

Wonderland

Using Stories with Young Learners 2

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This paper focuses on how to use stories in the young learners' classroom. In particular, we will be looking at three story types: those which present new language, those which give young learners practice in using the newly-learnt language, and those which consolidate the material. Also, on the basis of the stories taken from various levels of the new Longman course for young learners *Wonderland*, we will discuss the following issues:

- 1 What are the key language points presented in the story?
- 2 What is being taught/learnt and how?
- 3 What should be pre-taught and how?
- 4 What should be done afterwards as a follow-up activity?
- 5 What is the potential for further exploitation?
- 6 What is realistic and practical?
- 7 What might not work for your learners in your teaching context?
- 8 What could be done to make it more suitable for your learners?

The two stories

The paper starts with the presentation of two stories. The first story is a joke about four friends trying to do some extreme sports (bungee jumping, parachuting and hang gliding), but instead, probably because of their intellectual deficiency, they end up doing budgie jumping, parrot shooting and hen gliding. The second story is a short video clip with one of the Disney classics with Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Goofy finding themselves in a big castle with loads of food.

The two stories, representing two story types, have a lot of differences. The very structure of each story has a different pattern, with the clear introduction-body-ending paradigm in the case of the 'sports' story, and loosely connected events with more focus on action in the second one. Familiarity with the characters is the second feature that makes the stories different: Mickey, Donald and Goofy are well known characters, whereas those presented in the joke are not really important and it is possible that we name them anyway we want and the story will not suffer any loss in quality.

Last but not least, there is the language load. The 'Disney' story is much better structured language-wise ('food' vocabulary, *It's big/small, Watch out!, He likes ...*) and thus lends itself to classroom use more than the first one, in which there is a variety of grammatical and lexical structures (dramatic narrative, going-to future, will, a lot of different prepositional phrases, non-graded vocabulary, etc.). And although the 'sports' story resembles the pattern that we would immediately associate with a typical classroom story, we will be concerned with the second type represented by the 'Disney' one, the reason being that this is the kind that children tend to tell: their stories are usually very personal (familiarity of characters) and not

that well structured, i.e. instead of the introduction-body-ending pattern, there is usually a lot of action and the events are loosely connected with one another.

Why use stories with Young Learners?

Before we move on to the discussion of the stories from *Wonderland*, let us have a quick look at how children respond to visual stimuli. In order to find out what happens in amazing young minds when exposed to pictures in course books (pictures being the most traditional vehicle for presenting a story), we need to do an experiment that will tell us what potential there is for printed stories and how we teachers can make the best use of it. The experiment uses the painting of the Catalan artist Joan Miró *Personajes y perro ante el sol*. There were two groups taking part in the experiment: adults (my colleague teachers) and children aged 6 (my learners). The language we used was Polish. Here are some comments adults made:

*It's a bit bizarre.
Must have been painted by a child or something.
Is that a picture at all?
Ugly.
Absolutely fantastic! Where did you get that?
I don't like such kind of painting.*

The comments are similar to those made by the delegates at the Forum. Children's comments, on the other hand were different:

*I'm not sure if it's day or night because there's a star next to the sun.
This man that is standing upside down, something's coming out of his head, and the woman, she's got something like a swan instead of the legs
What are those things?
He's got hairs in his ear, just like my granny.
Can we add the mouths?
I have such a Walkman too, but mum doesn't let me take it to school.*

When we compare adults' comments with those made by children, we arrive at some general methodological points we should bear in mind while teaching young learners:

- 1 They do not evaluate, they just go for it.
- 2 They personalise more.
- 3 They create their own context by extending the already existing one.
- 4 They do not need a lot of exposure to detail as their attention may begin to wander and they will not be focusing on the activity/story. Also, as presented in point 3, they can add the details themselves by extending the context.
- 5 They are action oriented.
- 6 They speak a lot.
- 7 Their output is less predictable.

Those seven points listed above relate directly to the methodology of using stories with young learners:

- 1 Stories should be action-oriented.
- 2 Stories should be personal (the use of familiar characters, the pre- and post-activities should make use of the personalization technique).
- 3 Stories should not be too detailed, both in terms of the story line and the visuals used.
- 4 Stories should allow for context extension.

- 5 Stories should use comprehensible input (the language that is at the right cognitive and linguistic level) so that the output is more structured, i.e. the language produced by the children is more predictable.

On top of that, we can add more points that justify the use of stories in the young learners' classroom. Firstly, children are surrounded by stories in the outside-of-the-classroom world, thus using stories with them is like using authentic materials that appeal to their imagination and develop creativity. Stories help children concentrate. Their visual attractiveness (whether we use the video, as, for example in *Monsters, Inc.*, the course book, as in *Emperor's New Groove*, or the listening material, as in *Toy Story*) helps in keeping the children focused and, because of that, their motivation grows.

Another motivating factor is that stories are full of action which, when dramatised, arouse motivation and help the new language sink in. Stories structure young learners' output thus promoting the use of the target language and minimalising the use of the mother tongue. There is also some humorous element in a story and fun is a powerful pedagogic tool: not only does it motivate young learners, but also, because of enjoyable events and funny characters, it helps in committing new language to memory.

Finally, stories can be used as presentation, practice or consolidation of the material. The presentation introduces new language in an implicit, motivating and contextualised manner and contextualisation is usually done through mental and physical involvement of the children (for example, through repetition, mime, role play, etc.). As for practising and consolidating the newly-learnt language, stories either put together some language points presented at earlier stages, or serve as a springboard for other follow-up activities.

The Jungle Book

In this part we look at one of the stories from *Wonderland: The Jungle Book*. The story focuses on the presentation of the verb CAN to express ability. The first thing children have to do is to learn the names of the characters.

To do this, we can perform a simple trick: choose six learners (or as many learners as there are characters in the story) and give each learner the name of a story character. Then, ask the others what the names are. Perhaps you will need to help the children a tad with either remembering the names or the pronunciation. Once they have mastered them, quickly rearrange the characters and ask the children again. Also, we can give learners numbers from one to six and, in order to get the children to remember the names better, ask them: *Number one, join Mowgli! Number two, join Bagheera! Number three, join Baloo! Number four, join Mum! Number five, join Dad! Number six, join King Louie!* After the children have memorised the names of the characters and have watched the story a few times, we can start working on the output.

With the six learners standing in the centre of the classroom, we ask the group questions like: *Can Mowgli climb? Can Bagheera jump?* The children will probably be saying *Yes* or *No* without the *he can/can't* part, but this is not a problem. Even if some of them get the answer wrong, they will be immediately corrected by the other children. Then we play the story again and ask the children to perform the actions. At this stage we can invite the other children to do the characters. This part can be done either as a viewing activity with the children watching the story and performing the actions, or as a listening one in which six children are doing the story and the others are correcting them by saying the correct sentence if they spot mistakes.

Finally, we can play the clip with the sound off and the class, on the basis of what they see, are dictating the story to those that can't see it, and whose task is to perform it. A big advantage of this story-based activity is that it is extremely dynamic and can easily be

repeated as every child would like to act out some part. This, in turn, transforms the viewing part into a meaningful drill which will help the focal language sink in.

The stories

The final part of the paper is based on the workshop part of the session in which the delegates worked in groups on the following stories taken from different levels of *Wonderland*:

- 1 *Monsters, Inc.*
- 2 *Toy Story 2*
- 3 *The Lion King*
- 4 *The Sword in the Stone*
- 5 *Emperor's New Groove*

The task was to discuss the questions outlined in the Introduction of this paper and present the outcome of the discussion as a poster. The general tendency was that, although only forty minutes were devoted to the discussion and presentations, the feedback was of top quality as the ideas presented were almost identical to those given in the teacher's books. Some conclusions can be drawn from that:

- 1 There is a lot of potential in (the) stories (used).
- 2 Stories can be used at various stages of a lesson/module, e.g. to present, practice or consolidate the material.
- 3 Stories lend themselves to the use of extra activities which fit naturally in the lesson plan.
- 4 Stories are nicer when used with some audio-visual aids.
- 5 Stories are safe in that their versatility appeals to all children no matter which part of the world they are from.
- 6 The collective knowledge of group members would allow them to compile teacher's notes in less than forty minutes.

I would like to end the paper as I ended the session, i.e. with the chant that now you can use with your learners or shout it out in the privacy of your homes. The chant is taken the *Cinderella* from the kindergarten level:

Apples, apples, give me apples
Biscuits, biscuits, give me biscuits

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