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## **PRESENTATIONS AND THE ART OF STORYTELLING: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT A DUTCH UNIVERSITY**

### **Abstract:**

From February 2014 to June 2014 I listened to and viewed about 200 student presentations in the field of international business at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences in the Rotterdam Business School's International Business and Language Department. I was teaching the entire third year student body in the English program (level B2 to C1). These students were Dutch and international students with English as a Foreign Language, and I am American and a native speaker. What struck me as I was audience to so many presentations was those presentations that did not seem to meet the requirements stood out because rather than just present the standard introduction, body and conclusion along with an array of dates and/or statistics they were delivered through the art of storytelling. Furthermore, the storytelling format no doubt was an aid in their memory and delivery of their presentation in a foreign language, English. Because the presentations were told in a storytelling format, they were far more interesting than the others, and they were far more persuasive. The persuasive presentation of course is very important in the business arena. Gallo recommends that you start by narrating the story, then gather photos, especially those with faces in them. He says presentations with more images than words are more successful. Next include video clips. (A number of my students included video clips but I limited them to 2 minutes as it was a 12 minute presentation.) Storyboard the slides next and then and only then finally create the presentation. There is a long history of the teaching of language learning and storytelling. Massa emphasizes the benefits for the English language learner who is listening to the stories, suggesting the benefits to the rest of my class who are audience to countless presentations over a six month period: "The students will also learn through storytelling that their ability to listen to others will increase, expanding both their vocabulary, knowledge base and sentence structure." I would like to focus in particular on the potential for persuasive business presentations through the art of storytelling by English language learners.

### **Keywords:**

presentations, business, storytelling, language learning, memory

One day last Spring my supervisor visited my Third Year English class to perform a teacher's observation for my annual review. I was a little nervous because I was new. I only started in February, and I was hoping for a renewed contract. Still I felt confident about the class plan for that day. First there was a lecture and workshop on the counter argument essay. I thought it went rather well because I incorporated use of the students' much beloved cell phones for the research of topics. Then I made time for teacher student interaction as they worked on a paper outline. I expected my supervisor to leave when the unit ended but she stayed for the next unit on presentations and international business. Three students gave presentations that day. One in particular stuck in my mind. His approach was a bit unconventional. It was so much so that afterwards even my highly trained and experienced supervisor posed the question of whether he was following the requirements and stayed on topic. I understood her point of view, but I found the impact of his presentation refreshing compared to the run of the mill types of some of the other students. The question is why did his stand out and even more importantly why did his presentation possibly create a change of idea in the minds of the audience.

His presentation was on ethics and business and consisted of merely three slides. He started out by telling a story about right and wrong using a persona to stand in for himself. He did this from memory, and he did it well. Then he expanded this story to include examples of the abuse of animals in business. He showed a short video in which animals were brutally abused. This was the climax of the presentation. He prefaced the video with a warning to the audience that the images were graphic. The choice to see or not to see itself made an impact. I chose not to see at first and then to see towards the end. And, yes, it was graphic. These were not images that I wanted to have in my mind. Finally, he introduced two companies, Ugg and Louis Vuitton, as examples of businesses that have unethical practices. So the question is would I answer his call to action because that is what it seemed he was presenting or would I reduce his grade for not picking a topic where, for instance, he analyzed the obvious choices, Apple or Starbucks, as examples of international business?

From February 2014 to June 2014 I listened to and viewed about 200 student presentations in the field of international business at Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences in the International Business and Language Department of Rotterdam Business School. I was teaching the entire third year student body in the English program (level B2 to C1). These students were Dutch and international students with English as a Foreign Language, and I am American and a native speaker. What struck me as I was audience to so many presentations was that those presentations that did not seem to meet the requirements stood out because rather than just present the standard introduction, body and conclusion along with an array of dates and/or statistics, they were delivered through the art of storytelling. Furthermore, the storytelling format no doubt was an aid in their memory and delivery of their presentation in a foreign language, English. Because the presentations were told in a storytelling format, they were far more interesting than the others, and they were far more persuasive.

The Orals or Presentation course was actually originally designed by my colleague Jan de Waard. The course is a required part of the Third year program for the study of English by the Dutch and international students. de Waard structured the course so that the students first had a practice 5 minute presentation and then only afterwards the 12 minute presentation for a grade. Both presentations had to focus on international business, and approval of the topic was required for the graded presentation. In addition to the presentations, students were required to write a 5 page paper in which they discussed and analyzed 18 peer reviewed journal articles on presentations. The paper was due before the graded presentations started. The idea was that students learned tips from the 18 articles and could implement them in their presentation. The structure of the course was successful in that many students got approval of their topic for the 5 minute presentation and were already planning and practicing for the 12 minute graded presentation. The articles seemed to be helpful, but the main message seemed to be to prepare and to use visuals. None of the articles talked about presentations in terms of storytelling although some of the more creative students leaned in that direction. The benefits of their innovation are reflected in the grading rubric as two 5 point criteria refer to gaining and maintaining the interest of the audience, and a main purpose of using the storytelling technique is creating a connection with the audience.

Having taught the International Business and Presentations course myself for the first time with my colleague's syllabus, I now have some insight and can take the advice from my colleague and the department to revise the syllabus to suit my own purposes or goals. Aside from the urging to lighten the load a bit in terms of the coverage of the 18 journal articles, I now want to do more to guide the students in their structure and delivery of the presentations. One goal is to emphasize the art of storytelling when teaching presentations for business. "Remember, stories complement data. Use both to reach your listeners. Data satisfy the analytical part of our brains, but stories touch our hearts" (use storytelling, 2014). "Sure, we need science and data to make the right decisions in life and work, but the best business books and keynote speakers use stories to help us retain the points when the stats fade from memory" (Snow, 2014). According to Gallo, "PowerPoint is not inherently evil. It's actually a great tool if you use it not to deliver information but to *tell a story* instead." Andrew Stanton delivers a persuasive presentation on the art of storytelling for Tedtalks. He outlines several points that can be transferred to the delivery of presentations in business (The storytelling imperative, 2013): Make the audience care; Make a promise from the beginning that the story is worth their time; Make them work for it; Story is about change. No change, no story; Construct anticipation in your story; Have a clear theme; Stimulate a sense of wonder; Look inside yourself.

The persuasive presentation of course is very important in the business arena. "Persuasion is the centerpiece of business activity. Customers must be convinced to buy your company's products or services, employees and colleagues to go along with a new strategic plan or reorganization, investors to buy (or not to sell) your stock, and

partners to sign the next deal. But despite the critical importance of persuasion, most executives struggle to communicate, let alone inspire" (McKee and Fryer, 2014, p. 1). Gallo recommends that you start by narrating the story, then gather photos, especially those with faces in them. He says presentations with more images than words are more successful. Next include video clips. (A number of my students included video clips but I limited them to 2 minutes as it was a 12 minute presentation.) Storyboard the slides next, and then and only then finally create the presentation. You're done; however, as with storytelling, you must rehearse and rehearse the entire presentation until you have it by memory.

One benefit of teaching storytelling as a technique for giving presentations is that it encourages students to have a familiarity with the material to be presented so that they don't have to read the slides with their back to the audience. The best of the presentations were, like a story, narrated from memory with the student making eye contact throughout the whole 12 minutes. Presenting by memory of course requires rehearsal and practice as the many articles assigned urged. This is much like storytelling where "delivery is crucial and requires both preparation and rehearsal" (Dujmovic, n.d., p. 75).

Another benefit of teaching storytelling as a technique for presenting is that you can emphasize a structure and practice the target language. "Students' recognition and understanding of story structure similarly enhances their abilities to comprehend and recall information, as well as helping them in their own efforts as readers and writers of the target language" (Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm, 1998, p. 27). The presentation rubric has the criteria related to storytelling of "logical structure" which I interpreted as a beginning, middle and end or introduction, body and conclusion. In the study of storytelling there is mention of Freytag's Pyramid which is a simple storytelling structure traced back to Aristotle. The pyramid includes Exposition, Complication (rising action), climax (turning point), reversal (falling action), and (moment of release). "Storytelling may seem like an old-fashioned tool, today — and it is. That's exactly what makes it so powerful. Life happens in the narratives we tell one another. A story can go where quantitative analysis is denied admission: our hearts. Data can persuade people, but it doesn't inspire them to act; to do that, you need to wrap your vision in a story that fires the imagination and stirs the soul" (Monarth, 2014). A call to action is exactly what many business presentations are looking for.

Following the guidelines for storytelling is one thing, but for these second language learners there is also the issue of language skills. Among the rubric criteria is accuracy/fluency for 20 points and pronunciation/articulation/intonation for 20 points, both out of 100. So 40 percent of the grade is based on language skills. There is a long history of the teaching of language learning and storytelling. "Proponents claim that storytelling leads to improved language skills as students engage in storytelling and story enactments themselves" (Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm, 1998, p. 25), "Storytelling is thought to be beneficial in part because it fosters teacher-learner collaboration, learner-

centered models, and more pluralistic (inclusive) approaches to instruction" (Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm, 1998, p. 25), Storytelling is widely known to build upon the learner's previous knowledge and experience, and comprehension is a result of the connection of old knowledge with new. This is especially the case when the students tie into their analysis of foreign business their experience from their internship abroad.

It is not just the presenter who has the potential to learn from storytelling for presenting. Massa emphasizes the benefits for the English language learner who is listening to the stories, suggesting the benefits to the rest of my class which is audience to countless presentations over a six month period: "The students will also learn through storytelling that their ability to listen to others will increase, expanding both their vocabulary, knowledge base and sentence structure" (n.d.) This would be a great boost as sometimes due to class time and scheduling there are up to 5 or 6 12 minute presentations in a row with up to 5 minutes in between to set up the presentation on the smart board. I believe that if the students followed the storytelling techniques of Stanton for instance and for one thing created a connection with the audience in some way, made them care, then the students in the audience would pay more attention and maybe even participate more in the question/answer period at the end of the presentation. As Stanton says, one way to imagine the presentation as a story and gain enthusiasm from the audience is to start with yourself and your experience. I have found in my experience that students are quite eager to take this path. In fact, some of the international students chose to present on their own country of origin and international business. Though some seemed a bit touristic and some had a bit too much video, in general these presentations were more passionate than some of the others and for that reason gained many more listeners.

According to Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm, more research is needed "to better understand benefits [of storytelling] for second language learning, interpersonal communication, and cognitive processing" (1998, p. 29). In the mean time I am teaching the Third Year English course with a revised syllabus that incorporates some ideas about storytelling as a technique for business communication and language learning. This revision stretches from adding exercises in day to day classes to guiding the students in delivering the final presentation. Through all these changes I will keep in mind the performance of my Dutch student who in an interview on July 9th, 2014 said that one reason he knew he had succeeded in connecting with the audience is that they weren't looking at their cell phones, and afterwards all but one of the students approached him to talk more about his presentation. In fact, he stated that "students talking to me after the presentation is more important than the grade itself." In his story of right and wrong, Johnny the persona makes a mistake and is in a metaphorical jail. He is suffering with guilt until he comes to understand the wrongness of his mistake. Only then does he find liberation from the guilt and is freed from jail. My student then presented the video and the companies. As Stanton encourages, he made the audience work because he did not spell out the connection between the story and the rest of the presentation. He made the students think and that is exactly what persuaded them to want to talk more

after the presentation. This student took a chance, a chance I want all my students to consider taking.

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