

Unit 20

Describing, Narrating, and the Art of Story Telling

Cast:

- Missionary Li Wei
- Mr. Mahmut
- Teacher Zhang Dong
- 4 or 5 students
- Taxi driver in taxi

Scene 20.1. Missionary Li Wei and Mr. Ahmet in tea house

Missionary Li Wei: Mr. Ahmet, could you tell me some stories from your life? I'm trying to learn how to describe and narrate things.

Mr. Ahmet: Describe and narrate things? What's the difference?

Missionary Li Wei: Well, describing things is when you give a detailed account of something. Narration is when you give a longer account of several connected events that hang together to make a story.

Mr. Ahmet: Ah. Well, let's start with descriptions. What would shall I describe?

Missionary Li Wei: There are lots of things you might describe for me. Look, I have prepared a list of ideas: What were your parents doing on the day you were born? What job experiences have you had? How are various holidays celebrated here? What are the rites of passage in your culture. How does the school system hang together in your country. What was your worst weather experience? What was your worst and your best job experience? What you like best about this city?

Mr. Ahmet, smiling: I suppose you also have a list of ideas to help you learn narrative speech?

Missionary Li Wei: Yes, I did make another list of things you could tell me about--how did you guess? Here are some of my ideas: could you tell me about a memorable trip you had? Could you tell me about the place where you were born and what your parents were doing at the time? Could you describe a day in the life of a 10 year old boy or girl? Could you tell me what you did in High School. Could you tell me about an accident, or an occasion where you went to the hospital?

Mr. Ahmet: Sure. Let's see... Let me start by describing some job experiences I've had. Have you got your recorder ready...?

Fade and Cut

Scene 20.2. Teacher Zhang Dong with class of 4-5 students

Teacher Zhang Dong: Learning how to describe and narrate are very important skills. Learning them requires lots of practice. You can do what Missionary Li Wei did, and get your language helper to describe things or narrate things to you. However, there are lots of other ways in which you can develop those skills. For instance, you can do something together with your language helper, and then you can discuss what you experienced together afterwards. What kind of things can you do together with a language helper that you could discuss later?

Student #1: Well, I suppose we could go to a movie or watch a TV show together.

Teacher Zhang Dong, writing the ideas on the white board: Good. What else can you think of?

Student #2: Go to a soccer match or other sporting event.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Good. What else?

Student #3: Go to a street market, eat at restaurant, play a card game together.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Good, good, what else.

Student #4: I suppose we could discuss yesterday's weather, our last language session together...

Student #5: Just spending 5 minutes at a busy intersection and looking at all the people there would give you stuff to talk!

Teacher Zhang Dong, laughing: Very true!

Student #3: It might be possible to attend a cultural event, like a wedding, graduation, funeral or a circumcision together.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Excellent ideas, every one of them. The idea is that you share an experience with your language helper, and then you discuss what you experienced. You can get your helper to describe what you did together. Then you try to explain what you did together, and you can get your helper to fill in the gaps or to restate correctly what you are trying to say. Make sure you record your sessions together, so you can listen to your helper's explanations later....

Fade and Cut

Scene 20.3. Teacher Zhang Dong with class of 4-5 students

Teacher Zhang Dong: Another thing you can do when you have progressed a bit in your ability to describe and narrate is to discuss “what happened?” with your helper. In other words, you discuss “current events” together. The exercise is similar to the “shared experiences” idea we just talked about, except that you don’t have the benefit of your Language Helper being there. You are essentially reporting on something that happened to you and use your Language Helper to interpret events. These can be personal events. Maybe you went to the market yesterday and something strange happened to you or someone else. You would try to describe the event and have your language helper interpret it. Maybe something cultural happened and you didn’t know what to do or say; maybe someone cut in the line and you didn’t know what to! You might also try to describe a national events (e.g., elections, festival, holidays, sports events).

Whatever you are trying to describe or relate, try to be as descriptive and narrative as possible when you give your report to your Language Helper. Newspaper reporters ask Who, Where, What, When, Why, and How? Try to answer as many of those questions as possible as you relate whatever you are trying to describe. Your Language Helper can assist you by helping you muddle through troublesome phrases, adding unknown vocabulary, or asking filler questions. In the end, try to give your report one more time from start to finish and record it. Also record your Language Helper giving the same report. Then practice telling your report until you can say it with some fluency, and use it when you are visiting people in the community afterwards. In other words, tell your friends “what happened”! This is the first step to becoming a good storyteller.

Fade and Cut

Scene 20.4. Missionary Li Wei holding Bible, in taxi with Muslim chauffeur

Taxi driver: Sir, I see you are a Christian. El-Hamdulillah, I am a Muslim. We believe that Jesus is a great prophet. Do you believe in Muhammed?

Missionary Li Wei: Sir, to me Jesus is more than a prophet.

Taxi driver: What do you mean, more than a prophet?

Missionary Li Wei: Let me tell you a little story to explain what I mean. Once upon a time there were two brothers. The older brother was a holy and pure man, beloved of God. The younger brother was a crook, a criminal. One day the younger brother got into a fight in a bar. He pulled out his switchblade and knifed someone. Blood squirted all over the place and the man died on the spot. When the younger brother saw what he had done he panicked. He ran home, stripped off his bloodied clothes, reached into the closet, put on his older brother’s clean clothes and ran away. Not long later the older brother came home. He saw the bloodied clothes on the floor and realized what must have happened. He then took off his clothes, put on his younger brother’s bloodied

clothes, sat down and waited. Soon the police showed up at the house and hauled the older brother off to prison. Eventually the older brother was brought before a judge who convicted him of murder and condemned him to death by hanging. Throughout the procedures the older brother never opened his mouth, never tried to defend himself.

After he was hung the younger brother was terribly convicted. His older brother, whom he'd always adored, whom he always wanted to be like, had died in his place. Finally the younger brother went to the judge and confessed, "Sir, a terrible miscarriage of justice has taken place. I am the guilty one. I should have been convicted."

The judge looked into the law books. They stated that the punishment for murder was hanging. He then looked the younger brother in the eye and said, "Son, your older brother paid the penalty for your sin. You are free to go, but sin no more."

Sir, I am the younger, and Jesus is the older brother. Do you see what I mean when he say that Jesus is more than a prophet? He is the atonement for my sin... That is what Christianity is all about.

Taxi driver after a moment of pensive silence: That's beautiful...

Fade and cut

Scene 20.5. Teacher Zhang Dong with class of 4-5 students

Teacher Zhang Dong: As you can see, story telling is a very effective way of communicating, for it often enables you to share sometimes difficult concepts in an understandable way. Also, people in Islamistan often have their own agenda, their own ideas of what they want to talk about when they learn you are a Christian. They'll start telling you that the Bible has been changed, or ask you how God could have a son, or start telling you that astronauts in space heard the call to prayer there, or whatever. You need a way to break away from their line of thought to say what you want to communicate. One of the easiest ways to do that is by saying, "hey, let me tell you a story which illustrates something important". People love stories, and they generally don't interrupt them. So have some short stories you can tell quickly and effectively which deal with the main issues people raise.

Now it takes practice learning to tell a story well. Sustaining interest and developing characters, who each have their own distinctive traits, is a skill. It is especially difficult to tell a good story in a short time.

You can practice storytelling by using picture books or pictures from a magazine to help you tell your story to your helper. Initially tell the story even if you feel you are muddling through. Then record your Language Helper's rendition of the story. After you think you can tell your story, try telling it to people you have gotten to know in the community.

Let's watch Missionary Li Wei tell another story...

Fade and cut

Scene 20.6. Missionary Li Wei in taxi telling story to chauffeur

Taxi Driver: Hello, good to see you again, Mr. Li Wei. Are you on your way to church again?

Missionary Li Wei: Yes, I am. How did you know.

Taxi Driver: You are carrying your Bible!

Missionary Li Wei: Yes, I guess I am. Have you ever read the Bible?

Taxi Driver: No. I read the Qur'an. The Bible has been changed. The Qur'an, on the other hand, is the seal of God's revelation...

Missionary Li Wei: Let me tell you a little story. Once upon a time there was a very rich man who lived in a mansion. His mansion had four beautiful sitting rooms. One day the rich man was relaxing in his first room, resting on his chaise-lounge and smoking his water pipe, when a thief broke a window and entered into the house. When the thief noticed the rich man he received a shock—he'd assumed there was no-one home—and was about to jump back out the window and disappear. However, the rich man just lay there passively, drugged as it were. He made no attempt to accost the thief, to sound the alarm, or to call his servants.

The thief quickly grabbed a few things from the room and climbed back out the window, puzzled—he'd never experience anyone letting him steal their stuff before! Well, he decided to try his luck again the next night. Once again he broke a window, this time into the second room. He again caught the rich man laying passively on a chaise-lounge, smoking his water pipe. The thief, bolder this time, walked around the room picking and choosing the things that struck his fancy and boldly walked out the front door! Again, the rich man didn't respond in any way.

On the third night the thief showed up again—this time he drove his pick-up truck right up to the front door. He boldly went into the house and entered the third room. The third room was the most beautiful of all: gold and silver and precious stones... The thief loaded up and drove off, even as the rich man watched him passively, as though drugged.

On the fourth night the thief pulled his truck up to the front door and entered the fourth room. To his surprise, the front room was virtually empty; nothing but some worthless rags in a corner, and the old man sitting on the floor. In frustration the thief kicked the

rag. When he did, the rich man leapt up and attacked the thief shouting, “Leave my rag alone! Leave my rag alone!”

The thief tore himself away from that madman, ran from the house and disappeared...

Taxi Driver with puzzled look: I’m not sure I follow you...

Missionary Li Wei: Why, it is simple. The four rooms are the four books you Muslims recognize as holy: the Tivrāt and the Zebur, which make up the Old Testament, and the Injil, the New Testament. When, according to you, priests in the past supposedly came and stole and changed passages from those books God—the rich man—just watched passively. When someone touches the fourth Book, however, your God would become angry, violent even. What kind of a God is that...?

Taxi Driver: silence

Scene 20.7. Teacher Zhang Dong with students

Teacher Zhang Dong: Story telling is an art which is very useful, particularly when seeking to communicate with people raised in an oral tradition. The story teller doesn’t try to explain the whole truth in a single sitting. He tries to move people from where they are at in their understanding to the next level.

A good story gets people’s attention, can trigger emotion or can hide the truth from antagonists. There are many kinds of people out there, all of them at different levels spiritually. A good story can catch people by surprise, and thus give them something to think about. Perceptive people will explore the meaning of the story or return and ask for more information; Jesus rarely explained his parables immediately. You can take people to the next level if they return for more information

Another advantage of a good story is that they are easy to pass on; people will share them with trusted friends.

The ability to tell a story well is key: everyone appreciates a good story teller. Story tellers don’t use notes—they know their stories by heart. If they refer to the Scriptures, they treat the Bible with great respect as the Word of God. Also, good story tellers can tell the same story in different ways. There is an Arab proverb that says, “Repetition can teach a stone.”

Besides being able to tell stories, the good communicator should also be able to use local proverbs and aphorism, short sayings which contain the wisdom and experiences of the past to illustrate a truth. In many rural settings in the Middle east, people quote proverbs all the time! Saying proverbs is a natural part of speech to these people.

There are proverbs to relate to every aspect of life: wealth, poverty, health, sickness, joy, sorrow, marriage, childbearing, status, work, philosophical thoughts, religious beliefs, social values, you name it. The point of the proverb is to teach practical wisdom on how to live a good life which makes a contribution to society in a succinct, easily remembered form. They can also be used to communicate an opinion which it might be impolite to say in direct speech or, when dealing with heavy theological issues, can defuse tension.

Collecting proverbs and asking people for their meaning is a good way to include the community, your neighbors and friends, in your quest to learn the language. When people see you collecting proverbs they will often help you find more of them!

Proverbs can be modified. The wise communicator can reconstruct them in order to make it appropriate for the message he or she is trying to get across.

Student #2: Teacher, can you give us a few more examples of parables and proverbs that are suitable for Islamistan?

Teacher Zhang Dong: OK, here are a few:

Turn the other cheek. A poet was called up to fight in the war. In the middle of the battle he takes the shells out of the artillery cartridges and fills them with flowers instead. As the shells explode they send showers of beautiful petals over the enemy. The enemy soldiers, tired, exhausted, depressed, marveled at the beauty exploding all around them. They started removing the shells and filling the cartridges with flowers and shot those back. The battle turned into a celebration the evil leaders were unable to stop.

The bride price. Someone asked about the price of a bride in our country. I told him that it is very great--that she costs more than money: the suitor has to promise to love and cherish only this one woman; he has to give her his heart. This is expensive because when he does, she gets everything he has. This is exactly what God wants too: He doesn't just want our money and our prayers. He wants our hearts; when He has that He has all of us.

Why I don't smoke: Someone offered me a cigarette. I politely refused, then said, "God gave us two important things: a body, and time. On the Judgment Day He will ask what I did with both. If I misuse either I will have to give an account. Many people think God will judge us on the basis of the haj, prayer, fasting and almsgiving. However, God will ask what we did with our bodies and how we spent the time he gave us on earth. Hence there will be lots of surprises on Judgment Day. Many prophets speak about this..."

Little piece of pork: Imagine a truck load of *hallal*, ceremonially clean, meat. What would happen to that whole truckload of meat, if I mixed in piece of pork? It would all become *haram*, unclean. That is what sin is like. Small sins spoil everything...

As for proverbs, a good place to start is the Bible. It is full of them. They are short and easy to remember. When asked about the source you can point people to the word of God:

- “Like mother, like daughter” (Ezekiel 16:44)
- “The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezekiel 18:2)
- “A dog returns to its vomit; a washed sow goes back to the mud” (2 Peter 2:22).
- “Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give” (Proverbs 25:14).
- “If a man pays back evil for good, evil will never leave his house” (Prov. 17:13),
- “Make plans by seeking advice; if you wage war, obtain guidance” (20:18).

Scene 20.8. Things learned from this lesson

- Description involves a detailed account of something.
- Narration is a longer account of several connected events that together make a story.
- Description and narration are very important but difficult skills. Learning them requires lots of practice.
- A good way to practice them is through the “Shared Experiences Technique” with your language helper.
- Try to answer as many questions as possible when you describe an event.
- Stories are very effective ways to communicate essential truths or difficult concepts in understandable ways. Most people appreciate a good story well told.
- Use appropriate proverbs and aphorisms in your speech.
- It is not always necessary to tell the whole truth in a single setting. Try to move people from where they are in their understanding to the next level.