



Sensations monthly Webinars
ENGLISH for teachers

January 2022



Fran Watkins

Teacher trainer,
teacher, exam
and materials
writer

The art and scope of Retelling in ELT: an invaluable task type

All attendees will receive a certificate of attendance and slides via email link 24 hours after the webinar









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Sensations *monthly* Webinars E N G L I S H for teachers

January



Fran Watkins
Teacher trainer,
teacher, exam and
materials writer

The art and scope of Retelling in ELT

We will explore how to:

- support learners' speaking development
- increase opportunities for fluency work
- raise engagement, extend speaker turns and manage cognitive load

27th January • 2pm UK time



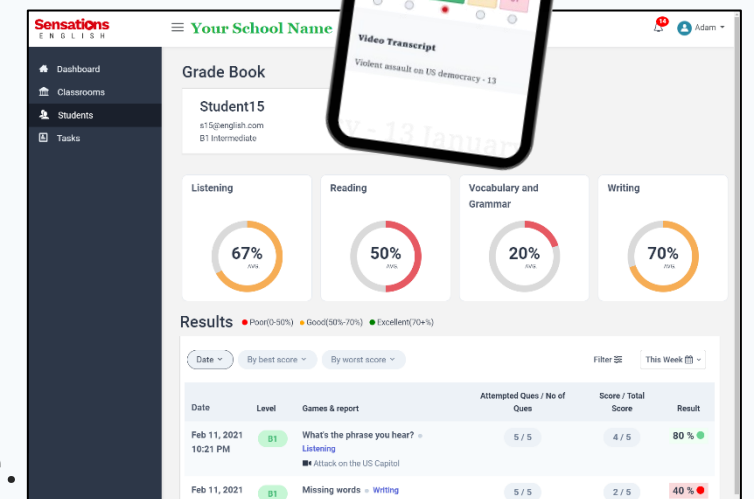
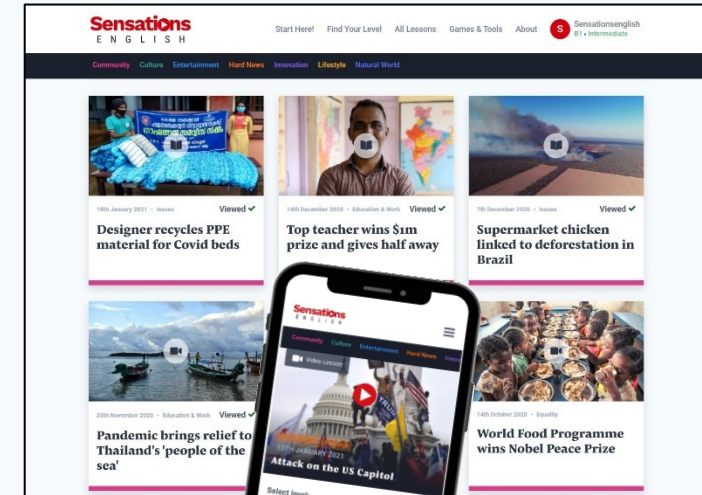
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Overview

- the power of storytelling and its effect on the brain – neuroscience and narrative theory
- retelling – background in TBLT
- its scope and value in the language classroom
- modifying the retelling task, for variety and differentiation



The power of stories

Stories are ubiquitous.

They are profound.

They have impact.

That's why ...

- news sells
- gossips gossip
- conspiracy theories mushroom





How people learn through others

In the words of J.K. Rowling ...



“Unlike any other creature on this planet, human beings can learn and understand without having experienced. They can think themselves into other people's places.”

Harvard Commencement 2008



Why stories work

We are social animals
We feel empathy

- Stories chime with our **affective** and **emotional selves**.
- They 'strike a chord' with us.
- An emotional, empathetic reaction means it is more likely to be **remembered** or 'encoded'.



**“Let’s pretend we scored a goal!
10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 ...”
[celebrating loudly]**

View the video here: <https://youtu.be/VNINrAhfg7o>



Watch the video



View the video here:
<https://youtu.be/VNINrAhfg7o>



Cognitive functioning

Our brains are hard-wired to receive and make stories

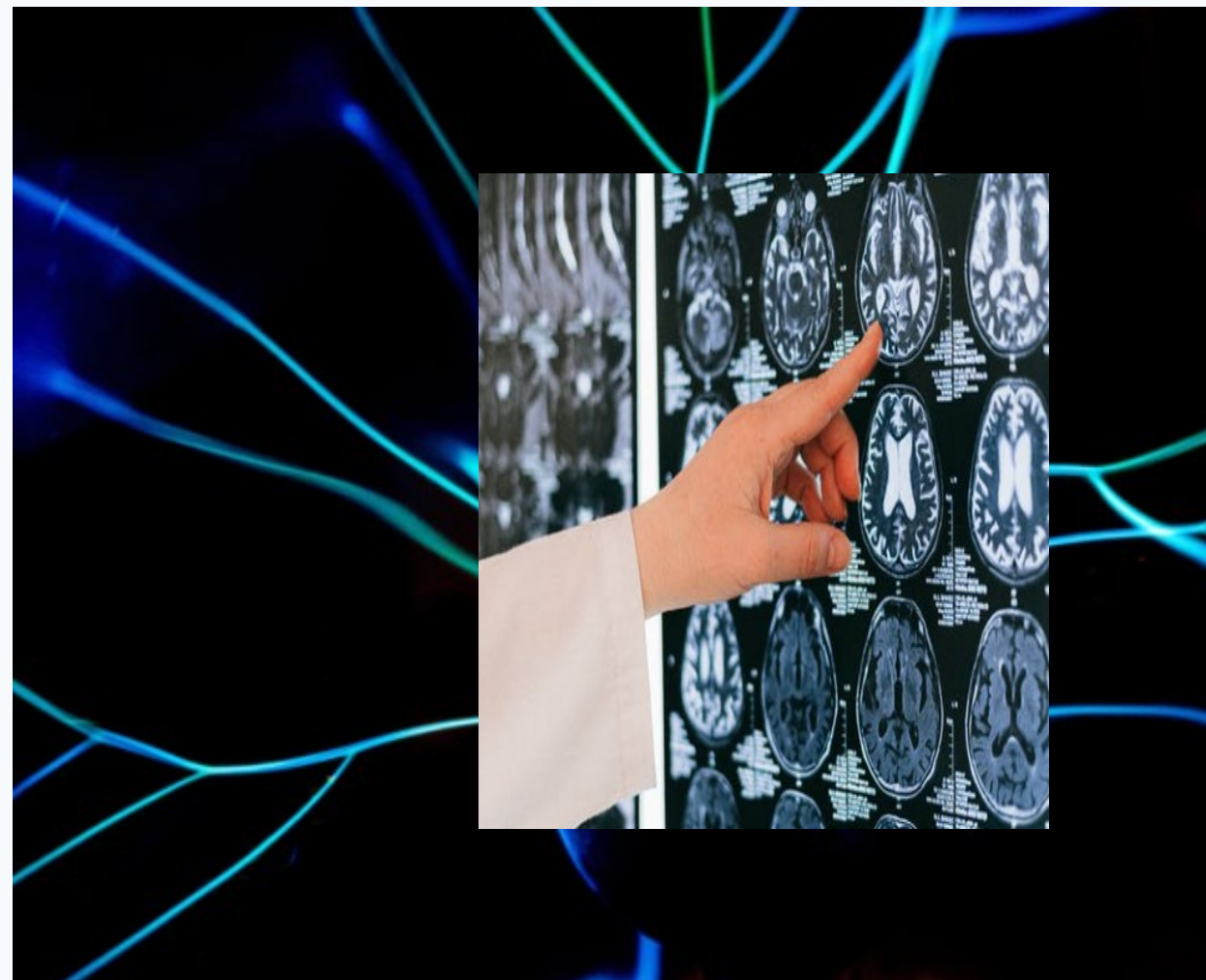
- **Except that** our brains are **not** hard-wired ...
- but **constantly rewiring** through neurons, making pathways to interpret and **make sense of the world** through stories.





The brain

- Story telling uses different parts of the brain
- There are neurochemical reactions on hearing stories
- There's a motor and sensory response - 'mirroring'





Neuroscience + narrative theory

... throw light on the power and mechanisms of stories.

Numerous fields exploit them, including:

Business and
marketing

Law

History

Training in the
medical
profession

Environmental
sciences

Politics



What is narrative theory?

Narrative is a **basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience**, such as time, process and change

Its focus is **the distinctive nature of narrative** and its various structures, elements, uses and effects.

It studies **how stories help people make sense of the world**, while also studying **how people make sense of stories**.



I tell stories as a teacher, to a whole range of adults.

But this session goes beyond stories per se,
to focus on **retelling** ...

What is **retelling**?



What is **RETELLING**?

It's when we tell someone a story that we have ...

- heard
- read or
- watched/heard.

As **social** animals, we do this all the time in our first languages



TASK – your turn 😊

JUST THINK! In everyday conversation (L1), when was the last time someone **retold** you a story OR you **retold** somebody else a story?



In the language classroom ...

(Generally) using stories in the L2
i.e. English

- Fictional and non-fictional

Written



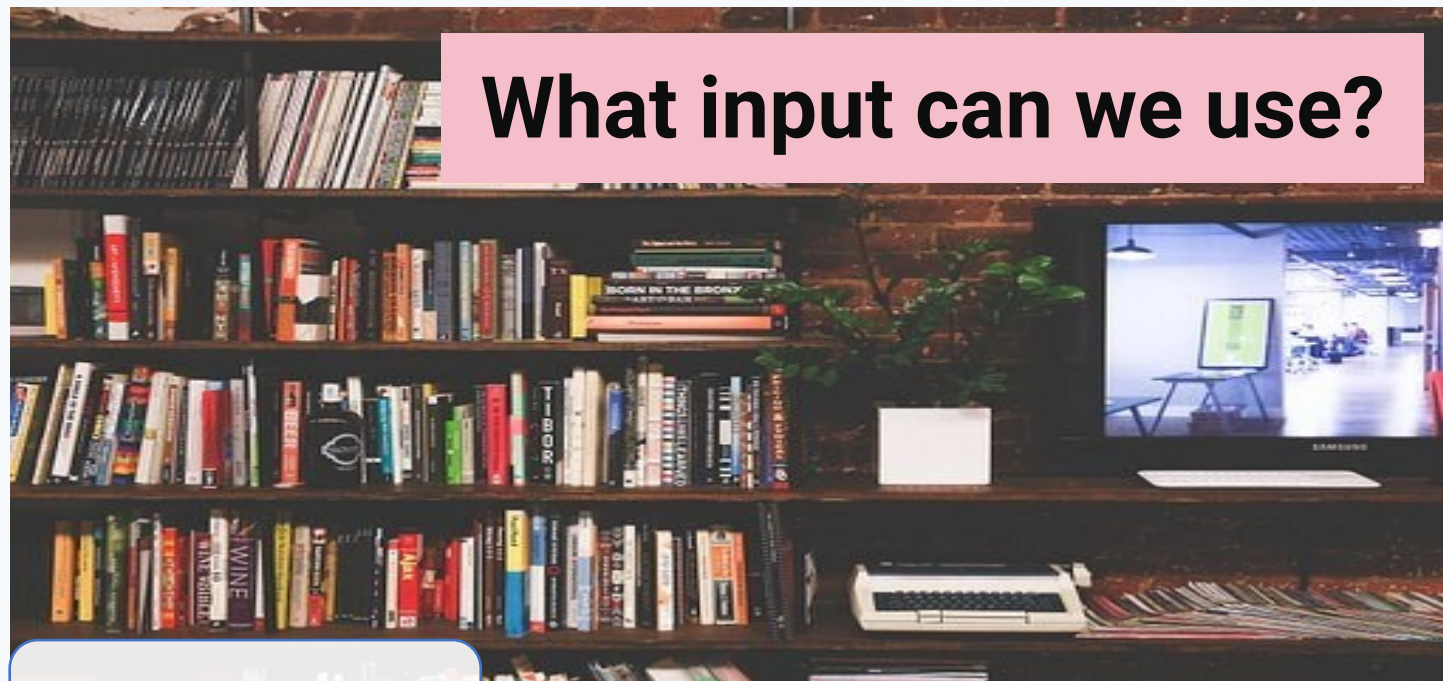
- Fictional and non-fictional

Heard



- Fictional and non-fictional

Seen
(and heard)



What input can we use?

TASK – your turn 😊

What kind of stories do you use in the ELT classroom?



Task Based Learning (TBL)





Task-based language teaching

TBL and developing learners' speaking

- **Repetition of the task** frequently happens in TBL research and classrooms,

e.g. Bygate (2001); Bygate and Samuda (2005); Hawkes (2009)

- **Narratives are a typical TBL task type**

e.g. Skehan and Foster (1999); Bygate (2001).

- Research often focuses on the effect of **planning/task type** on production

Skehan and Foster (1998); Ellis (2009)

Fluency

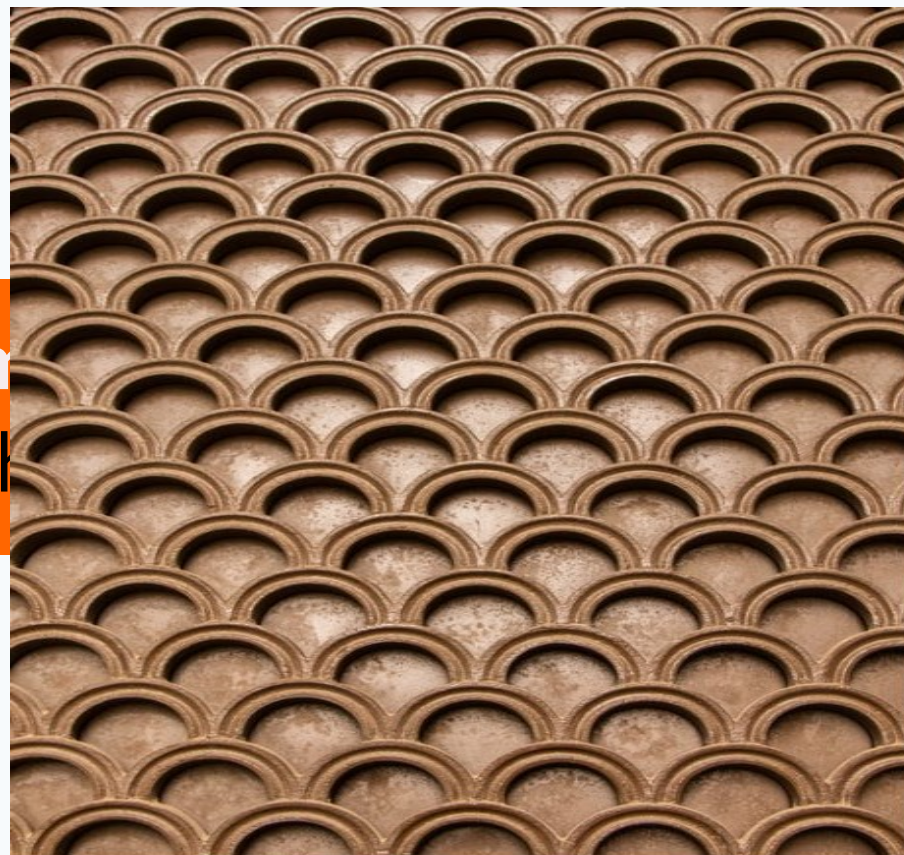
**Complexity
/ Range**

Accuracy



Task-based language learning

Of course, **repetition doesn't** fit the 'transmission' model, or better





Reiteration

There's **repetition**, and then there's **repetition**.....

“ calling it **task iteration** ...

avoids giving the misleading impression that using the same task more than once will elicit the same response each time.

... each time the same task is used, the learners' experience of it will be different, in part because learners will orient to it differently. ”

Diane Larsen-Freeman in Bygate (Ed) (2018: 317)



Benefits of Retelling

What's appealing about retelling from a TBL perspective is ...

- that **meaning** is primary, authentic, essentially communicative
- **narratives** are often used as a task type;
- **variables** can be easily adjusted around the task + planning;
- the **possibility of revisiting** the same/similar tasks;
- its central acknowledgement of the **limits of attentional capacity**.



My take on Retelling

Retelling frees up the brain ...

Fran Watkins 2020 ETAS JOURNAL



Getting learners to **retell a story** (2nd time), with a *possible* conscious focus on form-related aspects, **lightens the cognitive load**.

“It is like attempting to play a piece on the piano with **careful attention** to emotion: this is considerably easier if the pianist is **already familiar** with the melody.”

TASK – your turn 😊

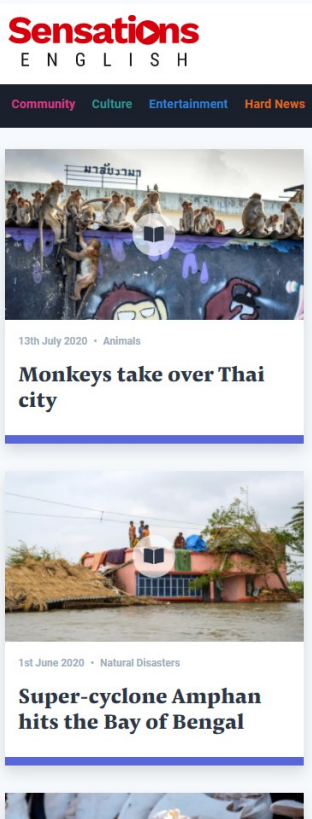
Does this make sense? Is it a helpful metaphor?



My take on Retelling

What's so **special** about RETELLING for me?

- Firstly, it allows for **extended turns**, even for low level learners.
- It's **inherently motivating** and enjoyable. Stoicovy (2004)
- It's an incredibly **flexible** task – partly due to the variables.
- It's **logical**. It moves from the content - the **WHAT** - to the **HOW**.
e.g. genre, (context-setting,) lexis, grammar, discourse, empathising with the audience, etc.

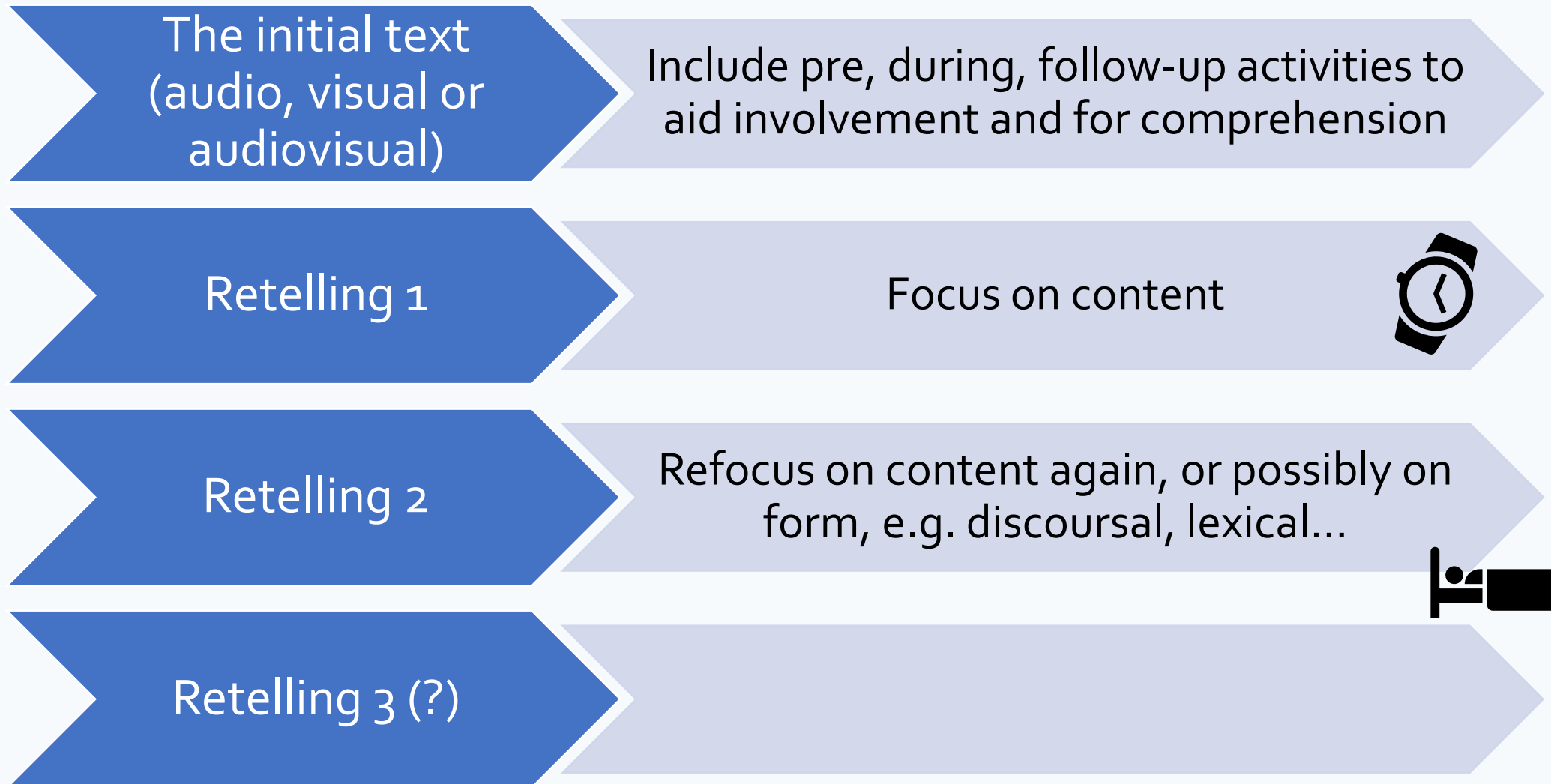


So what's the procedure in the ELT classroom?





General Retelling procedure





A sample story

Yemeni fishermen find fortune inside whale

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Video Lesson

NATURAL WORLD • Animals
9TH JULY 2021

Yemeni fishermen find fortune inside whale

[Yemeni fishermen find fortune inside whale \(sensationsenglish.com\)](https://sensationsenglish.com)

TASK – your turn 😊

Listen/watch the story! Try to make sense of the headline and image

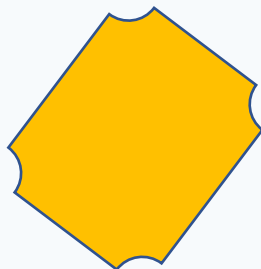


Selecting appropriate stories

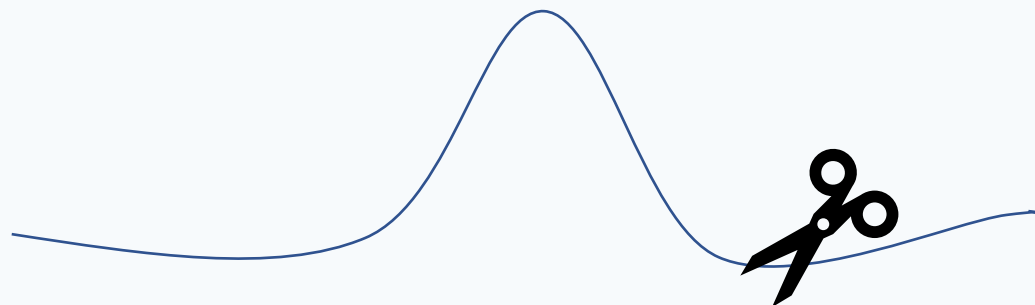
Which stories do I choose **for my learners?**



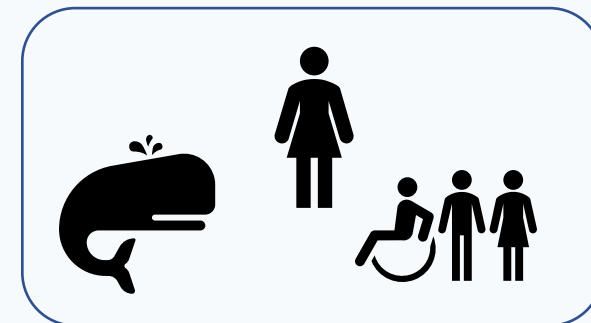
LEVEL



SHAPE



LENGTH



'CHARACTER(S)' OR
'ANIMALS'

The first essential, the life and soul, so to speak, of a story, is the plot.

A story that is whole has a beginning, middle and end...

Aristotle



Now it's your turn ...

TASK – your turn 😊

- Watch yourself in a mirror or phone camera
- Prepare for 1 minute – think about who / where / what / how / the end



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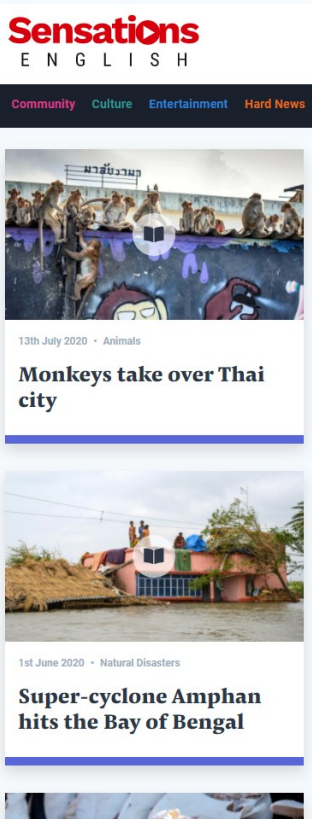
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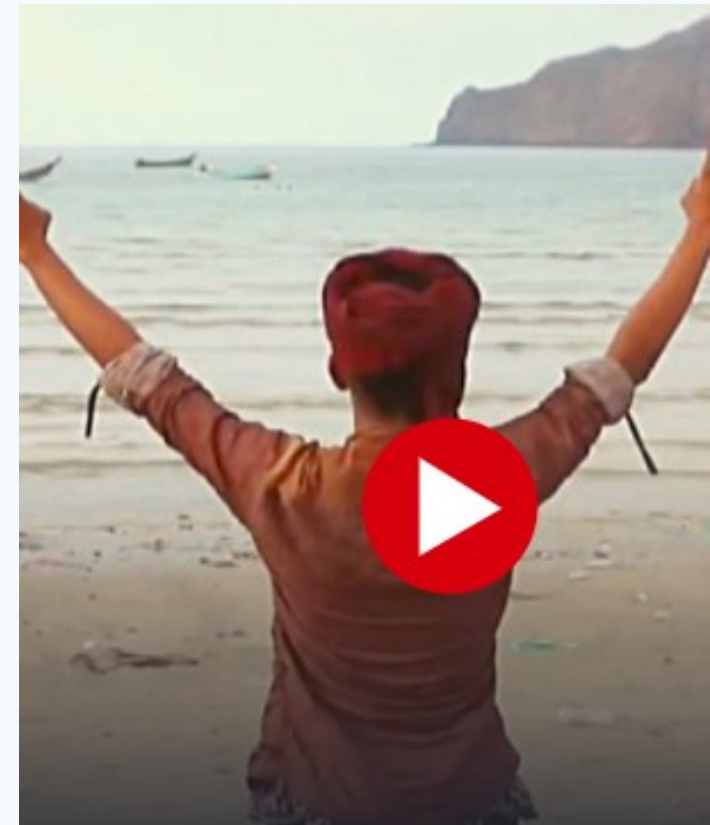
NATURAL WORLD • Animals
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Yemeni fishermen find fortune inside whale

I heard this really interesting story the other day about



How does this translate to the actual classroom ?





Support learners' retelling



Using **frames** as support before/during retelling

Lead up/background
Problem
Solution

Beginning/context
Middle
End

Lead up
Conflict
Resolution

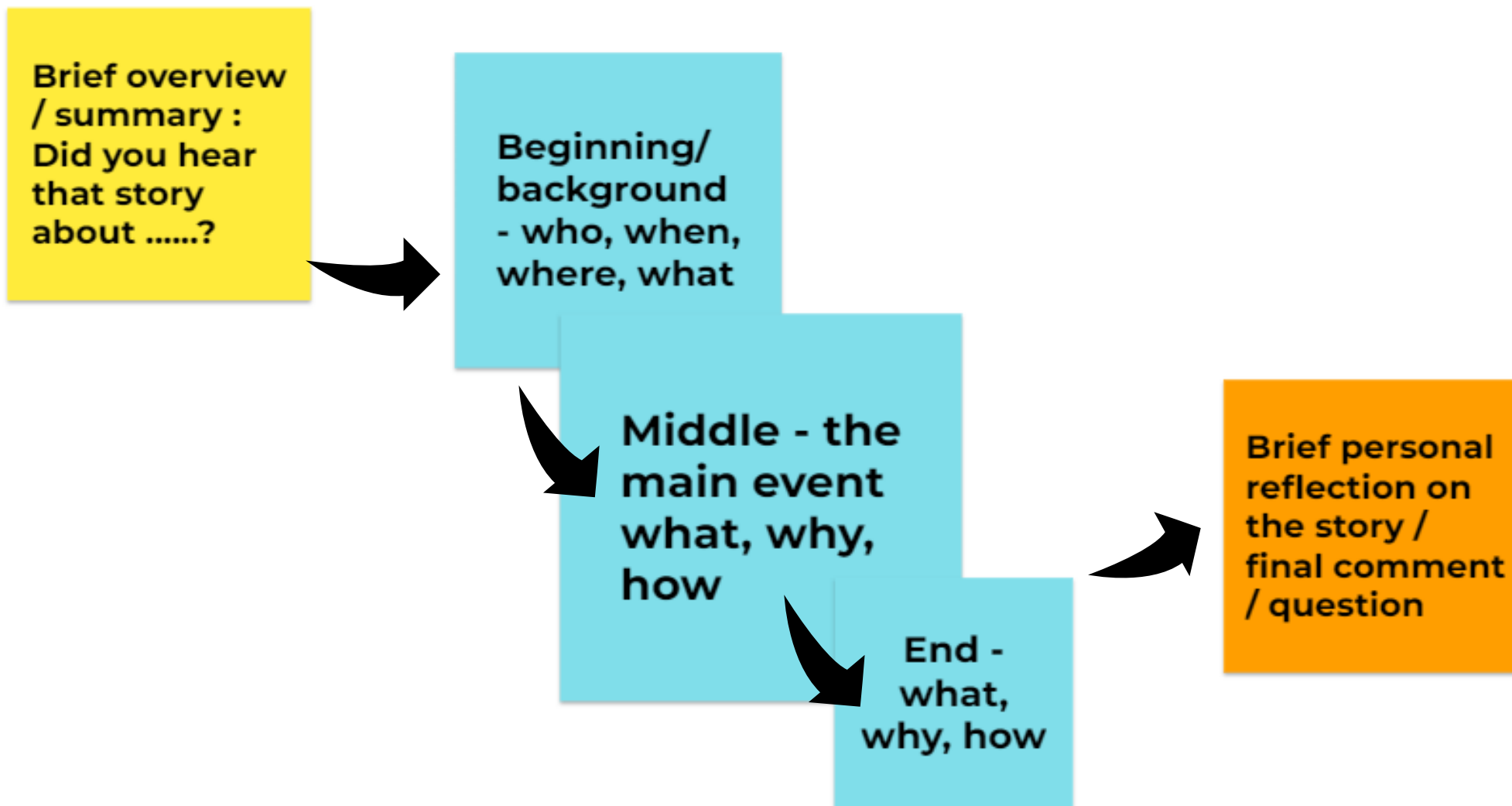
Main Event –
Cause
Effect

- *Some frames work better than others – story dependent*
- *Adjust the levels of scaffolding*





A sample supportive retelling frame







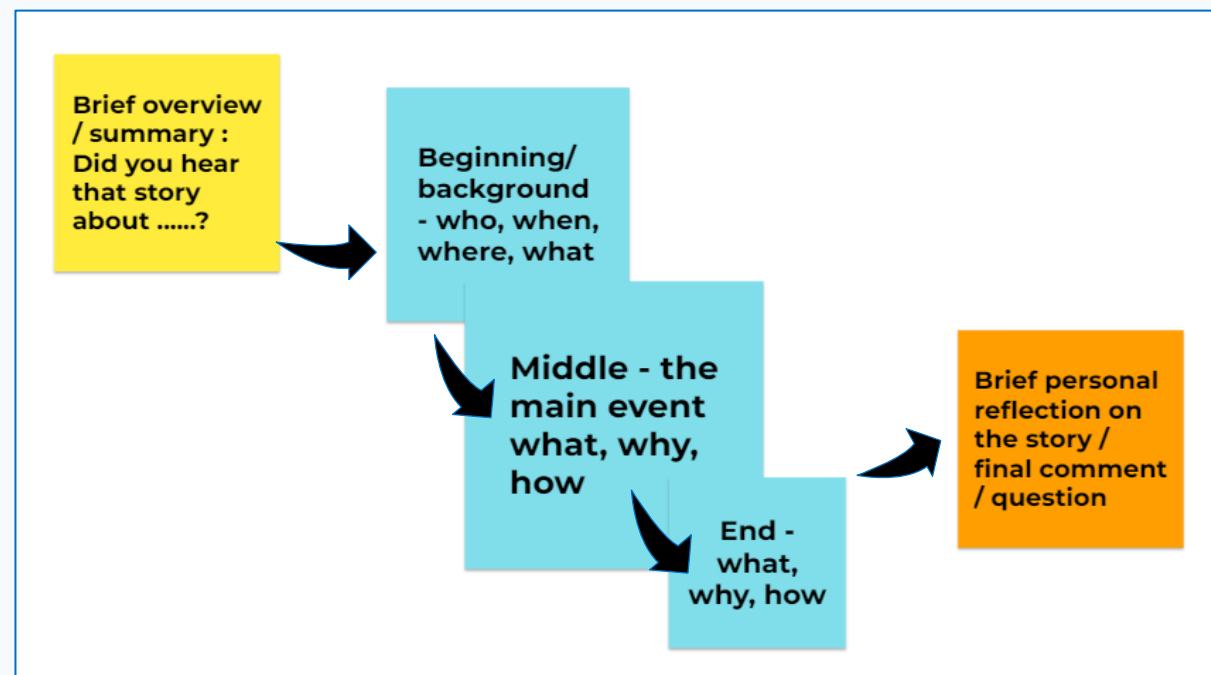
Retelling with a specific focus

Before the next retelling, learners focus on specific language

Specific (Language) focus

- **Lexical**, e.g. collocations, idiomatic language, lexical chains
- **Discoursal**, e.g. sequence markers, attitudinal markers
- **Grammatical**, e.g. narrative tenses, cleft sentences, relative clauses
- **Pronunciation**, e.g. sentence stress, contractions, linking, specific phonemes

Reuse **the frame** if appropriate





How authentic a task is retelling?

- In the ELT classroom, learners **re**tell the story to someone **already familiar** with it.

- **Solutions?**

- **Jigsaw retelling**



- **Change interactions**

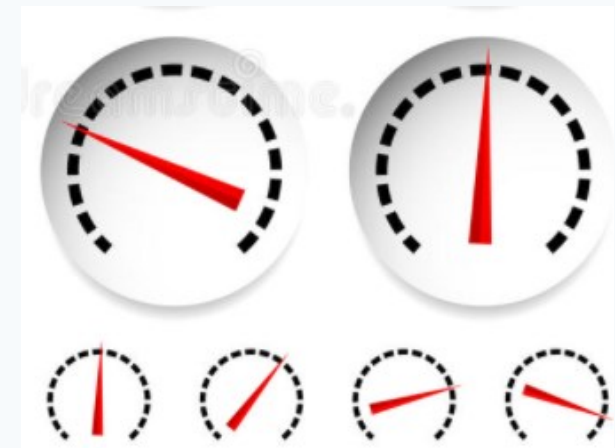
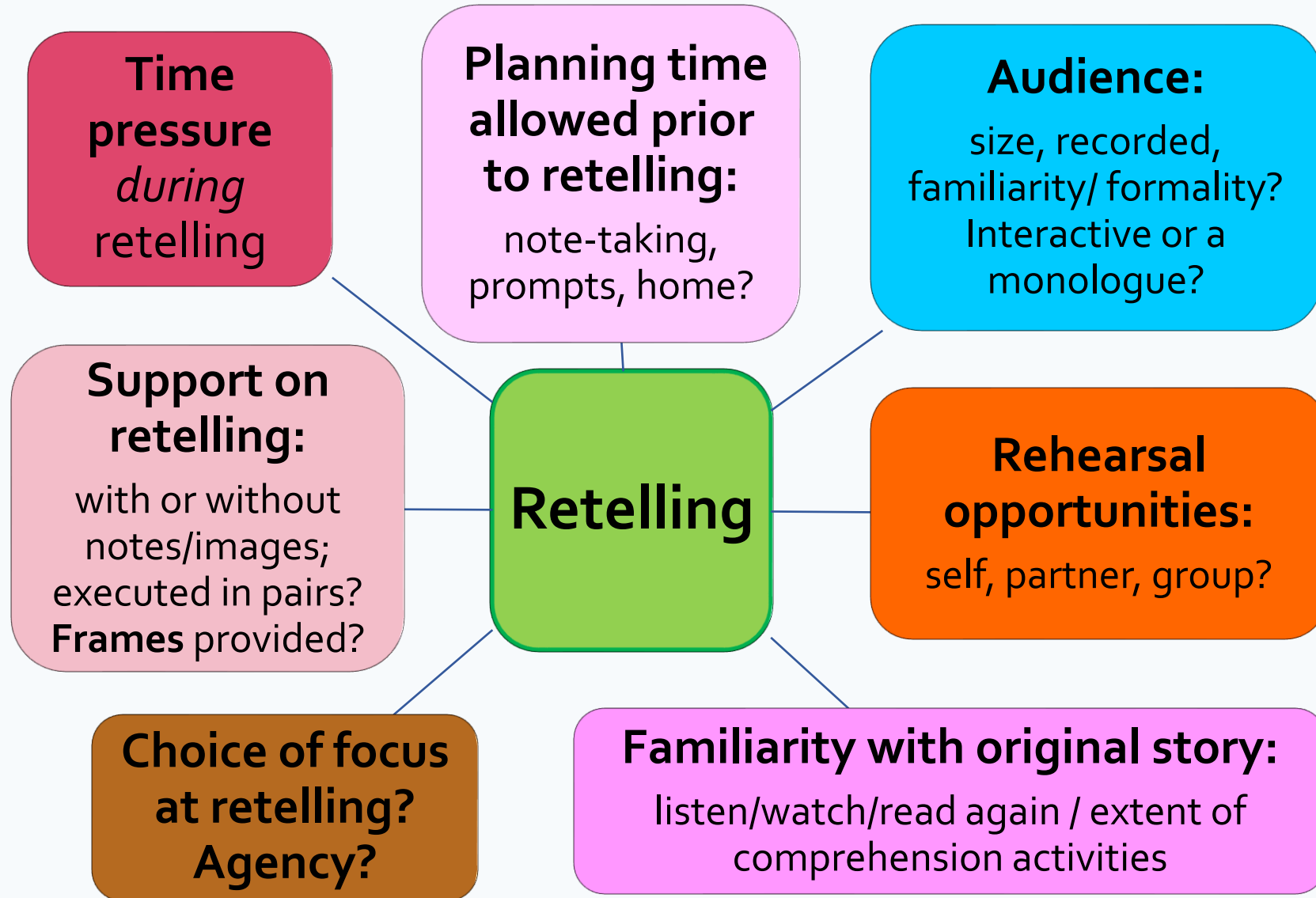


Learners are **motivated** by retelling.

- Inherent challenge / game-like
- Confidence-boosting
- Performance conditions add variety
- Very learner-centred



Ways to differentiate

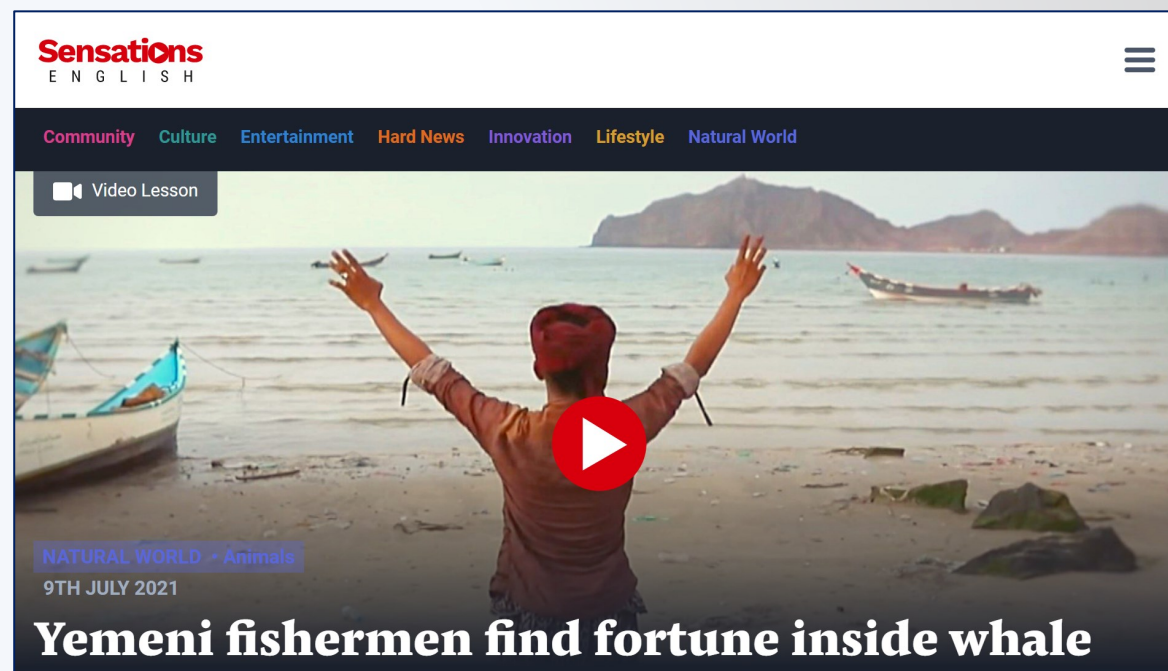




Learner engagement

My learners appear to enjoy retelling ...

- as a memory test
- to hear themselves talk in English
- to convert some of the lexis/grammar they witnessed into output so as to extend their current interlanguage
- for their own stated/unstated linguistic goals, e.g. pronunciation





Feedback from a student

An advanced student – her personal focus: **extending her vocabulary**

"The first time you tell a story, you do it tentatively, and you're not really sure about the order and the words. Repeating it gives you the chance to use different words."

"It was easy to remember the steps because the story was easy, so I was able to concentrate on the vocabulary."

"[without the mini language focus stage] I would've just got the meaning across without using the words and phrases. I would have concentrated just on the story itself."



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13th July 2020 • Animals

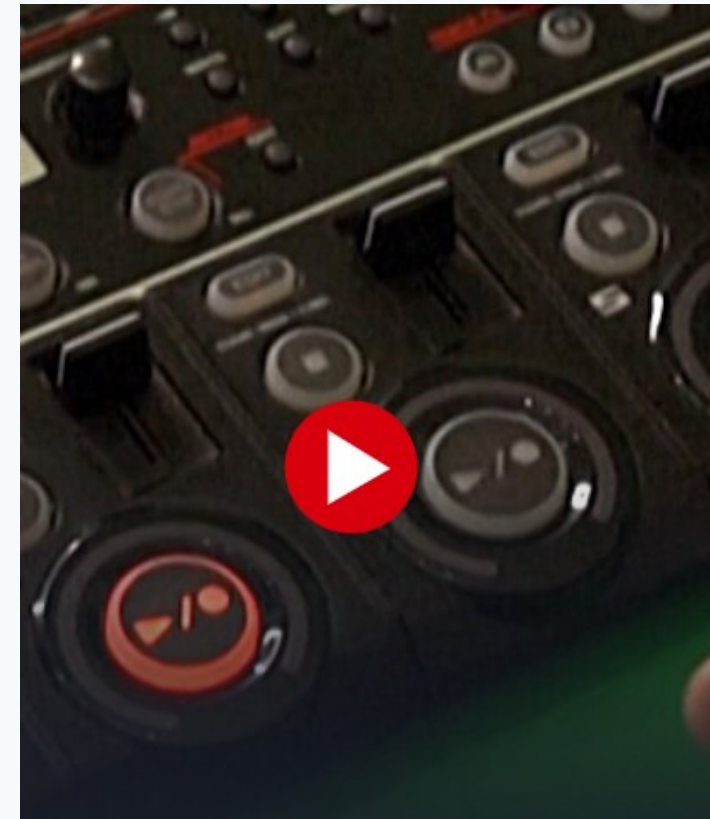
Monkeys take over Thai city



1st June 2020 • Natural Disasters

Super-cyclone Amphan hits the Bay of Bengal

Further considerations



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Other considerations

- **Rationale** for retelling to adult learners can be made **explicit**
- Give **feedback** where feasible
- Give learners opportunity to **exercise agency** –
 - **which texts?**
 - **which performance conditions?**
 - **which language focus?**

“The **action-based approach** therefore also takes into account the cognitive, emotional and volitional resources and **the full range of abilities** specific to and applied by **the individual as a social agent.**” CEFR (2001) p 9



To sum up 1 ...

- stories have an **visible, scientific impact** on the brain
- language and memory are inextricably connected
- most learners are **engaged** when retelling stories
- learners often prioritise speaking – stories provide ideal, substantial material (longer turns)
- TBL – meaning focused, interactive – includes task repetition + retelling



To sum up 2 ...

- retelling allows us to 'play with' the cognitive load
- different iterations can have **different focal areas** to enhance linguistic development
- retelling stories can be easily adjusted for variety, memorability and differentiation purposes
- retelling can cater for and promote learner agency and individuality



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