
Book Reviews

Storybuilding

Jane Spiro

Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006, 180 pages

Reviewed by: *Ellen Pilon*

A new addition to Oxford's *Resource Books for Teachers*, *Storybuilding* offers 72 well-planned activities to guide learners in writing stories. However, this is not just another writing book: *Storybuilding* integrates the four skills so that the learner also reads stories, tells them, and listens to others telling them. And many activities also include grammar practice and vocabulary development.

Still, readers may ask, for example, How is storybuilding relevant for newcomers who are studying language and Canadian business culture? How is storybuilding relevant for international ESL students who want to gain university entrance? Spiro suggests that buy-in is no problem. She explains that stories provide practice in all kinds of language: verb tenses, descriptive adjectives, reporting verbs, punctuation, dialogue, character development, and functions such as giving advice or instructing. Storybuilding can also improve learning skills and increase knowledge of the real world.

Series editor Alan Maley describes the technique presented in the book as a nonthreatening way for learners to write their own stories, noting that "it effortlessly overcomes the frequently voiced objections to this kind of work" (p. 3). Spiro says that learners can be taught how to tell a story even if they think they are unimaginative, and she believes that it is well worth the effort for both teacher and learner. She adds, "a good writer of stories is a good writer; a good storyteller is a skilled and confident speaker" (p. 7).

Storybuilding involves many components, each treated in its own chapter. The book begins with storybuilding blocks, moves on to sources of stories, story stars (characters), settings, action (plot), patterns of stories, genres, stories as games and competitions, performing stories, and finally publishing stories. Each chapter has five to nine activities. Lessons can be used either progressively or in any sequence.

Each of the ready-to-use activities includes a brief note, recommended level, time, aim, full description of the procedure, and usually one or two variations. Once a teacher becomes familiar with the choices in the book, he or she can quickly select one before class: the activity is ready to roll with minimal photocopying. Typical of other books in the *Resource Books for Teach-*

ers series, all the activities are well designed and would be easy to facilitate in a classroom with little if any tweaking.

Some of the activities incorporate writing techniques such as the use of cohesive markers. For example, in 1.3 “Story connections: the dancer and the clown,” learners compare the meaning of two similar sentences that have different cohesive markers. They then read a short, eight-sentence story, after which the story is divided into columns for subject noun, verb, conjunction, and object noun. Learners make sentences using varying combinations of words focusing on how the meaning changes.

Activity 2.4 has some unique ideas for writers’ notebooks. Learners jot down brief observations each day for a week, then organize these heterogeneous ideas into the structure of a story.

Some familiar favorites are included in ready-to-use detail such as pictures for stories, cartoons with empty dialogue balloons, or newspaper headlines to rewrite. Section 3, on story stars, offers activities where learners describe their characters’ physical appearance. Learners organize words into categories for places, prepositions, ways of traveling, and verbs of movement in the vocabulary activity of 4.4; they then choose words to create a story.

This book collects a wide variety of activities to encourage willing learners to explore language through storybuilding. Convince learners to accept storybuilding as a useful way to learn language, and they will benefit through improved reading, writing, listening, and speaking. After the pleasure of reviewing this book, I bravely introduced fiction reading as a first step in storybuilding with my workplace culture class of newcomers. Business letters have been losing their appeal; so I hope that storybuilding will coax them into delightful complex sentences and lengthier compositions written in accurate English. *Storybuilding* will help me smooth their way with tried and true activities.

Storybuilding is adaptable to any ESL English class, any level, and any number of learners. It combines lively activities with useful language-learning and would be a useful additional to every teacher’s bag of indispensables.

The Reviewer

Ellen Pilon has an MA (English literature) and an MLS (Library Science) as well as her MEd (TESL); so this book addresses all her academic interests. She teaches workplace language and culture to newcomers at the Halifax Immigrant Learning Centre. She is TESL NS President and TESL Canada Treasurer.

How to Teach Grammar

Scott Thornbury

Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 1999, 192 pages

Reviewed by: *Parto Pajoohesh*

How to Teach Grammar is one in a series of easy-to-use how-to books. According to the author, the book is directed to teachers of English “who are curious or confused or unconvinced about the teaching of grammar,” regardless of the degree of their teaching experience. From personal experience, I have encountered many teacher trainees of adult ESL in a state of curiosity, confusion, or doubt about teaching grammar; nevertheless, I have also found them eager to learn. They tend to be interested in such questions as whether or how to adopt a deductive or inductive method in their teaching, or whether or how to focus on form or meaning or both. Debates commonly arise over such issues in ESL teacher training courses, not to mention the numerous inquiries about error correction and feedback. ESL teachers and trainers will find this book a clear and practical guide to teaching grammar, specifically because it is supplemented by ample sample lessons that illustrate various teaching options (e.g., inductive or deductive). These sample lessons, crafted to reflect a variety of tasks and genres and appearing throughout the book, consist of a description of a lesson plan followed by discussion and evaluation sections.

The first two chapters provide an overview of what grammar is and the reasons for and against teaching grammar. The author compares and evaluates these arguments through theory-based but teacher-friendly discussions. Chapters three and four provide synopses of deductive and inductive methods of teaching grammar. Each chapter includes the pros and cons of the respective approach, followed by several lessons that illustrate the application of each method for simple grammar items or structures. Chapter five consists of examples of how to teach grammar through texts. Examples include using a scripted dialogue to teach the present simple, or an authentic text to teach the passive voice. Chapter six demonstrates various ways of practicing grammar by focusing on the accuracy/fluency issue, and chapter seven shows how to deal with student errors, discussing how teachers can work through their attitudes to errors and responses to correction. Chapter eight describes varied ways of fitting grammar into a lesson. The author accomplishes this by incorporating grammar into task-based, skills-based, and story-based lessons. The main focus in this chapter is on presenting a fluency-to-accuracy model of instruction based on the communicative approach as an alternative to the typical accuracy-to-fluency sequence frequently observed in English language-teaching materials. Chapter nine encapsulates many basic concepts that a language teacher should know

about language assessment in general and testing grammar in particular. Validity, reliability, and the backwash effect are among these concepts. The chapter offers a comparative discussion using samples from both discrete-item and oral-performance formats.

Finally, chapter ten wraps up the main consideration of the book, why and how not to teach grammar ineffectively. An example of an ineffective lesson plan is followed by a review of the six rules for grammar teaching; namely, the rules of Context, Use, Economy, Relevance, Nurture, and Appropriacy. To help teachers or trainers reflect on and discuss these grammar issues, an appendix provides photocopiable Task Files that contain tasks relevant to each chapter. These are accompanied by answer keys.

In conclusion, the author cautions readers on two points. First, teachers should use the sample lessons presented in the book only as examples or options because there are many ways of teaching grammar items. Second, teachers need to take into account their students' needs, level, interests, and learning styles when referring to the author's suggestions throughout the book.

Points that I appreciated about this book are its teacher-friendly language for definitions and explanations, its easy-to-follow format, and its unique way of revisiting the basic rules of grammar teaching at the end of each sample lesson. The strongest feature of the book is how it continually connects language learning theories with the practical aspects of grammar teaching. The book starts by offering theoretical arguments for and against incorporating grammar into language teaching; it then helps readers explore various theoretical stands and teaching approaches by weighing their advantages and shortcomings through sample lessons that are further evaluated and discussed. The author's overall conclusion mirrors that of Ellis (2006), that grammar still holds a central place in language teaching and that on balance, research and practice, as well as theory, provide evidence that teaching grammar works.

Thornbury has written a book that is accessible to ESL teachers. It provides a balanced overview of theory and practice related to the teaching and learning of English grammar.

The Reviewer

Parto Pajooheh is a research fellow at the University of Alberta. She has been an ESL teacher trainer at two of Toronto's TESL certificate programs and has extensive experience in EFL teaching. She received her doctorate in second-language education from OISE/University of Toronto.

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