

The Frightened Mouse

How to Tell a Participation Story in Class 4



Why tell stories

Those who have never tried it might think it absurd to try to tell a story to children who have little understanding of the target language. *What? All those nouns and verbs the children don't know?* But those who have tried it once will know that nothing is better than storytelling for such children. *All that unknown language just comes alive for them in the story. They don't need to know all the words, they just know what is happening!* Moreover, if my listeners know relatively little English, it will help them even more if they can *see* the story unfolding before their eyes – if they can be a part of the story.

How to do it

An American teller, Papa Joe, puts it simply:

If you want to become a storyteller, tell stories.

If you want to become a better storyteller, tell more stories.

Really, it is as simple as that. But trying something for the first time is never quite as easy as it looks when someone else does it. So this article is intended to help the first-timer tell a tale and to suggest ways of activating the listeners. Unfortunately, reading an article like this is rather like learning to swim from a book; practical help is *much* better than theory! So if you want to improve your abilities as a teller, you could also look around for storytelling workshops in your area. Your in-service teacher-training institute may help, or your local library might be able to put you in touch with workshops for storytelling in your own language. National organisations like the *UK Society for Storytelling* are another place to start; <http://www.sfs.org.uk/>

You can also get a taste of what I mean from the video clip on my web site: http://www.talesandmusic.de/see_us/videos.htm

This is from the end of my video *The Strongest of Them All* (Cornelsen Verlag, 2000).

How NOT to do it

Pedagogically bad to start with a negative – but I shall: Don't learn a text! I know that a beginner's greatest fear is forgetting the story. So the obvious solution seems to be to learn the text by heart.

But don't! Another teller, Wayfarer Tomm, once said:

The amateur tells the words. The professional tells the story. The artist tells the listener!

This explains much of the magic power of storytelling; the listener senses the strong personal communication. In order to tell *to* the listener when you are remembering a text you have learnt, you need to be an excellent actor. Which most teachers simply are not. But free yourself from having to remember a text – and the powerful communication can begin.

Using a skeleton

So instead of learning a text, use a skeleton of the tale – just the bare bones which show the logical development of the plot. Below is the skeleton of a tale I often use with young learners.

The Frightened Mouse

Small mouse – frightened of bigger mice.

One day heard about a magician – lived across the river – could change people.

Mouse went to magician. *I want to be a BIG mouse.*

Magic words – mouse changed into a BIG mouse.

Proud. Didn't say *thank you* to magician.

Next day big mouse frightened by cats.

Mouse went to magician. *I want to be a BIG cat.*

Magic words – changed. Proud. Didn't say *thank you*.

Next day big cat frightened by dogs. Mouse went to magician.

I want to be a BIG dog.

Changed. Proud. Didn't say *thank you*.

Next day big dog frightened by horse.

Mouse went to magician.

Never want to be frightened again – I want to be a BIG tiger.

Magic words – changed into small mouse.

That's because you didn't say *thank you*!



Now this is a rather “fleshy” skeleton because I have written it for you, who do not yet know the tale. But once you do know it, you can strip away even more of the words; after all, you only need to use the skeleton to remind yourself of what happens in the story.
My personal skeleton might be something like this:

1. Small mouse – frightened
2. Magician – can change
3. I want to be a big mouse. But no thank you
4. Frightened of cats – want be a big cat – no thank you
5. Dogs – want big dog
6. Horse – want TIGER!!
7. Changed back to small mouse – You didn't say thank you.

It is now extremely simple to learn, and the logic of the story's development always points very clearly to what the next step is.

- It only has 42 words, rather than the 141 of the original skeleton.
- The tale is presented as seven steps.
- Four of those steps are identical, just with a different animal.
- The animal progression is also completely logical – the mouse wants to be a big mouse / big cat / big dog / tiger.

When you have read this skeleton through a few times and the logic is clear, you are ready to tell. What could be easier?



Telling the tale

First make sure there is a sufficiently large clear space in front of the listeners where you can bring children in to participate under your direction. Just a few square metres is enough.

I might begin something like this:

- *My story starts with an animal. What animal do you think it is?* (There will always be some in the class who understand enough to suggest animals. Others will quickly follow suit.)
- *No, it wasn't a cat. Not, not a dog ... it was a very small animal* (use hands to show size), *a white animal, a long tail* (use hands to show tail, use face to suggest a gnawing mouth and twitching nose – someone will probably suggest MOUSE in one language or another).
- *Yes, it was a mouse! Now, who wants to come up to be the mouse?* (Gestures will make it quite clear what you want and there will be no shortage of volunteers!)
- *Right, you are the mouse. Hello, Mouse!* (shake hands with the mouse, who will certainly say *Hello* back).
- *Mouse, say "Hello, I'm a mouse" to everyone ... Everyone, I want you to say "Hello" to the mouse: One, two, three – HELLO MOUSE!* (With participation stories, I always use this “Hello” routine; it allows the listeners who cannot come onto the stage to enjoy some participation.)
- *Now this mouse is a small mouse* (make the mouse become small, hunched shoulders, etc.), *frightened* (use body language to show anxiety – frightened glances, nervous trembling, sudden jumps – remember that some of these could also suggest being cold).
- *Mouse, are you frightened?* (Nod to show the answer is *Yes*. If your mouse is not able to articulate that, just put your head behind the mouse and talk through the mouse's back, giving the correct answer. Talking through the back is a fundamental technique to use in such participation stories when the children need more support. Usually the child will repeat what was said. Use short phrases and when the child's repetition is inaccurate, simply nod in agreement and repeat the phrase once again as if the child had said it correctly.)
- *Yes, you are frightened because here comes another mouse – a BIG mouse!*
- *Who wants to be the big mouse?* (Show BIG body language for new mouse, swaggering walk, etc. Same *Hello, I'm a BIG mouse* procedure.)
- *And the frightened mouse is frightened because the big mouse is so big – AHH!* (Guide big mouse to swagger across stage, guide small mouse to hide away in a corner or behind a chair.)
- *Thank you, big mouse. Say "Goodbye" to everyone ... Everyone, say "Goodbye, big mouse."* (Show the big mouse can now sit down again – with practice you will develop a feeling for this stage management aspect of placing children where you need them.)
- *Now one day the frightened mouse, are you still frightened? – Yes! – One day the frightened mouse heard* (hand to ear to explain “heard”) *about a man, a magician. Do you understand what a magician is? Yes, a person who can do magic. Big magic. Magic to change people.* (Many difficult words like *magician* can be explained this way, in dialogue with the listeners using known words such as *magic, abracadabra*.)
- *The frightened mouse thinks: I want to be a big mouse* (Say the phrase slowly and get the mouse to repeat, using back talking if necessary.)
- *Yes, I want to be a big mouse. Perhaps the magician can help me.*
- *Now, who wants to be the magician ...*

I have described only this first part of how I might tell the story because I do not want to suggest that this is how it MUST be done. I have used this story with a primary class twice in the last few weeks and I remember that it came out something like the way I have outlined here. But the next time, it might well be rather different.

It is important for you to discover that such techniques are guidelines to

point you in a certain direction as you work with the children. These guidelines are there to free you, not to tie you down. For that reason it is better that I stop my description here, and let you make your own discoveries of how to tell the rest of the tale.

Additional points

As you do discover more, you will become aware of many additional factors. These might be practical aspects such as seating arrangements or the lighting in the classroom. You will certainly discover and develop a range of follow-up activities to build on the storytelling. Although I have written about these in the *Teacher's Handbook* which accompanies the video *The Strongest of Them All*, you will

learn your own way of dealing with things simply from the experience of telling stories to your class.

Language note: Which tense to use

It is worth noting that you can switch quite naturally from the past to the present tense in such a telling, either for moments of dramatic intensity or simply when commenting on what the audience can see right now. This reflects the more flexible grammar of oral communication rather than the written language.

About the tale

I heard this tale many years ago from an Indian teller, whose name I did not make a note of! As a type, it is clearly a chain story, common in many different cultures. The Grimms' *Von dem Fischer und seiner Frau*, the English *The Old Woman who lived in a Vinegar Bottle* or the title story I tell as *The Strongest of Them All* on our video are other examples.