilities to listen for understanding, so only designated participants are allowed to speak. Other participants should withhold their questions and comments.

Once the feedback round has finished, the participants, still in their circles, engage in a debriefing. Questions are determined in advance by the Story Circle facilitator but might include prompts like these:

1. What common themes did you hear from the stories?
2. What surprised you?
3. What challenged you in the stories you heard?

Lastly, everyone is brought back together for a whole group discussion led by the facilitator. The facilitator should also ask participants if there are any closing remarks before making final comments, thank everyone for participating, and remind them of their interconnectedness. Below is a general timeframe for a Story Circle session:

15 minutes	Welcome, introductions, overview
10 minutes	Introduction to the Story Circles aims and process
5 - 10 minutes	Get into circles (5 to 6 each)
45 minutes	Conduct Story Circles (Prompts 1 and 2 + Flashback and Debriefing)
15 minutes	Whole group debrief and conclusions

The above is a bare minimum at 90 minutes. It would be wise to allow more time for groups with language learners.

Considerations for Language Learners

Language learners can greatly benefit from Story Circles held online or face to face. For sessions with language learners (which is often the case), some general advice is to:

- Provide the prompts in writing, either in a handout or on a screen, in addition to saying them to the group
- Allow extra time for participants to think about their response to the prompts (the recommended 15 seconds per person may not be enough)
- Allow students to use visual aids, e.g., drawings, photos, and other props to help them deliver their stories and messages in their groups, as well as the debriefing/discussion at the end.

In order to ensure a successful session, the language teacher will also need to make a number of adjustments to support the students' thinking, listening and speaking skills.

Thinking

Participating in Story Circles requires students to engage in a degree of deep reflection on self, one's culture, and interactions with people of other cultures as well. Students will need to choose their words carefully. Attempting to do this impromptu can be a little overwhelming, even for native speakers. For language learners, providing the Story Circle questions in advance allows students to come up with thoughtful answers about themselves and aspects of their lives/culture they may not be able to deliver 'in the moment.' It also gives them time to consider their grammar and choose the right vocabulary. But it is important for the students not to lose the sense of spontaneity that comes with a "live" conversation. For this reason, allowing students to prepare written responses for their circles is NOT advised. Rather they should be encouraged to consider their responses, but not rehearse and read them from a piece of paper or, worse yet, their phones.

Students may also need to be coached in advance on how to make their responses *interesting* by using storytelling strategies such as: detailed descriptions, a clear message, and personalizing as much as possible within the set time limit. Encourage students to use what they know, "capture a truth" (Stanton, 2012) and express their deepest felt values.

Speaking

In preparation for Story Circles, students will benefit from the practice of speaking skills associated with storytelling, i.e., producing clearly pronounced and intoned language in an expressive manner that engages their audience. This can be done in the standard method of controlled and freer practice of difficult sounds, words and phrases associated with the Story Circle topic.

In addition, pre-taught speaking and coping strategies, such as: expressing interest in a conversation; interpreting and expressing understanding; and 'buying time' when answering difficult questions, (e.g. repeating the question while thinking of an answer, or using phrases like, "Hmmm.. that's tough...") will help language learners feel more confident in their Story Circles.

Listening

The Story Circles experience will require language learners to listen for both gist and detail, so it will be beneficial for them to get as much conversational listening practice as they can beforehand. As each member delivers their roughly two-minute response to the two prompts, the language learner will attempt to comprehend the other members' overall messages, as well as details, which they will later relate back to the group in the feedback rounds. Ideally, they will not only recall random details, but be able to synthesize them into an overall impression and make reflections on the messages of individual members and what is said by the circle as a whole. Without practice in advance, this may be too challenging for some students. But with repeated practice, the students may be more confident and capable of providing feedback in their circles.

It is of paramount importance for the facilitator to create a welcoming atmosphere in the physical or online space, where all students feel like their opinions are welcome, even if they are not expressed in perfect English. This can be established at the beginning of the Story Circle session by clearly stating the meaning and benefits of Story Circles, and then explaining the process clearly enough that students will be able to adhere to it when they begin their sessions.

In practice, getting language learners ready may mean at least one or two preparatory sessions before they attend a Story Circle with a diverse group of people they have never met. Before my intermediate Japanese students participated in Story Circles in DePaul University's online Global Conversations network, I pre-taught them prompts they would be expected to answer, put them in Story Circles during our regular class, and coached them on how to deliver their responses as naturally as possible. I also had them practice listening and responding to other students' stories. Giving them time to think about their response and practice with their peers beforehand was critical to their successful participation in the Story Circles.

Student Feedback

Five Japanese students participated in my first Story Circles in 2021, as part of the DePaul University Global Conversations Program. The Japanese students were all undergraduate English majors with intermediate to advanced (CEFR B1-B2) English skills. They joined approximately 50 students from multiple countries in two subsequent Story Circle sessions, which were formally titled, *Developing Intercultural and Intra-religious Understanding through Story Circles*. They were facilitated by myself, an American based in Japan, along with Jan Krimphove, a German based at Unichristus in Brazil, and Dr. Khaled Keshk an Egyptian professor of Theology, based at DePaul. The theme of the Circles was encounters with other religions and cultures. In an open-ended survey conducted after the event, the Japanese students provided written feedback. All reported having a good or great experience. Below are some of their comments in their original English.

On Telling Communicating in the Circles

Though I was considering that my English was not good enough to catch all different English accents, participants explained when I asked questions and we could have a smooth conversation.

Overall, my English level wasn't good compared to other students because I couldn't tell my opinion in detail. I managed to make myself understood in English, but it's not good at

the point of exchanging opinions and deepen opinions. So, I'd like to learn more English vocabulary including about the social problem in order to exchange my opinion to others smoothly in the future.

I realized it is difficult for me to listen to Spanish English [accents] because I don't have any opportunity to talk with Spanish [speakers] in English, so I learnt I should listen to many kinds of English in my daily life to talk with international people.

I learned that I shouldn't afraid of talking and explain my opinion, because overseas students were active and they tried to understand my English.

Now I am able to explain my ideas (with a little help from teachers) and that sharing ideas is so interesting and leads to so many learning opportunities.

The conversations was different from Japanese classes, so I was inspired it. It was fun!

On developing global competencies

In terms of "Global Competence", I found that communication is one of the most important skills.

I learned about deep part of different cultures. I can search the cultures and countries on the internet, but I can't know real life on it.

I enjoyed sharing cultural stories. The English ability was not so important, but I was a little bit afraid of abusing cultural values with no intention. Overall, the experience told me the importance of trying to be as neutral as possible. When we talk about "Cultural appreciation and appropriation", my brain was exploded. There were a lot of things to think. In addition to that, since there were people from several kinds of cultural backgrounds, I was surprised how people see Japan from their points of view.

I thought I need to THINK before I actually say. In order not to abuse cultural values and belief.

From the comments above we can see that the Japanese participants often found it difficult to express themselves, particularly their deeper beliefs. This may have been due to lack of communication skill, confidence, or practice in reflecting about themselves and their cultural values. Likely it is a combination of the three. But it is encouraging to know that they enjoyed it. In fact, some gained confidence through the experience, and were motivated to study harder and participate in future Story Circles. Regarding global competency development, they learned the importance of intercultural communication, and not just to rely on the internet to gain knowledge of the world. They also learned the importance of considering culturally appropriate responses, which it seems was something they had not studied before in their language classes.

Conclusion

This article promotes the use of storytelling in the language learning classroom, which can be done by adopting UNESCO Story Circles methodology. In addition to summarizing how to organize your own story circles in class, I have provided additional advice on how to prepare language learners for interacting in multicultural Story Circles, along with feedback from my own L2 students. Like all things, if you wish to incorporate Story Circles into your language teacher toolbox, the more you practice the better. The first time, you will need to keep a copy of the guidelines close at hand. But gradually, you should become more comfortable with the process, which should enable you to provide more meaningful opportunities for your students to listen and share their stories. This could lead to enhanced communication skills, self-reflection, and a greater awareness and appreciation of others.

References

- Adichie, C. (2009, October). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TED Conferences. https://www.ted.com/speakers/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie
- As, A. B. (2016). Storytelling to improve speaking skills. *English Education Journal*, 7(2), 194-205.
- Boris, V., & Peterson, L. (2018). Telling stories: How leaders can influence, teach, and inspire. *Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning*.
- Bruner, J. (2004). Life as Narrative. *Social research: An international quarterly*, 71(3), 691-710.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2020). *Manual for developing intercultural competencies*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).
- Denning, S. (2005). *The leader's guide to storytelling*. Jossey-Bass.
- Dyson, A., & Genishi, C. (1994). Introduction: The need for Story. In A. Dyson & C. Genishi. (Eds). *The need for story: Cultural diversity in classroom and community*. The National Council of Teachers of English.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2014). Motivation in second language learning. In M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, & M. A. Snow. (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th Edition). (pp. 518–31). National Geographic Learning/Cengage Learning.
- Lucarevski, C. R. (2016). The Role of Storytelling on Language Learning: A Literature Review. *Working Papers of the Linguistics Circle*, 26(1), 24-44.
- Nguyen, K., Stanley, N., Stanley, L., & Wang, Y. (2015). Resilience in language learners and the relationship to storytelling. *Cogent Education*, 2(1), 991160.
- Stanton, T. (2012, March). *The clues to a great story* [Video]. TED Conferences. https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_stanton_the_clues_to_a_great_story?language=en
- UNESCO (2013). *Intercultural Competencies*. UNESCO. <https://www.gvsu.edu/cms4/asset/7D7DCFF8-C4AD-66A3-6344C7E690C4BFD9/unesco-intercultural-competences-doc.pdf>.