

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

GLOTTODIDAKTIK

LUBELSKIE MATERIAŁY NEOFILOLOGICZNE NR 28, 2004

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Teaching Through Storytelling at the Primary EFL Level: Expanding Young Learners' Vocabulary

The story is one of the first literary genres that people are exposed to since the earliest moments of their childhood. The unique atmosphere of stories, the problems of their protagonists, the battle between good and evil, and the supernatural phenomena are captivating for all children, L2 learners being no exception. In their case, stories not only promote a growth in motivation and positive attitudes to second/foreign language learning, but they also serve as an invaluable source of linguistic input.

The present article focuses on the advantages of implementing the elements of storytelling to the syllabuses of English courses for young learners. It comprises two major parts, the theoretical background for storytelling as a learning/teaching tool, and the description of the study whose objective was to verify the usefulness of story-based lessons for vocabulary learning.

Storytelling in the English classroom: theoretical considerations

A story-based methodology

In order to successfully exploit the richness of stories in the foreign language classroom, an appropriate methodology is needed. The most commonly used ELT methodology applied to teaching young learners, based on the Plan-Do-Review model (Fig. 1), has been described by

Ellis and Brewster (2002). The model offers a division of a lesson or a storytelling session into three stages, similarly to skills-based work: pre-storytelling, while-storytelling and post-storytelling. The first phase, or reflection phase, is aimed at activating mental schemata and vocabulary, and prepares students for storytelling proper. In the second stage (experimentation phase) students participate in the storytelling according to the rules proposed by the teacher-storyteller. The third phase, namely the further reflection phase, gives an opportunity to consolidate the language and ideas through a variety of follow-up activities. As pointed out by Ellis and Brewster (2002), the Plan-Do-Review model has two main advantages. Firstly, it promotes learner autonomy through the development of strategies of planning, reviewing and hypothesizing. Secondly, it offers a possibility for clear organisation of the lesson, with a smooth transition between the three stages.

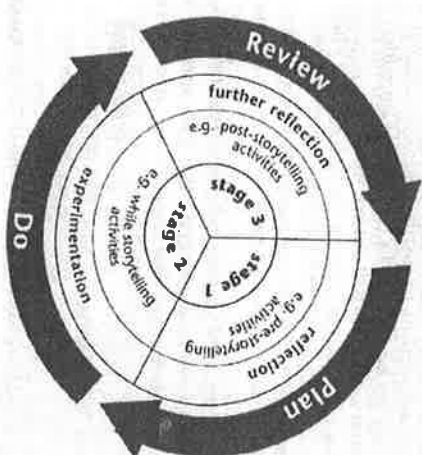


Fig. 1 A framework for a story-based methodology – the Plan-Do-Review model

Literary devices in stories

A story's linguistic richness manifests itself in the use of a variety of literary devices. Properly exploited in the L2 classroom, they may serve as an aid to both understanding the story and committing new target language to memory.

Among the devices of expression most frequently employed in stories are rhythm, rhyme, repetition, onomatopoeia and alliteration. They promote retelling the story by learners, facilitate memorising it if it is required, and encourage learners to imitate fragments of a story (Barton 1986). Additionally, as it has been found, vocabulary presented in the form of rhythmic refrains can be learnt more easily than if it were incorporated into a prose narrative (Kolsawalla 2001).

Stories which feature suspense, mystery and surprise provoke interest and arouse curiosity. This, in turn, contributes to learners' active participation in the storytelling, which leads to creating more opportunities for language practice (Ellis and Brewster 2002).

Last but not least, almost every story for children contains elements of humour. If a story is amusing for students, they will find the atmosphere in the classroom more learner-friendly and develop positive attitudes to learning English.

Motivational value of storytelling

Apart from the fact that stories can be used in the foreign language classroom to improve learners' command of English, they may also serve as a tool to prepare their minds for further language education. Thus, storytelling contributes to the realisation of the two main objectives of early language teaching, namely increasing young learners' language awareness and 'whetting their appetite' for language learning in the future (Brewster, Ellis and Girard 2002).

Motivation, one of the key factors in language learning by young learners, should, according to Komorowska (2002), be sometimes given more attention to than their linguistic achievements. Storytelling offers such opportunities, especially with regard to the development of intrinsic motivation. Firstly, language used in stories offers a

challenge for children-listeners. If the challenge is reasonable, young learners will by all means possible try to respond to it (Brown 1994). Secondly, due to relevant, child-centred content, stories arouse and maintain interest and curiosity, which also constitute the basic elements of intrinsic motivation.

Tales, 'the children's genre', create manifold opportunities for relating the story worlds with a child's own world. For children the world of stories is comprehensible because it offers the same kind of approach to life, namely the combination of reality and fantasy. The conclusion that follows from this statement is that stories help children explain the surrounding reality and develop their psyche. According to Halliwell (1994), imagination in children is not only a means by which they conceptualise the world, but also a stimulus for real language use. It seems evident then that storytelling, in which imagination is deeply embedded, can be a link between a child's world and the environment of the second/foreign language classroom.

Quite importantly, listening to stories during English lessons provides the possibility of developing the receptive knowledge of the language, especially language patterns, sounds, rhythm and intonation. In addition to that, children who are still in the 'silent phase' of their learning can accumulate some linguistic material without being forced to produce it (Wright 2002).

Storytelling and the development of multiple intelligences

As postulated by Gardner (1983) in his pioneering book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, people are equipped with a number of intelligences rather than one single intelligence measured by standard IQ tests. While all humans possess elements of each of the intelligences, which include linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinaesthetic and personal intelligences, one or more of them are usually more prominent in an individual.

Owing to the increasing interest in Gardner's theory, a tendency to design ELT materials promoting the development of multiple intelligences has been revealed. Storybooks and other story-based materials contribute to the creation of a holistic language learner as

they activate all types of intelligences (Ellis and Brewster 2002). Most evidently, storybooks cater for the development of visual intelligence and visual literacy, as the images that they feature manifest meaning and are sometimes crucial to story understanding.

Bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence may be developed through a variety of performance activities, which include reacting in a particular way to certain words or fragments of a story. Additionally, drama activities, which naturally follow storytelling, offer a possibility for focusing on the value of kinaesthetic intelligence.

The language of stories, which has a natural musical flow, helps to acquaint learners with the stress and intonation patterns of a target language. As English is 'a stress-time' language, in which stressed beats occur at equal intervals, it is advisable that teachers use selected fragments of a story as a model for naturally-sounding language (Ellis and Brewster 2002).

Another type of intelligence, namely spatial intelligence, can be exploited in such while-storytelling activities as sorting, classifying, and labelling pictures or matching them to corresponding written or spoken words. Logical-mathematical intelligence is helpful in such tasks as sequencing the events in a story, predicting or guessing the content.

Emotional intelligence, which, according to Goleman (1997) is a core of human intelligent behaviour, could be reinforced during storytelling-based lessons. In a story one can trace elements of both such positive emotions as love, fairness or friendship, and negative ones like jealousy, desire for power, fear or anger. As pointed out by Fitz-Gerald and Gunter (1971), these emotions should not be marked 'adult only' but children as well should be given an opportunity to experience them.

Stories' selection and adaptation

Not every story that is normally read only for pleasure can be readily used in a foreign language classroom. The selected text should suit the level of learners both in conceptual and linguistic terms

(Colwell 1980 and Ellis and Brewster 2002). That is why an appropriate story selection should be based upon the following five criteria: linguistic, psychological, cognitive, social and cultural.

In order to provide maximum linguistic benefits, the language in stories should be slightly above the language proficiency level of learners. To avoid the danger of the lack of understanding, teachers can use visual aids and make the most of the literary devices in stories. Additionally, some texts may require alterations in grammar, vocabulary and length to make their comprehension easier.

In the psychological domain, it is advisable to select stories with engaging, memorable content in which one may find joy, humour, resourcefulness and other positive aspects of human nature. It is by showing such features of humans that children's self-esteem can be stimulated. Violence, hatred or fear will most probably exert negative influence on young learners' still developing psyche.

The educational potential of stories is brought into focus while considering the cognitive criteria for their selection. It is vital that the texts allow for the existence of different learning styles and intelligences, as they are the elements of pupils' 'learning to learn' potential (Ellis and Brewster 2002).

Since many stories are substantially culture-bound, they may pose some comprehension problems for learners from outside the cultural group in question. Hence, the teacher needs to verify whether or not a story contains unclear cultural references, which may become an obstacle for learners attempting to grasp the plot.

Each storytelling session is based on three elements: the story, the storyteller and the audience. After an appropriate story is selected for a particular group of learners, it is time for a teacher to change his/her roles and become a storyteller. In order to do that, teachers must fulfil certain conditions. First of all, they must get familiarised with the story, its thematic and linguistic content. Otherwise the text's richness will not be communicated to the audience. Secondly, voice, a powerful tool for a storyteller, needs to be disguised so as to imitate the salient features of the characters and build up the atmosphere.

Thirdly, storytellers ought to make the most of gesticulation, mime and facial expression since all of them facilitate conveying meaning.

Vocabulary acquisition through storytelling: the study

The study described in this paper was carried out in order to investigate the development of the receptive knowledge of vocabulary in primary school learners in the course of a sequence of storytelling-based lessons. Also, it was examined to what extent the learners' intrinsic motivation was stimulated by the storytelling cycle.

Purpose

The cycle of storytelling lessons pursued a range of objectives. Above all, it was undertaken in order to:

- verify the usefulness of story-based lessons in enhancing primary school learners receptive knowledge of vocabulary;
- enrich the learners' vocabulary with adjectives, which, often neglected in coursebooks, are naturally found in stories;
- exploit various ways of presenting stories in order to observe the learners' reaction to them;
- observe whether using stories in teaching English at primary level contributes to the development of intrinsic motivation and positive attitudes to learning;
- investigate how the learners evaluated the selection of stories and accompanying activities used in the study.

Subjects

The children taking part in the study were five girls and two boys aged between seven and eight, who had been learning English for three years in a private language school. As far as the level of language proficiency of the subjects is concerned, they were classified as elementary learners.

Materials

The four stories used in the study, selected from graded readers, included "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", "The Shoemaker and the Elves", "The Happy Prince" and "The Little Indian Boy". The text of "The Happy Prince" had to be modified in order to match the subjects' level of language proficiency. The majority of the materials in the study were prepared by the author of this paper herself, though some of them were based on the storybooks or the accompanying activity books. Three techniques were used to present the story: showing a video-recorded version of a story, presenting a story orally with picture flashcards or storybooks with colourful illustrations and telling the story with the subjects' active participation.

Vocabulary presentation and practice was carried out by means of picture and word flashcards and activity handouts. These included bingo grids, crosswords, word search and photocopied pictures. Vocabulary tests were specially designed to assess the vocabulary acquired after each story and after the entire storytelling cycle.

In addition to this, two interviews were administered before and after the study. Their goal was to examine the subjects' involvement in the lessons as well as their attitude towards storytelling as a technique in the foreign language classroom.

Design and Procedure

The study lasted five weeks and consisted of eight storytelling-based lessons. Additionally, five lessons were devoted to vocabulary tests, and two lessons to the interviews. The table below presents the general design of the study:

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 7
	Story 1 vocabulary test	Story 2 vocabulary test	Story 3 vocabulary test	Story 4 vocabulary test	Final vocabulary test
Story 1 lesson 1	Story 2 lesson 1	Story 3 lesson 1	Story 4 lesson 1		
Story 1 lesson 2	Story 2 lesson 2	Story 3 lesson 2	Story 4 lesson 2		

The primary aim of each sequence of two storytelling lessons was to pre-teach, practise in context and revise the target vocabulary included in the story. It was assumed that the students would be able to learn receptively up to ten selected vocabulary items from each story. The secondary objective of the lessons was to preserve the atmosphere of a real storytelling session through focusing the students attention on the content of the story as well.

As far as the design of vocabulary evaluation tests is concerned, they followed an identical pattern for all the stories. They comprised two tasks: picture-word matching and gap filling. The gap filling tasks were based on self-designed summaries of the stories and involved reading a short text and understanding the context in which the target words should be used. The final vocabulary test was administered to the subjects two weeks after the study had been completed. The objective of the test was to check to what extent the vocabulary from the four stories was retained by the students. The test consisted of the picture-word matching task (similar to the one in the tests after the individual stories), and the task in which the subjects were to select one word (of three provided) that best completed the sentence. The sentences used in the task were extracted from the stories.

The final interview concentrated on the subjects' evaluation of the course. They were asked to express their opinions about the general appeal of the course, the storytelling techniques used, the theme and content of the stories, and the activities accompanying storytelling. The subjects were also expected to assess how telling stories in the language classroom influenced their motivation to learn English.

In order to ensure that the sufficient amount of time could be devoted to vocabulary practice, both through exposure to the story and the activities, each of the stories was presented during two lessons. Every lesson followed the same pattern – a division to five main stages: opening, pre-storytelling stage, while-storytelling stage, post-storytelling stage and closing of the lesson.

General lesson 1 plan	
1. Opening	
2. Pre-storytelling phase	
A) predicting	
B) vocabulary presentation	
3. While-storytelling phase	
A) first listening	
B) second listening	
4. Post-storytelling phase	
focused on story content	
5. Closing	

General lesson 2 plan	
1. Opening	
2. Pre-storytelling phase	
A) recollecting the story	
B) vocabulary revision	
3. While-storytelling (third listening)	
4. Post-storytelling phase	
focused on vocabulary practice	
5. Closing	

The pre-storytelling phase of the first lesson was devoted to predicting the content of the story and vocabulary presentation. The learners discussed the theme, the plot and the characters of the story on the basis of the illustrations and prompting questions. New vocabulary items were always introduced by means of three types of tasks. First, the vocabulary was presented by the teacher using a set of pictures and word flashcards and some realia. Then, the subjects were involved in two more activities, which included different types of matching, Pelmanism, miming the target words, playing memory games or Total Physical Response activities.

During the while-storytelling stage, the story was presented to the pupils twice. The first listening required general understanding of the story so as to enable the learners to perform such tasks as putting the pictures from the story in the correct order or answering a simple question about the content. In the second listening, the subjects attended to the story in greater detail. The while-storytelling activities in this lesson concentrated on the content of the story.

The post-storytelling stage of the first lesson required the reflection on the story and checked the learners' understanding. The subjects expressed their opinion about the story, reflected upon the plot and the characters and answered comprehension questions.

The pre-storytelling stage of the second lesson dealing with a given story comprised: recollecting the main message of the story, revising

vocabulary, recreating the plot of the story and discussing the characters. It also served the purpose of preparing the learners for the while-storytelling stage devoted to vocabulary practice. During the while-storytelling stage the story was presented once, and the pupils were asked, for example, to raise the appropriate word or picture flashcard when they heard a particular vocabulary item.

The post-storytelling stage consisted of three activities in which the pupils practised the target vocabulary. They included matching, solving crosswords and word puzzles as well as playing board games exploiting the target vocabulary. It was assumed that these activities would facilitate the internalisation of the target vocabulary, its recognition both in the context of the story and outside it, and additionally draw the learners' attention to the spelling of the words.

The results of the study

As already mentioned, up to ten words were selected from each story and then tested after its presentation, i.e. after every two lessons. In addition to that, a final vocabulary test, which checked the retention of the target words over time, took place two weeks after the completion of the study.

On the basis of the results the subjects were classified as belonging to the following three groups:

- pupils who were able to complete the task correctly;
- pupils who made not more than two mistakes;
- pupils who made more than two mistakes.

As far as the nature of mistakes is concerned, the subjects tended to have difficulty with the words which sound similarly or are spelt in a similar way (e.g. leather – late). Also, some problems concerned the adjectives that were presented in the form of pairs of opposites (e.g. hard – soft). The pupils remembered that there was a connection between the words, however, they did not always recognise their meaning correctly.

The table below (Table 1) illustrates the results of the first task, namely picture-word matching, for particular tests.

	Story 1	Story 2	Story 3	Story 4
No mistakes	6	6	4	2
Not more than 2 mistakes	1	1	0	1
More than 2 mistakes	0	0	0	2

Table 1 Number of pupils who committed mistakes in the matching tasks of particular story tests

As can be seen from the table, the matching tasks after the first three stories were performed without any mistakes by the majority of the subjects. There was one pupil who committed not more than two mistakes. Though the results of this task for the fourth story are generally positive, 2 pupils provided the answers with more than two mistakes. However, this situation may be attributed to the fact that some children were absent from at least one lesson during which the fourth story was presented, thus their access to the input was seriously limited.

The results of the second task, gap filling, are displayed in Table 2 below. In this task the subjects were to complete the summary of the story with appropriate words. Although the words to be inserted in the summary were provided on the page, some pupils had problems with the correct spelling. The mistakes they made concerned the following words: *lather (leather), *pressz (precious), *step hill (steep hill), *dep river (deep river), *gras (grass), *darg wood (dark wood), *swold (sword).

	Story 1	Story 2	Story 3	Story 4
No mistakes	7	5	3	3
Not more than 2 mistakes	0	2	1	1
More than 2 mistakes	0	0	0	1

Table 2 Number of pupils who committed mistakes in the gap-filling tasks of particular story tests

The gap filling task proved to be relatively easy as most of the subjects were able to complete the summaries with appropriate words spelled correctly. Once again, the table illustrates that the fourth story was most problematic for the pupils. Still, they appear to have performed the gap filling task slightly better than the matching task.

The first task of the final vocabulary test, picture-word matching, measured the receptive knowledge of sixteen target words. Three pupils were able to complete the task without any mistakes, one pupil made one mistake, one of them made five mistakes, two of the subjects tested made more than eight mistakes.

In the second task the subjects were to complete ten sentences borrowed from the four stories with an appropriate word from the three options provided. It was observed that the familiar context of the story helped the subjects perform this task successfully. The answers of two learners were 100 percent correct, one of them made one mistake and three subjects made two mistakes.

It could be observed that, comparably to the gap filling tasks in the tests after each story, the subjects had again some problems with the words spelt or pronounced in a similar way. What is more, some pupils tended to confuse the words from the same story. When they had the choice of two words from the same story, they would choose the wrong item, but from the same story as the correct one.

Before and after study questionnaires

The questionnaires were conducted in the subjects' native language. The reason for this was that the pupils' level of language

proficiency would not allow them to express sophisticated ideas in English. While all the subjects took part in the before-study interview, only six of them participated in the final interview. The questions asked in the interviews were mainly of an open-ended type and were a stimulus for spontaneous, unconstrained answers. Due to the use of such questions, the questionnaires served as a springboard for an open discussion on both the storytelling cycle the children participated in and the general idea of exploiting story-based lessons in the EFL classroom.

The opening question in the interview conducted before the study concerned the subjects' general attitude to learning English. Five pupils enjoyed learning English, whereas two of them said that they liked it sometimes. They stated that they did not enjoy performing certain tasks because they found them too problematic or difficult. No pupil declared that they did not like learning English at all.

Asked about whether they found tales/stories interesting, the majority of the learners answered positively. One pupil, the youngest member of the group, said that stories were usually too childish to be engaging. Generally, the subjects felt that the stories about animals were interesting, though some of them preferred tales in which the main protagonists were children at their age. There were children who enjoyed stories in which the plot was based on adventure as well as those involving supernatural powers. Asked about the types of stories they did not like, the subjects pointed at traditional stories, like "The Little Red Riding Hood", explaining that such tales were 'old-fashioned' and not popular among children nowadays. Answering the last question all of them agreed that they would like to take part in story-based lessons in the future.

The interview conducted after the study showed that the overall attitude to the study was positive. Five of the subjects liked all the lessons and one person stated that he thought only some of them were interesting. Four of the subjects enjoyed listening to the stories, while three of them preferred participating in the activities prepared by the teacher. Almost everyone agreed that the most exciting activity was

Pelmanism, matching in pairs the flashcards displayed on the classroom walls.

The subjects' favourite story appeared to be "The Goldilocks and the Three Bears," because they liked both the plot and the characters. Some pupils preferred "The Shoemaker and the Elves" and they supported their choice with the presence of the supernatural powers.

As far as the method of story presentation is concerned, the subjects considered the video recording of the story as the most appealing. This can be attributed to the fact that television is nowadays a primary source of entertainment for children. One pupil stated that he preferred telling a story by the teacher who used illustrated flashcards to aid understanding.

Four pupils declared that they were more willing to participate in the storytelling-based lessons than in regular lessons based on the coursebook. Two pupils said that stories would appeal to them if used occasionally.

The subjects felt that they benefited considerably from the study as far as learning new vocabulary items was concerned. When prompted, they were able to enumerate many examples of the target words that they had learnt. As far as the activities that helped them internalise vocabulary are concerned, the subjects mentioned all flashcard games and activities as the ones that contributed to their learning. Interestingly enough, two pupils indicated that the tests conducted after every two lessons were not merely a measure of their progress but an opportunity for further revision of the vocabulary.

After the cycle of eight storytelling-based lessons, the pupils expressed the opinion that they would like to return to regular coursebook lessons. They suggested that an alternative solution could be using story-based lessons interchangeably with coursebook lessons.

When asked whether they were more willing to participate in story-based lessons than in coursebook lessons, six pupils answered that they were, and one person said that he did not know. This proves that stories may have a motivating effect on young language learners.

Conclusion

The assumption that storytelling can promote vocabulary learning, as far as receptive knowledge goes, was proved to be valid. Selecting appropriate stories for a particular group of learners enables the presentation of the target words in the natural, acquisition-rich context. The study carried out by the present author made it possible to conclude that it was the familiar context of the stories which facilitated the receptive learning of the target vocabulary items. The findings of the study also made it clear that storytelling should be incorporated in the syllabuses of English courses for young learners as it helps create positive attitudes to language learning and enhance motivation. The conclusion that follows from the discussion of the study is that storytelling-based lessons can substantially contribute to the development of children both as independent learners and language users.

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