11. Storytelling

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It is very likely the case that the most natural and the earliest way in which we organize our experience and our knowledge is in terms of the narrative form. (Bruner, 1997).

Drawing on Bruner’s understanding of the key role narrative plays in the construction of meaning, we acknowledge that stories function as a powerful tool to pass on knowledge in a social context. Recent studies in psychology and cognitive science show that the human brain is predisposed to understand, remember and tell stories: humans think in, remember facts according to, and shape their personal and collective identities along narrative structures. Narratives, it appears, occupy a privileged status in human cognition (Bruner, 1991; Graesser, Ottati, 1995; Glaser, Garofsky & Schwan, 2009; Rubin, 1995; Schank and Abelson).

Learning researchers often cite the use of stories as a promising strategy for designing meaningful and anchored learning experiences for students (Järvelä & Renninger, 2014; Glaser, Garofsky & Schwan, 2009; Mayer, 2011). Storytelling presents an effective approach to language and literacy development given the rich communicative function of stories in both linguistic and cultural terms. Roney (1996: 7) explains that storytelling is both “co-creative and interactive” and, as such, offers great potential as a “teaching-learning tool” in the primary literacy curriculum. By telling children’s stories, both teller and listener are actively engaged in creating narrative understanding, a process that fosters psychosocial, linguistic, metalinguistic and metacognitive skills.

Storytelling can also be an effective pedagogical tool in English Language Teaching (ELT) with young learners since children’s literature is a rich source of high-quality language input. Bland (2014: 2) claims that children’s stories are multi-layered (readable in different ways at different levels of linguistic sophistication and cognitive maturity) and multimodal (combining written text, visual images and graphic elements), and that this complexity encourages multiple readings and engaged analysis.

Storytelling is also a dynamic, multi-sensory way to expose young learners to the rich tradition of children’s literature in English by taking into account various narrative
genres (fairy tales, folktales, myths, legends, fables) as well as informal narratives, and by examining how stories circulate in every culture as a means of entertainment, cultural preservation, and moral education. By reflecting on the structural elements of stories (characters, plot, setting, narrative point of view), children learn how narrative technique is used in making meaning. An understanding of narrative communication is key to cultivating broader cultural awareness, empathy, and respect for diversity, which are part of the “hidden curriculum” in primary education.

This paper will explore storytelling as an effective pedagogical tool in ELT with young learners by examining the process of designing story-based lessons for the primary ELT classroom: selecting and adapting stories; story-based language activities for lexis and grammar development; reading and writing activities with stories; using different media (music, rhyme, raps, masks, puppets, scenery, mini-books) to enhance and dramatize stories. The paper draws on Ghosn’s (2013: 120) concept of a four-phase cycle of storytelling, the “story journey”, which extends from pre-story to post-story activities for the ELT classroom:

1. Preparing for the story
   - arouse curiosity; activate prior knowledge; introduce key language; set goal for listening/reading.

2. In the story world
   - Interactive; dialogic reading; shared reading; read aloud; storytelling with props; independent.

3. Reflecting on the story
   - Answering teacher questions; shared whole class discussion; small literacy circles.

4. Returning to the story
   - Re-telling/checking for details; story maps; plot profiles; letters to characters; literary journals; news reports; new scenes/additions to text; script writing; creative writing.

11.1 Selecting and adapting stories

The first step in any storytelling activity is typically to choose a story to read. A teacher needs to consider a number of factors when choosing a story to use in the young learner classroom. For example, Ellis and Brewster (2014: 17-18) suggest a series of criteria and questions to consider when selecting storybooks, including:
   - story (for example: Is the story interesting and familiar? Does it have a powerful message?);
   - images (for example: Are the images clear, strong and compelling? Do the images help support the story’s meaning? Do they provide scaffolding for the text?);
   - language (for example: Is the language rich and expressive yet accessible to young learners? Does it use rhyme and rhythm? Does it repeat key phrases?);
   - lexis (check unfamiliar content or words and idioms, and check clarity);
   - grammar (check verb tenses, structures, and syntax);
   - ideas (check nature and number of ideas and how they are explained, check length and complexity of sentences, check time references).

A further consideration is whether to use authentic storybooks — in other words, those written for children whose first language is English — or those adapted specifically for learners of EFL (commonly known as “graded readers”, which will be discussed further below). There are strong arguments in favour of both. Wright (2001: 5) suggests that authentic stories are highly motivating and rich in language experience for L2 learners, allowing them to develop a “reservoir of language” as language items and sentence constructions are introduced without their having to use these productively at first. Storytelling stimulates children’s listening and reading fluency as they search for textual meaning and predict outcomes of stories. Speaking and writing fluency develop gradually as children build up knowledge of lexis and grammar, moving the acquired language into their productive control. Ghosn states that exposure to “rich, natural language typical of quality children’s literature will facilitate the procedural memory’s processing of the correct structures to the cerebellum” (2013: 134).

Ellis and Brewster (2014: 14) note that using authentic storybooks can be motivating for children and can provide a greater sense of achievement. Many language difficulties in authentic storybooks can be overcome through an effective use of intonation, mime and gesture by the teacher, and by using visual support, such as illustrations in the book. Using authentic storybooks also means being able to choose the most popular and commercially successful books for children, which may be an indicator of their quality and suitability for storytelling activities. On the other hand, graded readers are produced specifically for language learners, with strict controls on the grammar and vocabulary which is included, meaning that a teacher may feel more confident in choosing a book that matches the competency level of his or her class, and consequently one that is likely to be fully understood by the children.

11.2 Telling the story/reading aloud

Having selected a suitable story, the next step is to help create “a story frame of mind” for children by re-positioning classroom chairs or tables in a story circle (Wright, 2001: 13-14). Having a regular story time, as well as some identifiable props, can also help the teacher create an appropriate atmosphere in class and prepare children to be receptive to storytelling.
Before beginning to tell or read a story, Ghosn (2013: 124) recommends introducing it in a way that helps activate the schemata and any key language to facilitate student engagement and comprehension. Using images, flashcards and objects (realia) to introduce new vocabulary and grammar, or revise previously learned items, not only helps activate prior knowledge, but also arouses curiosity and prepares students for the story journey. Lazar similarly suggests "pre-story brainstorming" with students to arouse their curiosity about the book cover and title (What do these suggest?), to predict the plot development based on the first paragraph, or to map a lexical set (for example, animals) relevant to the story’s theme (1993: 84-85).

As Wright notes (2001: 10-11), telling a story in an improvised manner and reading aloud from a book are two different strategies, each with advantages and disadvantages. Reading aloud might offer the possibility for greater repetition of sounds and encourage pattern recognition, children hear the same exact words with each reading and learn to predict and reproduce these patterns. On the other hand, telling a story that draws on but is not bound to the book is more personal and spontaneous: the reading is powerful because it comes from the teller rather than from the book. Also, the teacher/teller can adapt the story by using language the children already know, and can more freely use non-verbal gestures and expressions to enliven the story and heighten its meaning.

Ghosn proposes an “interactive” or “dialogic” approach to reading aloud— with many brief pauses for clarifications, questions and predictions — as an effective strategy that “enables teachers to emphasize new vocabulary and structures and to clarify meanings naturally in context” (2013: 133). The storyteller can paraphrase the book and recast the language based on children’s questions and input, which might also be expressed in the L1. Ghosn warns, though, that too many pauses or interruptions during a reading can undermine the flow of the story (2013: 236).

In contexts where children are not yet independent readers in the L2, a structured approach wherein the teacher maintains control of the discourse by introducing, activating and reinforcing key language is vital. Some language activities to support learning during the active storytelling phase may include: word webs; jumbled pictures to re-order; matching game (word-image); Pelmanism; bingo; word definitions; picture dictionary; true or false or multiple choice questions; filling gaps in a story; predicting what comes next; summarising plot; miming a sequence; children’s retelling of the story; choral reading of key phrases; chanting and singing; role-play and dramatization; drawing; creative writing (see Wright 2001).

Green and Del Negro (2010) emphasize the importance of interactive readings with preschool children, whose attention spans are predictably shorter. Very young learners respond best to a natural, unhurried, expressive reading of a storybook, using a gentle, quiet voice that encourages them to listen attentively. In this case, flexibility and creativity are especially important in storytelling — changing the pace of a reading; varying the intonation; using repetition and rhyme; enlivening a reading with finger puppets, stick dolls, masks, objects, or images; taking a break from reading to stretch, clap or sing — in order to maintain the audience’s attention (2010: 147-148).

11.3 Reflecting on the story

The post-storytelling phase involves reflecting back on the story as a group, sharing insights, opinions, and feelings about it. Ghosn notes that asking open-ended questions such as “What do you think about the story?” will elicit longer and syntactically more complex responses from learners than closed questions like “Did you like the story?” (2013: 139) since the former invite children’s own thoughts and ideas. Closed questions obviously play a useful role with beginners as they can provide scaffolding and can be answered by less proficient speakers. Rosenblatt (1991) defines two types of questions: questions that generate efferent responses (involving factual information retrieval from the text) and those that generate aesthetic responses (involving readers’ emotional and intellectual engagement with the text), the latter of which can stimulate extended discussions with more advanced learners.

Aesthetic responses to stories can range from simple reflections, such as reliving the story while remembering a particularly vivid scene, imagining characters or picturing settings/events from the story, to more complex reflections that involve connecting the story to personal experience. Ghosn observes that teachers encourage more complex forms of reflection by asking children questions like “Has anything like this happened to you?” or “Has anyone ever seen something similar?” (2013: 141).

Greene and Del Negro (2010: 180) suggest that focusing children’s attention on humorous and surprising moments in a story can act as a “bonding tool” that not only draws their attention to these narrative elements, but also to the social dimension of the storytelling experience. What is funny varies according to age group and culture (slapstick, irreverence, satire), and children can learn about ambiguity in the pragmatic use of language as an advanced form of re-reading and reflection.

Ghosn notes that the ability to apply “other reading or media to the story” is another form of advanced reflection in which children are able to compare the new story to another with a similar theme, characters or setting. Language teachers should develop children’s awareness of how both words and images function in stories. Bland and Lütge (2014) note that understanding picturebooks and graphic novels requires children to combine “literary literacy and visual literacy”. In pre- and post-reading activities, teachers should draw attention to the peritextual features of storybooks, such as book covers and titles, to help children develop cognitively by practising inferential thinking (2014: 7).

Lazar proposes that close readings of a text might also engage students in discussions of the “literary metalanguage” used (for example, metaphor, simile, personification, paradox, alliteration) (1993: 43). On a scale of evolving complexity, learners might also discover the function of narrative point of view and practice adopting various characters’ perspectives. a skill that can be developed through productive tasks such as writing letters to characters or writing journal entries from the points of view of different characters (2013: 142-143).

Such perspective-taking tasks help develop empathy by enabling children to project themselves into a character, see the world through their eyes, and vicariously experience a
11.4 Returning to the story

The final step in the story journey provides an opportunity to use the story as a springboard for further learning, specifically language learning. Work carried out in the “return to the story” stage can take a number of forms. Children can be given or asked “comprehension check questions” in order to check understanding of key points or particular areas of detail. Checking comprehension can of course occur during previous phases, but during the post-reading period the teacher can do this in a more formal way, for example with written questions, sentences to complete, or illustrations to put in order. Interacting with a text in greater detail in this way is likely to improve comprehension of the text as a whole.

Any interaction with the text will also promote the recycling of language, of both lexis and grammar. The teacher can offer activities to recycle language that has been previously studied and that reappears in the story currently in use, but also to draw children’s attention to new language. Often, learners are able to understand a text globally but may not notice all the features of language present. It has been argued that that language learners will not be able to learn features of grammar in a foreign language unless they first consciously notice them (Schmidt, 1990), and any activities which promote interaction or manipulation of new grammar in the text is likely to promote this. “Noticing” as a concept will be discussed again below in relation to some example activities for the “Return to the story” phase.

Any number of activities to recycle and interact with language from the text can be carried out in the “return to the story”, including:
- **Stop and start**: The teacher retells the story with mistakes or factual differences. The children tell the teacher to stop when they hear the mistake and correct it.
- **Checking predictions** (Shin & Crandall, 2014: 222): Children are asked at the beginning of the story world cycle to write, or, in the case of lower level learners, draw predictions about the story on a piece of paper. The predictions can be formulated on the basis of the title, book cover, illustrations etc. The predictions are placed in a predictions box, and in the “return to the story” phase, the teacher reviews the predictions with the class.
- **Using story boards / graphic organisers** (Shin & Crandall, 2014: 224): Children can review and create their own record of the story by simply drawing pictures, by drawing pictures and writing words under them, or by drawing pictures and writing sentences under them, with the choice depending on the learners’ competence level.

Alternatively, the teacher can provide illustrations, and the children write words or sentences under them, or complete speech bubbles in the illustrations.

- **Group retelling** (Shin & Crandall, 2014: 222): The teacher can retell the entire story, eliciting some words at various points in the story. Alternatively, he or she can ask children to say some lines from the story or ask children to role play some of the parts.
- **Retelling and rewriting** (Shin & Crandall, 2014: 182): The teacher asks a series of pre-prepared questions on key events in the story. As the children reply to the questions, the teacher uses their answers to construct a summary of the story on the board. This is an effective way of moving from reading and retelling to a highly scaffolded writing activity.
- **Creative writing**: A number of creative writing activities can emerge from storytelling. For example, Ghosn (2012: 154-158) recommends scriptwriting, whereby children write a script to use in a dramatization of all or part of a story, and writing news reports, for example for newspapers or TV news, covering the key events of the story.

Moving beyond the particular story studied in class, particular grammatical structures or lexis can be highlighted by the teacher and subsequently used as a basis for original stories written by children individually or in groups (Dawkins and O’Neill, 2011).

All of the activities above involve recycling language from the story to a lesser or greater extent. Retelling and rewriting activities in particular give learners the opportunity to reuse language they have been exposed to during earlier stages in the story world. In doing so, they may begin to “notice” gaps in their own linguistic competence, and will be motivated to fill them. As Swain and Lapkin note, “[t]he activity of producing the target language may prompt second language learners to consciously recognize some of their linguistic problems; it may bring to their attention something they need to discover about their L2.” (1995: 125-126) In the case of young learners, many are unlikely to have the metalinguistic awareness to be able to identify or enunciate the elements of their language competence that are missing. However, they are nonetheless likely to be motivated to use language provided by the teacher to fill any gaps and this may drive language learning. The “return to the story” phase can therefore be seen as a key opportunity for language work, recycling language from the text and increasing overall language competence.

11.5 Beyond the story journey: extensive reading

This paper has thus far discussed storytelling as a shared activity, generally involving a shared reading with a competent adult, typically a teacher. However, one of the ultimate aims of the language classroom must be to develop learners’ reading competence in the foreign language to the extent that they can read independently. One way to foster such competence is “extensive reading”, that is to say the introduction into a teaching programme of opportunities, both inside and outside of class, for extensive, independent reading of texts at an appropriate difficulty level. Developing reading competence has

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benefits beyond the skill of reading itself; studies have linked increased reading competence to improved writing competence (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989), speaking competence (Elley, 1991, Day & Bamford, 1998), while a number of studies have found a direct link between extensive reading programmes and increased vocabulary acquisition (see, for example, Day et al., 1991, Nation & Wang, 1999, Figada & Schmitt, 2006).

A typical extensive reading programme involves learners being assigned or choosing books, made available through a school or class library, at an appropriate proficiency level. Reading time can be made available but eventually learners are expected to read extensively outside of the classroom. Books designed for independent reading by language learners – typically referred to as “graded readers” – are widely available. The ELT Journal periodically publishes reviews of titles published for both adults and young learners (see Hill, 2013 for the latest review, at the time of writing). Graded readers contain language that is controlled for both grammar and vocabulary. In terms of the former, sentence structure, tenses, use of modals and so on are tightly controlled at lower levels (for example, an entry level graded reader would typically only contain present simple, would have short sentences and not use modals verbs), with more structures introduced as the levels progress. In terms of vocabulary, lexis is typically restricted through limits on “headwords” – the number of different words, excluding derivations, included in a text. Vocabulary control is thought to be crucial to the success of extensive reading programmes. Research has shown that in order for independent reading to be fast and pleasurable, with an adequate level of comprehension, a reader should know at least 98% of the vocabulary (Extensive Reading Foundation, 2013: 3). Levels lower than that would be acceptable for “intensive reading” – the kind of reading typically carried in the language classroom, where the learning can be scaffolded.

11.6 Conclusion

Overall, the paper has demonstrated that a storytelling approach in ELT with young learners has linguistic, social and affective benefits. First, stories are motivating and enjoyable, helping to develop a positive attitude toward the English language and culture. Second, stories present the L2 through patterns of repetition and rhyme which are predictable and memorable, thus facilitating language acquisition and retention. Third, by listening to, reflecting on, and telling stories, children learn the intonation, prosody and pronunciation of the L2, thus improving oral skills. Fourth, stories can provide a springboard to a great deal of language learning, particularly through reading and writing activities that involve interacting with and recycling language features from the text. Finally, all children can understand and respond to stories at their own linguistic and cognitive level, thereby making storytelling a highly inclusive activity.

References


Extensive Reading Foundation (2011), Guide to Extensive Reading.


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5 For example, a B1 level graded reader may contain around 1000 headwords, referring to the total number of words for the number of different words contained within the text, with words such as sleep, sleepy and sleeping being counted as a single headword.
12. Metafore visive per l'energia

Ergolandia, la valigia didattica per introdurre l'energia come tema verticale dalla Scuola dell'Infanzia alla Scuola Secondaria di primo grado

Federico Corni e Hans U. Fuchs

La percezione dei processi naturali porta alla formazione della gestalt della forza. Questa gestalt è resa cosciente e accessibile alla mente umana con l'aiuto di metafore e storie.

Le forze della natura (vento, acqua, fuoco, ghiaccio, cibo, suolo, moto...) ci appaiono – e sono concettualizzate – come agenti potenti. Questi agenti hanno dimensione e intensità, e il loro potere può essere misurato in termini di energia.

Sadi Carnot ha dimostrato che si può creare una scienza del calore usando le metafore di quantità di fluido, tensione, e potenza. Mostriremo come questo archetipo può essere generalizzato e come si possono costruire diagrammi di processo in termini di metafore visive.

Descriveremo poi come questo paradigma è sviluppato didatticamente, per l'educazione scientifica degli alunni dalla scuola dell'infanzia alla secondaria di primo grado, nella Valigia Ergoladia del progetto Max's Worlds di MultiLab.

12.1 Metafore visive per l'energia

L'immagine della cascata di Sadi Carnot

È piuttosto comune al giorno d'oggi considerare i processi fisici come il risultato del moto di particelle microscopiche nello spazio vuoto o in campi gravitazionali o elettrici e magnetici. In questo approccio alle scienze fisiche, l'energia è fondamentalmente energia di movimento, il che porta a una visione fortemente ristretta di quello di cui abbiamo a che fare.

Se, invece, adottiamo l'idea di forze della natura agenti e interagenti nei processi naturali, possiamo creare una visione generalizzata del ruolo dell'energia nei processi fisici basata su strutture metaforiche fondamentali della mente umana. Questo approccio è stato formalizzato durante i primi sviluppi della scienza dei motori termici (Carnot, 1824).

In sintesi, noi guardiamo i processi come il risultato di azione e interazione di forze della natura come i fluidi, l'elettricità, il calore, le sostanze o il moto. Forze diverse sono concettualizzate in modo analogo: ciascuna è percepita come avente una dimensione (un