

Story books in the classroom

In this article I would like to highlight the value of using story books in a Young Learner's classroom. I will look at its strengths and benefits in terms of language acquisition as well as promoting socio-cultural understanding.

- Why use story books?
- How story books work in a socio-cultural light
- Authentic text
- Story books to use
- How a story book can be exploited
- Methodology
- Conclusion

Why use story books?

My experience of teaching with story books has been very positive in that my general perception has been that children become highly motivated learners within this approach.

- Working with illustrations provides a creative and artistic learning environment which children respond to.
- A story book provides a child-centred universe where abstract concepts are symbolised within the text and images.
- It provides an ideal context for literacy practice as well as linguistic acquisition.
- Supporting visual literacy is important in order to help children take meaning from text as well as develop aesthetic understanding.
- Providing information through pictures is an important and fast developing method of communication in the global world.

How story books work in a socio-cultural light

By socio-cultural I mean personal expression and identity in a mixed social context, which can include differences in origin and gender as well as socio-economic, religious or special educational needs (SEN).

- A story-based approach can take creative, authentic unadapted texts from all over the world, with their embedded linguistic and aesthetic cultural identity, to the heart of the language classroom.
- Authentic stories for children have often evolved over several generations and by their very nature are a means of transmission of socio-cultural values which are often universal, such as tolerance, perseverance and courage.
- A story book approach lends itself to a communicative language method where children are encouraged to use the language from the story either in role play form or games.
- Activities such as; information gaps, questionnaires and surveys, guessing games or retelling the story.
- Children are given tangible tasks where they learn to collaborate with their peers. In this learner to learner relationship children feel more comfortable and can build on their self-confidence and self-esteem in the learning environment.

Authentic text

When the text is authentic and not grammatically sequenced, it exposes the learner to several tenses at the same time, which reflects a real life situation where the learner will have to find meaning through image and context, building on learning strategies.

- Original text which has not been specially adapted for the foreign language learner will contain idiomatic language which can be taught in chunks which often takes the learner beyond the conventional curriculum.
- Coursebooks and graded readers simplify the text, illustration and print style with their priority being clarity. However, an authentic storybook author and illustrator will play about with print styles, artistic mediums and genre, for example the author Lauren Child and John Burningham mix photo graphics with drawings and enmesh text into the images creating 'text drawings'. These characteristics add to the holistic and affective entity for the child when learning with storybooks.
- The learner becomes more open minded about text with fewer preconceptions about what text should look like and be more likely to take creative risks in their own work and developing their understanding of genre type.

Story books to use

I look for books with attractive, artistic and original illustrations which will capture the children's interest.

- The conceptual and linguistic level needs to correspond with their age and developmental level. This is important because if the child can not engage with the story, they become demotivated, loose interest as well as confidence.
- For lower levels it's good to have repeating structures, rhyme or cumulative text. If the story is right for their developmental level and their interests, children soon know the story by heart and can repeat it with pride - something that doesn't happen so easily with language in a text book unless it is a song or rhyme.
- I like books which contain a strong message, be it social or environmental. Children seem to have a sharp sense of justice which can be captured and developed with story books.

How a story book can be exploited

In preparation for a course a teacher needs to reflect on the learning objectives:

- Identify grammatical structures and functions
- Group the lexical themes
- Identify rhyme and spelling patterns
- Idiomatic language

Also when choosing a story it's good to consider the potential for cross-curricular work. For example the all-famous story 'The Hungry Caterpillar', by Eric Carle, provides a context for a project on the life cycle of the butterfly.

'The Five Little Fiends', by Sarah Dyer, a story about sharing and protecting the environment, can lead to a science project about natural and man-made elements and recycling.

The British Council recently published a preview of David Graddol's updated research on the position of English learning worldwide. According to Graddol, English is being repositioned as a 'basic skill' to be learned by Primary School children, in preparation for learning other subjects in English at Secondary. Cross-curricular work can help fit in the English language exposure they need, for a busy school timetable.

Methodology

A story-based approach to teaching English is acquisition based, working on the learner's pre-knowledge and taking meaning from context and image.

- A learning cycle can be applied to each lesson as well as approaching the book as a whole;
 - pre-story
 - while
 - after activities.
- That's to say the language is presented, used and then reviewed. Activities and games, such as guessing, matching, sequencing, labelling, classifying, songs, chants, TPR, role play..... (See references to teacher's guide books for activities, at the end of this article)
- At the same time working on the four skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- Having a concrete outcome such as a book-making project or a board game gives the children an enormous sense of achievement at the end of studying a story.

Conclusion

A story-based outcome in terms of affective levels shows that the socially situated child literature (Shamin, 1996) accommodates affectivity and contributes to the child's holistic development:

- Self-confidence as a learner
- Enjoyment of learning
- Creative thinking
- Metacognition

Both the learner and the teacher are involved with the material. A teacher needs to invest time in preparing the lessons but by appropriating the material they become more engaged. It is a satisfying way of teaching not only for language objectives but also for the socio-cultural and cross-curricular input.

Further reading

Ellis, Gail and Brewster, Jean (2002). Tell it again! The New Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers + cassette. Harlow: Penguin English
Mourao, Sandie (2003) Jet: Realbooks! In the Primary Classroom Mary Glasgow Magazines an imprint of Scholastic Inc.
Wright, Andrew (1995/1997). Storytelling with Children, Creating Stories with Children. Oxford: Oxford University Press

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