CHAPTER 2

How Would a TV Commercial Producer Make Lessons as Memorable as an Ad?

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What makes one lesson such a knowledge-transfer triumph, while others seem to dwindle quickly or even die upon student contact? Using a story to carry your message can make the difference between success and failure. Stories get the brain's attention, keep it coming back for more, and eventually result in independent use of the knowledge. The challenge for both commercial producers and teachers lies in knowing how to choose the right story—and how to do it well.

A COMMERCIAL PRODUCER'S TIPS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

When I worked in commercial production, I developed commercials and campaigns for local businesses, and it was my job to gather information from a business, get a feel for who the company was, and then create a message that would focus on what the company was about and wanted to accomplish. This core message needed to be remembered and acted upon. Your goal for a teacher is the same as it is for any commercial producer: know what the core message is, plant it into the minds of your audience, and have them act on it. As a teacher, I now use the same skills that I employed when I made those commercials to produce language skills in students.

Commercial producers and marketers are always analyzing successful commercials so that they can imitate their success. Two books that are popular with my friends still working in the field are *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (Kahneman, 2011) and *Made to Stick* (Heath & Heath, 2007). Both books shed light on why successful commercials work and why the "story" told in each commercial is the key.

These books have given me a greater understanding of why I've had success with using stories in the classroom. The examples in the books explain how a story touches us and changes us, and therefore is remembered and often acted upon. Marketers know how to put this research into action; my belief is that language teachers can do it, too.

Tip 1: Identify your core message and put it in a story.

First you need to get a grasp on how a commercial producer or marketing professional uncovers a company's core message and relays it as a story in a commercial. For a little perspective on the process, I called Gretchen Everett—the marketing director for Taco Time Northwest—to ask about the fast food chain's recent change in commercials. From the beginning the founder of Taco Time had a passion for fresh and healthy ingredients. So the core message of the commercials was fast food that is fresh and healthy. This set the company apart from other fast food chains. Its mascot, Ned the talking cactus, poked fun at Taco Time for not *really* being fast food.

But as more and more national fast food chains (such as Subway) recognized that "healthy and fast" sold well, they started hopping on the "fast food can be healthy" bandwagon. Gretchen and her team realized that Taco Time was in danger of losing its distinctive identity in the market. Its core message needed a tweak. Taco Time worked to set itself apart from the national fast food companies once again. The company connected itself to an even greater idea. "Time and vision came together for us as the buy-local movement, anti-large corporation movement surfaced," Gretchen passionately states (personal communication, June 28, 2012).

Taco Time's pièce de résistance was its decision to become the locally owned company who buys locally. It now provides customers with the opportunity to be part of a noble cause in spades: It uses locally grown ingredients and buys other items from local suppliers. "We are fresh, healthy, and local to the core," Gretchen says. That is the core message. One of the newest commercials pieces together a puzzle showing where that chicken, lettuce, and cheese on your Taco Time taco came from. That is the company's story.

As a language teacher, your core message is what you want students to learn. You need to find a good story and use it as a vehicle to deliver your intended lesson content. There are detectable, repeatable elements in memorable stories. If you understand what the elements are, you'll be able to look for them during planning. Let's look at some good examples of story-containing commercials.

Tip 2: Use stories that surprise.

Think about a Geico commercial. A plucky little lime-green gecko stands in the middle of a board room table. The CEO praises advertising results while smiling and nodding straight at the gecko. A board member attacks the gecko jealously, saying how easy it is for a cute little lizard. The gecko corrects the man, saying,

"Ah . . . gecko actually." The board member continues to belittle him, imitating his accent, "I'd get more attention if I was tiny and green and had a cute little British accent." Another board member slants her head questioningly and says, "British? I thought you were Australian." "Actually," the gecko responds, "I'm from . . ." and the screen changes to "Geico" with the tag line "15 minutes could save you 15% or more on car insurance." We are delighted with the little fellow and wonder, "Well, where is he from?" Our curiosity is piqued. The next time he comes on screen, this time in a new scenario, we are subconsciously attempting to guess what will happen this time. Our minds are actively engaged.

How about the Old Spice Man putting new life back into male grooming products that our fathers and grandfathers used? We are shocked when this sculpted body of a man, just out of the shower and wrapped in a towel, asks, "Does your man look like me? Does your man smell like me?" He's already shocked us, but then he continues through a rapid-fire succession of James Bond–like changes. He is on a yacht. An oyster in his hand turns into diamonds. Suddenly he is on a horse. All of this is possible for you, he suggests, if your man uses Old Spice. Each commercial surprises us and takes us on a journey of fantastic possibilities. We are left asking, "What's going to happen next?"

There is a repetitive story behind every event that these characters are involved in—one that first surprises and then piques our curiosity. We remember the product because of these stories, not because of the products themselves or even the characters themselves. It is the surprise story woven around the characters that inspires our curiosity.

How does curiosity play a part in memory-making? Basically, our brain constructs a model of what is normal. It does so by linking circumstances, events, actions, and outcomes that co-occur with some regularity (Kahneman, 2011). We observe a finite sample of events and form a generalization drawn from the events (Pinker, 2008). But when the story is outside of our mental image . . . surprise! Now we are curious.

Why is this little green gecko at a board meeting? Who is this gorgeous man who defies the laws of physics and seems to be in many locations at one time? The story doesn't fit our model of what is "normal," so it grabs our attention, priming us to learn something new.

As humans, we thrive on learning through surprise. What comes next? How does it fit into our life? A story that surprises your classroom or audience with the unexpected delights them. They're ready to fill in the blanks and figure it out. They've been stimulated, and a creation of new patterns of meaning takes shape. This creation is the essence of learning.

As previously mentioned, a great resource for story analysis is *Made to Stick* (2007), coauthored by Chip Heath, a professor of organizational behavior in the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University, and Dan Heath (his brother), a former Harvard Business School researcher turned educational entrepreneur. The Heath brothers refer to the space that surprise creates as a "gap," something

that needs to be filled in—an essential, unexpected space left for the audience to put something into and make meaning out of.

These gaps are essential in the classroom. Students learn best when they are totally and actively involved and take full responsibility for their own learning. Gaps allow them to do so. Knowledge, especially language acquisition, is not something that is passively absorbed, but something a learner actively creates.

So surprise (or "the unexpected," as the Heaths label it), is first on your list of things to look for when searching for a good story for your lesson. But what do you look for next? Let's complete your list.

Tip 3: Tap into emotions and give details.

Want an idea to stick? The more brain connections, the better. As language teachers, we all know this. Increasing the number of connections enables the brain to recall information swiftly and with little effort. The brain doesn't act sequentially, like a chart; it acts more like a parallel computer processor. It thrives when it is challenged to do many things (Kahneman, 2011).

Feelings enhance the quality and quantity of information acquired by an audience, and producers know it. Emotions aren't just mental; they are felt in our bodies and often cause physical reactions. That is what a commercial producer wants. Remember this when you're choosing stories for language acquisition lessons. Tap into them in your class, and you'll reach students.

I look for stories that will bring out physical, body-based reactions. Our throats tighten when we hear about lovers who must part; the hairs on our arms rise as danger draws near; tears form in our eyes over the loss of a loved one; laughter shakes our bodies when a story takes a funny turn. When you teach language, this physical reaction gives students another of the connections needed to cement what they're learning in their minds.

Commercials do a good job of giving viewers plenty of concrete, emotion-filled information while still allowing them to connect the dots. Take MasterCard's "Priceless" commercials. In one, we watch a father and son at a baseball game. The cost of every item purchased during their outing, from tickets to food to autographed ball, is listed. But the time spent in real conversation with your 11-year-old son is "priceless." We are drawn in. We can relate to their story, to the concept of the truly important moments in our lives. We feel the warmth of their love. As humans, we have a shared language of experiences.

The other important element in this story that awakens emotions and makes the spot memorable is its concrete information; detail by detail, the story builds and forms in your mind. These plausible details are what make the story credible. This credible and concrete information adds to a story's likelihood of being remembered (Heath & Heath, 2007; Kahneman, 2011). Credible and concrete information makes emotions feel real because the situations are real.

PUTTING STORIES, SURPRISE, AND EMOTIONS INTO LESSONS

It's now time for your lesson planning. If you choose the websites and published materials you use wisely—keeping in mind what makes commercials effective—you'll find that much of the work has already been done for you.

Tip 4: Connect intended content to culture-crossing emotions.

Some of the old language teaching standbys (such as fables, legends, and proverbs) are great. They fit the bill of providing an element of surprise based on situations we all can recognize, and they often draw on emotions and provide plenty of shared experience detail. They are not to be overlooked.

The websites I frequently use are those with news stories because they often have stories that offer surprise and emotion-building credible details as well as stories for different levels. Two examples are Breaking News English (www.breakingnewsenglish.com; a free site) and English-to-Go (www.english-to-go.com; a subscription-based site). Both use actual news stories (there's the credibility!). You do, however, need to go through the stories and choose the ones appropriate to your program requirements and/or students' needs. Between the two sites, there are literally hundreds of stories. Since the program I teach in is topic-based—structured around a number of topics the state government asks us to cover—I usually search for stories that I can tie into an existing topic.

A news story about a cat saving an entire German family from a house fire caused by a rag left too close to a hot burner, for example, ties right into the topic of safety. Or how about a mother duck who grabs a Vancouver police officer to save her ducklings after they fall through a sewer grate? She didn't call 911, but her efforts will get students thinking about the different types of situations in which they would call an emergency number. By combining safety materials, which can be dry, with stories like these, you can add the elements of surprise, concrete details, and emotion to your lesson.

To teach the topic of money and budgets, I have used a story from English-to-Go about a young Swedish woman who won a contest for a free trip to Hawaii and ended up with a huge tax problem and not nearly enough money budgeted for the trip. The emotion of feeling cheated and the reaction to that injustice is universal. I tie in actual personal/family budget sheets to this lesson as well, but those become associated with the budget and tax returns of the young Swedish woman from the story, and that makes the message stick.

Tip 5: Design teaching materials around the story.

Last year I put an entire book to work: *Eye of the Storm* (Loader, 2007). Previously, I had used this graded reader only as a reading text, but because I've trained myself to be on the lookout for stories that provide surprise, credible and concrete details, and emotion, I noticed that not only did *Eye of the Storm* have all of these qualities, it could tie into every topic I needed to cover for the quarter,

not to mention cover the grammar required for the level. Spotting the story is always the most important step; luckily, this book is full of usable storylines, including a young man studying for his career, young lovers who are separated, families in peril, dangerous weather, rescues, culture clashes, and an overbearing, elderly father.

Even though the book I chose was already written, it didn't mean there was no work to be done. First, I looked at the topics required by my department (my core message): safety, emergencies, health, money and budgets, jobs, and parenting.

I tied jobs and health into a chapter about one of the main characters, Max, studying to be a pilot. Of course, the jobs topic connection is easy to see. But the health connection was mental health, doing something we enjoy for our own mental well-being. Max loves to fly. By choosing these two topics, I left plenty of space for students to think independently. What gives them pleasure? What do they do to reduce stress in their lives? What jobs are they interested in? What job training do they need or already have?

Alongside the story I used materials that state governments and institutions provide online. These are handouts on practical/daily living information. They are often dry, but they work well in combination with a story.

When it came to the language aims, the first thing I did was choose 10 vocabulary words from each section along with some collocations and phrases. I then made simple fill-in-the-blank or matching worksheets. I combined all of the above into group activities and discussion activities that are already part of my curriculum and were not just made for this book. Rewriting some of my existing materials using the names of characters from the book added to the effectiveness of the materials.

I wanted the grammar I chose from the story to improve students' verbal skills. For this book, I taught grammar lessons on the modals *should* and *could*, comparisons and superlatives, as well as writing and answering questions. You can imagine that a story about a devastating hurricane has quite a bit of opportunity for *should* and *could*. What should you do when there is a hurricane warning? What could you do to protect your family? But there was also the story of conflict between parents and adult children. What should be done in situations like this? Do the *shoulds* differ depending on a student's country of origin?

The book is also full of comparison opportunities related to winds getting stronger and waves getting bigger. The characters are becoming more frightened. The danger increases. Judgments have to be made depending on degrees of the danger.

Letting students write questions about the characters or what happened rapidly increased students' abilities to put question forms into verbal use. Reading comprehension skills were also enhanced because of the questions. Students had to find and/or remember the details necessary to answer the questions about the chapters and the characters.

Tip 6: Rerun language concepts.

This is the easiest principle to implement. Follow the lead of the advertisers, and once you've determined your core message—your topic and grammar points—rerun it. You can rerun those points over and over in any story. It is not necessary to reuse the exact same handouts, of course, but *do not* introduce material that doesn't tie into your original curricular requirements. In order to avoid distractions, stay within the bounds of your core message.

Liken this to seeing the same character in a series of commercials. The Geico gecko is in many ads, but his message is always the same: 15 minutes saves you up to 15%. MasterCard grabs our hearts each time with different stories, but the message is the same: "For everything else there's MasterCard."

CONCLUSION

Using stories that contain surprise, credible and concrete details, and emotion adds another benefit in the classroom. The stories help accelerate student learning by increasing the level of ease with which a message is received. A story tends to relax and engage a class. Learning is taking place because students are engaged on many levels. This is not the sequential learning of a grammar chart (which can cause anxiety).

When was the last time a commercial put you under so much strain that you couldn't think clearly? Probably never. If you choose your stories wisely, never subjecting the class to shocking or embarrassing topics, you'll reduce the strain that acquiring language can cause in students. And they will thank you for it.

Now that you have the fundamentals of what makes a good story and examples of how to put a story to good use in the classroom, you only need to do one more thing. Start looking for stories. I prefer to set stories aside as I run across them. I categorize them and then file them under possible topics. With this method good stories are always on hand. Just keep your eyes open to any story's possibilities.

You are now on your way to becoming a commercial producer in your classroom. Choose your stories wisely. Create new pathways to language learning by looking for stories with surprise, lots of details, and—most of all—emotion. Right along with the story, your language message will stick like glue. And you'll have the satisfaction of a job well done. Priceless!

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