

# Using Anecdotes in Language Class

Anecdotes are stories, usually from personal experience, that people tell to make a point or entertain others during a conversation. These personal stories have a considerable role in everyday human interaction (Jones 2001), and according to Wright (1995, 16), “the whole world is full of storytellers.” Anecdotes often have an emotional component, such as happiness or sadness, excitement or embarrassment, or amusement or disappointment. Therefore, when we share an anecdote, we share a compelling story with other people. While it is not possible to remember all of the anecdotes we know, we do remember the content of noteworthy ones, and often we pass them on to others.

It is well known that inserting anecdotes in essays and oral presentations is a good strategy to attract and hold audience attention (Benson 2000; Lukey-Coutsocostas and Tanner-Bogia 1998). This also applies to the second language classroom; using anecdotes is a good technique to arouse student interest and establish a meaningful and memorable con-

text for learning. This article aims to describe types of anecdotes, explain why anecdotes are useful in language teaching, and suggest how to use them in the classroom.

## The six elements of an anecdote

As with many aspects of human discourse, anecdotes tend to follow a pattern when they are used in conversation. Researchers in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis (Labov 1972; McCarthy 1991, 1998) have identified six narrative elements of anecdotes, which are presented below, with examples.

**1. Abstract**—the abstract introduces the anecdote and may give essential context to the story: “Did I ever tell you about ...?”; “I remember when I was ...”

**2. Orientation**—the orientation sets the scene for the story by identifying where and when it takes place and the people involved: “Do you know that every year we have this school fair?”; “You remember last year’s school picnic, right? There, we...”

**3. Complicating events**—the complicating events are the main events of the story and are what makes it intriguing and interesting: “The next thing she did was try to put out the fire.”

**4. Resolution**—the resolution tells what happened at the end of the story and how things worked out: “...and finally he passed the test.”

**5. Coda**—the coda signals that the story is over and brings the storyteller and listener back to the present: “Now I look back and say...”

**6. Evaluation**—the evaluation is how the storyteller indicates the essential point of the anecdote and why it was worth telling: “It’s not the worst thing that happened to me, but...”

These six elements are not always present. For example, an *abstract* and *coda* may not be found in all anecdotes. However, according to McCarthy (1998, 134), *evaluation* is not an optional element, since “without it there is no story, only a bland report.” That is, evaluative statements identify the significance of the anecdote and prevent the audience from asking “So what?” (Labov 1972, 366). The evaluative element may appear at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of the anecdote. Evaluation can be either explicitly stated or rendered through implicit devices such as exaggeration, repetition, mimicry, intonation, and figurative use of language (Jones 2001). Moreover, the listeners may collaborate with the teller and add their own evaluation of the anecdote or comment on its worth.

### **Anecdotes in the classroom**

Anecdotes told in the classroom express our feelings, ideas, and experiences, just like the ones in daily conversations. However, since anecdotes are an excellent way to generate discussion to help students use their language skills, teachers usually have an additional intention in mind: a teaching objective to describe, explain, clarify, or emphasize an aspect of language or content.

In practice, we can divide anecdotes used in class into three groups: (1) planned anecdotes, (2) semi-planned anecdotes, and (3) unplanned anecdotes.

#### **Planned anecdotes**

Planned anecdotes are similar to those used in essays or in oral presentations. The teacher plans when to use the anecdote in the lesson,

how to use it, and what kind of an exercise or questions will follow the anecdote. For example, if a language point will be presented, the teacher should decide beforehand which vocabulary items or grammatical structures to emphasize while sharing the anecdote. The anecdote may be written down so the teacher can either read it aloud or tell it using notes. The significance or evaluation of a planned anecdote is also considered while planning and is indicated either at the beginning or at the end of the story.

#### **Semi-planned anecdotes**

Semi-planned anecdotes differ from planned anecdotes because the complete details are not worked out in advance. In this case, the exact words or sentences are not written down, although teachers do have one or more anecdotes in mind and are prepared to tell them at the appropriate time in the lesson. One strategy is to keep a list of anecdotes and let the student reactions or the flow of the lesson determine which one to share. It is also good to base semi-planned anecdotes on the events experienced by the whole class or by one group of students. For example, an anecdote about a school night or an extracurricular activity that all students participated in reduces the need for explanation and saves time. Individuals can share their personal anecdotes as well, and if the teacher knows a student’s anecdote, she may plan to ask the student to share it at an appropriate time. As with planned anecdotes, it is important to consider the purpose and significance of semi-planned anecdotes beforehand.

#### **Unplanned anecdotes**

Unplanned anecdotes come up naturally in the flow of classroom activities and are spontaneously activated by a response, a question, or a discussion that suddenly reminds the teacher of a story that is worthwhile to share with the students. In this sense, unplanned anecdotes are like those that appear in everyday conversation. These impromptu anecdotes may also be provided by students, as one of their experiences may be enlightening or thought-provoking for both their classmates and the teacher. If the point of the anecdote is not clear, either the teacher or the students can indicate the need for an evaluative element, just as a listener might do in a naturally occurring conversation.

### Benefits of using anecdotes in language classes

Anecdotes are one of the most economical, easy, and enjoyable ways to introduce meaningful language and content, to practice language skills and subskills, and to help manage classes of various ages and proficiency levels. Experience shows that students are always highly interested in experiences of their teachers and peers. Although some teachers may not feel comfortable with the idea of sharing personal information with their students, others may love to share their experiences and ask similar questions about the students' experiences. How much the teacher shares and asks the students to share depends not on being friends with them but on creating a friendly atmosphere in the classroom. The ideas listed below summarize the benefits I have experienced while using anecdotes in my classes.

- Classroom management is an important aspect in teaching any course, regardless of subject matter. It is an issue for novice and experienced teachers, for teachers of young or adult learners, and for teachers of beginner to advanced levels. Thus, an attention-grabbing anecdote may wake up sleepy students, engage unmotivated ones with the task, and reinforce a context so it is not easily forgotten.
- Genuine communication occurs in language classes when learners provide their own experiences and information. By listening to anecdotes from the teacher and classmates, asking questions for extra information or clarification, and contributing evaluative feedback as in real life dialogues, the language learners engage in authentic communication. Moreover, by telling an anecdote or responding to their friends' anecdotes, students organize their ideas and contribute to the discussion (Wright 2000). The language and conversational skills used while telling our stories are different from the skills we use in controlled, inauthentic classroom tasks. Therefore, using anecdotes in language classes has the benefit of modeling the customary daily storytelling skills, and emphasizing those skills develops students' conversational skills (Jones 2001).

- Sharing anecdotes gives students the chance to reflect on their own and on others' concerns, perceptions, and values (Wright 2000). This reflection develops higher level cognitive skills, including the ability to evaluate and synthesize information, as well as affective skills such as empathizing.
- Anecdotes can also be used in content courses where the material is more demanding than language courses. Even advanced learners of English, especially at the tertiary level, may at times have difficulties in content courses. Thus, the use of anecdotes to explain, exemplify, and evaluate the new content aids learners' understanding, learning, and retention.
- When an anecdote is told by a native speaker English teacher or when it is about an experience in an English speaking country, the anecdote provides cultural information. In this respect, anecdotes represent a more realistic reflection of the target language culture and its people than the views presented in many textbooks.
- While students learn more about each other and their teacher, the teacher learns more about the students. Anecdotes therefore reinforce the friendly relationship between teachers and students and among the students themselves.

### Anecdotes about using anecdotes

Following are two examples of my classroom experiences using anecdotes. The first one is from an intermediate level class of seventh grade (13 to 14 years of age) learners of English in a private school in Ankara, Turkey. The lesson took place during an assessed observation while I was a trainee in the Certificate for Overseas Teachers of English (COTE) program. The anecdote I used had a language focus on the use of *used to* and *would*. I had already written down my anecdote for my trainer in the pre-observation session, and I read it to the students, as if reading a story or a diary entry:

When I was a child, we used to live in the same building as my grandparents. My mother and my father were working for a bank, and my grandparents used to take care of me during the day.

My uncle was my best friend, although he was 20 years older than I was. He would often take me wherever I wanted to go. We would play volleyball during the weekends, or he would watch cartoons on television with me. He traveled a lot to other countries because of his job. He usually brought some presents for me from the countries he visited. Once, he brought a huge doll from Belgium, and I loved it so much that I slept with her every night.

My grandmother used to be a very fussy woman, so she became very angry when my uncle and I messed up the house while playing. I remember how angry she was when she found out that we were trying to make a pool for my toys on the balcony by carrying water from the bathroom. She used to get furious when we played with water and actually, she was right, because everywhere would become wet, even the carpets and the furniture, while we were carrying the water.

On the other hand, my grandfather was a relaxed and patient person, so he would watch and laugh at us at those times. Some days, my grandfather and my uncle would play backgammon. Both were good at it and it used to take many hours to have a winner. However, I could not see the end of their matches because I always fell asleep while watching them.

Then, one day, my uncle got married and moved to live with his wife. It was not very easy for me to lose my best friend at home. No one was taking me to play volleyball or to the cinema. My grandmother was missing her son, and she did not get angry even when I tried to make a pool on the balcony again, as I had done with my uncle. My grandfather tried to teach me how to play backgammon, because he, too, had lost his partner.

This planned anecdote contains the six specified elements of an anecdote. Since I read it to students as a diary entry, I stated the *abstract* of the story before reading the anecdote to inform the learners of what the story was about. The first paragraph works as the *orientation* to set the scene, the second, third, and fourth paragraphs contain the *complicating events* sequence, and the last paragraph concludes with the *resolution*. After reading

the story, I signaled the end of it by saying “So that was my childhood...”, which works as the coda. Lastly, the *evaluation* element lies in the aim of sharing it with students, which is the language point I had covered with the students before and after reading the anecdote.

After using an anecdote of childhood memories, language teachers may apply different types of follow-up activities. First of all, since the students are excited hearing about their teacher’s childhood, the follow-up activity may easily have a speaking focus, where the students ask further questions about their teacher’s childhood or the characters in the anecdote. Students may also be encouraged to share their own childhood memories and exchange their anecdotes using the grammar point in pair work, group work, or whole class activities. Similarly, the anecdote can be followed by a writing task that has a grammar focus. For example, an exercise to demonstrate the difference in meaning between *used to* and *would* can be carefully planned to help students recognize that both structures can describe repeated actions in the past. Since *used to* and *would* are, in many cases, used interchangeably, the anecdote should be organized in such a way that the students can easily deduce the difference between them without having the teacher present the grammar lesson deductively or through explicit grammar teaching. Each student may write one of his or her childhood memories using *used to* and *would*. Following that, they may exchange papers and read each other’s anecdotes, and even edit them for the specific language focus.

The second anecdote was an unplanned, impromptu anecdote used in a preservice teacher education program with third year students of an ELT methodology course on teaching English to young learners. The topic of the lesson was classroom management in classes with young and very young learners. The students were prospective teachers who had read the required materials before coming to class, and we were having a lively debate on how to reach out to problematic students. One of the class participants noted that “The way we react to one student’s misbehavior has an impact on the other students.” She observed that if a student breaks the classroom rules, and if the teacher does nothing, other students may think they can break the rules as well. After hearing this

comment, I remembered one particular event that happened in a fifth grade class during my beginning years as a teacher of English and shared it more or less in these words:

I think something I experienced in my early years of teaching may be a good example for such a classroom management problem. I was teaching English to fifth grade primary school students. The students had 12 hours of English a week, and they would start studying mathematics and science in English the following year. I was teaching a lesson on the types of animals, including mammals, reptiles, fish, birds, and arachnids. The names of these five animal types were written on the board, and I asked students to give examples for each type of animal for a review. After a couple of examples, one of the students stood up, came to the board, and wrote the name of one of the other students as an example for “reptiles.” The whole class went crazy; they were laughing and praising the boy for doing such a funny thing, while teasing the one whose name was on the board.

After telling this anecdote, I asked what should have been done or said, and we had a very active discussion on punishment, reinforcement, and classroom management. Although I had not planned to tell them this anecdote before, it was fruitful for the class discussion as my students enjoyed imagining what they could do with such a student in such a situation when they became teachers of English. The *abstract*, *orientation*, and *complicating events* are easily identified in the anecdote, and my question “What should have been done?” works as the *coda*. The anecdote does not contain the *resolution*, although the trainees provided many possibilities. The *evaluation*, on the other hand, is given at the very beginning of the story when I mentioned its relevance to the course content.

As I was really happy with the follow-up discussion on this anecdote, I intended to use it in the same week with another group of student teachers taking the same course in a different section. This time, the unplanned anecdote turned out to be a semi-planned one, since I had jotted down the name of the problematic student as a reminder of the anecdote.

### Things to consider while using anecdotes

I believe anecdotes are enjoyable, interesting, and motivating for both teachers and learners; however, there are certain points that need to be considered in order to use them in a productive and successful way:

- Teachers should be honest about the anecdote they share in class. If we talk about something we have made up, it is not an anecdote but fiction, and students will usually realize this.
- It is highly important for teachers (especially native speakers of English teaching abroad) to be careful about the local and national culture. An anecdote should not make students feel ashamed, upset, or angry.
- Anecdotes need to be relevant to students’ cognitive development and intellectual level. An anecdote that is very enjoyable and helpful for adults could be meaningless or problematic for teenagers or children.
- When teachers use an anecdote in the classroom, they should always be able to point out its worth and purpose and be aware of the different elements that make up the story (McCarthy 1991). This will result in coherent storytelling and lead to higher quality language practice.
- In writing and speaking, anecdotes contribute to the presentation, development, and illustration of the points in the essay or in the presentation. However, telling students to use this technique does not automatically make them start writing excellent essays or giving wonderful speeches. Therefore, choosing topics that students have some experience with and encouraging them to use relevant anecdotes in their work helps them enjoy both writing and speaking.
- Wright (1996, 8) indicates that using stories “merely to introduce and practice grammar or particular lexical areas or functions” is a danger for storytelling, as the stories become a routine for the students rather than a novel and fun activity. This concern is also valid for anecdotes. They can sometimes be used only as a warm-up activity with no intention of teaching, in which case



the anecdote is still useful for classroom management.

- The length and timing of the anecdotes is important. In my opinion, whether planned or unplanned, the anecdote should not take more than three or four minutes. Otherwise, some of the students may have concentration problems and not pay attention or lose track. Thus, if the teacher plans to use an anecdote, it is always better to rehearse it to be aware of its length. In addition to length, the timing of the anecdotes is also an essential point to consider. To illustrate, the ones we use before lunch breaks may seem very long, as it may be difficult for the students to concentrate. Telling an anecdote in order to cheer up a class after they had a difficult exam may misfire as well, since the message of the story has nothing to do with the learners' present situation.
- Not only the anecdotes of the teacher but also the anecdotes of the students can be helpful for the lesson. If only the teacher tells the anecdotes, the lesson may become a one-person show. However, each student should have an equal chance to share an anecdote, and it should be his or her decision to do so.
- Like every technique, using anecdotes requires flexibility. You can plan to tell your anecdote, or it may come naturally. If it is improvised and if you know it is the right time to use it, it is better not to miss the chance, even if it means deviating from your teaching plan. On the other hand, if you realize that your students do not like it or cannot understand your point, it might be better to mention the evaluation element of the anecdote and cut it short rather than stop telling it.
- Since anecdotes are short stories about personal experiences, they require the standard tools of storytelling mentioned by Pedersen (1995): (1) maintaining eye contact is useful to check for listener comprehension and for using evaluative devices; (2) using gestures, facial expressions, movement, and other body language helps the audience understand the point and significance of the anecdote;

and (3) concentrating on voice quality is critical because the audience must hear everything clearly. Moreover, both tone of voice and intonation add to the emotional impact and work as implicit evaluative devices.

## Conclusion

Anecdotes are inseparable parts of authentic everyday conversation, and they are an effective technique for written and oral presentations. Since teaching is a never-ending presentation in front of different and sometimes difficult audiences, using anecdotes can be a useful and rewarding technique that should be integrated into classroom language teaching. This integration has fruitful results both for target language development and social interaction in the classroom.

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## Appendix **Summarizing Authentic Academic Essays**

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*Some Suggestions for Academic Writing Instruction at English Teacher Training Colleges • Magdalena Ożarska*

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One of my favorite authentic passages for a summary task concerning Milton's "On his Blindness" comes from Lerner (1975, 76). The task is to summarize the text while avoiding plagiarism.

The theme of this poem is acceptance of one's lot. It can never be easy to accept blindness, or to escape from the feeling that one has, somehow, been unfairly singled out for suffering; and the struggle which this short poem enacts is between protest and resignation, between bitterness and acceptance. And since it is a Petrarchan sonnet, the natural ordering of the poem is, protest in the octet, acceptance in the sestet. Yet the poem does not begin with direct anger, with the voice of someone insisting that he's been badly treated, as it might if written by a highly dramatic poet—Donne, say. It begins with a considered statement, a long and complex sentence, the voice of someone controlling his emotion while he explores a difficult situation. Control is important in this poem.



Following are examples of six student summaries of the above paragraph. They have not been through the initial peer review correction stage and serve as a worksheet for error correction during the final class.

1. John Milton's poem entitled "On his Blindness" is based on Petrarchan conception of the sonnet which is divided into two parts. In the first part, namely the octet, the author expresses his protest against his blindness and suffering from the feeling of loneliness. Yet, in the sestet, the state of the approval of the poet's lot is presented. However, the first lines which are written in quite sophisticated language present restrained emotions while considering complicated situation.
2. As Laurence Lerner claims in his book, Milton's poem deals with poets fate. It is an example of a Petrarchan sonnet which is divided into two parts. Octet is the first part in which the poet complains about his tragedy. The second part—sestet, expresses the poets coming to terms with his fate.
3. The poem "On his Blindness" by John Milton is an example of a Petrarchan sonnet which expresses a complaint in the octet, acceptance in the sestet. In general, the theme of the poem concerns tolerance of our fate and suffering connected with being unfairly chosen to experience pain.
4. The main idea of the poem "On his Blindness" by John Milton is the reconciliation with one's faith. This Petrarchan sonnet presents a battle between opposition and passivity, sourness and approval. One of the most important element in the poem is the control of one's feelings while being in a difficult position. It is clearly illustrated at the beginning of the sonnet as the author does not express his frustration.
5. Lawrence Lerner begins his analysis of John Milton's "On his Blindness" by introducing the subject matter of the poem as well as its major aspects. He is concerned with the fact how the structure of the verse reflects the two stages of the process of coming to terms with blindness, namely "protest and resignation" (Lerner 76). The "protest" stage is characterized by control of emotions resulting in the complete acceptance of the speaker's fate in the "resignation" stage.
6. John Milton in his poem "On his Blindness" depicts how difficult is to come to terms with the loss of sight. He emphasizes that it is extremely painful and depressing. Contrary to Metaphysical Poets such as Donne he is more restrained in expressing his sorrow.