

## Lifestorying and Drawing in a Czech EFL Class

Sydney J. Butler

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This article describes a "lifestorying" activity for developing oral communication in an EFL classroom. The instructor, a volunteer teacher for the Canadian "Education for Democracy" organization in Prague, Czechoslovakia, was teaching four courses at the intermediate level of English for post-secondary students at the Prague Institute of

Chemical Technology. The article includes samples of the students' drawings which were used in the class to enable the students to generate ideas and build vocabulary for their personal stories, in the re-telling of which they gained confidence and improved their oral fluency in everyday English.

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### English in Czechoslovakia

In the spring of 1990 I was very fortunate to be teaching English to four classes of adult students at the Prague Institute of Chemical Technology as a volunteer with the Education for Democracy organization of Canada. The students, mainly in their third or fourth years of post-secondary education with a sprinkling of older post-graduate students, were keen to improve their command of oral English. All of them had studied English as a formal, academic subject, either during secondary school or at the Institute, but only with native Czech teachers who gave very little emphasis to spoken English. Very few of the students had had any experience of communicating with a native speaker of English. In fact, for many of them their only contact with the oral language was through audiotapes and television programming.

Following the Czech Velvet Revolution of November, 1989, the students throughout the country rejected the compulsory teaching of Russian language (and also Marxist philosophy, history and economic theory). Instead, English was valued, not only as a key to the students' technical and scientific studies, but also as the means by which they would be able to communicate with the rest of western Europe. Indeed, even during those early, exciting months of 1990, when many students became involved in student exchanges with Holland, Sweden, and Spain, it was very clear that English has become the *lingua franca* for social communication. It has also become the working language for those Czech and Slovak students who are going to France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Israel for work experience as part of their technical education.

Consequently, the goal of this program was to improve the

students' fluency in English for the purposes of social interaction in the everyday world of a united Europe, rather than to cater for any narrow specialization in any of their technical fields. Thus the focus in each class was on oral language in communication amongst the students themselves, rather than simply between the class and the instructor.

### **English as communication**

The English courses which I developed for the Institute were therefore based on a communicative model, by which the students would use their textbook knowledge of English gained through the courses taught by Czech teachers. It was necessary to develop class structures that would ensure that the students had to use English to make themselves understood. In fact, communication was the main criterion for the use of English in the classroom. All questions of grammatical structures, usage, idiomatic expression, and pronunciation were subservient to the overall goal of conveying meaning in everyday situations.

Consequently, the courses developed through a series of activities which included oral introductions, interviews, panel discussions, debates, reports of newspaper articles, and sample dialogues around a number of themes, with a light-hearted leavening of games, songs, and improvised dramatic skits.

Two important principles evolved. First, I learned that for genuine communication to take place there had to be an information gap--something that the speaker knew, and the listeners or questioners wanted to know. Secondly, there had to be time available for a speaker to generate the vocabulary and find the idioms particular to the topic.

### **Communication through lifestorying**

During the first half of the course the students learned to adapt to more informal teaching styles. But more important, they came to understand that learning a second language was not simply a matter of learning to pronounce words correctly and getting the grammar right. At first, there was the expectation that everything spoken had to be correct, and that if an utterance did not conform to the standards of a native speaker, then it was necessary to correct the speaker. Such an attitude reflects the student's experience of learning English in a teacher-dominated classroom in which all of the student's efforts at dialogue are directed towards the teacher whose function is to judge and correct the student's language, with the emphasis on the form of the language rather than the message

conveyed.

Perhaps the most successful activity in my courses occurred when I switched from general topics to stories deriving from the students' personal experiences. For the first session in this unit, I had asked each student to bring to class a photograph or snapshot which showed something important in their lives. The results were fascinating. There were pictures of the family, pets, holidays, excursions, and student camping trips, all of which provided ample grist for the communicative mill. However, one difficulty which I had foreseen was that some students were not able to bring a photo.

For these students I had prepared 9 x 12cm pieces of blank paper. I explained the concept of Do-It-Yourself and then asked them to draw their own D-I-Y snapshot, either the reproduction of an actual photo which they remembered or the snapshot which might have been taken on a particular occasion if a camera had been available. So, quite by accident, I had two conditions of students in the classroom. It was hardly a controlled experiment, but I noticed that the students with the D-I-Y snapshots had a lot more flexibility in their choice of topic than the students with the real photos.

I allowed all of the students some rehearsal time during which they listed the key words which they would need to tell the story behind their picture. This was an opportunity for me to circulate among the students to help them with their dictionaries or to provide them with basic idioms or narrative language structures. Then, working in a small group of four or five students, each student had the chance to tell a life story, while the listeners were encouraged to use "Where, When, Why, Which, Who" questions to extend their understanding.

### **Drawing and vocabulary**

The bedroom illustrated in Figure 1 was "Jaroslav's" choice for the "Sense of Place" life story, when I had asked the students to choose a place important in their lives. Jaroslav's drawing shows how he generated key vocabulary by labelling the objects in his bedroom. Generally, the students made separate word-lists to cover the topic of their picture. Objects in the pictures, of course, produced words in the noun categories, but I also encouraged them to generate verbs to suit the actions implicit in their stories, and also adjectives, not simply to describe the scene, but also to take them into the deeper significance of the story by expressing the feelings associated with it in their memories.

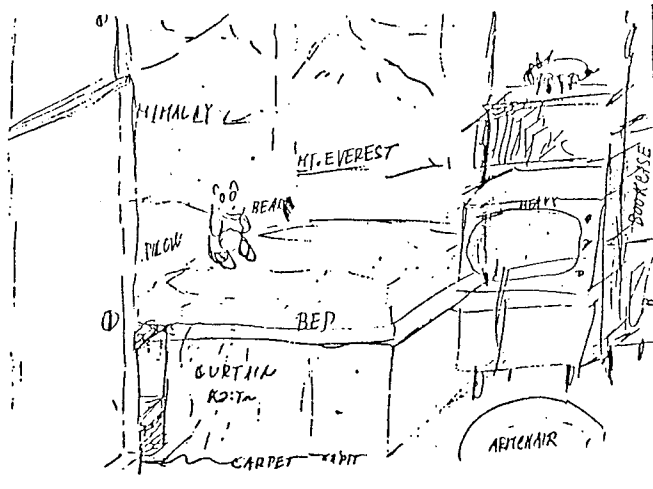


Figure 1 - "Jaroslav"

Many of the students' drawings showed evidence of the accumulative effect of the interaction between drawing, thinking, and the generation of language. For example, "Jirina's" drawing in Figure 2 started as a somewhat bare outline of a child and a fence. Then, as she prepared her vocabulary list she added appropriate details to her picture. The interaction between drawing and writing became apparent as she shifted easily between the two modes of idea generation.

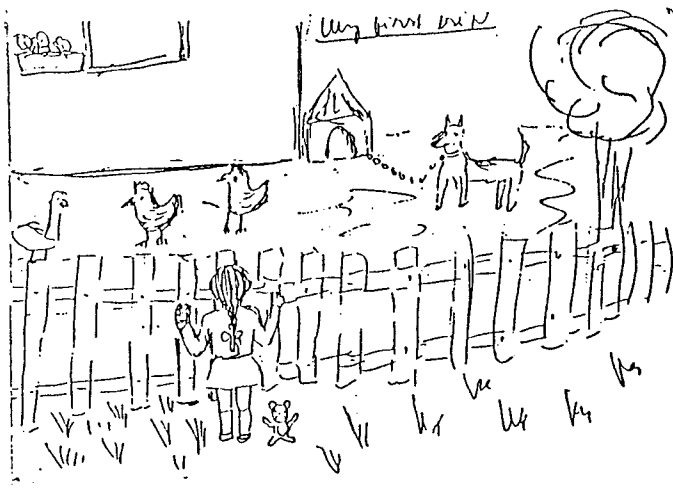


Figure 2 - "Jirina"

The cartoon-like quality of many of the drawings was also an inducement to add dialogue during the rehearsal period. "Marenka's" story of her losing her little sister is an example of how the spoken word appears directly in the drawing as the character's speech-bubble in figure 3. Because I was able to notice the grammatical error during the preparation time, it gave me the opportunity for some timely intervention on the form of the past participle of "steal" which she was then able to correct before her presentation to the group.



Figure 3 - "Marenka"

### Lifestorying from the drawings

This is not to say that a picture is always worth a thousand words, because it is not often that a whole action can be captured in a single image. To develop their life-stories some of the students decided to depict both a beginning situation and the resolution of the story in a sort of rudimentary cartoon-strip. "Tanya's" drawing in Figure 4 shows her and her younger sister crying because of the message they had just received on the telephone. What is not possible to see in the picture is the total shock and absolute despair which the two girls suffered when an anonymous voice told them that their father had just been killed. Nor is it possible to show the girls' isolated situation. They were alone in the family apartment because the mother had gone off to a country cottage with their baby brother and their father had gone to work.

This is a good example of how the drawing, because of what it does not show, creates the information gap. In this case it became an excellent motivator for the other students in the group to want

to find out more about the situation and how it was resolved. I watched the telling of this story because there was no mistaking Tanya's emotional involvement in the story-telling as she relived the horror of the situation. In spite of the drawback of her limited control of the target language, Tanya's natural skill as a storyteller captivated her audience. The students asked questions to clarify and extend her description of the situation in the drawing, and were in suspense as Tanya went on to explain how the two girls had contacted a neighbour who had phoned their father's workplace and got their father on the line. Because, as it turned out, the initial phone call was a cruel hoax, and she never found out who the heartless perpetrator was. The sympathetic responses from Tanya's audience brought this storytelling episode to a happy resolution, and it was obvious that Tanya had achieved considerable success in sharing such an intensely personal story.



Figure 4 - "Tanya"

### **Lifestorying and lifewriting**

Not all of the stories, of course, were as intense as Tanya's. After the initial lifestorying session for which I had asked the students to bring photos, the value of the drawings as an aid to talking became very apparent, and I encouraged all of the students to make drawings as part of their preparation for telling other personal stories. Thus I was able to suggest types of situations for which no snapshot could possibly have been available. Tanya's story derived from the lesson when I had the students think of a "Time of Danger" when they were scared or frightened, or had been in a life or safety threatening situation.

For the rest of this lifeworlding unit I drew upon my experience with native English-speaking students in public school and adult classes in lifeworlding as a means of developing writing skills (see Butler/Bentley, 1988A, 1988B, 1989, 1990). I found that many of the writing experiments which had worked in our lifeworlding groups also worked for these Czech students in their oral lifeworlding. The "Sense of Place" activity provoked a wide range of responses. So, too, the "First Experiences" and "Childhood Incident" triggers enabled the students to draw upon their own memories for their stories. "Favourite People," "Memorable Moments," and "Happiest Times" also produced some interesting stories. Not all of the students were forced to respond to any specific trigger. Rather, there were enough alternatives to give the students some choice in deciding which stories to share with their peers.

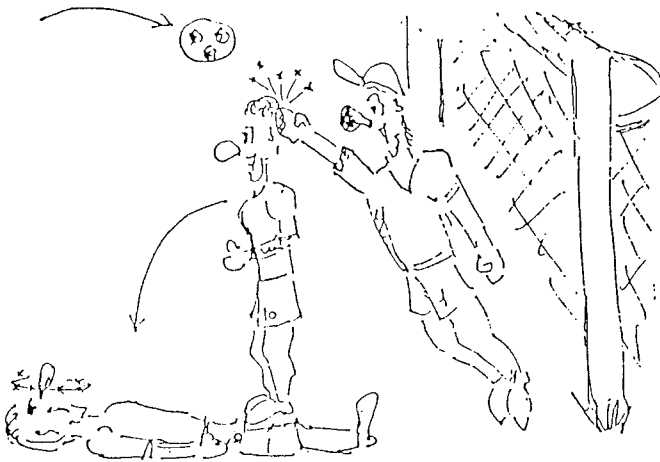


Figure 5 - "Vasek"

### A case-history

"Vasek's" drawing (figure 5) is notable, not only for the quality of the drawing itself, but more so for the effect which the drawing had on the storyteller. Up to that point in the course, Vasek had been a cheerful, cooperative, but somewhat shy student. While his knowledge of English vocabulary and grammatical structure was adequate and on a par with the rest of the class, his oral performance was considerably lacking. In fact, it was difficult to get him to say anything, and he obviously had difficulty in participating with the other students in the communication activities. For the first month he seemed scarcely to have made any progress.

However, his good humour overcame any possible sense of discouragement, and he kept coming to class regularly. I was listening in on his group when it was his turn to tell his story, expecting that for him to get the words out would be only a little less painful than drawing teeth. But I was wrong. As might be expected, the quality of his drawing captured the other students' attention easily. In addition, he had prepared the words "football, striker, goalkeeper, cross, punch, hospital, unconscious." So, the story came out slowly. He was a striker on a college football (soccer) team. He charged the goal to head a high pass or cross from the wing. He jumped to head the ball. At the same time the goalkeeper jumped to punch the ball away. But the goalkeeper's punch caught him under the jaw, and he fell down unconscious. It was a K.O. When he came to, he was in hospital with all his teammates around him. The coach told him that his header had scored the winning goal.

It was a delightful story which the other students enjoyed, but the main effect could be seen on Vasek's face. He was beaming with the success of actually having communicated a real experience to his listeners in English, and they had understood his story in spite of his somewhat fragmented language. On subsequent occasions Vasek had opportunity to repeat his story to other groups, and it was noticeable how his language performance improved in fluency and expression with his growing confidence, a progress which carried over to the other communication activities which followed this unit.

### **Conclusion**

The value of this lifestorying unit for the Czech students goes beyond the mere production of language. With older, native speakers of English I have found that lifestorying and lifewriting are powerful tools for the development of the life-review process (Butler, 1985). But the benefits in my Czech classroom were just as valuable. With their lifestories the students were able to re-create in English the very common day-to-day experience of telling someone about something that was uniquely theirs. The activity provided them with opportunity and motivation to extend their communicative power in the target language. It also contributed to each student's sense of personal identity. As their instructor, I felt that after hearing their stories I knew each one on a more personal level. I also learned through their stories a lot about Czech culture and the lifestyle of Czech students. Perhaps, most of all, this activity illustrates the value of having a real audience for the students' language, just as Crookall (1986) found for his EFL students' short



stories, and also as Appel (1989) found when drawing upon the students' personal experiences and self-reflection.

I was especially fortunate in being able to get the students to use their abilities in drawing, not as a mere illustration, but rather as a heuristic technique which enabled them to develop their ideas about their life stories. Their drawings provided a focus of attention during their storytelling episodes with their peers, and also provided a very important rehearsal time, when they could expand on their topics and collect the essential vocabulary. The result was that every one of the students gained considerable satisfaction in the achievement of being able to communicate short anecdotes or memoirs of personal experience.

There was an additional bonus, when at the end of the course I asked the students if they would like to "publish" their stories. Many volunteered to give me written copies of their stories which I was later able to put into a computer. Then using a simple desk-top publishing program I made a simple booklet of their stories, using their original drawings in the final paste-up, and then photocopying a book for each of the contributors. These students were very proud to receive their individual copies, being able to appreciate each others' stories, in the knowledge that they had all become English authors of the "samizdat" publication "Stories from Prague."

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### **THE AUTHOR**

Dr. Sydney J. Butler is an Assistant Professor in the Language Education Department of the University of British Columbia, where he is involved in teacher education programs and the Lifewriting Project.