

Teaching English to Refugees through Storytelling

Emily Camplejohn

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2019

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

Jaeshil Kim, Ph.D.
Thesis Chair

Stephanie Blankenship, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Melody Harper, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Emily C. Knowles, D.B.A.
Assistant Honors Director

Date

Abstract

Many refugees are trying to learn English while assimilating to a new culture. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has identified several needs and goals of refugees including competence in the language of the receiving culture and participation in a new, welcoming community. Storytelling, expressing or receiving a narrative through oral or written communication, can be implemented for teaching English to refugees with these goals and can link academic learning with real life experiences. In addition to using storytelling as a meaningful way to interact with language, storytelling also fosters a community within the classroom. The teacher is responsible for facilitating a supportive community in the classroom through authenticity and mutual sharing of life experiences. Storytelling creates a context where both the teacher and the students can learn from each other's life, language, and culture. As students share their stories and listen to others, they are learning from their peers and building relationships with them. This research investigates several case studies and conversations with three missionaries who shared about their experiences of serving refugees in Austria, Greece, and Jordan. Considering the unique academic, cultural, and psychological needs of refugees, this research will demonstrate how storytelling creates a positive community from which psychological healing and immense academic benefits can come about. Lastly, this research provides easily implementable pedagogical strategies for using storytelling and creating a positive community in an English classroom for refugees.

Key words: refugees, ESL, storytelling, trauma, pedagogical strategies

Teaching English to Refugees through Storytelling

Liberty University School of Education has established a framework of five professional dispositions that the program seeks to develop in its future educators. The first of these is “social responsibility... which is the belief that all students can learn” (Liberty University School of Education, 2007, p. 3). This disposition encompasses the idea that every student is valuable and unique, and teachers need to demonstrate sensitivity toward diverse student needs and backgrounds (Liberty University School of Education, 2007).

Many refugees are facing significant economic and cultural challenges while assimilating into a new culture, especially learning English and having social support which the lack of often leads to stress and even depression (Goodkind, 2014). Additionally, many did not receive the same type of schooling in their home countries and, in terms of American grade standards, are years behind their American peers in literacy or other subjects (Roxas & Roy, 2012). Many refugees have suffered trauma and may not be psychologically prepared to learn as effectively (Willis & Nagel, 2015). At the same time, every refugee has a unique life story, and past experiences will differ from student to student.

If a teacher cares about his or her refugee students and believes in their capacity to learn, the teacher needs to know his or her students. The teacher must be teachable and ready to learn about students’ past experiences in order to provide the most effective instruction (Stewart, 2015). Understandably, refugees are in a unique situation of (often unwanted) cultural assimilation, trauma, and limited past education. Considering this situation within the worldwide refugee crisis, teachers need effective language teaching

strategies. Storytelling can be used as an effective teaching strategy because it utilizes language in a comprehensive and authentic way. Additionally, storytelling in the classroom promotes a strong learning community by relating to others' life experiences. This community and the opportunity to express oneself and relate to others through stories has academic, social, cultural, and psychological benefits for refugee students.

Refugees and Second Language Acquisition

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)(2018), refugees are defined as, “people fleeing conflict or persecution. Refugees are defined and protected in international law, and must not be expelled or returned to situations where their life and freedom are at risk . . . [There are] 25.4 million [refugees] around the world.” Due to their life experiences and circumstances, refugees have unique needs for second language acquisition (SLA). Learning the language of their receiving country meets several goals of refugee integration according to UNHCR. Specifically, competence in the new language can promote social and economic independence to rebuild a positive future, foster understanding of the receiving society, and form meaningful social connections with others in order to feel part of the receiving society (UNHCR, 2002).

Overwhelmingly, English is the target language for refugees. According to M1 (this paper will refer to missionaries as M# to protect their identity because some of them live in insecure locations), who is a missionary at a refugee mission base called The Oasis in Vienna, Austria, the refugees at the Oasis were highly motivated to learn English because knowing English could help them many places throughout the world and help them to be successful in a new home (personal communication, February 20, 2018).

English has the power to create a new life for refugee families. Therefore, this paper will specifically address teaching English although similar principles could be applied in teaching another target language.

Specific Factors in Refugees' Capacity for SLA

As the definition of refugees implies, many refugees have come out of traumatic situations. These traumatic environments can cause incredible stress on the brain and directly affect learning (Willis & Nagel, 2015). Willis and Nagel (2015) investigated how trauma effected children's social psychological development through a study of ten teachers and six administration from four different schools in Northern Uganda. Uganda faced consecutive civil wars from 1971 to 2006, which caused entire villages to be displaced, education to be interrupted or cease, and children to experience horrific abduction, slavery, forced military service, and other traumatic events (Willis & Nagel, 2015). After investigating the neurobiological and social psychological aspects of learning, Willis and Nagel (2015) concluded that when children experience war-related traumatic events such as loss of loved ones, drastic changes within their communities, lack of structure, and absence of educational resources or support, their brains suffer. This post-traumatic stress, impaired brain development, and lack of resources or child-care results in fragmented or hijacked learning according to the model proposed by Willis and Nagel (2015). Children's learning was fragmented when they lost their supportive environment, and their learning was hijacked when their energy was used towards dealing with war-related trauma instead of development and learning (Willis & Nagel, 2015). Likewise, because refugees have experienced varying degrees of war-related trauma, the effects on the brain influence their academic abilities (UNHCR, 2018).

In addition to likely having experienced trauma and its psychological effects, refugees face cultural challenges. First, due to cultural values or even necessity, students may need to prioritize other things above education. Obligations towards family, work, home culture, or religion could interfere with having time to study English. Secondly, many refugees come from oral cultures. People in oral cultures prefer spoken communication as opposed to written communication, and they rely on oral art forms to pass along their cultural traditions and stories (International Orality Network). Therefore, some oral cultures have little or no emphasis on literacy (DeCapua & Marshall, 2009). Culture preference for oral or written communication can deeply affect how people approach learning and storytelling. Third, M1 shared that sometimes it was hard to understand what refugees needed most because, for example, some cultures have strong honor/shame values. From these cultural mindsets, it can be considered disrespectful to ask questions to the teacher because the students are expected to honor their teachers and not to question their authority (personal communication, February 20, 2018). Lastly, many refugees have never experienced a formal classroom setting where literacy was encouraged (UNHCR, 2002). One's educational background, level of literacy in one's native language, and the number of languages one speaks influences his or her capacity to learn English in a classroom setting (UNHCR, 2002). Many refugees are not literate in their native language and so have no literacy to transfer into a new language (personal communication, February 20, 2018). Teachers need to investigate the cultures and the past educational experiences of their students if they are going to successfully meet the current level and needs of the students.

Refugees face many challenges as they are integrating into a new society and trying to learn English. Some challenges for getting refugees to come to English class often can include transportation, child care, and weather according to M2 (personal communication, March 6, 2018). Most significantly, psychological factors including trauma and students' cultural or academic background can affect refugee student's learning and make storytelling one of the most effective teaching methods, considering these vast needs and various challenges.

The Learning Community

With these specific factors in mind for teaching refugees, teachers must investigate students' needs and goals in order to create the best learning environment for language acquisition. M2 observed that in Jordan, conversational phrases were the most highly valued language skill. His strategy was to teach "survival language," or, in other words, language aspects that could be used as tools for surviving in a new country because the "survival language" best met his students' goals (personal communication, March 6, 2018). Likewise, to be effective in teaching English, teachers need to intentionally learn about student's specific needs, cultural and educational backgrounds, and educational goals. In this sense, the teacher is also a learner.

High school language arts teacher, Mary Amanda Stewart (2015), used refugee students' life experiences as teaching resources for their language enrichment but more importantly for engaging the students and the teacher in a transformative way. Stewart (2015) wrote about how teachers have a great opportunity to learn from their refugee students and must do so in order to design effective instruction and classroom activities. Greater depth and authenticity can occur when refugee students are invited to contribute

to conversations about books or literature which document other refugee experiences. Their contributions simultaneously help the teacher to gain understanding of his or her students but also provide a way for students to relate to each other and learn from each other (Stewart, 2015).

Along with the rest of the class, the teacher is learning from his or her students' experiences, cultures, languages, and stories. The classroom can become a community of mutual learning and growing where the teacher is the facilitator but also a participant in the learning community (Goodwind, 2014). The teacher is responsible for considering each student and creating the caring learning community in such a way that each can learn from each other while practicing language skills. A good teacher builds relationships with his or her students and remains adaptable to the needs of the learning community. This thesis proposes that using storytelling will create this community within the classroom, help meet refugee students' needs, and bridge cultural differences to foster growth, understanding, and relationships.

The Relevancy of Storytelling in the Language Classroom

For the purposes of this paper, storytelling will be defined as expressing or receiving a narrative through oral or written communication. A good story must include relatable or lovable characters, identifiable or vivid settings, conflict resolution, or an unpredictable event (Stahl, 2010, p. 166). A good storyteller utilizes all of these elements, attempts to understand his audience, and learns when it is an appropriate time to share his story. Since language is the vehicle for delivering a story, a storyteller must also have a good handle on the language. Therefore, since language is necessary for effective

storytelling, refugees coming to the US or Europe and learning English can use storytelling to practice and improve their language skills.

Richards & Renandya (2002) highlighted four facets of second language acquisition as reading, listening, speaking, and writing. According to the definition of storytelling, all four facets can be taught through storytelling. Students can learn the English language through reading and listening to other's stories because stories help students to engage with the language when it is framed in the narrative. After hearing or reading others' stories, students can also learn how to use the English language to express their own personal stories through both speaking and writing.

Reading

Selecting literature for reading exercises should be carefully considered. Interesting, engaging texts that also help students meet their goals of cultural integration or economic success could include culturally influential works such as *The Odyssey*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Frankenstein*, *Things Fall Apart*, *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet*, etc. (BBC, 2018). ESL teachers would certainly need to use beginner reader's versions of these stories and select books that are appropriate for each student's level. Knowing these works is a sign of education or academic intelligence in American culture and could be helpful for a refugee if he or she seeks higher education or a job in certain fields. But more importantly than reading culturally relevant works is perhaps the need for reading material that is relatable to the students. Stewart (2015) recommended, "Reading literature in the classroom about people from the same cultural group... can be used to promote cross-cultural understandings for students and teachers" (p. 151). This cross-cultural understanding encourages deeper relationships within the

cross-cultural community in the refugee classroom. Because relevant literature can invite and mediate a retelling of refugees' own experiences, teachers are given a starting point for getting involved in their refugee students' lives and responding with some understanding and compassion. Potentially books such as *True Stories of Teen Refugees* (Heing, 2017) or *Stormy Seas: Stories of Young Boat Refugees* (Leatherdale, 2017) could prompt discussions or written responses in English from students by introducing familiar or relatable experiences. Perhaps finding stories of other refugees for reading practice could give students the confidence to tell their own stories and have another's narrative and the accompanying vocabulary words to relate to personally (Stewart, 2015).

In addition to literature being relatable and relevant, storybooks with pictures can be especially helpful as they utilize universal images, engage more senses, and provide more context for the story. For example, M3 works with refugee women in Greece. She uses English notebooks from her students' other formal English classes for her informal English support sessions. The notebooks include Bible stories and illustrations that depict each narrative. Because many of the women are illiterate and speak very little English, M3 relies on these pictures to help tell the stories. She teaches simple vocabulary that is associated with the pictures in the stories. For those who are further along, she will tell the Bible story in their native language first and then tell them the Bible story in English. The lower-level students focus on vocabulary while the upper-level students focus on conversational phrases (personal communication, April 4, 2018). Additionally, teachers should allow time for students to truly absorb the stories and understand their significance even if this means some repetition. In fact, according to Stahl (2010), "The magic of stories is that when we hear them or read them for a second, third, or fourth

time, different images may be stimulated, which remind us of different experiences, creating new learning processes” (p. 163).

Listening

“Listening to stories is the start of our education. A good story will draw us in and encourage us to ponder the images and what happens in the story... and think about how this story intersects with other stories in our lives” (Stahl, 2010, p. 162). While listening to interesting, relatable stories, humans naturally create mental images to accompany the stories. Our imaginations engage our senses as we hear about another’s experience (Stahl, 2010, p. 162). For example, we can imagine hearing a child’s cries, tasting warm bread, feeling thirsty, or smelling smoke. When we hear these words, our senses evoke the experience in our minds. Engaging the senses and imagination in this way deepens the connection of the listener to the material he is learning, making storytelling an effective manner of getting a student to pay attention and interact while listening.

Although Western thinking tends to prefer objective facts and logic, students from other cultures may not respond well to stated principles or an overload of facts. If they have little or no formal educational background, learning lists of vocabulary words or grammatical words likely will be ineffective. “Oral communicators memorize what they hear, not what they read. Furthermore, they memorize more quickly if the style is natural and enjoyable” (Brown, 2004, pp. 173-174). It is often easier to memorize material taught in a narrative rather than material communicated in abstract statements that are disconnected from a real-life context. Stories are more retrievable from our memories because they access multiple areas of our brains and can be cross-referenced with other

personal experiences. “Our stories bring the experiences to life and are much more memorable to others than stated principles or beliefs” (Stahl, 2010, p. 163).

Speaking

During social or classroom interactions and conversations, every speaker plays a role as both a listener and as a speaker. Listening plays an extremely important role in the development of speaking abilities. Speaking feeds on the ability to listen and the abilities to notice language aspects while listening and then use those language aspects as output. This exchange of listening and speaking is a social action. In order to speak a language, one must know how the language is used within social contexts (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Shared values, beliefs, and experiences that can be noticed in these interactions begin creating the community. Therefore, by helping students have the tools to listen comprehensibly and then to speak and share their perspectives, the foundation for classroom community is being created. Having a positive community alleviates anxieties and increases sociolinguistic competence and therefore can give students the confidence to practice speaking in the community they feel accepted in. The story-sharing community, therefore, should encourage students to speak and interact with the community.

Interaction is the key to improving one’s language skills (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Through social interaction, speaking can increase grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence as students are motivated to arrange language parts to fit the needs for the interaction to be successful. Effective teaching on speaking is interactive, collaborative, and reflective and can incorporate vocabulary brainstorming, conversation, and self or peer evaluations (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Storytelling

encourages students to engage and interact with the language in the stories either as one absorbing language aspects while relating to the other's experiences or as one sharing his or her story while producing language output. Therefore, research supports storytelling as aiding speaking skills, because telling a good story aloud should be an interactive, collaborative, and reflective experience.

Writing

Writing is one of the most challenging aspects of learning English for many refugees (personal communication, February 20, 2018). Writing at its best is a social practice with an emphasis on the importance of cultural and linguistic variation (Behizadeh, 2014). Writing involves being able to use linguistic tools in an effective manner to communicate a message. It gives the writer power to express thoughts in a concrete manner. "The process of learning how to tell a story is a process of empowerment. We all want to narrate our lives, but very few of us have been given the techniques and insights that can help us form plots to reach our goals" (Zipes, 1995, p. 4). Teaching refugees how to write their stories will equip them to process their life stories and then be influencers by empowering them to share their stories. Therefore, through writing practice, teachers can give their refugee students the English techniques and linguistic tools to effectively and impactfully express their personal narratives.

"Writing instruction that fails to connect to students' funds of knowledge is not only conceptually unsound but pedagogically impotent... New information that cannot be tied to any prior knowledge is not learned well or at all" (Gee, 2008, p. 77). Storytelling naturally accesses students' prior knowledge and experiences through writing about one's own experiences. When teachers create their writing curriculums, Raimes (1995)

suggested that teachers help students select writing content that “will actively encourage students to use writing as a tool for learning and for communication and to become engaged enough with their writing to have an investment in examining it, improving it, and eventually revising it for readers” (p. 309). People are already naturally invested in their own lives and could be motivated to examine language forms and insure proper written communication of their own story. Writing has the advantage of allowing students to see how they are using language and look back and make changes. Self-preservation will motivate students to proofread their personal story and communicate accurately.

Academic Benefits of Storytelling

Suarez-Orozco and Gaytan found in their Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Study that recently-arrived immigrant youth experience a decline in academic performance over time. They found the most influential factor of academic performance to be English language proficiency followed by behavioral engagement (Holton, 2010). Therefore, by effectively and efficiently teaching English to refugees, teachers will be aiding refugees in overall academic performance.

Human’s brains are created with a phenomenal apt for storytelling and cognitively processing narratives as a path for personal growth. Zipes’ storytelling program for elementary students “aims to further the conceptual and cognitive skills of children” (Zipes, 1995, p. 18). Learning and practicing narrative structures is helpful for children’s mental and cognitive development (Zipes, 1995, p. 18). Children “return constantly to the important and traumatic events of their lives... they are eager to learn about their birth and their history..., to belong to a community, and to have a sense of their own importance

(Zipes, 1995, p. 136). Intrinsically, humans are crafted to participate in stories. Since human minds are wired to work in narratives, teachers should try to access that intrinsic ability in education.

It is widely accepted that motivation is a key aspect in academic success.

Storytelling ignites intrinsic motivation. When movie writers create their characters and their stories, they must give the character motivation in order to show the significance of their actions in the story. Motivation underlies action in a story. “The story emotionally endears an audience to content. It stems from the needs, wants, desires, and challenges important to the main characters, their struggles and what they are willing to do to get what they want... character motivation [stems] from circumstance or context” (Dowd, 2015, p. 48). Like movie writers creating fictional stories, students can access their personal drives and motivations when they tell their stories. Therefore, teachers can interact with students’ personal intrinsic motivation and intertwine this motivation with their learning.

Assessment

Portfolios are compilations of a student’s work through a whole class. Portfolios can include worksheets, projects, writing assignments, journal entries, or any other student work. “Portfolios for writing assessment offer a better match between sociocultural theory and assessment practice than direct writing assessments” such as timed essays (Behizadeh, 2014). Portfolios are a great assessment tool because they gather information about a student’s achievement in multiple modes.

In terms of storytelling, portfolios could include notes or reflections from story discussions or short personal written works. Also, using technology, students could add

audio recordings to their portfolios. Refugees should not only be assessed for one type of skill (Behizadeh, 2014). Many direct, timed assessments that often cause stress or nervousness even for native English speakers, may favor American culture. Whereas, diversified assessment utilizing portfolios to compile a varied sample of student work could be a great tool to accompany storytelling strategies and reflect the cultural diversity which refugees bring to the classroom.

Authentic Connection

New English students are far more equipped to write about their own personal experiences and prior knowledge than they are about new topics. Using familiar, engaging material while interacting with the four main facets of SLA allows more time to focus on language acquisition instead of memorizing unfamiliar content. On the other hand, using familiar content helps make input comprehensible. “Another feature of input that is important for acquisition purposes is that it must somehow be comprehensible. If the learner’s job is to grasp the message contained in what is said to him or her, then that message must be retrievable” (VanPatten, 2017, p. 35). Narratives are retrievable due to humanity’s natural bent towards retrieving and sharing stories. Further, sharing stories is a process that transfers an internal narrative to an external narrative. The vehicle for this process is language. Therefore, successful linguistic communication is necessary to attain the goal of relating the narrative. This is preferred over isolated language exercises where the goal is simply making it through the exercise.

Stewart (2015) used literature and personal narratives to teach English in her high school refugee classroom because she believed that, “when the students who personally own those lived experiences are invited to co-construct learning about global issues,

greater depth and authenticity can occur in the classroom” (p. 150). Students can provide insight into their own backgrounds which is preferred over teachers coming to conclusions on their own. If teachers want to cultivate an understanding, supportive learning community, they must listen to their students and seek to learn their stories and backgrounds and not assume understanding but rather intentionally seek out understanding. Stewart (2015) shared that her students’ personal narratives about the refugee experience was educational for her and gave her some guidance for how to effectively give instruction to her students. Storytelling opens conversation about life experiences and can be the catalyst that begins trusting relationships and greater understanding. Each student will have a unique story. It can be dangerous to assume knowledge of his or her past, and students will be hurt by false assumptions. Rather than assume, teachers should provide opportunities for students to express themselves and their stories. This is how teachers can begin to cultivate authentic relationships with their students.

Lastly, storytelling activities should include involvement in the community outside the classroom. Perhaps students could collect stories from family members or community members (Zipes, 1995, p. 16). They could conduct informal interviews with questions suggested by the teacher and then practice listening to the story and taking notes in order to retell the story. An activity like this would encourage family and community collaboration in learning and further connect students to both other people and their learning.

Psychological Benefits

Refugees, like any human, have psychological needs, but these needs are often heightened by their experiences of fleeing their homes and war-related violence. Most refugees have experienced loss which has a strong, direct effect on their psychological well-being (Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). Considering refugees' psychological distress from past experiences and current struggles of adjustment, it is important for teachers to be aware and promote mental health of refugees. Storytelling, which teachers can utilize in the classroom, is psychologically beneficial for refugees. For example, a study on community-based intervention for African refugees showed that mutual learning and cultural exchange promoted psychological well-being (Goodkind, 2018). Historically, stories have driven mutual learning and cultural understanding which built communities and a sense of belonging.

Bell (2010) presented the Storytelling Project which recognized the psychological significance of storytelling that brought communities together through expressing life experiences. The purpose of the project was to develop pedagogical strategies for increasing education and understanding of racism (Bell, 2010, p. 11). Bell explained why storytelling was strategized as the mode to effectively meet the goal,

Stories are one of the most powerful and personal ways that we learn about the world, passed down from generation to generation through the family and cultural groups to which we belong. As human beings we are primed to engage each other and the world through language, and stories can be deeply evocative sources of knowledge and awareness... Indeed, stories have historically provided ways for people with few material resources to maintain their values and sense of

community in the face of forces that would disparage and attempt to destroy them... they can bridge the sociological, abstract with the psychological, personal contours of daily experience. (Bell, 2010, p. 16)

As Bell recognized in developing the Storytelling Project, storytelling is a cross-cultural method of expressing the human experience and connecting to others. While storytelling is being used for educational purposes, it brings people together by allowing them to tell their experiences and relate to others in the class on a personal level. Considering how human minds are wired for storytelling, the community which storytelling has the capacity to develop has significant psychological benefits especially for refugees who are in need of social support.

Cultural Considerations

Challenges of educating refugees can include cultural differences among peers or teachers and how to effectively integrate language in a culturally diverse classroom (Miller, 2014). Studies illustrate that there is often a great amount of information that teachers do not know about refugees, which might result in inaccurate assumptions. Through their research in high schools in Australia, Uptin et al. (2013) explained that schools that view refugees as a homogeneous group do not see them accurately when they misunderstand or neglect refugees' diverse background. Indeed, educators might be unaware of refugee students' unique challenges and cultural or educational backgrounds (Stewart, 2015). Therefore, "a unilinear model of development in the acquisition of language structures and uses cannot adequately account for culturally diverse ways of acquiring knowledge or developing cognitive styles" (Heath, 1982, p. 73).

Children across various cultures grow up experiencing different types of literary events and uniquely learning how to interpret features of literary events. Some grew up with strong written literacy backgrounds, having been read many books as a child and having been taught how to read at a young age. Others may come from backgrounds that focused on oral literary traditions or grew up learning how recognize underlying principles or abstract connections while listening to a narrative. Because of these larger sociocultural patterns, an approach that suits a variety of cultures and literary backgrounds is appropriate especially in a classroom for refugee students (Heath, 1982, p. 74).

Further, “oral cultures require their own narrative style” (Brown, 2004, p. 175). In most oral cultures, repetition is appreciated not corrected, tone of voice matters, and realistic pictures are appreciated (Brown, 2004, p. 176). Considering various cultural factors, students should be allowed to tell their story using discourse conventions from their own culture as long as they are successfully using English, and it does not interfere with the communicative effectiveness of the story. Teachers should make allowances for the students to express themselves using their culture’s preferred conventions (Brown, 2004, p. 175). While engaging in storytelling activities in the classroom, students should be given the freedom to share their stories in a style which they are naturally and culturally more oriented to. Practically speaking, teachers can give various options for classroom activities. For example, perhaps providing pictures or audio recordings to accompany a book would benefit those who did not grow up in an environment with much exposure to literacy. When students present or share their stories, teachers should carefully consider whether critical feedback will be helpful or discouraging. If a student

simply overly utilizes repetition because of his or her cultural background, perhaps a teacher should not correct it just because repetition is less appealing for American culture.

Refugees with limited previous education often come from high-context cultures or cultures with a pragmatic rather than an academic orientation. “For members of high-context cultures with pragmatic orientation, the meaning of messages must be embedded in context” (DeCapua & Marshall, 2009, p. 162). Since these cultures may tend to learn and share information in a less direct manner, students may have a heavier reliance on context and a distaste for factual PowerPoints or flashcards. Considering these socio-cultural factors, storytelling could provide more options in terms of variety of language use, more creativity, and more context than flash cards or grammar worksheets. Teaching students in a way that attempts to bridge cultural differences not only helps academically as students receive information in the way their brain best receives it but also helps psychologically as the group dynamic is strengthened when cultural diversity is considered.

Processing Trauma

According to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1970), there is an order in which people attempt to meet their needs. Therefore, refugees may be trying to meet their or their family’s needs for physical well-being and security or trying to deal with trauma before they want to devote significant attention to their education. M2 shared that many of the refugees were still dealing with trauma, and in extreme cases it was almost impossible to start teaching them. He noticed that although physical needs were a higher priority to meet before starting to meet educational needs, education was still very

important to the refugees (personal communication, March 6, 2018). “Not all refugee youth experience the same trauma and hardships in their resettlement journeys, but a majority will struggle with coping with them... the decision to flee from the danger is sought on with uncertainty, confusion, and fear” (Birion, 2016, pp. 8-9).

Through their study of traumatized Ugandan children whose education has been either fragmented or hijacked, Will and Nagel (2015) found “that education has the capacity to help children make positive neural connections and reframe their experiences” (p. 49). After studying school teachers and leaders in Northern Uganda, Will and Nagel suggest that these teachers “are playing an imperative role in helping to re-program the plasticity of children’s brains by demonstrating healthy living and learning behaviors and... organizing secure and stimulating learning environments” (p. 49). Further, teaching literacy assists with neural programming. Teachers can help students to make sense of their experiences by using language to construct understanding which may help them to manage their emotions. The process of strengthening one’s capacity to construct meaning “can modify cognitive structures and therefore assist in the psychological and sociological rehabilitation of children who have suffered the effects of trauma” (Will & Nagel, 2015, p. 49). Therefore, traumatized students need a secure learning environment where they can learn to make sense of their experiences. Storytelling in the classroom can meet these needs as it garners a secure environment through community and allows students to learn how to construct meaning from their personal experiences.

However, there is a tendency to repress trauma, abuse, abandonment, and other negative experience and instead create a happy ending to conflict in many American fairy

tales. In American culture, the stories that children grow up hearing typically end with “and they lived happily ever after.” Sometimes these stories can rationalize or minimize cruelty. “Such focus on resolution and happiness only points to our tenacious capacity to avoid unpleasant realizations about childhood experiences” (Zipes, 1995, p. 220). Stories should not give false illusions of harmony after abusive or cruel circumstances when the real-life outcome from these situations is trauma. Life does not always reach a sweet, happy ending where the characters are all living in harmony and bliss. Teachers will do a disservice to their students to attempt to rationalize or tidy up messy or traumatic situations. Not every story the class reads should be a “live happily ever after” story. Additionally, students should never be forced to create an illusion of a happy, harmonious ending if that is not the honest ending. Nonetheless, storytelling “can be used to expose social conditions, provide narrative tools for children, enhance pleasure through insight into the causes of conflict, and teach young listeners to grasp differences between people and alternatives to distressing situations” (Zipes, 1995, p. 223). Teachers must accept the fact that not every hurt or conflict can be solved in the story. Although teachers can make a big difference by being compassionate listeners, teachers are not psychologists and should not pretend to completely understand trauma or create counseling sessions in classrooms.

Safe Environment to Share

Good storytellers know how to select an appropriate story for the environment (Stahl, 2010, p. 166). In order to create a safe environment for refugees to share their stories, listeners need to be aware that many refugees have experienced trauma and be ready to be loving and supportive towards the storytellers (personal communication,

April 4, 2018). Formation of a group dynamic is a key first step in creating a storytelling community. The students need to spend time getting to know one another through social interaction (Bell, 2010, p. 94). This social interaction should include and be facilitated by the teacher. Teachers need to be good listeners while looking to meet student needs and create a caring environment. If students feel safe and secure with a trustworthy teacher, their learning will increase as well as their willingness to engage in the storytelling process. M1 described his experience working with refugees in Austria at a ministry center called The Oasis. M1 and the other missionaries there initially built relationships with the refugees by sitting and listening to them and providing for some of their basic needs such as warm clothing and a temporary home. The Oasis provided both English and German teaching. Before the refugees were ready to begin learning English, they wanted a relationship with the teachers partially because they were fearful. M1 shared that many of the refugees that they were serving were very hesitant to share their real names and often introduced themselves using a fake name. So before teaching English, it was vital for the teachers to spend time talking with them and building trust (personal communication, February 20, 2018). SLA education is more likely to be effective when teachers and other classmates encourage and support learning. A climate of trust and mutual respect will make students feel free to be themselves and to learn (UNCHR, 2002, p. 130). Storytelling ideally must be done in the context of a self-reflecting, extraordinary community which will not only make learning collaborative but also pleasurable (Zipes, 1995, pp. 7-8).

Interpersonal Connections

Storytelling breeds community. Bonding takes place when someone shares their life experiences and the listener responds with empathy and understanding. Further, in a classroom, often students will have gone through similar experiences and can build a deep connection with others who share those similar experiences. Using English as a common language, people with similar experiences but different languages can communicate and relate in an English classroom (Duran, 2016, p. 29). Bonding and encouragement within an understanding community can bring healing. “The Trauma Centre for Survivors of Violence and Torture is a non-governmental human rights organization that utilizes inclusive evidence-based healing processes to address the psychosocial needs of our multiply wounded society” (The Trauma Center, 2018). Located in Cape Town, South Africa, the Centre hosts group trauma counseling sessions where storytelling is utilized. The group members viewed storytelling as a powerful way to build relationships and to find care and support (Colvin, 2019). Therefore, in a classroom, teachers and fellow students must also understand and sympathize with this relational nature and reciprocate with care and support. “Traumatic storytelling... entailed a localized, complex, and often difficult process of crafting sociality. And for many participants, storytelling was as valuable for its social powers as it was for its therapeutic efficacy” (Colvin, 2019, p. 27). Creating a healthy social dynamic in the classroom with students from diverse backgrounds and unique experiences, cultures, and personalities can be challenging. However, the power of positive relationships can motivate students to participate in class and refugees will value a supportive community while seeking hope, healing, and integration.

Pedagogical Approach

An approach in the classroom reveals an underlying philosophy of education and belief system (Smith & Carvill, 2000, p. 163). A proper approach towards English teaching to refugees necessarily includes the belief that every student is valued and is capable of successfully learning and communicating. Further, every story, life experience, and culture are significant and valuable. A compassionate teacher must adopt these values if he or she wishes to earn the trust of the students and earn the privilege of hearing their stories. The goal is to foster a learning community built on trust. The necessary approach of a story-telling classroom focuses on the fact that students learn better in a classroom community which values their personal stories and cultures.

Storytelling is a communicative and pragmatic approach that uses smaller tasks to build up to larger goals. For instance, while listening to a story, students can write down new vocabulary words and then engage in a discussion. This smaller activity contributes to the goal of students being competent enough in English to communicate their stories effectively. Also, storytelling can help students to form relationships and advocate for themselves and for others who have gone through similar experiences. Because use of students' native languages may be limited, teachers will need to use material and language aspects that are familiar and comprehensible as possible. Story material draws on familiar, relatable experiences and the language aspects utilized are communicative and pragmatically useful for participating in conversations in society. Also, in a supportive learning community, students can help each other and collaborate when the material is difficult. Therefore, the overall approach of storytelling in an English refugee

classroom is communicative and collaborative and with strong underlying principles of valuing students and creating a community that shares life experiences.

Practical Implications

An effective environment for storytelling will foster expression, structure choices, and encourage impact. Use fun, icebreaker games to encourage relationship building and sharing personal information to the class. Games also can make the environment seem more casual and put some students at ease and make their experience more comfortable. Additionally, look for ways to make the classroom comfortable and aesthetically pleasing.

The four facets of reading, writing, speaking, and listening should be accessed in class. Therefore, take time to plan out a syllabus with activities using all four of these facets. Most classes should use activities which help students practice more than one facet. For example, students could read a short story together and then practice speaking and listening in a group by discussing the main elements and implications of the story. Finally, students could practice writing by completing a journal entry reflecting on the experience.

Find some simple stories that will be relatable, thought-provoking, and fun. Collect some reading materials before class but then allow students to choose a couple of stories. During the reading of these materials, highlight the vocabulary words that are key for storytelling. For example, transitional or sequence words, personal pronouns, family words, words about emotions, action verbs, descriptive adjectives, and words that may be necessary in a narrative. Teach these vocabulary words as they appear in literature in their natural context within the narrative. Perhaps students can keep these vocabulary

words in a place that they can easily access them in the future such as a word list in a notebook or online flashcards. Then to further the authentic connection to the stories, teachers could bring the stories taught in class to life through role play or fun activities that support the themes in the story. For example, if the students studied a story of a store-owner and how he started his business, the teacher could create a role play activity where students pretend to go into a store and must use English to read their “shopping list” and converse with the “store owner” to complete their purchases.

Because teachers should value every student equally, insure that every student is getting opportunities to read stories out loud to help students get more comfortable with output. Depending on each student’s level, it may need to be as basic as students taking turns reading a few words. For example, student 1 reads, “She took a bus to town.” Then, show a picture before student 2 reads, “She wanted to make a new friend.” Highlight and explain the word “friend” and have students store it in their own word bank. Then student 3 reads, “she decided to be brave...” Then student 4 reads, “...by talking to strangers at the park.” Show another picture. Explain the word “brave” and ask students to think of a time that they showed bravery and to make a note of that experience. Reading needs to be interactional and meaningful while noticing language elements that can be later accessed. Try to find out what interests the students. If a lot of students love to play soccer, find some stories about soccer at their level and then facilitate a discussion about the reading and student experiences with soccer. Remember that the class is about the learning community which is comprised of many unique members. Therefore, diversity in class material is ideal.

Conclusion

Storytelling is an effective language teaching strategy. However, this is not a new discovery. People have been telling stories since the beginning of human history. Stories are the carriers of cultural values, ways of life, traditions, and beliefs. Human minds are innately created to think in terms of stories. God created human minds this way so that humans could be a part of His story. He writes the stories of his children's lives as evidence of His glory. Further, God wants His people to share their stories as testimonies to His glory and great love. Jesus communicated profound truth through parables that were relatable to his listener's life experiences. Just as Jesus built relationships through stories, people can build relationships with each other through sharing stories together. People enjoy going to the movies together or gathering around campfires or in coffeeshops to hear another's stories, and children love being read bedtime stories. Many human bonding experiences revolve around stories. Community is built through storytelling because necessarily there are both tellers and hearers of the story; it must be a group activity. Additionally, language is intrinsically tied to this storytelling experience as it is essential for communicating the story and understanding the story. Using language is how humans relate to each other and reach common understandings. Therefore, by telling stories, people can learn and practice language.

Interaction is key in learning a language. The learner needs abundant practice in both absorbing the language through listening or reading and through outputting the language by speaking and writing practice. When the teacher guides listening to and reading books and stories that discuss relatable experiences, the students will be able to engage and then use some of the same linguistic tools which they observed for expressing

their personal stories. Then teachers can facilitate discussions about the relevant topics about the readings and prepare students for telling their own stories. Storytelling forces the teller to regulate their language and use it well in order to effectively deliver their story. In this way, storytelling covers foundational components for successfully communicating in a language.

Therefore, language teachers should engage in storytelling. Storytelling creates a community of sharing life experiences and using language in a way that is natural to students' minds and relevant to their experiences. As this research has shown, the academic, social, cultural, and psychological benefits of storytelling strategies are specifically helpful for meeting needs of refugee students. Refugees have had unique and usually traumatic life experiences that likely their teachers do not understand, nor should they assume that they understand. Due to this, teachers should also take on the role as a learner. By being teachable and willing to listen, the teacher is laying a foundation of trust and mutual understanding. By learning about their students, teachers can better their instruction by considering students' past experiences and culture, which benefits both the teacher and the students. As refugees are assimilating to a new society, they need social support and usually English skills. Teachers have the opportunity to provide both, and storytelling is one of the best methods to meet these two needs.

Certainly, more research can be done on this topic and more resources can be created to help teachers or others who serve refugees. The psychological benefits could be further expounded upon. Specifically, neurological research on the effects of storytelling on the traumatized brain or further studies on the role of teachers and education on the psychological and mental health of refugees would greatly enhance this

topic. Teachers and psychologists should further work to collaborate on how to effectively help refugees. Teachers should personally seek out counselors or psychologists for guidance on understanding their students and how to aid their psychological health. Many more teacher resources and training programs can be developed specifically with the purpose of preparing teachers to teach refugee students. Increasingly, non-ESL teachers could also benefit from resources and training programs as they may receive refugee students and have little experience or training about how to teach them. Personally, I hope to continue this research and further contribute to the resources available to teachers of refugees.

References

- BBC. (2018). The top 10 stories that shaped the world. *Culture*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20180521-the-top-10-stories-that-shaped-the-world>
- Behizadeh, N. (2014). Mitigating the dangers of a single story: Creating large-scale writing assessments aligned with sociocultural theory. *Sage Journals*, 43(3), 125-136. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X14529604>
- Behizadeh, N. (2014). Xavier's take on authentic writing: Structuring choices for expression and impact. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 58(4), 289-298. Retrieved from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/doi/10.1002/jaal.357/full>
- Bell, L. A. (2010). *Storytelling for social justice: Connecting narrative and the arts in antiracist teaching*. New York: Routledge
- Biron, H. L. (2016). Refugee youth challenges and unique needs in Worcester public schools that are satisfied by African community education. *International development, community and environment (IDCE)*. Retrieved from https://commons.clarku.edu/idce_masters_papers/76
- Colvin, C. J. (2018). *Traumatic storytelling and memory in post-apartheid South Africa: Performing signs of injury*. London: Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429491818>
- Dowd, T. (2015). *Storytelling across worlds: Transmedia for creatives and producers*. New York: Routledge
- Duran, C. S. (2016). *Language and literacy in refugee families*. Houston: Springer.

Goodkind, J. R., Hess, J. M., Isakson, B., LaNoue, M., Githinji, A., Roche, N., . . . Parker, D.

P. (2014). Reducing refugee mental health disparities: A community-based intervention to address postmigration stressors with African adults. *Psychological Services, 11*(3), 333-346. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2013-44745-001.html>

Heath, S. B. (1982). What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school.

Language in Society, 11(1), 49-76. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500009039>

Heing, B. (2017). *True stories of teen refugees*. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu>

Holton, G., & Sonnert, G. (2010). *Helping young refugees and immigrants succeed: Public policy, aid, and education*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan

Leatherdale, M. B. (2017). *Stormy seas: stories of young boat refugees*. Toronto : Annick Press

Liberty University School of Education. (2007). Conceptual framework. Retrieved from https://www.liberty.edu/media/1150/activedocuments/School_of_Education_Conceptual_Framework_Alignment.pdf

Maslow, A. H. (1970). *Motivation and personality* (Second ed.). New York: Harper & Row.

Miller, K. E., & Rasmussen, A. (2017). The mental health of civilians displaced by armed conflict: An ecological model of refugee distress. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences, 26*(2), 129-138. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S2045796016000172>

- Miller, J., Windle, A. J., & Yazdanpanah, L. K. (2014). Planning lessons for refugee-background students: Challenges and strategies. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 9(1), 38-48. doi:10.1080/18334105.2014.11082018
- Pineteh, E. A., & Mulu, T. N. (2016). Tragic and Heroic Moments in the Lives of Forced Migrants: Memories of Political Asylum-Seekers in Post-Apartheid South Africa. *Refuge*, 32(3), 63+. Retrieved from http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A515495269/AONE?u=vic_liberty&sid=AONE&xid=4823a555
- Raimes, A. (1995). Ten steps in planning a writing course and training teachers of writing. Appeared in Richards, J. C. & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Richards, J. C. & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Roxas, K., & Roy, L. (2012). "That's how we roll": A case study of a recently arrived refugee student in an urban high school. *The Urban Review*, 44(4), 468-486. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11256-012-0203-8>
- Stahl, J. (2010). Telling our stories well: Creating memorable images and shaping our identity. *Missiology: An International Review*, 38(2), 161-171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182961003800207>

Stewart, M. A. (2015). My journey of hope and peace: Learning from adolescent refugee's lived experiences. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(2), 149- 159.

doi:10.1002/jaal.455.

The Trauma Centre. (2018). Mission statement. Retrieved from <https://traumacentre.org.za/>

United Nations High Commissioner Refugees. (2002). Refugee resettlement: An international handbook to guide reception and integration. Chapter 2.6 Fostering Independent communication: Language Training programs for adult resettled refugees. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/enus/protection/resettlement/3d9860614/refugee-resettlement-international-handbook-guide-reception-integration.html?query=second%20language%20acquisition>

United Nations High Commissioner Refugees. (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/>

VanPatten, B. (2017). *Input to output: A teacher's guide to 2nd language acquisition*. USA: McGraw Hill

Willis, A., & Nagel, M. (2015). The role that teachers play in overcoming the effects of stress and trauma on children's social psychological development: evidence from Northern Uganda. *Social Psychology of Education*, 18(1), 37–54.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-014-9282-6>

Zipes, J. (1995). *Creative storytelling*. New York: Routledge,