Using moral dilemmas to practise speaking

Tom Godfrey discusses using ‘Storydrama’ in ELT and how it can help develop speaking skills.

Moral dilemmas provide a proven method of generating heated discussions. Moral dilemmas challenge learners to reveal their own psychology and prioritise between such values as freedom, family, duty, self-interest, love and financial gain on a personal level.

The lesson methodology is influenced by David Booth (1994) and his work using ‘storydrama’. The principal features of storydrama exploited in this lesson are:

- Learners focus on issues, characters, mood, conflict and dilemmas in a story as a stimulus for learning and discussion.
- Learners respond personally drawing on their own psychology and values.
- Learners bring the story to life through improvisation and discussion.

Storydrama is a very powerful medium. Stories have been exploited for educational purposes and used to stimulate language acquisition for centuries – and with good reason! Stories stimulate imagination, develop intellect, clarify emotions, identify anxieties, problems and aspirations, and fulfill the need for ‘magic’ in a world that often seems to lack it.

Psychologically stories can represent a part of human consciousness that exists in all cultures. The story, *Cheating Lale* was written in order to get my students to consider the importance of taking responsibility for their learning and to discuss issues related to cheating. Each learner will respond differently as their relationship with the story depends on their own interpretation of the world.

It is a story about a young girl who is seduced by the independence of life away from her family but then faces the prospect of failing her final exams or cheating and its consequences. We all interpret events in our own way according to our own ethics and learners are highly motivated to participate in a psychological test to evaluate their own ‘value’ system by discussing the characters and events in the story. The lesson is an integrated skills lesson but primarily focuses on developing speaking skills, discussion, and turn-taking techniques.

The lesson consists of five stages although, as with any lesson these are flexible and need to be adapted to the level and needs of the group.

The first stage involves setting the scene, arousing learners’ interest and personalising the topic of ‘cheating’. The teacher can brainstorm the word ‘cheating’ before getting the learners to share their views in pairs using the picture and questions here. The teacher can elicit information about Lale such as:

*This is Lale. How old is she? Is she a student? Where does she live?*

The next stage involves introducing the characters and some lines of dialogue to allow learners to predict and create their own story. Brainstorm the word cheating and ask if your class have any examples or stories about it. Show a photo or introduce the character, Lale.

Once they have an outline story learners can re-tell their story to a new partner and compare their stories. This provides an effective prediction activity to prepare them to listen to the story as well as providing guided speaking practice and an opportunity to peer teach relevant lexis and check their understanding of the context. Students can also try to find images representing the six characters.

The teacher now tells the story using appropriate gesture and mime to help illustrate the meaning using the characters’ pictures as prompts.
Learners listen to the story comparing their story to the real one and after listening check in pairs.

Students can be put into groups to act out the story (six scenes) and perform it as a melodrama and / or to focus on the language of collocation (underlined) in the text as preparation for the final discussion.

**Lale’s story**

Lale was a student teacher in her last year. Her father brought her up alone after her mother’s death and although a poor fisherman, he made every sacrifice in order to provide for her education. Lale had lots of fun at college. She went out with her boyfriend, Mehmet. He told her not to worry about her studies and didn’t allow her time to study. He was very possessive and wanted her to be with him most of the time. When the time came, it was clearly going to be impossible for her to pass the final examinations. Without her teaching certificate, Lale would not be able to get a job and her father’s hard work would be for nothing.

Lale asked her teacher what to do. The woman was very angry and told her it was too late to think about that now and that Lale should have worked harder. Lale asked a friend who said that she would give her the answers in the exam if she gave her 500 dollars.

In the exam the teacher caught her cheating and the Director expelled her from the college. When her father found out what had happened, he threw her out of the house and refused to have anything more to do with her.

Now homeless, penniless and with no future Lale met an older man who was a widower with four young children. He said he would marry her as long as she stayed at home and looked after his four children.

The lesson builds to the final discussion and psychological test. Learners evaluate the characters and events discussing their behaviour and they have to write the 6 characters in order of whom they like the most (number 1) to who they like the least (number 6). Students then discuss their order justifying their order with reasons. This is a fun discussion activity in which students in groups justify their order based on their interpretation of the story and their own value systems. Finally the teacher explains they have completed a psychological test as each character represents a value and the order they have written reflects their personal value system. The teacher displays the characters and values and asks learners to evaluate how accurately the test evaluated their values systems.

**Extension activities**

The lesson can be followed up in any number of ways. Some extension activities that have worked successfully for me are:

**Dramatisation:** How could life have been different? Students work in small groups focusing on one moment in Lale’s life that contributed to where she ended up in the story. Learners role play the scene so that it has a different outcome.

**Writing:** Speculating about the future. It is now ten years later and Lale’s life has moved on. Where is she now? What is she doing? Students write a letter as Lale to her friend/teacher/father (students choose) to tell him/her about her life now. Students write their letters alone or in groups (depending on the level) then hand them out to others to read. Students can then reply to the letter in role as the addressee.

**Role play:** Students choose one of the characters they would like to be. It is now just after Lale’s wedding day. Students in groups ask the character questions.

**Collocations and phrasal verbs:** Students read the story again and find and underline collocations they find. They then write their own story using at least 5 of the expressions underlined.

As in any activity developing oral fluency, learners need to have the ability to effectively manage a free discussion. There are many features of oral interaction that a teacher can focus on but one useful area is that of turn-taking. Before the activity or in a previous lesson you can input some expressions for taking, keeping or inviting someone to take a turn. (I agree with you but,...If you could just let me finish...Don’t you agree?)

Alternatively at the end of this lesson (especially if the discussion can be video recorded) learners can reflect on their turn-taking strategies and self evaluate.

Pedagogically, stories provide an opportunity to develop and practice receptive skills as well as provide a rich context for language input. Once students are familiar with the story outline and content, it provides a context to focus on structure, lexis and phonology and provides a ready context for follow-up writing and speaking activities. Stories are a powerful stimulus when they raise questions or moral dilemmas. Learners explore issues, events and relationships through improvised exploration and discussion. These discussions force the students to acquire new language to try and express themselves which is one of the most important motivations for learning.

**References.**
