



## USING STORIES IN TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this work is to provide a theoretical background for using stories with young learners and to introduce various activities that can aid in language acquisition and learning.*

### Why use stories?

With the growing trend of young learner teachers adopting holistic teaching methods, stories have emerged as a valuable tool for facilitating language learning in an interesting and authentic manner. However, reading to children goes beyond just imparting English language skills; it also fosters creativity, promotes cross-cultural understanding, and enhances various cognitive, social, and cultural competencies. Therefore, incorporating storytelling into the English language-learning curriculum for students is a logical and beneficial practice.

### Young learners

Holistic teaching methods are becoming increasingly popular among teachers who work with young learners. These learners are typically between the ages of six and twelve and possess a mix of adult and childlike qualities. Specifically, I will focus on eight and nine-year-old learners who have basic reading and writing skills in their first language but lack a strong understanding of grammar. While they can use language in everyday situations, they are not yet proficient in using it as a tool. They enjoy activities such as playing games, singing songs, reciting rhymes, and expressing their own thoughts and ideas. The following list shows general characteristics and language development of a young learner according to Wendy and Ytreberg:

- *They can tell the difference between fact and fiction.*
- *Their basic concepts are formed. They have very decided views of the world.*
- *They ask questions all the time.*
- *They rely on the spoken word as well as the physical world to convey and understand meaning.*
- *They are able to make some decisions about their own learning.*
- *They have definite views about what they like and do not like doing.*
- *They have a developed sense of fairness about what happens in the classroom*

and begin to question the teacher's decisions.

· They are able to work with others and learn from others.

Language development:

· They understand abstracts.

· They understand symbols (beginning with words).

· They generalize and systematize.<sup>1</sup>

### Your book collection

Young learner teachers can benefit greatly from having a collection of picture books, even if they have a limited budget. Second-hand books, particularly large hardcover versions, are a good option as they are durable and easy to read aloud. Collaborating with colleagues to create a book bank is another way to access a variety of stories without spending too much money. When selecting books, it is important to consider their suitability for language learners and look for specific characteristics.

- Repetitive words and phrases.
- Rhyme and/or onomatopoeia.
- An easy-to-follow sequence.
- A predictable or familiar storyline.
- Illustrations that support the understanding of the text.
- Interesting characters that the listeners can identify with.
- Humor and lots of action.
- An exciting ending with an appropriate conclusion.
- A clear message or moral.
- An appropriate length for the age group / level.
- Topics or content that can link into the curriculum.

### How can children be helped to learn a foreign language?

In "Teaching Engl. to Children" Brumfit, Moon and Tongue say: *"It is not surprising to note that a child's concentration span increases as he/she grows older. Children cannot concentrate on one thing for a long period and therefore the authors recommend that lessons should be divided into a series of activities lasting no longer than five or ten minutes. This is because children are bombarded with new experiences and information. Teachers should introduce a reasonable number of new language items and present and practice them in a number of different ways."*<sup>2</sup>

### The delivery

When your audience does not speak English as a first language, the delivery is everything! There is an art to reading aloud to an audience of youngsters, so once you have fallen in love with a great book, the next step is to work on your performance.

According to *Tell It Again* by Gail Ellis and Jean Brewster, *"Storytelling involves three essential elements: the story, the teller, and the listener. A well selected story told by an effective storyteller captivates young listeners' attention and the three elements work in harmony."*<sup>3</sup> With that in mind, here are some tips for making story-time with your young learners a big success.

### General guidelines

<sup>1</sup> SCOTT W. A. AND YTREBERG L. H – Teaching English to Children. Longman, 1991, ISBN 058274606X

<sup>2</sup> BRUMFIT C., MOON J. AND TONGUE R. – Teaching English to children. Collins ELT, 1991, ISBN 0-00-370288-X

<sup>3</sup> ELLIS G. AND BREWSTER J. – Tell it Again. Penguin Books, 2002, ISBN 0-0582-44774-7

It is recommended that you read the story to yourself or practice in front of a mirror before reading it to your students. This will assist you in determining how you will read it, which voices and actions you will employ, and how you will engage your students. You should also become familiar with the pace and flow of the book, and ensure that you vary both as necessary. Depending on your audience and the book, you may need to modify the language and length. All of this should be done prior to reading the book to your students.

### **The use of space**

It is suggested that you create a specific space in the classroom for storytelling, even if it requires rearranging the furniture. Additionally, it is important to establish a routine and set rules for story-time, such as having the children ask questions at the end to prevent interruptions. It is crucial to ensure that all children can see both you and the book clearly, as this will aid in their understanding of the story. If a child cannot see, they may lose interest and become distracted. Lastly, it is important to wait until everyone is settled and focused before beginning to read.

### **Generating interest**

To get your students interested in a book, it is important to display enthusiasm for it. You can make the presentation of the book more engaging by using various techniques such as gradually revealing the cover, hiding the book for students to find, or bringing it out of a unique container.

### **Providing language support**

To generate interest in a book among students, it is crucial to exhibit enthusiasm towards it. One effective way is to display the book cover and prompt the students to share their thoughts and ideas based on the title and images. Some educators prefer to use flashcards or tangible objects to introduce essential vocabulary. Additionally, you can teach them a rhyme or a game that relates to the topic or language used in the book. Another useful technique is to encourage students to predict the story's plot by displaying images or reading significant sentences from the book. Lastly, if you have previously read the book with your students, motivate them to recollect the characters or storyline.

### **Follow-up activities:**

#### **Story sequencing**

In this activity, students are encouraged to collaborate to recall a familiar story, illustrating the key stages and retelling it to their classmates.

Instructions:

In groups, students decide on the key stages of the story they are going to illustrate. Stronger groups of students should be encouraged to think of more stages (this provides differentiation).

1. Hand a piece of blank paper to each group and ask them to draw lines to divide the paper into equal-sized boxes. They will need one box for each key stage of the story, so if a group has more stages it might be better to give them several pieces of paper so they have enough space for their drawings. (Alternatively, you could pre-make these before the class and hand them out to groups.)

2. In each box, students draw a picture to represent the key stages of the story. Depending on the level of the class/group, they could write a sentence (or more) underneath each picture to describe what is happening.

3. Students take turns retelling the whole story with the others in their group, using the pictures and words to help them.
4. Students then cut up the page and divide the pictures equally between the members of the group.
5. The group works together to retell the story for their classmates, with each member reading out their part and showing their pictures in the correct order.
6. The pictures can be kept in an envelope and used again in future lessons. (You might want to write a number on the back of each picture for later reference.)

### **'Lift the flap' book**

In this activity, children learn the meaning and form of words in context by creating illustrated flaps to cover key words in a book.

Instructions:

In groups, the children each select a word from a page of the book and copy it on to a piece of paper. (Monitor to make sure the chosen words can be easily illustrated and that the whole group understands the meaning of each word; you may wish to give groups specific pages from the book to look through, so they do not all choose the same pages/words.)

1. Divide the words between the members of the group, so that students have a different word to the one they initially chose. Ask them not to show the others what they got! Give each student one Post-it note.
2. Each students should cut up their Post-it note to create a flap to stick over their word in the book (but do not stick them on the book yet!). They should then each draw a picture on the Post-it to illustrate the meaning of their word.
3. Students show their drawings to the others in their group and see if they can guess the word.
4. Stick the Post-it notes over the words in the book.
5. Choose someone to be the 'teacher' and read the story to the class.
6. When the storyteller reaches a flap, he or she should stop and show the drawing. The other students should call out the word, and the storyteller can then lift the flap to see if they are right.

### **Storyboarding**

In this activity, children retell a familiar story, and then the teacher takes photos to create a storyboard.

Instructions:

After reading a short story aloud, put the children in groups.

1. Students should choose between 5–10 key moments in the story, and then recreate those scenes using their bodies and/or other props. (Note: Depending on your class size and the time you have available, you could either ask each group to choose and recreate their own key scenes, or choose the key scenes as a class and assign one or two to each group.)
2. Take photos of each scene, upload them to the computer and print them out. (You may want to print each image on to white paper with some space below it, if you want students to try step 5.)
3. Within their groups, students can then put the images in order and take turns to retell the story to each other.
4. With guidance, students can write sentences below each image and staple it together

like a book.

5. A shortened version of this activity is to photocopy images from the story (lamine if possible to make them more durable), mix them up, then hand them out (in sets) to groups. The groups then have to put them back into the correct order and retell the story. It can be made into a race, with points awarded to the group who finishes correctly first.

Storytelling is one of my favourite things to do with very young learners and I know I am not alone. If you have tried storytelling before but without the desired results, I think it is really worth giving it another go.

### **Conclusion**

Concluding, children's literature stories can be very motivating for young English learners by creating an engaging and exciting learning environment. Such stories constitute a great resource for effective language learning, and English language teachers should use stories as a powerful tool in their teaching repertoire. Teachers should remember, however, to make thoughtful and careful selections of stories to adapt the stories to their student's proficiency level and decide whether they are interesting and suitable enough to allow for understanding and language skill development. Used that way, reading stories to young students can be a powerful and appealing English teaching method.

### **References:**

1. BRUMFIT C., MOON J. AND TONGUE R. – Teaching English to children. Collins ELT, 1991, ISBN 0-00-370288-X
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