

Theoretical Analysis, Classroom Practice, Opinion Essays

## **The Stories of My Life: A Task-Based, Oral Narrative Lesson for Employment Purposes for Learners with Refugee Backgrounds**

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### **Abstract**

This classroom practice oriented article provides the instructional framework and procedures for one of the sample field-tested lessons from the oral narrative units derived from the Syrian Learners of English for Employment in Canada (SLEEC) project (Huang, 2021, 2022). This sharing is intended to provide a ready-to-use lesson plan and materials for implementation in the classroom, as well as to inform the work of practitioners supporting learners with refugee experiences.

### **Context**

Since the start of the Syrian civil war, more than 6.6 million Syrians have fled the country, making the Syrian refugee crisis one of the largest global humanitarian crises of our time. To date, Canada has been one of the leading countries endeavouring to resettle these refugees. From 2014 to 2020, Syria was the top country of origin for refugees resettled to Canada (Macklin & Blum, 2021), with a new 2021 resettlement target set at 36,000 (Paperny, 2021). However, a needs assessment study involving both learners' and instructors' perspectives within the federally-funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) program revealed serious concerns by both parties that LINC was not adequately addressing the language-learning needs and practical circumstances of learners with refugee backgrounds (e.g., Huang, 2021; Waisman, 2018). The multi-phase Syrians Learning English for Employment Purposes (SLEEC) project at the University of Victoria, British Columbia, was therefore designed to tackle these language-training issues ([www.sleec-uvic.com](http://www.sleec-uvic.com)).

The SLEEC program was developed from the results of a needs assessment carried out in 2017–2018 that highlighted both instructors' and learners' concerns about the mismatch between learners' needs and employment-related language training, and about the inadequacy of materials suitable for meeting those needs (Huang, 2021). As per the needs assessment data, both instructors and learners noted the inaccessibility of employment-purposed language training, or so-called "Enhanced Language Training," for learners below the level of Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) 5. The majority of offerings are targeted to the advanced level (e.g., [LINC Employment Related Language Training](#) offered by the Saskatchewan Intercultural Association: CLB Levels 7 and 8; [Enhanced Language Training](#) offered by the Toronto District School Board: CLB 6 or higher; LINC for Employment offered by ISSofBC: CLB 7 and 8; and the level specified by [Settlement.org](#) as "advanced") (see also Zhang, 2018). Since then, changes appear to have been introduced by some providers in order to offer work-specific English instruction to learners at CLB 2 to 4 (e.g., the Helping Newcomers Work initiative by the Agincourt Community Services Association based in Ontario). The SLEEC program has to-date

implemented over 100 instructional units (see Figure 1) focused on oral communication skills across different proficiency levels in the course of field-testing both lessons and instructional and learning materials.

**Figure 1**

*Sample SLEEC Lessons*

The figure displays a grid of 20 sample SLEEC lesson cards. Each card includes a small image, a title, and a brief description of the lesson's focus. The cards are arranged in a 5x4 grid. The top right of the grid has a blue header with the text "SLEEC Program" and the Applied Linguistics logo.

Lesson Title	Lesson Title	Lesson Title	Lesson Title
Good Morning, Housekeeping! Language Used in Casual Conversation	I Have Your Order from Skip? Language Used in Food Delivery Contexts	Can I Take Your Order? Language Used by Drive-Thru Attendants (Part 1)	Tell Me About Yourself! Language Used in Job Interviews (Level 1, Part 1)
Turn the Tables! Language Used by Restaurant Servers (Level 1)	Knock, Knock, Room Service! Language Used for Room Service Requests	When the Phone Rings! Language Used for Scheduling Appointments	Tell Me About Yourself! Language Used in Job Interviews (Level 1, Part 2)
Turn the Tables! Language Used by Restaurant Servers (Level 2)	Ready to Order? Language Used by Restaurant Servers	One Order of Chicken Biryani! Language Used by Servers in a Cooking Class	How's Your Work Going? Language Used by Casual Conversation
Price Check on Aisle 3! Language Used by Supermarket Staff Clerks	Welcome to Tim Hortons! Language Used by Cashiers	Tell Me About Yourself! Language Used in Job Interviews (Part 1)	Ma I Interrupt for a Moment? Language Used in Meetings
Paper or Plastic? Language Used by Supermarket Cashiers	Can I Take Your Order? Language Used by Drive-Thru Attendants (Part 2)	Tell Me About Yourself! Language Used in Job Interviews (Part 2)	Could I Follow up with you by Phone or Email? Language Used in Networking

### Empirical and Theoretical Support

One of the recommendations developed through the needs assessment was to afford Syrian learners with refugee backgrounds opportunities to navigate often contradictory identities within the context of learning English for employment purposes—for instance, from being a business owner to needing to seek temporary employment, or from being a medical professional to needing to be recertified (Huang, 2021, 2022). Oral narratives, or autobiographical storytelling, are one way to address this need. The efficacy and applicability of storytelling in job applications

and professional communication have been well established (e.g., Boris, 2017, Heifetz, 2016; Kurnoff & Lazarus, 2021); furthermore, the skills acquired apply beyond employment. Our proclivity to tell stories to make sense of our world is one of the distinguishing features of being human. Oral autobiographical storytelling involves speakers' sharing selected events in their lives and their associated feelings and reactions to those events. Indeed, narratives both as a phenomenon and a research methodology have generated a rich body of research (e.g., Goodson et al., 2017).

Given the shared experiences by Syrian learners with refugee experiences, but also recognizing that every learner's experience is unique even within the broader shared experience of forced migration, this lesson rests on the assumption that people tend to share their experiences with others by narrating them. It is best introduced after the mid-way point or towards the end of the SLEEC program, once a sense of support and safety for experimenting with expressions of meaning and emotional disclosures has been firmly established. (For general English instructions for non-refugee learners, the lesson can be implemented earlier as a way for learners to get to know one another and for building a learner community.) Even so, narrating experiences that one has coped or is currently coping with is an inherently intricate matter and always deserves sensitivity in its implementation.

The lesson's learning potential lies in the rich, multiple dimensions of oral narratives, namely, emotional, cognitive, and social. For the emotional dimension, narrating an experience may lead to different degrees of reexperiencing that event and reevoke its associated emotions, which in turn may intensify, lessen, or be altered during or after the narration through direct reappraisal, as well as reappraisal derived from gaining some temporal perspective. Narrating an event can neutralize traumatic inhibition (Pennebaker, 1997). However, it is by no means an uncomplicated process, and it has the potential to reignite trauma if it is implemented without self-perceived distancing and a self-defined safe space for sharing, receiving, and understanding personally meaningful expression and exploration (Piazzoli & Cullen, 2021). For the cognitive dimension, narrating life stories requires learners to explicate their experiences and translate them into a narrative through languaging (see Jensen, 2014). This requires the learner to construct the meaning of, or understand, a lived experience in a way that moves beyond the emotional dimension, whether vague (because of distance in time or other affective variables) or sharp (because of nearness in time or the intensity of the experience, for example). Finally, narrating life stories taps into the social dimension, which requires sharing that narrative and, by extension, the lived experience with someone else. Having a broader, shared refugee experience and, within the context of learning the target language for employment, the presence of empathetic others in a sense validates the learner's reality at a fundamental level that facilitates sharing and understanding other interpretations of life events. Learners' reasons for sharing, based on those stories that have already been shared, also typically involve these three dimensions: for example, reexperiencing a positive event (cognitive and emotional), informing others (cognitive and social), and gaining support (emotional and social). Other reasons gleaned from research include clarifying the meaning of a chosen event, gaining empathy, releasing emotions, and seeking advice (Babermas, 2018).

Reflecting on one's past experience can also give rise to learning, which "may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which

guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). The power of autobiographical narratives has also been extensively researched and argued (Goodson et al., 2017). The method does have limitations in that the lesson design necessarily constrains the type of story that is allowed to emerge, following a certain chronological order or set of sequences or narrative stages. For those teaching advanced learners, however, removing the constraints to enable learners to construct their own timeline of self-selected key events in their professional life can be the first step toward an expanded life story as the course progresses.

Retelling a story or re-narrating stories we have read, heard, or witnessed is a common act. Retelling is how both fiction and non-fiction stories are passed down through the generations. In language teaching, the use of storytelling in various contexts and learner age groups has generated some empirical support for its efficacy in developing different aspects (e.g., vocabulary, pronunciation, and syntax) and domains (speaking, reading, listening, and writing) of the target language (see Lucarevski, 2016; Peters, 2021). Re-narrating to oneself or to different people in small groups or outside of class can also promote fluency, syntactical complexity, and accuracy (e.g., Bui, Ahmadian, & Hunter, 2019). Different types of retelling are a form of context-embedded recycling for consolidating learning and can involve, for example, narrating similar events with the same theme, narrating the same event but making a different point, or narrating different events with the same underlying theme or point. The potential for narrative storytelling to induce healing, moreover, is a process that takes time and requires both narrators and listeners to anticipate the non-static, unfinalizable nature of narrating and understanding lived experiences (Goodson et al., 2017).

It is worth noting that the field-testing of the lesson included in this article did not give rise to learners’ sharing of experiences of trauma or violence (e.g., Waterhouse, 2016) or of racism, classism, or discriminatory behaviours related to employment, or even general negative emotions triggered by the stories they shared. Instead, the sharing generated deeply moving, positive emotions of pride, joy, gratitude, and aspiration (Jensen, 2014). This could be the result of the stage of their resettlement—most of those at CLB Stage 1 (*Initial Basic Ability*) have recently arrived or are in transition to Canada. It is also not to deny the possibility that such sharing could lead to unexpected directions and territories. For navigating issues related to trauma or violence, readers may refer to Waterhouse (2016), Earner (2018), Valenzuela (2021), or the materials on guidance for stress and trauma developed by the UNHCR (2019). For work on systemic racism and discrimination related to employment, refer to Jackson et al. (2013). The sections that follow describe the instructional framework and procedures.

### **Lesson Design and Procedures**

**Level:** The lesson can be easily modified to suit learners at different proficiency levels.

**Suggested Timeframe:** 120 minutes

**Goals:** To create and orally narrate a personal story through identifying topics from specific points in time and recalling the specific events, emotions, and impact of those lived experiences.

**Objectives:** To develop learners' confidence in telling their stories with descriptive details, mediated through objects or pictures they select to represent something meaningful from the past, present, and future.

### Instructional Framework

The lesson design adheres to Long's (2014) Task-Based Language Teaching, where task design starts with a needs analysis to identify target tasks for a specific group of learners—in this case, Syrian learners with refugee experiences. For Long, the term “tasks” refers to “real-world activities people think of when planning, conducting, or recalling their day” (p. 6). Through modifications, the target task (not the grammatical features)—in this case, storytelling—becomes “a series of progressively more complex *pedagogic tasks*,” defined as “the activities and the materials that teachers and/or students work on in the classroom or other instructional environment” (Long, 2014, p. 6, emphasis in the original). The framework uses the cycles of pre-task (for preparing learners for doing the main task), main task (the target, real-world task), post-task (for focusing on forms to ensure that learners “get it right in the end”), and follow-up task (homework for consolidating learning) (Willis & Willis, 2007, pp. 30–32). These embody the modified principles for developing an instructional sequence originally put forward by Nunan (2004), as follows: (1) *scaffolding* (i.e., tasks and materials provide support within the task and for subsequent tasks); (2) *within- and between-task dependency* (i.e., each task builds on those that have been completed); (3) *context-embedded recycling* (i.e., the target language is used in different contexts); (4) *active learning* (i.e., tasks are designed to engage learners through activities using the language); (5) *integration* (i.e., the lesson integrates meaning, function, and form); (6) *creation* (i.e., the lesson is designed in a way that helps learners engage in authentic language use); and (7) *reflection* (i.e., opportunities are provided for guided reflection on the process and/or product).

### Implementation

This section describes the lesson procedures after the lesson was field-tested in remote learning mode by learners in CLB Stages I (*Initial Basic Ability*) and II (*Fluent Intermediate Ability*), corresponding to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) Ratings A1.1 to B1.1 ([Centre for Canadian Language Benchmark](#); [ACTFL](#)). For classroom teaching, teachers can use the one-page lesson plan for easy reference (Appendix A).

**Pre-Task Cycle:** The tasks in this cycle are designed to introduce the lesson's target task (storytelling) and activate the learners' background (linguistic, content, discourse, and/or strategic knowledge).

*Pre-task 1:* Ask questions to prompt learners to share their experiences with or perceptions about storytelling: Do/have you shared your stories with others? Why is storytelling important? Play the [1,000 Dream](#) video clip to elicit what the clip is about. For more advanced learners, questions may include: Why is it important who tells the story? What are the pros and cons of personal stories told by oneself versus others? What are the benefits of storytelling? How is storytelling relevant to English for employment purposes (the context of the program) (e.g., Heifetz, 2016).

*Pre-task 2:* Play a [video clip](#) of an immigrant talking about her past, present, and future using the three items she has selected. Note that the clip is not for learners to regurgitate the language, format, or style used by the speaker; it is important to emphasize that people tell their personal stories in their own ways. Elicit from learners what the speaker talked about, and what other topics one could talk about in creating a story about one's professional life (e.g., place of birth, family background, parents' and siblings' characters, interests, work and school or educational experiences, work history, other personal interests and pursuits, future aspirations). Write those items in the chat (for remote learning) or on the board (for face-to-face learning) for learners to draw inspirations from when they carry out pre-task 3.

*Pre-task 3:* In three stages, have learners search for one object or photo apiece from their past, present, and future.

- (1) Past: Give learners one to two minutes to search for one object/photo from their past that shows something they are proud of. Record those items on Slide 1 (Appendix B). After learners have briefly showed their items, use Slide 2 to elicit only key words from learners to describe the who, what, where, when, and why. It is important to stress that they need only to generate key words to describe the object/photo. For a larger class size and in-person instruction, learners can share their items with their neighbouring peers. The slide can be a sharable and editable one where learners can enter their own key words.
- (2) Present: Give learners one to two minutes to search for another object/photo that is important to them in the present. Repeat the procedures described in (1).
- (3) Future: Give learners one to two minutes to search for a third object/photo that represents something they aspire to in their future. Repeat the procedures described in (1).

As Ausubel (1968) once said: “The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach [them] accordingly” (p. 18). By building on and drawing from what the learners know, including their own language (Huang, 2021, 2022), completing these pre-tasks also serves to scaffold their performance of the main task.

**Main Task Cycle:** Using the slides from the pre-task cycle, provide learners some *strategic planning* time (where they consider what they will say in terms of content and language before undertaking the task) to create their own narratives, as well as some *online* or *during-task* planning time (where they are allowed to complete the task) to enhance fluency, accuracy, or complexity of oral production (e.g., Skehan et al., 2012). Encourage learners to focus on the meaning and content they wish to express to engage their listeners. Have learners take turns telling their stories. As a way to build confidence, or if the lesson is implemented early in the course, have them first share their stories within a small group as a way to rehearse telling their stories in a less intimidating setting before sharing them with the class. After each one-minute story, use a quick question based on the learners' proficiency level (e.g., Can you relate to the story? What's one thing you like about the story? How did the story make you feel?) to encourage them to pay attention to others' stories as listeners. Audio-record or have learners audio-record their own stories for use in the follow-up task cycle. Have each group volunteer to tell one story from the past, present, or future to share with the class, and make sure there is a story from each period (past, present, and future) for form-focused work in the post-task cycle.

While learners tell their stories, use Slide 3 to concurrently transcribe their oral stories. Alternatively, have learners draft their stories using a sharable document such as Google Docs or Slides to facilitate form-focused work in the post- and follow-up task cycle.

**Post-Task Cycle:** Use the transcribed texts from the previous task cycle to do form-focused work. Avoid the temptation to correct all errors. Prioritize pronunciation issues that compromise intelligibility. Focus on common deviations that are within the learners' level—for instance: (1) lexical: descriptive details and word choices (may involve lexical accuracy or diversity depending on level); (2) phrasal: verb tenses; (3) discourse: well-organized description of event sequences, transitional words or phrases to signal time shifts, or a *theme-rheme* analysis (theme: the semantic starting point for a clause or sentence; rheme: the end point or destination that comments on the theme) for more advanced learners (Halliday, 1994). Use the Find it, Analyze it, and Correct it (FAC) strategy (Huang, 2010) to elicit input from learners to make this cycle interactive and to facilitate the self-editing work they will do in the follow-up task. Encourage learners to read out their sentences (which further serves as *auto-input*; Ellis, 2003) when they revise their stories.

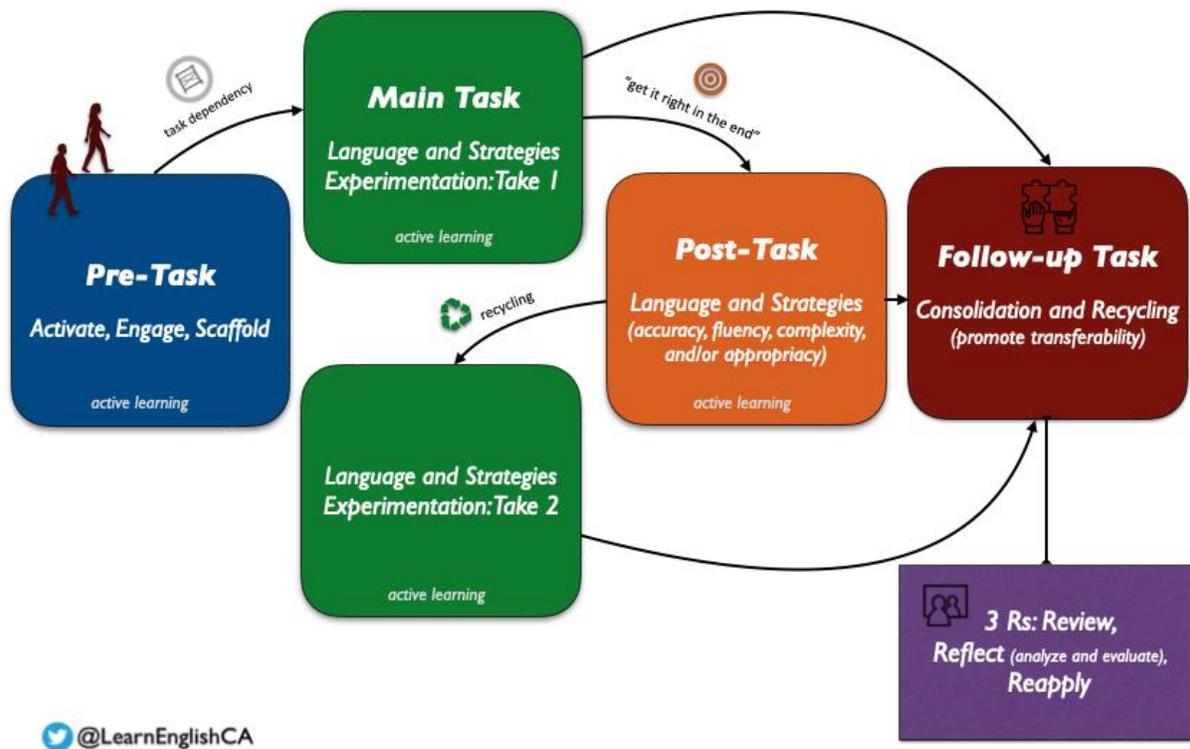
**Follow-up Task Cycle:** Divide the homework into a three-level challenge to enhance learning outcomes. Remind learners to complete the Level 1 Challenge as soon as they are able to maximize the benefit of reflective learning.

Level 1 Challenge: *Review, Listen, and Reflect.* Have learners review the lesson within 24 hours by viewing the videos and reviewing the slides used during the lesson before listening to their own oral story recorded in class. Use the reflection prompts to guide their reflection: What did you do well? What did you find challenging? What would you say differently?

Level 2 Challenge: *Refine and Record.* Have learners use the form-focused slides from the post-task to refine their own stories by applying the FAC strategy before re-recording their oral stories.

Level 3 Challenge: *Listen, Compare, Reflect, and Apply.* Have learners compare the story recorded in class and the story they recorded to complete Challenge 2. Use prompts (e.g., What improvements have you noticed? What did you find challenging in revising your story?) to guide their reflection. Have learners retell their stories to a friend or family member.

*To Scale Up the Lesson:* For more advanced learners, instead of using the past–present–future framework, have them create a timeline of major events in their lives, along with an image presenting each milestone. Depending on the complexity of the stories, the lesson can also be implemented in multiple units to enable different types of retelling. These may give rise to important transformative learning through exploring values, beliefs, and worldviews, and through autobiographical reasoning that facilitates making connections between different parts of the learner's past, present, and future, leading to personal development (Habermas & Köber, 2015). Figure 2 presents an overview of the instructional framework (Huang, 2021).

**Figure 2***SLEEC's Task-Based Instructional Framework*

### Conclusion

As Clandinin and Connelly (1994), two prominent figures in the field of narrative inquiry, stated: “Stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell of our experience. A story has a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history.... People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones” (p. 415).

With the benefits of developing cultural awareness, building a learner community, attending to the affective and social dimensions of learning, listening to learner voices, and practicing emergent, language-focused teaching that addresses learners’ needs (not needs pre-determined by the teacher), the potential of oral narrative for telling, retelling, reliving, and learning from stories of personal or professional experiences is boundless. Those narratives, moreover, have the potential of helping learners with refugee experiences move into—and through—moments of learning, of transition, and of life every time they narrate a life story.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to our Syrian friends and to the SLEEC team for their contributions to the development and field-testing of this lesson.

## Funding Statement

This article is derived from the SLEEC project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Insight Grant).

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## Appendix A

### One-Page Lesson Plan

### **The Stories of My Life: Language Used in Storytelling**

**Learners:** CLB 3-5 (The lesson can be easily modified to suit learners at different proficiency levels.)

**Goals:** To create and orally narrate a personal story through identifying topics from specific points in time and recalling the specific events, emotions, and impact of those lived experiences

**Objectives:** To develop learners' confidence in telling their stories with descriptive details, mediated through objects or pictures they select to represent something meaningful from the past, present, and future

**Suggested Timeframe:** 120 minutes

Phase	Time	Steps	Materials
Pre-Task	1	<b>Link to Personal Experience</b>	
	10 min.	1. Play the 1,000 Dream clip. 2. Elicit thoughts and observations about the clip (refer to the article for sample questions).	Clip 1
	2	<b>Activate Background Knowledge</b>	
Pre-Task	10 min.	1. Play clip 2. 2. Elicit the topics the speaker used to tell her story. 3. Generate other topics one could use to create a life story (refer to the article for sample topic areas). Have learners type their ideas in the chat or note the topic areas on the board/slide.	Clip 2
	3	<b>Search, Show, and Tell</b>	
Pre-Task	30 min.	<p><b>Past:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give learners 1-2 minutes to search for one object/photo from their past that shows something they are proud of.</li> <li>Have learners share their items and record the items on Slide 1.</li> <li>Use Slide 2 to elicit and record key words from learners to describe the who, what, where, when, and why related to their chosen objects/photos.</li> </ul> <p><b>Present:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give learners 1-2 minutes to search for another object/photo that represents something important to them in the present. Repeat the steps as per the Past section.</li> </ul> <p><b>Future:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Give learners 1-2 minutes to search for a final object/photo that represents something they aspire to in their future. Repeat the steps as per the Past and Present sections.</li> </ul>	Slide Deck (Appendix B)
	Main Task	40 min.	<p><b>Create and Tell Your Story</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have learners use the slides from pre-task 3 to craft their own stories. For beginning learners, suggest that they generate one sentence for each of the who, what, where, when, and why categories.</li> <li>Depending on class size, have learners take turns telling their stories, or have them tell their stories in small groups first before having each group volunteer or recommend one story from one of the three periods (past, present, future) to share with the class.</li> <li>Audio-record or have learners record their own stories. While learners tell their stories, use Slide 3, not shown to learners, to transcribe their stories.</li> <li>After each story, ask a question to engage learners' active listening (refer to the article for sample questions).</li> </ul>
Post-Task	30 min.	<p><b>Revise and Refine</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Address common pronunciation features that might have compromised intelligibility.</li> <li>Use Slide 3 with the transcribed stories to address level-appropriate lexical, phrasal, and/or discourse level issues (refer to the article for suggestions) through the FAC (Find it, Analyze it, and Correct it) strategy.</li> </ul>	Slide Deck (Appendix B)
Follow-Up Task		<p><b>Review, Reflect, Record, and Apply</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have learners complete the 3-level challenge.                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Level 1: <i>Review and Reflect:</i> Have learners review the lesson and listen to their own recordings to engage in reflection (e.g., What did they do well? What would they say differently?)</li> <li>Level 2: <i>Refine and Record:</i> Have learners use the slides from class to refine their stories by applying the FAC strategy before recording their stories again.</li> <li>Level 3: <i>Listen, Compare, Reflect, and Apply:</i> Have learners listen and compare the two recordings before reflecting on what improvements they have noticed. Have learners retell their revised story to a friend or family member.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	The Story of My Life Worksheet (Appendix C)

**Appendix B**

Sample Sharable Slides

*Sample Slide 1*

 Search for one object/photo **from your past** that shows something **you are proud of**.

Past/Name	Object/Photo	Past/Name	Object/Photo
Student 1		Student 4	
Student 2		Student 5	
Student 3		Student 6	

*Sample Slide 2*

 Search for one object/photo **from your past** that shows something **you are proud of**.

PAST	Who	What	Where	When	Why
Student 1					
Student 2					
Student 3					
Student 4					
Student 5					
Student 6					

Sample Slide 3

<b>Period</b>	<b>My Story</b>	<b>Image/ Object</b>
<b>Past</b>		
<b>Present</b>		
<b>Future</b>		

Language Foci:



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