

Listening to Our Students: THEIR Stories

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Abstract

Storytelling in the classroom has long been recognized for its many benefits, especially as a bridge from orality to literacy. With the changing demographic landscape present in current elementary classrooms across Canada and internationally, storytelling reaps additional benefits for promoting the goals of inclusion among diverse learner profiles. This article provides an updated literature review reflecting these shifting instructional mandates, offers practical ideas for using storytelling in the contemporary classroom, and provides an illustrative sample of a co-constructed story between student and teacher, highlighting the many ways in which storytelling benefits all learners.

Everyone has a story. Story telling is a cultural universal (Brown, 2000). Long before humankind developed written literacy skills, storytelling was a crucial vehicle for preserving, sharing, and transmitting the cultural ways of being and knowing (*savoir être et savoir faire*) to the next generation. In indigenous cultures, elder wisdom is revered and oral transmission by way of stories and legends to the young is especially valued to this day. The discovery of the wreckage of the Franklin expedition, for example, is attributed in large measure to remarkably accurate oral stories told over 166 years representing many generations (Allen, 2014). Artwork, images, and objects provided important adjuncts to oral storytelling traditions.

Written literacy development is relatively recent in the human evolutionary chain—only 5,000 years of recorded documents exist. Literacy practices allow us to widen the storytelling lens, permitting broader sharing across time and space with diverse audiences near and far, including through the affordances of “new” or multi-literacies in the digital world (Garrety, 2008). Written literacy allows us to revisit stories, to hold them steady for personal study and reflection, and to reengage firsthand with texts we might ourselves have had a hand in creating, or that might have been written by others and passed down in the form of letters and diaries. Further, our stories inspire, motivate, and change the world, sometimes long after the passing of the storyteller. Perhaps the most compelling example would be *Anne Frank: The diary of a young girl* (Frank, 1947) wherein Anne, at the tender age of just 13, entrusts her innermost thoughts to her diary, Kitty, throughout two years in hiding during the German occupation of Holland in World War Two (Figure 1). Anne’s diary, discovered and published after her death at the hands of the Nazis, was translated into more than 60 languages, and read by millions over the years, ensuring her voice not be silenced or that the world might ever forget—Anne was inarguably their most famous victim. Anne was acutely aware of the power of literacy. She wrote, “I want to go on living even after my death. I am grateful to God for giving me this gift, this possibility of developing myself and of writing, of expressing all that is in me.”

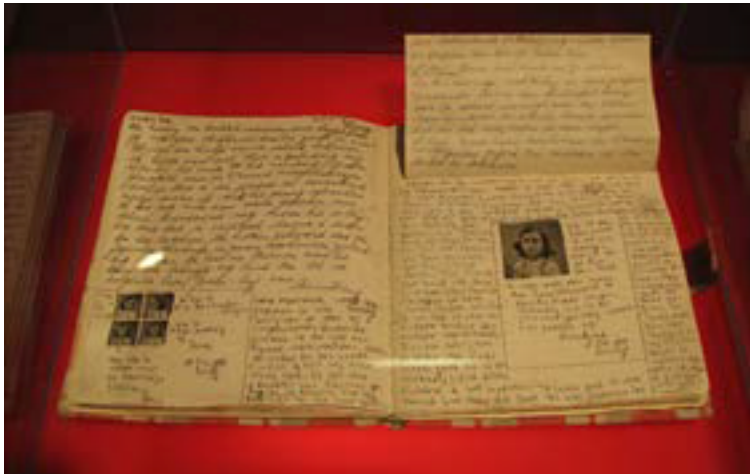


Fig. 1: Anne's diary (Cowper, 2013). Credit: www.heatheronhertravels.com

In a contemporary context, Malala Yousafzai (2014, 2017) reminds us that, “one child, one teacher, one book, and one pen can change the world” (Figure 2). Her advocacy for education for girls in her native Pakistan and her outspokenness against the Taliban is world renowned: even a child's voice can be heard around the world (Iverson, 2017). At the age of just 15, death itself was less frightening for Malala than the thought of being forgotten and her story lost along with the story of countless young girls on whose behalf she wanted to speak. While the Taliban might have wanted her dead, fate had other plans for Malala. Her story has inspired millions as a cosmic force for global change in educating young girls, in the telling and retelling whether orally (Yousafzai, 2014) or through print (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2015; Yousafzai, 2017).



Fig. 2: Malala (Davis, 2015). One child, one teacher, one book, one pen

The power of storytelling is gaining increased attention among classroom practitioners, researchers, and in academe: Mount Royal University in Calgary, for example, has a storyteller-in-residence who works with students, professors, and community members to turn interesting ideas into meaningful action, including advocacy and community awareness in a variety of media.

This paper highlights the potent impact of storytelling as a teaching and learning strategy in the context of the culturally and linguistically diverse elementary classrooms common across Canada today. In particular, when the stories belong to the children themselves as the authors and tellers of the stories (Roessingh, 2011), we create learning environments for literacy and language development that are culturally responsive, inclusive, and rich as a source for seeing the world from multiple perspectives not possible through the purchase of commercially prepared materials. Among English-language learners (ELLs) these texts, sometimes written bilingually and referred to as *identity texts*, validate students' identity and support the crucial connection to home language and literacy practices (Cummins et al., 2005).

The paper begins with a brief review of the literature relevant to storytelling. This is followed by suggestions for supporting the storytelling endeavors of students in upper elementary classrooms. A sample story, *Abhi does his hair*, generated from personal experience with one of my grade six students, provides an illustration for how storytelling can be used in the classroom to realize multiple literacy and language learning goals.

Literature Review

This section reviews four areas of research related to storytelling: children's ability to construct autobiographical texts or stories; the value of incorporating these texts into the classroom; the pedagogy of listening and being present to children; and the need to increase oral vocabulary development as foundational to the recognition of new words in print.

The demands of constructing a good story. While storytelling may seem like a natural, easy task, in fact, it is not. Storytelling requires the teller to integrate and mobilize a host of cognitive, metacognitive, and linguistic resources. These include knowledge of story structure, vocabulary, and literary conventions such as plot and theme. In addition, the storyteller must recognize what the listener shares, and whether they have pertinent prior knowledge. These abilities are developmental (Geist & Aldridge, 2002), with each year of educational advancement reflecting evolving abilities to engage with the multifaceted demands of storytelling.

In recalling a personal experience from the past, for example, the teller must reach into the autobiographical memory to marshal the sequence of events and relevant details and encode them in the appropriate words, all in working memory (Fivush & Nelson, 2004). Producing a written version of the story places the additional demands of the transcription skills—printing and spelling—on the teller. Dictating the story to an engaged adult who transcribes and co-constructs the story can lessen the cognitive burden. Cooper (2005) provides an excellent, accessible review of the theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical implications of dictation and dramatization of Vivian Paley's storytelling curriculum.

Illustrating stories with drawing or photographs provides a scaffold and a concrete touchstone for reference (Collelo, 2001; Craig & Lockhart, 1972). This is particularly effective as a pre-writing strategy, functioning as a type of priming activity as young writers retrieve the words they want to use in their storytelling. In their

seminal work on levels of processing, Craig and Lockhart (1972), and subsequently elaborated by Ekuni, Vaz, and Bueno (2011), observed that visual input created the strongest recall value of all the senses including words, especially when physical details were to be remembered, the picture superiority effect—“a picture is worth a thousand words” rings true. Such deep processing offers a scaffold for the writing task to come and enhances the quality of the writing, particularly among younger students (Roessingh & Bence, 2017). Further, newly emerging findings from the neuro and cognitive sciences (Ionescu & Vasc, 2014) underscore the contribution of body-object interaction (BOI) as these tactile experiences create connections and neuro pathways to the brain to create meaning: embodied cognition.

The benefits of incorporating storytelling into the classroom. Colby and Lyon (2004) underscore the many benefits of bringing multicultural literature into the classroom, including heightening awareness and sensitivity to differences, affirming identity by seeing oneself reflected in the literature choices for study and sharing in the class, developing empathy and respect for others, and examining issues of power and racism. It would seem, however, that when the creators of the texts are the students themselves, an added personal dimension for promoting understanding and appreciation of diversity, and a deepened sense of identity, are more immediately available. Opportunities for developing language awareness, and translanguaging—the simultaneous, fluid access to both first (L1) and second language (L2), selecting a word that may not exist or translate in efforts to realize precision in meaning making—marks these students as sophisticated language users (Celic & Seltzer, 2011). Moreover, this affords a direct connection to home language and literacy practices and offers the storyteller the opportunity (and the challenge) to negotiate meaning in the “third space”—the space at the intersection of first language (L1) and second language (L2). Figure 3 illustrates this idea.

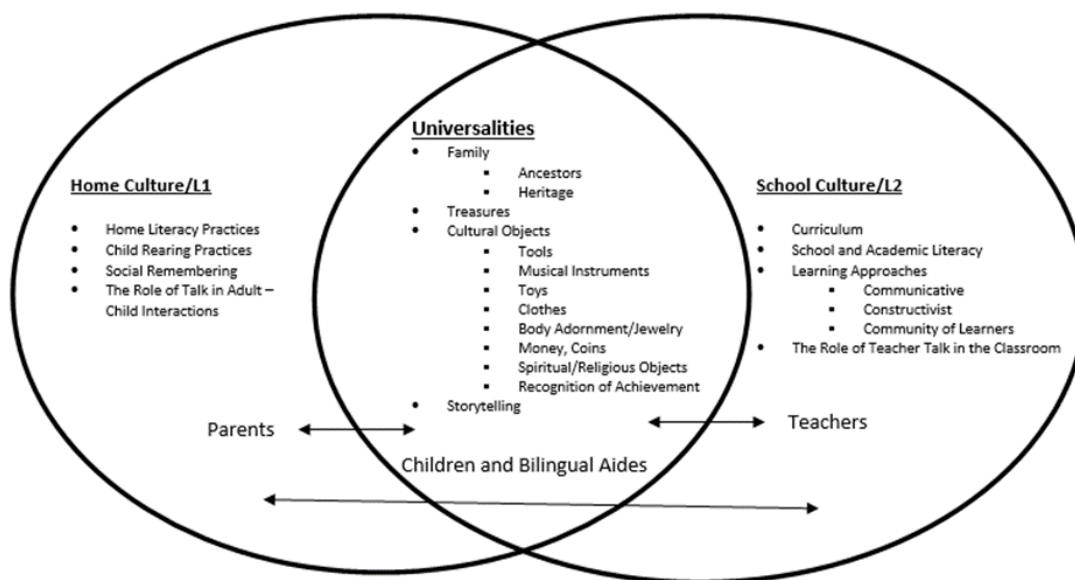


Fig. 3: Negotiating language and culture in L1 and L2.

When stories are directly connected to personal experiences or cultural universals and represented by way of artefacts or objects such as family treasures (Brown, 2000; Roessingh, 2011), costumes and traditional dress for cultural celebrations, body adornment and grooming habits, there is rich content that can be shared within the classroom and understood at a deeper level through tactile experiences.

The pedagogy of listening and being present to young students. Grounded in socio-cultural/constructivist theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978), teachers can be involved in the co-construction of the text allowing for the introduction of new vocabulary that permits nuance and precision to the text. When teachers target the small step ahead of the child's current level of development—Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD)—their learning potential is reset to a new current level of development. While children whose first language is English learn rare and sophisticated words primarily from their mothers through elaborative and collaborative talk while engaged in storybook reading, for example (Torr & Scott, 2006), young ELLs as well as other linguistically vulnerable students are dependent on their teachers for this more challenging input and interaction. While ELLs can benefit from collaborative work with their age and grade peers, teachers are in a better position to recognize teachable moments, to make online decisions about the readiness for learning “next words to know,” and explain and embed them in meaningful contexts—in this case the students' choices for their storytelling. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of understanding new vocabulary. Baxter (2007) defines teachable moments as follows:

A teachable moment is an unplanned event during the day that adults can use as a learning opportunity for kids. When a child displays an action or behavior that can be used as a learning tool, parents and providers should capitalize on the moment, and provide the opportunity to extend or expand the child's learning.

Teachers can also use these teachable moments to tune in, actively listen, and be present to a child. Clark (2014) discusses the many benefits to children's development when they are aware that someone is listening to them. This conveys respect and they have something important and interesting to share. This reciprocity develops relationships of trust and builds confidence among young learners, documented as important contributors to children's engagement with school. Listening on the part of teachers affords a window into a child's thinking processes and control over language-in-use—important opportunities for informal assessment.

The importance of vocabulary. Written language is not merely “talk on paper,” but rather, offers unique challenges and opportunities to put precision and nuance to the rendered text, perhaps especially in the vocabulary choices. Oral conversational language at all ages depends overwhelmingly on approximately 2,000 high-frequency word families, whereas written discourse at grade four draws on a literate vocabulary of 9,000-word families; at grade 12, this increases to 18,000-word families.

The research community increasingly recognizes vocabulary learning as crucial for children to advance academically (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005; Biemiller, 2001, 2003; DiCerbo, Anstrom, Baker, & Rivera, 2014; Schleppegrell, 2012). A Canadian study (Scott, Jamieson-Noel & Asselin, 2003) notes a paucity of attention allocated to vocabulary instruction by teachers, both in terms of quantity of time and quality of instructional engagements. ELLs and children raised in poverty are most in need of

language learning support in content area instruction. Biemiller (2001) makes the case for direct and explicit teaching of vocabulary, highlighting the need to expand the oral repertoire of students' vocabulary knowledge first. Ulanoff and Pucci (1999) and Van Kleeck (2008) suggest that teachers can have an impact on the development of oral vocabulary and thinking skills by adopting the same types of storybook reading strategies that mothers who engage with their children are noted for, as mentioned earlier (Torr & Scott, 2006). Recognition of the literate form of those words follows more readily. Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker, and Schneider (2013) echo these researchers' findings, reporting that even in upper elementary grades, students learn more vocabulary from oral story telling by adults than from independent reading. A threshold or critical mass of approximately 9,000-word families—not realized until around grade four—in addition to strong and fluent foundational decoding skills, are needed for students to independently gain meaning from print. This threshold coincides with the “grade four slump,” the pivotal point of transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn (Chall & Jacobs, 2003). Scholars attribute the failure to traverse this transition to increasingly demanding text to insufficient lexical knowledge. In the meantime, it would seem that teachers play a key role in developing a robust oral vocabulary. Introducing vocabulary beyond the 2000 high-frequency word families needed to compose or render a simple narrative, therefore, becomes a critical learning need for many young learners.

Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002) advance a three-tiered model (see Figure 4) for thinking about vocabulary instruction.

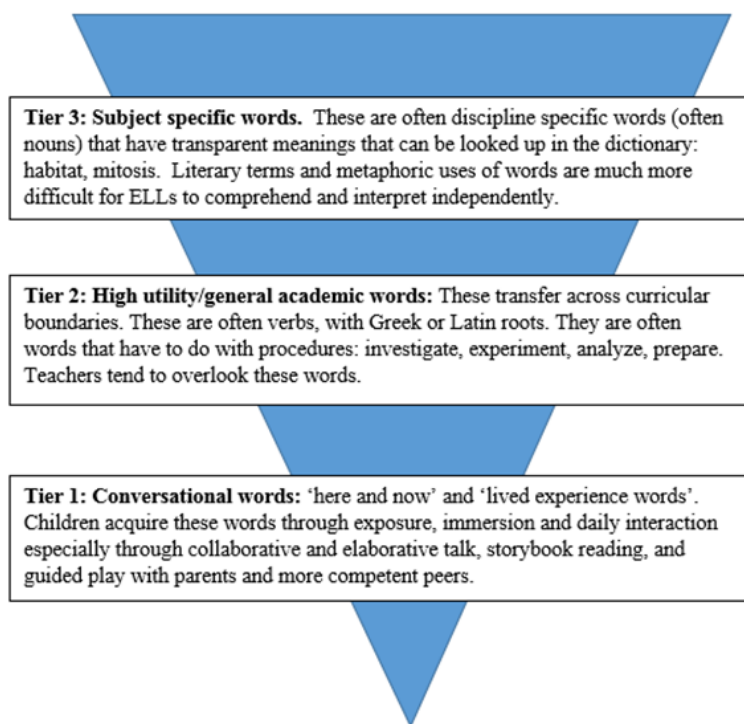


Fig. 4: Three-tiered model of vocabulary (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002)

It is the Tier 2 and 3 vocabulary that is important to introduce, teach, and rework with students, affording them multiple opportunities and modalities for hearing, saying, reading, and writing the words they need to engage with the increasingly complex and academically demanding tasks of school.

The foregoing literature review suggests storytelling and co-constructing stories with students for them to write and retell would be an ideal platform for providing exposure and experience to develop vocabulary and to realize the many benefits noted here of students' ownership of the stories they would like to share.

I turn next to teaching implications that emerge from this review of the relevant literature.

Teaching Implications

Teachers can strategically mitigate the various demands that written literacy imposes on learners in the early years, and on ELLs who may not yet be at grade level in their language and literacy development. This enhances the possibilities for stories to find their way from the hearts and minds of the teller into artefacts for sharing that will enrich classroom learning opportunities for everyone. What follows is a series of simple-to-implement ideas for scaffolding learning and providing enriched input that can result in stories worth sharing.

1) Choose anchor books for storybook reading as a launch. *The Swirling Hijab* (Robert, 2002), *Chachajee's Cup* (Krishnaswami, 2003), *Stone Soup* (Muth, 2011), *Grandma's Quilt Tells a Story* (Starnbach, 2008), or *Malala's Magic Pencil* (Yousafzai, 2017), for example, provide a starting point for introducing concepts, provocations, and essential questions around cultural universals and differences. These are intended for students to explore and express themselves further in open-ended ways, but generally do not contain the Tier 2 and 3 words that students need to hear. Teachers need to elaborate these book readings by introducing new vocabulary.

2) Find informational texts to supplement the storybooks to further enhance vocabulary development, or, target the "next words to know" for elaborative and collaborative talk with students in constructing their stories.

3) Use objects, artefacts, and realia to ground the story and encourage direct tactile interaction with materials to support building neuro-pathways between body and brain, and language.



Fig. 5 and Fig. 6: Making soup.

Quilting, for example, provides a tangible context for concepts related to patterns and geometric shapes. Students can make quilt blocks from paper or cardboard shapes and color them, or play with ceramic tiles to make patterns. Making soup offers a context for teaching procedural language and enhancing the words children may not know for chopping, shredding, dicing, slicing (Figures 6 and 7: Roessingh, 2014). The storybooks mentioned are sufficiently flexible to use at different grades, depending on the language and learning goals identified.

4) Exploit the potential of personal relevance, personal connections, and the familiar in making curricular connections at any grade. Target cultural universals that allow for students to make back-and-forth connections in “the third space.”

5) Consider allowing for dual-language writing. Even though, increasingly, with the current generation of Canadian born children of immigrants, proficiency in L1 is oral only and used for communicative purposes at home, seeing their L1 in print form is enlightening and can reinforce literacy concepts. When these young students’ culturally embedded ways of knowing and being are recognized and valued in the classroom through storytelling, their sense of identity and pride is enhanced.

6) Encourage photo essays/stories, cartooning, drawing, and sketching. As noted earlier, visual information is especially important in constructing meaning: the human brain was never wired to recognize the alphabet! Only much later in the evolutionary chain did the brain repurpose the concepts of shape, size, space, pattern, and sequence to develop literacy. Plan to pair visual information with written information, beginning with the pre-writing tasks.

7) Provide templates, writing frames, or sentence starters to support the writing task. This will be particularly important in the early grades as children must control various skills and mobilize

psycholinguistic and metacognitive resources to produce coherent text. As students transition to more academic modes of expository discourse, these same supports continue to be important.

8) Allow for dictated/co-constructed stories. This will require one-on-one time, or volunteer adults to support the story development, with a particular emphasis on vocabulary learning. Offloading the demands of generating text can enhance the final product. In addition, one-on-one time offers an opportunity for teachers to focus on one child at a time, building relationships that have the potential to be life altering.

9) Share students' stories. Be sure to make provision for various ways of sharing the stories produced, including work in progress. It can begin with an exchange of the photos and drawings with open-ended questions from classmates, for example, or an invitation for extended family members to join the class to demonstrate a procedure (e.g., how to coil and tie a juda) or display a collection of artefacts (e.g., patkas). The class can compile the stories and publish them; create a website; plan for a type of story or book launch event that invites the parents and others in the school to celebrate and learn together (Figure 8). Our website (www.duallanguageproject.com) celebrates our Family Treasures and Grandma's Soup book writing project.



Fig. 7: The book launch celebration.

10) Extend and recycle new words through a variety of engaging tasks. The Internet offers endless possibilities by way of YouTube clips and websites, for example, for students to practice and rework vocabulary through listening and reading, even independently.

A Storytelling Sample: Abhi

The following story was generated and co-constructed between Abhi, a grade six student who comes to my tutoring group on Monday evenings, and me. The goal of this work was to encourage Abhi to use more sophisticated vocabulary by asking for procedural talk associated with an oral recount or retelling, and to understand more of his Sikh traditions. What more personal a topic than how he takes care of his hair?

Abhi was eager to take on this assignment, supplying a series of photos that would support the step-by-step rendering of his retrospective take of his hair care habits and the cultural significance of them. As his partner, my work was to introduce new vocabulary, to provide a structure for the procedural storytelling or recount, and to learn from him. Several of his words did not have direct translations into English; in the six years I have been working with Abhi, I have never seen his hair down. One of the older male students in the group was quick to volunteer a demonstration on his own hair showing how adept a young man can be in fashioning a *rishi* knot.

Abhi's Hair

My name is Abhi. I am 12 years old and in Grade 6. One of my most prized possessions is my hair. By my Sikh cultural tradition, it has never been cut. My hair is now nearly waist length. How do I manage such long hair, you might ask. Let me explain.

First, I undo my hair, shaking it and letting it fall naturally. I wash my hair, never scrubbing one place for too long, or else my hair will be very greasy. I let it air dry. This takes hours, so usually I do this on the weekend.

Next, my mom parts my hair into two sections: one section for the lower braid and the other section, the juda, which will be worked on top. Then my mom braids them and connects them. She then rolls my hair up to make a joora or top knot. It might also be called a rishi knot. Mothers do this for their young sons, but over time, boys begin to be able to do this for themselves. I'm almost there! Braiding and knotting look like a complicated process, but actually, once you have practiced enough, it's quite quick and easy.

Finally, I cover my hair with a patka or rumal I wear to parties and to school. This way my hair stays in place and it stays clean, too. I have many patkas. They are very special because they are made in India. Often, family members travelling to India for holidays will bring patkas back as gifts. I love to receive them! Whenever I go swimming I like to keep my hair in a juda. How do you manage long hair under a football helmet? Some boys simply take their long hair down and let it fly around.

Canada is a diverse country. People come from all over the world to make their new home here. They bring their cultural traditions with them, and want to keep them. Canada includes people who have all kinds of preferences about their hair. Even though most Sikh boys cut their hair nowadays, I make my choice for long hair. I am very proud of my hair. Being different from other boys is very fun. It's empowering to show that I am a Sikh.

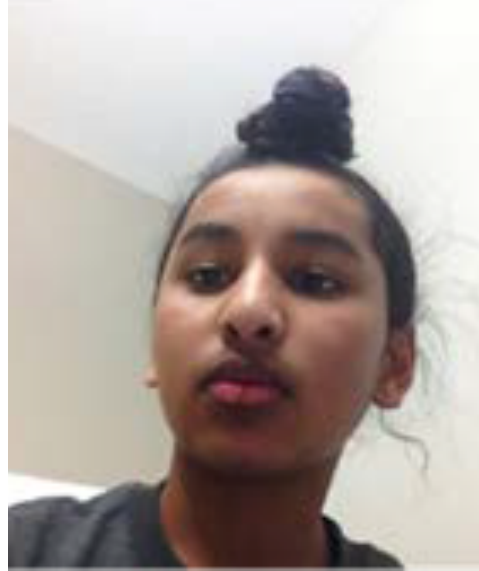
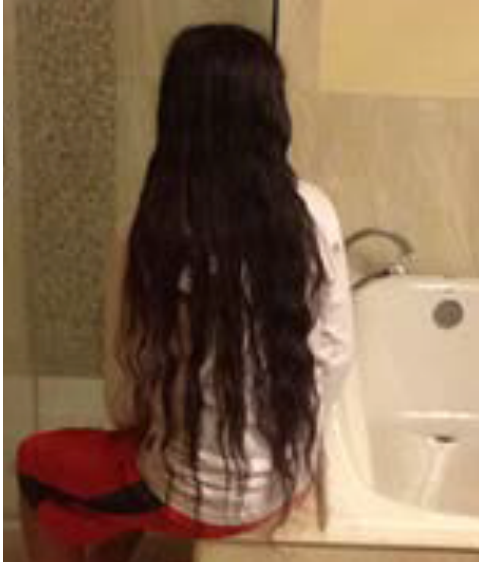


Fig. 8 and Fig. 9: Abhi's hair.

Genre and task requirements constrain student's vocabulary choices. Storytelling is essentially an oral activity that draws heavily on conversational language and high frequency vocabulary associated with Tier 1 in Beck et al.'s (2002) vocabulary framework. Even though engaging in collaborative talk beforehand and deliberately embedding more academic-like word choices such as *manage*, *connect*, *process*, *practice*, *finally*, *cultural*, *tradition*, *section*, *diverse*, *possession*, *naturally* associated with Tier 2 vocabulary, the overall nature of the text still reflects dependency on high-frequency vocabulary. It is important to remember to offer experience with different genres, especially expository modes, to introduce more high-utility academic words (Tier 2), and- secondly- to continue to place instructional focus on vocabulary teaching and learning in all grades.

It is interesting to note Abhi's spontaneous access across both Punjabi and English, borrowing and embedding words such as *juda*, *joora*, *rishi*, *patka*, and *rumal*. These are all words that do not have a direct translation and indicate his lexical flexibility. Translanguaging is seen as a strength and a resource among bilingual learners, reflecting a nimbleness in vocabulary control, as the speaker must make spur-of-the-moment choices to retrieve the exact word for the exact meaning intended from their integrated sum of lexicon.

Conclusion

Storytelling can advance multiple learning, language, and literacy goals in today's diverse classroom settings. Storytelling can promote cultural awareness and sensitivity, identity construction, and leave permanent artefacts of literacy engagement that can be revisited many times for retrospective insights and enjoyment. Sharing our stories requires active listening and, in turn, builds relationships of trust and respect.

Everyone has a story. Many of them. It is finding the topic, the time, and making the opportunity to turn storytelling into a learning opportunity in the classroom. Often, minimal planning or preparation is required. Few of us will ever become famous. Few of our stories will bend the arch of time, or leave our mark on the human collective conscience. Our sphere of influence might be small, but our stories can nevertheless create small ripples on the ocean of time as those who journey after us discover our stories, become curious, and pick up the threads of what we have left behind, as they themselves see how our stories informs and shapes theirs.

Letters, diaries, scrapbooks and journals, photo albums, and the gift of literacy that both Anne Frank and Malala Yousafzai understood at a young age make possible a legacy of indelible footprints that time cannot erase, ensuring the reach of our being beyond our own lifespan. Our stories might be our most treasured possessions worth sharing.

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