

'Better the rudest work that tells a story or records a fact, than the richest without meaning.'

John Ruskin, *The Lamp of Memory*

Through stories, children are drawn into the lives and experiences of fictional characters. This imaginative involvement gives them opportunities for reflecting on their own lives and for learning to understand their personal hopes and fears, conflicts and predicaments. The imaginative content also helps learners to order and structure reality. This has important implications for the primary school curriculum, which stresses imaginative contemplation as well as the transmission of facts and information. Stories present particular opportunities for learners to order experiences and to make sense of them through reflection and reinterpretation. The important general and over-arching point is that engaging with story provides learners with opportunities for imaginative reflection, provides access to experiences which in real life may be denied, and provides a meaningful context for language to operate naturally.

Story-telling is an activity that appeals to all, both young and old alike. In addition, the story-telling situation is very special. Story-telling is not engaged in as a duty but as an interaction of pleasure in which the teacher makes no demands on the child. For the child, it is a happy and secure time. Most of the time, the teacher is positive and interesting and a feeling of security and special worth is conveyed. A conducive learning environment is created and such an environment is crucial for effective second language learning in young learners. John Holt, in his book *How Children Fail*, has this to say:

'Most children in school fail. Why do they fail? They fail because they are afraid, bored and confused. They are afraid, above all else, of disappointing or displeasing the many anxious adults around them, whose limitless hopes and expectations for them hang

over their heads like clouds. They are bored because the things they are given to do and told to do in school are so trivial, so dull and make such limited and narrow demands on the wide spectrum of their intelligence, capabilities and talents. They are confused because most of the torrent of words that pour over them at school makes little or no sense, it often flatly contradicts other things they have been told, and hardly ever has any relation to what they really know — to the rough model of reality they carry around in their minds'

Apart from the desirable features implied in this quotation, story needs to feature strongly in the primary school curriculum as an important way of helping learners to hypothesize, empathize, and to solve problems.

Let us now look closely at some of the essential features of story that make it an effective tool for teaching a second language to young learners.

Essential Features of Story for Effective Teaching

1. The teaching of basic language skills should always occur in a wider language context which can make vital contributions to the efficiency and organization of the whole process. The larger the language context in which the skills are seen to be operating, the more the support they receive and the more smoothly and thus more automatically they operate. It is better to set a real language process in motion and induce the learner to use and explore skills within it as a story would naturally lend itself to. On the other hand, to have a formal lesson with the teacher giving verbal instructions or rules about how the skill is to be carried out, can be unproductive. Apart from confusing productive use of language with abstract knowledge about language, such prescriptive teaching renders the whole operation in a way which destroys the automatic function. The whole situation

becomes stilted, trite and very, very unnatural. Michael Halliday, in his book *Explorations in the Function of Language*, says that each use of language presents an image of language possibilities to the child. If he learns successfully he will have learned to identify a certain use, saying then: '... so language can be used for'

Halliday, in his book, seems to think that the child internalizes certain images of language in use as he encounters them. A story can be created or adapted to represent areas in which the child needs to become experienced in receiving language and areas in which he will need to practise his own uses. It does not restrict language to what Halliday calls 'representational meaning', that is, language which has as its main feature not the fact that it contains information, but includes a wide range of functions. Language is seen as a purposeful activity. Such an approach widens the range of the second language as it is experienced by children, and children will be encouraged to experiment with using language over widening ranges of use. It will allow the teacher to see lexis, grammar and phonology acting together in a meaningful educational context.

2. Much second language teaching, especially in the early stages, consists of frequent repetition of new patterns and structures to be learned. Although the teacher may devise ways of drilling new structures, it is often difficult to invent opportunities for repetition which interest and hold the attention of all the children. Many soon become bored by drills and language teaching games. A story, however, can be used to introduce new language patterns or to reinforce a pattern which has been learned previously. Many stories provide the opportunity for much repetition of structure and vocabulary and many other stories can be 'dressed up' to provide such repetition in a lively and interesting context. Story-telling also provides an element of fantasy and imagination which is difficult to achieve in language teaching drills.

3. In listening to stories, children are learning the intonation patterns of spoken language, and the grammatical patterns and styles of speaking. Opportunities for listening are particularly important for young second language learners.

From the early stages, after the story has been introduced once or twice, listening to taped stories gives them more opportunities for hearing a story and for absorbing it at their own pace. Soon their ears become attuned and they will discover meaning in the alien sounds and rhythms, and even attempt to use them. After listening to a story only once, some children begin to take on some of the language and its meaning. After several opportunities for further listening, the evidence of progress can be remarkable.

4. In story-telling, all the four skills — oral, listening, reading and writing — can be incorporated. Of course, in the early stages of second language learning, the first two will be the most important. The child must be taught to listen, for if she does not listen, then his or her own attempts at oral language will be deficient.

5. Stories are usually about the inner world of emotion, intention or behaviour — things for which there are no clear verbal equivalents. For example, to a child, expressions like, 'I love you' can be vague unless accompanied or backed up by an action, a hug, maybe. The sensory situation constantly provides confirmation and clarification of what is being said, and a glance at the speaker's face and his gestures and his intonations provide further clues to meaning. Therefore, to a child, learning to operate linguistically in a second language situation without reference to the immediate situation constitutes a much bigger task than is generally recognized. Many children in Malaysia enter school quite unable to interpret a second language that is not supported by the sensory situation around them. They are so used to gaining sensory confirmation or clarification from their eyes or ears that they become insecure and disorientated when they are deprived of such support.

6. If story-telling as a method is adopted, it can lend itself to teaching language across the curriculum. For example, if the story of the 'Hungry Caterpillar' is used, one can actually bring a live caterpillar into class and watch its metamorphosis. One can also go through with the children the various types of food caterpillars eat, and so on.

7. In story-telling, children focus their attention on meaning and not on the mere parroting of structures. There is visual, oral and written support for everything that goes on in the classroom. For example, word order is an important device in English for signalling meaning. Changes in word order usually indicate a change in meaning. Let us look at this sentence — 'The man pulled the turnip'. 'The man pulled the turnip' carries a different meaning from 'The turnip pulled the man'. Compare 'It is raining' and 'Is it raining?' In each case, the words are the same and there is only an apparently simple change in the order of words. But we all know that there has been a great change in the meaning. If children see this for themselves and understand it, we are well on the way to effective second language learning. This method of teaching focuses pupils' attention on meaning and not on form.

8. Story-telling allows the teacher to practise group work and individual work effectively. In other words, it allows the teacher to cope with mixed abilities within the same class. The extension activities prepared can allow some to read the story, some to work on cloze (prediction skills), some on text organization (sequencing activities), some on picture and statement matching, some — the weaker ones, especially — on single word recognition activities like Word Bingo. It also frees the teacher to move around and give individualized and personal attention to students who need it.

9. Lastly, and most importantly, story-telling is an enjoyable activity. The enjoyment of the story should not be sacrificed at any cost. Enjoyment keeps motivation high, the setting as discussed earlier inspires confidence in children and when children are confident they will try to perform. If children are given opportunities to perform all the language skills meaningfully, they will surely become competent in a very short time. The Birmingham study carried out to assess children taught via this method, adds credibility to this fact.

Stories for language teaching purposes are not selected at random. Teachers who want to adopt this method must be aware of some of the principles involved in the selection of stories. I will attempt to give some. I am not

suggesting that the criteria given are complete or that all are necessary. They are merely guidelines for the teacher, because ultimately it is the teacher who knows her own individual class best.

Guidelines for Selecting Stories

1. Since children have so much to gain from stories, it is important that in the choice of the story for the week or month, we include ones which will provide them with clear opportunities for taking on the language, and making some of it their own. Understanding of content is crucial if the child is to become involved and if some of the words and grammatical patterns are to become part of his or her language development.

2. The story should have a clear story-line, it should be told in direct and simple language and it should be well supported visually. This is particularly effective if children have opportunities for hearing it several times, or if it has a theme which they are familiar with, or if the cultural content is particularly interesting to them.

3. Stories with repeating sequences offer most support to children when they are inexperienced users of the second language. The same repeating sequences which give support to children learning the language, are the same features which make sequence stories popular with children. Such a story gives opportunities for them to join with the story-teller in telling the story. Children love to be able to anticipate the next step and to be able to join in at appropriate points.

4. To ensure that children understand the story the teacher can do the following:

- (a) Get to know the story well, before it is told. You should note the potential support it will offer as well as the possible difficulties.
- (b) Set the scene for the story clearly before it is told.
- (c) Place more emphasis on introducing the story through telling it rather than by reading it. It is easier to add, extend, explain and adapt for children when the story is not tied to the text.

5. Make sure that there are opportunities for the children to retell and recreate the story through talking, as these will provide a base for their development as readers and writers of stories, as well as helping them to take on the language.

6. Remember that when starting to learn another language, children rely heavily on their eyes and ears to help them understand, for meaning is not conveyed by words alone. Thus, a classroom which ensures that children are involved in activities using real materials and in making and doing things, provides more support for the child learning the language than one where ideas and information are imparted only through words. Visual support in the form of objects, models, and illustration help. These will fill in the gaps that unknown words and phrases will leave and also allow children to hold the story in their heads and to make their own connections. Visual support in the form of gestures, eye contact and body movements of the story-teller, all have an important part to play. In other words, they will understand more if each story-telling situation can be made into a 'performance'. One must remember, though, to strike a balance between a good performance and interrupting the flow of the story.

7. Teachers teaching in a plural society must be sensitive to various racial groups and avoid material or references which may be offensive to a particular race or religion.

8. Think also of all the possible activities that can be done based on the story, like:

- (a) Activities that focus on listening skills and spoken language.
- (b) Activities that are based on reading and writing skills.
- (c) Activities that give more experience of the story as a whole.

(d) Activities that focus on elements within the story.

These ideas for developing the stories are for you to adapt and modify according to the needs of your individual class.

9. Finally, I firmly believe that the teacher who uses story-telling as a method to teach language has one aim, and that is, through the enjoyment of a story, the child will make that important transition from language taught in class to language used in his everyday situation.

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