



Reviewed work:

*Stories: Narrative Activities in the Language Classroom.*  
(2003). Ruth Wajnryb. Cambridge: Cambridge University  
Press. <http://www.cambridge.org:80/uk/> Pp. vii + 248. ISBN-  
10: 0521001609. ISBN-13: 9780521001601. £15.65

Reviewed by:

Howard Doyle  
Macquarie University

An Australian primary school grammar text describes "narrative" texts as "...telling a story. They entertain and instruct the reader, listener or viewer" (Walker, 1996: 84). This succinct definition expresses the essential qualities of the "story" which Wajnryb's (2003) *Stories: Narrative Activities in the Language Classroom* advocates.

Wajnryb's rationale, which is to provide a book that "exploits stories in the service of language teaching" (p. 2) fills the first 17 pages of the introduction. On the first page she stretches the idea of a "story" to include "narrative jokes, ...anecdotes", "narrative exchanges" and "narrative events" (p. 1) – events from everyday life. On page 2 she defines the "storied lesson" as "a managed unit of time in the language learning classroom...during which some aspects of a story or stories are made available as a learning resource" (p. 2).

Wajnryb aims to show ways for teachers to bond with and thereby motivate a class of students by introducing them to stories. Her ultimate aim is to provide activities that teachers can use to develop their students' identities through producing their own stories, with all the advantages of confidence-building and ownership that such an approach can produce. Wajnryb states her belief that:

...taking on literacy...in another language requires an acculturation to the genres of that language. This is a process by which learners may become consciously aware of...knowledge...held by native speakers of their [*the native speakers'*] first language (p. 15).

Thus, by adopting a socio-linguistic perspective on story telling, Wajnryb offers advice and activities on how to run a "storied class". Forty two activities are described in three different sections, each containing 14 activities. Section A focuses on "Learning about text as narrative

genre" (pp. 20-99), Section B on "Language learning through narrative lessons" (pp. 100-152) and Section C on "Building a 'Storied Class'" (pp. 156-208).

Section A activities take advantage of narrative in a range of text-types (e.g., "traditional stories" like Cinderella in Activity 7 for critical thinking, pp. 69-72; "adventure" in Activity 4, pp. 39-59; forms of biography in Activity 8, pp. 73-77; "anecdote" in Activity 10, pp. 81-84; even "personal advertisement" and "limerick" in Activities 13 and 14 respectively, pp. 94 -96 and 97-99) mainly by extending features of discourse in such texts. As well, features of narrative are used to extend this genre into the field of how language can be used, such as "coda" in Activities 5 ("Starting at the End" pp. 63-62) and 6 ("Getting to the Point of the Story", pp. 63-68).

Of these two latter activities, Activity 5 requires time and input by the teacher in adapting the activity from what is provided in the book, but story-based comprehension and grammar tasks in Activity 6 seem better resourced for teachers in a hurry. These two examples raise the issue of whether busy teachers who just want to find a usable activity for a class would be prepared to follow Wajnryb's rationale. In this respect, Activity 4 is my favourite, as I could use the 19 pages of already provided story-building activity cards as I wished. But there are too few activities as readily applicable as this one.

Wajnryb intends the second set of 14 activities to adhere to "communicative methodology as a means towards achieving language learning objectives" (p. 100). Some of these activities depart from storytelling as such, to pair and group work, at times taking advantage of content drawn from contexts in the past in order to have students practise various functions. For instance; Activity 19 ("Arguing a case", pp. 118-122) relies less on events from the past than simply ideas for students to draw on for presenting arguments and opinions; Activity 16 ("Read, Ask and Tell", pp. 106-112) contains information-gaps for practising question forms and reporting; and similarly tasks in Activities 20 ("Describing the circumstances of a past event" pp. 123-124) and 21 ("Complaints in the context of a recount", 125-131) rely on details of past events for students to ask for and present information requiring cause/effect and complaint language respectively.

A bonus in *Stories* is Wajnryb's story bank (pp. 209-232) which she provides as "Extra narrative material which you may find more appropriate ..." (p. 209). At various points, activities refer to relevant stories in the story bank, but no cross-referencing of stories to activities is provided.

In the final 14 Activities in Section C, Wajnryb argues that as storytelling is a social act (p. 160) it facilitates class bonding and forges a class identity. In her words:

...stories (and activities based on these) derived from the lives of people in the classroom are more authentically engaging than anything a teacher might find in a course or newspaper (p. 160).

In this section, she aims to build activities around this idea (explicitly in Activity 29 "Storytelling as a social act", pp. 161-166). Examples, like story reconstruction (Activity 29, pp. 161-166) and students sharing weird stories from their lives (Activity 35, pp.184-187) and sharing personal language-biographies (Activity 33, pp. 177-79) abound, as they should in a book full of communicative activities.

But here is the rub: Wajnryb writes about stories even though these are not taught much in ESL or EFL classes. Who, then, might use this book, and why?

As a teacher, teaching simultaneously on two programs, one for high level Academic English and the other for pre-intermediate General English, I found it possible to dip into the book in various ways, but less so than I thought initially in my teaching situation. While I was able to use the book as a teacher's resource book, I found that in some cases I needed to construct my own activities from the basic ideas suggested. ESL teachers, and forseably literacy teachers, would probably find a ready-made basis for activities. However, teachers who need a resource upon which to build a syllabus may need to adapt activities further.

A reason for using the book is the theoretical and practical attention given to the concept of genre and also the pedagogical case Wajnryb makes for incorporating narrative, or stories, or for developing the storied class itself. For example, in Section A Wajnryb's activities first orient learners toward narrative genre then assist them to "exploit narrative for diverse language-learning goals" (p. 18) including phonemics practice ("Sound Contrast" and "Schwa Map", pp. 136-142) and attention to errors ("Text Repair", pp. 102-105).

Wajnryb incorporates many such novel extensions and variations of narrative and "the story". However, the time available to teachers to search for them in a resource like *Stories* is variable, and the lack of cross-referencing to activity types, levels, time, language points or skill is unhelpful. Klippell's (1984) volume *Keep Talking*, for example, lists an "Alphabetical table of activities" (pp.188-192) and "index to language and level" (p. 193) while in Burbidge, Gray, Levy and Rinvulucrici's *Letters* (1996) activities are grouped and listed on the contents pages by activity level and time, (pp. v-viii). Similar tables are also used in Wajnryb's (1990) own *Grammar Dictation*. These are very useful features for busy teachers and in my view represent a gap in this volume if the publishers want to have *Stories* on every language college's bookshelf.

For a number of reasons *Stories* is a book that can be used for inspiration, as a model or starting point for teachers in various language or literacy teaching contexts. In a community language-learning scenario or for dealing with adult literacy, this a book that focuses on narrative as a valid and recommendable approach. But in most contexts where learners need more immediate and vital language and communication functions for every-day interaction, Wajnryb's *Stories* might remain on the supplementary activities shelf of the ESL classroom.

### References:

- Burbidge, N., Gray, P., Levy, S., & Rinvulucrici, M. (1996). *Letters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Klippell, F. (1984). *Keep Talking: Communicative fluency activities for language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walker, P. (1996). *Pascal's basic primary grammar: A concise guide to modern grammar*. Glebe: Pascal Press.

Wajnryb, R. (1990). *Grammar dictation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### **About the Reviewer**

Howard Doyle has taught ESL in Austria, Japan and Australia, most recently at NCELTR, Macquarie University in Sydney. Presently at Macquarie University he is tutoring international post-graduate students in how to deal with language and academic literacy issues.  
e-mail: [inchatswood@hotmail.com](mailto:inchatswood@hotmail.com)