

(RE)INTRODUCING STORYTELLING AND STORY - READING INTO A FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract: The present article discusses the validity of using storytelling and story-reading in teaching primary learners. It stresses the benefits of using this powerful and motivating tool with young learners and the need to implement it in the Polish educational system, where both strategies seem to be undervalued. The article provides an overview of ideas on how to use storytelling and storybooks in the foreign language classroom.

Key words: language teaching and learning, storytelling, storybooks, story-reading, literacy, primary learners

Introduction

The art of storytelling has always been appreciated by humankind. It has enriched people in all spheres of their activities since pre-historic times. Storytelling has been used as a means to transfer knowledge, wisdom, and life experience from one generation to the next. The development of language and storytelling is closely linked as one cannot exist without the other. Storytelling is the essence of human communication. People tell stories all the time. Some of them are reduced to a single utterance, while some others are extended to prolix ongoing tales. No matter how lengthy or concise the stories are, they are indispensable for the proper functioning of human beings whilst the ability of telling stories in a masterful way may result in better understanding by the audiences.

Storytelling can also be used as a strategy implemented in language teaching and learning especially at the early stages of language education. The article approaches the subject in two ways: through teaching language and literacy by means of story-reading and oral storytelling. Both strategies seem unjustly forgotten not only in Polish education but also in other countries. The authors of the article would like to share their insights into why story-reading alongside with storytelling should be given a more intensive reconsideration.

The Polish school and the use of stories in teaching English to young learners

In Poland, the Core Curriculum defines the following, among others, general aims of teaching children at the first educational stage: to develop qualification and cognitive skills, to develop literacy skills, to enable children to acquire knowledge and the skills necessary for understanding the world, also by guaranteeing them access to a variety of sources of information and the means of using them. As

for some specific aims of teaching a foreign language, primary children are supposed to have a general understanding of short stories and fairytales, when supported with visual aids as well as understand simple dialogues in stories and cartoons; to take part in class performances; and to use dictionaries, multimedia, and storybooks [1].

The Core Curriculum also defines certain details concerning the management of the classroom, like the division of the classroom space into two parts: the working space with the blackboard and the desks, and the recreational space, including the book corner. Finally, in the process of teaching a foreign language it is recommended to organize extracurricular activities, such as library lessons and book club meetings.

As can be seen the choice of story-telling and storybooks as a teaching technique is recommended by the Core Curriculum; likewise, their place in the process of learning a foreign language has long been acknowledged (cf., e.g., Brewster, Ellis and Girard, 1992) [2]. Yet, this powerful and motivating tool is neglected by teachers of English in the Polish state school, and a variety of research confirms this claim. According to a report on the effectiveness of teaching English to primary school learners [3], more than a half of teachers in lower-primary school never or seldom use storybooks. At the same time, the study shows that both in grades 0-III and grades IV-VI, lessons mainly concentrate on the use of the course book and the activity book together with the recorded materials that come in the sets; almost all the English teachers admit to using them in every lesson (about 90% of lower-primary teachers and 98.37% of upper-primary teachers). In the light of these findings it seems interesting that according to the survey conducted among parents 30% of schoolchildren read books in English in their free time.

Other studies revealed similar tendencies [4, 5]. In the study on the use of teaching resources by teachers of En-

glish; both the teachers themselves and the observers report that the course book with the recordings is the teaching tool used in almost every lesson by 90% of teachers. At the same time, other teaching aids are used much less frequently. Among the least frequently used teaching tools are authentic materials, DVD recordings, and storybooks, which is surprising because such materials are exceptionally attractive to children [4]. A similar lack of variety in the range of teaching resources used by teachers is reported for English lessons at the third educational stage [5], which shows that the teaching of English in Poland has little to do with authentic language use.

Stressing this point, after Szpotowicz and Muszyński [4], that all this is at odds with the current trends in foreign language methodology. In all grades of primary school, it is important to use methods, techniques, and teaching materials (including the authentic ones) which render the variety and dynamicity of the lessons necessary for motivating children to learn the language. They point out that teachers can successfully inspire children to speak English by implementing longer texts for listening and reading, which can easily be found in English literature.

Educational potential of storytelling and story-reading

At the early stages of language education and teaching literacy, irrespective of the language which is taught or learnt, storytelling can prove amusing and effective. Stories involve students' thinking, nurture their emotions and imagery and hence boost the development of language and literacy. Storytelling does not require sophisticated teaching aids. It is an innate ability of a human being to tell stories. It is also an ability that every (language) teacher should possess in order to present educational material to learners and by doing so perform a transfer of knowledge. Having analyzed some literature on storytelling, it is possible to arrive at a conclusion that a couple of decades ago it used to be quite a popular strategy for the development of literacy. As a subject, storytelling either was or has been in the curriculum in some US schools, for instance. On the other hand, storytelling has been used as a strategy in lessons of English as a second language, also in Polish schools. Anyway, whether storytelling is used as a strategy or a subject, there is a noticeable tendency in many countries for its revival in pedagogy, especially in the context of language development in younger students.

Storytelling proper engages imagery to a greater extent as during the process the storyteller relies on his/her images rather than pictures in a book. Collins (1999, in Isbell et al. [6]) states that stories "provide conceptual framework for thinking which allows children to shape experien-

ces into a whole" as well as to map them and create mental imagery. The researchers come to the conclusion that storytelling helps children to recollect the story imaginatively. Many scholars, with Linda Frederics [7] among them, assert that storytelling develops imagination, activates active and passive language skills, strengthens and improves critical thinking. In addition, stories are enjoyable; they promote social interaction and establish positive rapport between the teacher and the learners.

Berkowitz [8] concurs in underlining the advantages of oral storytelling over reading aloud to children. She emphasizes dramatizing that accompanies storytelling and 'makes it possible for everyone to participate and be included in a "close-up" way'. This is how she describes the process: "The children and I make direct eye contact without a book between us. As we read each other's faces and emotions, a kind of call-and-response takes place, a mutual matching of facial, vocal, and physical expression. If I suddenly jump up or raise my voice, the children's eyes widen and they gasp. If I begin to whisper, they crouch forward and draw close. This kind of listening and response is a direct form of communication that creates a level of intimacy, empathy, and unity at our gatherings".

Berkowitz [8] points out the necessity of engaging children in dramatizations as they build their self-confidence and problem-solving skills "[d]ramatizing stories lets children actively choose and make sense of characters, events, predicaments, and solutions". She claims that when preschoolers listen to the stories and actively participate in them they learn how to communicatively interact, how to appreciate different points of view and how to resolve problematic situations.

For these and many other reasons, storytelling should be introduced in study programs. Isbell et al. [6] determine that storytelling and story-reading positively influence language development in young children. Their research confirms that children who are engaged in story reading "experience vocabulary growth" as well as "communication opportunities" through discussions over a story line and its illustrations. So, while reading or being read to, the learner is connected to language acquisition through a direct relation to the text. In the case of storytelling, the educational emphasis shifts to the involvement of the audience and interaction with a storyteller, while it is considered a more personal experience for the listener due to his eye contact with the teller.

Young learners acquire language actively through meaningful interactions with one another, adults and imaginary characters while playing. Their vocabulary is mostly structured upon the language units and linguistic behavior they are exposed to during a range of interactions (see Isbell [9]; Chomsky (1972), in Isbell et al. [6]). Storytelling is one of the ways to enlarge students' vocabularies.

How to use storytelling and storybooks with primary schoolchildren

Miller and Pennycuff [10] established a connection between storytelling and its influence on the emergent and prospective literacy development in children. They claim that storytelling may strengthen reading comprehension by helping students to develop the sense of a story and as a result, figure out the meaning of the story. The authors suggest a few useful techniques, adopted from Black (2008), for implementation in the classroom:

- Students are asked to read at least five different stories and find one that they would like to tell. After reading the story, the student tries to tell the story to a partner.
- Following the retelling, students go back to the text to be sure that the important details are included. Students can also work with partners to retell the story using only six sentences – two each for the beginning, middle, and end.
- Following the six sentence version, students can try to tell the story using only three sentences – one sentence for the beginning, one for the middle, and one for the end. With a partner, the students share their stories.
- The listening partner offers positive feedback to the storyteller, and then they are asked to offer one suggestion that might make the storytelling even better. The storytellers are then ready to begin telling their stories to the class [10].

A number of useful tips for storytelling activities in the classroom have been formulated in Berkovitz [8]:

- Learn a few simple stories. Use fairy tales, folktales, and stories from your own life.
- Tell stories with refrains or dialogues that repeat and can be easily remembered and predicted by children, such as Goldilocks and the Three Bears, We're Going on a Lion Hunt, The Enormous Potato, and The Little Old Lady Who Was Not Afraid of Anything.
- Identify parts in the story – while planning or as opportunities arise – when children can perform physically or express themselves through words and sounds. Invite children to act out or make sounds for these parts.
- Ask questions related to the story that prompt children's imagination. For example, "Why do you think Goldilocks chose to sleep in the baby bear's bed?" or "How do you think she feels once she's found the perfect chair?"
- Understand that children may interrupt because they are fully engaged and wish to contribute their ideas. Find ways to incorporate their ideas in the story without losing momentum [8].

The two basic ways in which storybooks can be used with primary school students are: (i) in-class reading and story-related activities conducted with the whole class and (ii) encouraging children to borrow books used in the classroom earlier and read them at home in order to do follow-up activities connected with those storybooks [11]. The latter is a great way of catering to the needs of especially ambitious learners and motivating children to work at home; the following part of this discussion is going to concentrate on the use of storybooks with the whole class.

To begin with, a teacher has to decide which storybook to use. The best solution is, of course, to use authentic storybooks which are part of the literary tradition and describe aspects of life in the target culture. Evergreens, such as Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* or Eric Hill's lift-the-flap books about the adventures of Spot are always a lot of fun for children (cf. Ellis and Brewster [12] and Szpotowicz and Szulc-Kurpaska [11]). Another possibility is using books about characters familiar to children from cartoons and TV series, like Postman Pat (e.g. *Postman Pat's Christmas Trip*), not to mention universal stories and fairytales like *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Hansel and Gretel*. All in all, the repertoire of storybooks to choose from is massive, and practically, any book will do as long as it meets certain criteria concerning the language of the story, the content, and the layout. Consider the handful of tips for selecting storybooks presented below [12]:

- Authentic storybooks should be chosen as often as possible, even if teachers may have doubts concerning the linguistic complexity of the narrative. With more challenging storybooks, text adaptation is possible. Teachers may simplify the language therein, although too much simplification is not welcome either because teachers do not want to lose some of the magic specific to the narrative.
- The length of the story is another story feature to be taken into consideration. With some excessively long storybooks, it may be possible to leave some ideas out, while it is always necessary to check how much time exactly it will take to read the story in class. The storyline should be logical, uncomplicated, and cognitively accessible to children.
- The best stories to choose are those which employ literary devices such as: repetition, rhyme and rhythm, alliteration, onomatopoeia, humorous dialogues, suspense, etc. They all enhance motivation and anticipation to follow the storyline, as well as participating in storytelling; they encourage repetition, improve pronunciation, and increase memorization.
- The subject matter of the storybooks should be interesting, engaging, and possibly amusing for the stu-

dents; the stories should address universal themes, such as good and evil, and morality.

- Storybooks should contain attractive and colorful illustrations in order to enhance listening and understanding. Illustrations should be clear and large enough for the whole class to see and possibly depict life in the target culture.
- Working with a storybook with the whole class can be divided into three stages: the pre-reading, while-reading, and the after-reading stage [11].
- Before reading a story to the whole class, the teacher should practice reading the book aloud at home, using appropriate intonation and gestures for the sake of fostering listening, and adapt the text if necessary. In class, the teacher should pre-teach the new words and use flashcards, games, and other materials and techniques to practice them. Then students should be asked to anticipate the content of the story, for example, on the basis of the cover or selected illustrations from the book. Last but not least, the classroom space should be organized so that children are seated in a circle, preferably on the carpet or cushions, while the teacher reads the story.
- While reading the story, the teacher changes the tone and pitch of his/her voice, alters his/her intonation, uses gestures to attract student's attention, encourages students to repeat some phrases or lines, and asks questions connected with the storyline or the illustrations. Reading the book upside-down, the teacher keeps eye-contact with the students.
- After reading the story, the teacher organizes a variety of post-reading activities, especially those which will provide a pretext for further listening. Teachers can prepare pictures with the characters from the story, or use some toys, and ask children to lift them up whenever they hear the name of a given character read out. They can also give sets of illustrations to the story and ask the children to arrange them chronologically while listening for the second time. Basically, the diversity of activities that can be used at this stage of a lesson is only limited by the resourcefulness of the teacher [11]. Teachers can use various vocabulary exercises, retelling and role-play, topic-related songs and rhymes, story-related art and craft tasks, like making puppets or books of different types [13], and many others.

A few more notes on storytelling...

The mother tongue is acceptable, at times, when conducting classes with a storybook. For example, at the pre-reading stage, when children anticipate the content of the story, or while-reading, when teachers interrupt reading to

ask what may happen next, answers in Polish are most likely to appear and can be allowed. Similarly, after reading the story, teachers ask the children about the moral of the story, and this can be carried out in the mother tongue [11, 12].

Teachers can retell stories that children enjoy. The more familiar they become with a story or character, the more they will want to perform it independently [8]. Similarly, teachers can read the same story more than once in the same lesson or a series of lessons, and this will not spoil the fun. Children do not get bored with a story that they have heard before. On the contrary, they like familiar stories and repetition builds their confidence [12]. A parallel can be drawn in this place between story-reading and storytelling as both these strategies are quite applicable to the development of language skills and literacy in general. Moreover, the recurring similarities in both of them cannot pass unnoticed.

Conclusion

Both story-reading and storytelling as strategies positively influence the development of language as well as literacy in young students. They both contribute to the development of all the language skills and engage language learners mentally and emotionally in meaningful social interaction. Storytelling and story-reading provide metaphoric modes for structuring the narrative in mind. They aid in the acquisition of grammar and syntax as well as instigate phonological awareness and enhance learners' vocabulary.

As teaching tools they are also beneficial, they may serve as a source for a variety of activities in the classroom. Now that more emphasis is put on storytelling and story-reading in the Language Core Curriculum; the task of the educators and language teachers is to reconsider the implementation of the activities connected with the use of these strategies on a regular basis in the classroom.

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