

Storytelling in Young Learner EFL Education: From Theory to Practice

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Listening to stories and storybooks are a natural part of the home environment for many children. Often very young children will play with books, practicing page turning and pretending to read imitating their parents or guardians. Children usually have a favorite book that they will pick out when they arrive home after daycare or at bedtime and demand that the parent reads, usually time and time again. Storybooks have become an integral part of childhood for many children, in the home and the classroom. The familiarity of using storybooks and the possibilities for language practice mean that they are an ideal material for use in language learning and the educational context, provided teachers understand the why, what, and how. This paper looks at the reasons for using storybooks, how to choose the right books, how to plan lessons around storytelling, and finally resources for teachers who utilize storytelling.

Storytelling for ELT

There are many reasons for using storybooks in the classroom. Traditional structure-based textbooks often provide a piecemeal approach to language learning, whereas storybooks can foster an holistic approach to language learning, with high motivation and intercultural awareness as further benefits (Ghosn, 2002). The content of textbooks is organized and influenced by the observation of learners' linguistic development (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). On the other hand, stories represent a holistic and top-down approach to learning that comes from outside of the classroom paradigm (Cameron, 2001). Rather than mechanical or structured learning, authentic stories can develop more personal involvement in the learning process (Collie & Slater, 1987).

For these reasons and many others, stories should be a central part of language education for young learners (Wright, 2008). Storytelling is intrinsically linked to literacy learning and naturally linked to spoken discourse (Cameron, 2001). As Krashen (1981) surmised, young learners acquire first and second languages more naturally than adults, who are more likely to consciously expend effort to learn. Krashen also advanced the notion of utilizing comprehensible input, where exposure to language at a level a little above the learner's level of comprehension is a core factor in the acquisition of language. In the primary classroom, the use of stories and storytelling aligns with both these ideas of second language acquisition and the classroom pedagogy of scaffolding comprehension support.

Benefits of storytelling

Related literature lists a wide range of benefits in using storytelling for education. Below is a summary of benefits from Ghosn (2002) and Ellis and Brewster (2002) with further comments and references added. Here are the benefits of utilizing authentic stories in the educational context:

Motivation

Listening to stories draws children in naturally and motivates them to listen, understand and respond. In a sense, stories have more in common with toys and puppets than traditional pedagogical materials. The child's attention is diverted towards enjoyment instead of formal learning (Shin & Crandall, 2014).

Provide natural language exposure in a meaningful context

Stories contain language discourse beyond the word or sentence. The language is driven by the narrative, rather than preconceived ideas of suitable topics or language exposure. Vocabulary is used and useful within the story, instead of being presented in abstract categories.

Encourage oral responses

With the focus on the events and emotions of the story, children respond and involve themselves more freely. The shared experience of group storytelling also encourages children to be less self-aware when responding and 'have a go' (Wright, 2008).

Provide a top-down approach to learning language

Stories have themes, messages and morals to learn. Understanding the gist of the story with the help of the pictures encourages a more top-down approach to listening and comprehension, rather than the bottom-up approach in traditional textbooks.

Promote academic literacy

Storytelling can act as a gateway to literacy for young learners (Cameron, 2001). This can include the mechanics of reading such as following the line and the return sweep, as well as the themes and tropes of genres and texts.

Promote critical thinking skills

As well as the basic elements of literacy, stories can provide a rich resource for critical analysis. Learners can develop their skills of inferring, evaluating, problem solving, and opinion forming (Shin & Crandall, 2014).

Deal with the human condition and emotional development

Stories are fundamentally about the human experience (Puchta & Elliot, 2017). Stories often deal with universal themes such as family, friendship, loss, change, and conflict. This makes stories useful for personal development beyond just language, which helps children to understand the world around them (Wright, 2008).

Foster positive intercultural attitudes

Stories are both universal and embedded within local cultures. They can act as a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar, for example by looking at common folklore and fairytales across cultures (Shin & Crandall, 2014).

Create shared responses to build social cohesion

As a shared experience, storytelling can develop the bond between adults and children as they experience the twists and turns of the narrative together (Puchta & Elliot, 2017).

Build anticipation of repeated vocabulary and language patterns

Children often like to listen to the same story again and again. Rather than finding this tedious, the expectation of coming events and repeated phrases seems to only heighten with familiarity.

Increase awareness of rhythm, intonation and pronunciation

Listening can help the learner become aware of the 'feel' and sound of a language (Wright, 2008). Listening to stories is perhaps one of the most comfortable and familiar listening activities for most children.

Cater for differing types of learner and intelligences

Stories can be used in a multitude of ways and provide a resource for many classroom activities. Just as project-based learning has a central topic that provides a central anchor for activities, lessons organized around stories can branch off in many directions.

Develop the learners' listening strategies

Successful listening for EFL learners is based upon willingness to listen without understanding everything and ability to parse for meaning and gist (Wright, 2008). Stories can provide practice for inferring, predicting, hypothesizing, and guessing (Read, 2007).

Can be used for cross-curricular activities

Just as project-based learning is centered on a topic with many related cross-curricular activities, a story-based curriculum can be used a central core

Form the basis of literacy learning

Storybooks can act as the gateway to literacy learning. By using storybooks the adult is modeling behaviors related to literacy. Storybooks can be the starting point for phonics teaching, learning sight words, listening and reading strategies, and more.

Choosing a storybook

Once an educator has chosen to use stories and storytelling as a component in teaching, the next step is choosing storybooks which will be suitable and compelling for their learners. It is worth bearing in mind that all contexts are different and the teacher will need to use a certain amount of personal deliberation to find suitable books for their given context. However, there are some universal recommendations to provide guidance.

Wright (2008) summarizes that a story should be:

- a story that you like
- one that could be effective
- engaging
- at a level that the learners can understand enough to enjoy
- rich in language
- helpful in fulfilling any language teaching objectives
- a starting point for cross-curricular work
- a good length

Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) suggest that a story should be:

- highly predictable
- familiar to the learner's home culture
- mostly comprehensible in terms of vocabulary level
- filled with repetition and predictable patterns
- a resource for drama and Total Physical Response
- easily supported with visual aids and realia

Read (2007) believes that the most important considerations are that the story is:

- relevant
- interesting
- appealing
- memorable
- attractively illustrated
- appropriate
- full of repetition
- cumulative

Ellis and Brewster (2002) provide a list of components to check when choosing a book:

- unfamiliar content and words
- idioms
- clarity
- tenses
- structures
- word order
- sentence length and complexity
- time sequencing
- linking ideas
- explanation of ideas
- story length

As these lists show, there is a lot to contend with when choosing a suitable storybook. I suggest that familiarity with your students and their interests, as well as the ability to analyze storybooks and ascertain their usefulness, all comes with time and practice.

Something to consider in the selection of storybooks is whether to simplify parts of the story to aid comprehension. Many authentic stories, and especially older traditional storybooks, contain many idioms and phrases that are not common in EFL teaching or indeed modern life. These can be modified if the overall meaning of the story is not changed. However, just because a word or phrase is above the learner's level does not mean that it should always be modified. Being exposed to some language that is above the learner's ability is a key part of developing listening fluency (Wright, 2008). Beyond modernizing certain phrases and reducing uncommon idiomatic language, I would be hesitant to change too much about a story.

Effective storytelling

The manner of how we tell the story is an important factor in the success of storytelling (Puchta & Elliot, 2017). This section will focus on the central aspects of storytelling, such as how to use your voice, body position, dynamics, questions, sound effects and actions. This is the “telling” aspect of storytelling, which is separate from the pedagogical concerns of using stories in education. This is the core of storytelling, before we introduce further components such as materials and activities.

Every storyteller is different, just as every teacher has a different teaching style. Often these will be linked, for example a teacher who is good at using music, chants, and songs would likely be able to incorporate these well into storytelling. Others may be better at changing the character of their voice for different characters in the story. A very physical teacher will be able to add dynamic actions to their storytelling, keeping attention and expressing the meaning of the story by using their body. Every storytelling style has worth and merit, from focused and intense to jolly and fun. Your style of storytelling may influence the books you choose as different storybooks lend themselves to different styles of storytelling, some with more focus on sounds, other with actions or characters’ dialog. However, it is worth trying to break out of your usual character and trying new things. After all, storytelling is all about wonderful characters and imaginary worlds! What better time to transform into someone new.

The core aspects of storytelling skills do not come naturally to everyone. During the first few times practicing with a book, seemingly obvious techniques might be missed while the focus is on reading the words or turning the pages. It may help to practice and become familiar with the story before telling it to an audience. With each retelling, you will become more comfortable with the rhythm of the story and new ideas will emerge, such as sounds, questions and actions to incorporate. Once the narrative is remembered, parts can be ad libbed or added on impulse depending on the attention and response of the audience. With each retelling of a story, I often find myself becoming more familiar with the message or moral of the story, and new ideas emerge about how to connect and personalize that message.

Although effective storytelling does take practice, there are many pointers in related literature that serve as a good starting point for both novice and experienced storytellers. Read (2007) provides a checklist for storytelling:

- practice the the mimes and actions you plan to use
- practice the way you are going to use your voice
- think about the pauses and questions you will ask
- make sure everybody can see and hear
- show each illustration slowly
- if possible, arrange the class in a semi-circle around the storyteller
- maintain frequent eye contact
- give time to think, look, comment, and respond
- invite personal responses
- share your enjoyment of the story

Voice:

- speak loudly, but not with your disciplinarian voice
- use a neutral voice for the narrator and different voices for characters
- quicken and slow the pace of your voice for extra attention
- pause at dramatic moments to add tension
- stress the important words with your intonation

Body position:

- stand if you are doing a retelling from memory
- stand or sit if you are holding the storybook
- hold the book to your side with your elbow and shoulder back
- hold the book wide open and make sure the whole audience can see
- hold it at your eye height so that you can see and point to the book

Ellis and Brewster (2002) focus on the types of questions that can be asked during storytelling:

- relate the stories to the listeners' lives
- elicit language such as words and answers
- find out what they already know
- arouse curiosity about the characters, places and events
- focus attention on specific things
- encourage predictions
- check progress of comprehension
- encourage thought and reflection
- show interest in their responses with follow up questions

The central aspect of storytelling is the performance of storytelling, however once storytelling has been brought into an educational context there are secondary components to consider which are no less

important. These components include aspects such as how the storytelling is embedded within education and the learning opportunities it provides, such as listening comprehension practice. These will be discussed next in terms of lesson planning.

Lesson planning for storytelling

Lesson planning with stories can be approached in much the same way as planning for receptive skills scaffolding. Storytelling for the listeners is a listening comprehension exercise. This means that there are three main stages to a storytelling lesson: before, during, and after (Read, 2007; Shin & Crandall, 2014). When using a storybook in a lesson, the teacher can consider how to set up the listeners for successful listening in the before stage. In the during stage, the listeners can be involved in activities to check their listening comprehension. After telling the story, there can be a stage to extend and further develop the content or language or the story. The next sections will provide more detailed examples for each stage of a storytelling lesson.

Before storytelling

At the very start of a lesson for young learners, getting attention and interest are key aspects to consider. Introducing unusual or unexpected realia is an excellent way of drawing attention and curiosity at the beginning of a storytelling session. Wright (2008) suggests showing an object from the story, such as an umbrella, and asking for suggestions and guesses. This can be done with a technique called “magic bag” or “magic box.” This is when the teacher uses a colorful bag or box filled with items or pictures. The teacher asks students to guess what is in the bag or slowly reveals the contents. Students can also touch and choose objects from the bag or box. Realia and magic bag/box are powerful techniques for focusing attention.

The beginning of the lesson and other steps in the before stage serve to set the context or contextualize the lesson and the storybook content. The context can include the literal place where the story takes place, such as the country or setting. It may include the characters of the story, for example a family or animals. It can also include the topics and themes present in the story, such as friendship or danger. The concept of contextualization is very helpful in developing ideas for setting up learners for successful comprehension.

Related to contextualization and another aspect to consider in the before stage of storytelling lesson is activating background knowledge and reviewing content or language that the students already know.

This could include pre-teaching vocabulary, introducing characters, or reviewing concepts that students may or may not be familiar with that will aid them in the comprehension of the story. Materials can include realia, flashcards, or pictures displayed with a projector.

Finally in the before stage of the lesson, the students can be given a reason or purpose to listen. This may include using the cover of the book to arouse curiosity about the characters and the narrative. It may involve a prediction question where students respond with their guesses about what will happen. For slightly older learner, this can be formalized with a KWL chart containing three sections “what I know,” “what I want to know,” and “what I learned.” Another similar material is an anticipation guide worksheet. Students predict the correctness of statements relating to the story. After listening to the story they check their answers and how many predictions were correct. Giving students a purpose for listening links the before stage with the during stage of the lesson.

During storytelling

There are many possibilities for getting students involved during storytelling. The focus may be mostly on the story, with some extra comments and questions to keep attention and check understanding in progress. At the other end of the spectrum, storytelling can be approached like a listening comprehension activity with students focused more doing something with extra materials such as sequencing picture flashcards to show their detailed comprehension.

Ellis and Brewster (2002) provide an overview of the types of questions that can be asked during storytelling:

- relate to the students' own experiences
- elicit language or information
- find out what students already know
- arouse curiosity and motivation
- focus attention on specific things
- predict what will happen next
- check understanding
- encourage thought and reaction

For low-proficiency learners, the level of the activity can be modified rather than the story. Wright (2008) suggests asking for non-verbal responses or one-word responses and using 'call and response' with repetitive story elements. TPR is another technique that is a natural fit for storytelling and young learners. Actions can be taught in the before stage and then used again in the during stage. Responding with actions is an easy and undemanding task when students don't have the spoken language skills for responding to questions.

Linse (2005) suggests using storytelling pieces, which are pictures of characters or items that children move and manipulate whilst listening to the story. A great resource for this is the Kiz Club website (kizclub.com), which is included in the resources section later in this paper. The storytelling pieces can be used in the before stage for pre-teaching vocabulary and introducing the characters, but where they really come in use is during storytelling when children can have a character/item each and move them as they hear the story. Pairs or individual learners can also be provided with a full set so that they can reenact the story as it is being told. This can also extend to the after listening stage with retelling and role-playing using the storytelling pieces almost like puppets.

After storytelling

Again, there are various directions that can be taken after storytelling. If the story is read once, then the after stage may come directly afterwards. A shorter storytelling lesson may finish off with checking predictions, reviewing content, and some brief personalization questions. However, if the story is being used several times with various activities and storytelling techniques, then the after stage may be a whole set of activities or even a full lesson in its own right.

One option after storytelling is to focus on the language aspects of the story. This may mean reviewing and checking key vocabulary, and putting it to use in production activities. It could involve taking expressions and grammar from the story and extending into a language practice lesson. Language skills can also be extended, for example moving towards production and speaking activities. For very young learners, activities after storytelling may involve more creativity, such as drawing or crafting. The product of these activities can be integrated into reviewing, language practice, or personalization.

Resources

Beyond published resource books on the topic of storytelling in education, many of which can be found in the references of this paper, the Internet has a wealth of resources for storytelling. Due to the

global and generally accessible character of the Internet, I have chosen to focus on online resources. Here, I will include my favorite free online resources which provide a wide range of support materials and lesson ideas for educators to use.

Kiz Club (kizclub.com) is a high-quality free online resource for teachers of young learners. The content varies from phonics and flashcards to crafts and seasonal decorations. Along with a range of general content for young learners, it also has resources related to stories. After clicking the “Stories & Props” tab, there is a menu in the left column. Storybook Patterns has support materials for many well-known storybooks, such as “Five Little Monkeys Sitting in a Tree,” “Go Away, Big Green Monster,” and “Brown Bear, Brown Bear.” Look carefully for the small blue “next” button to the right of the title as it’s easy to miss. The support materials are mostly picture flashcards related to the characters, objects, and places in the famous stories. They are drawn in a clear attractive style along with all the other Kiz Club content. There is the option to download color or black and white files. Back to the menu in the right column, there is “Classic Tales Patterns,” which has similar content for popular fables and fairytales. The leveled stories pages are also very useful as they provide graded readers at different levels in a format ready for printing. Kiz Club would be my first destination in preparation of materials for a storytelling lesson.

Reading Rockets (readingrockets.org) is an online literacy initiative for teachers, parents, and anybody involved in literacy education for young readers. There are pages for broad topics, such as dyslexia and parent engagement, as well as specific pages for aspects of literacy, such as phonics and sight words. Reading Rockets provides a detailed overview of the current state and understanding of literacy education. For teachers looking to integrate storytelling into their teaching, there is a section of classroom strategies under the “Teaching Reading” tab. This page lists literacy activities indicating whether they are suitable for before, during, or after reading. Each technique has its own page, video illustrating the technique, and often blank templates that are ready to use in the classroom. Some strategies especially suitable for a storytelling lesson include anticipation guide, think-pair-share, and story sequencing. This classroom strategies section of this website has

an extremely useful collection of ideas for lesson planning around storybooks.

Conclusion

Storytelling can be an effective and suitable technique for young EFL learners. It is familiar and leads well into language and literacy learning. With preparation, practice, and an understanding of how to structure lessons based around stories, teachers can utilize storytelling along with other traditional materials for young learners.

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