

Story-based Teaching

(based on Lynne Cameron: Teaching Languages to Young Learners)

Stories and especially fairy-tales represent holistic approaches to English language teaching and learning. Stories are linked with the world outside school, as they originate in the outer world. Stories offer benefits of mystical and magical elements, of poetics, metaphors for society, and warmth of early childhood. Just we have to be careful that our own nostalgia does not push the stories beyond the reality. This generation of children lives in the information age, which might not be compatible with the distant world of stories.

The organisation of stories

Children who have read, seen or heard several stories might discover some rules which govern the tale. E.g. events happen at different points in time, difficulties or evil are overcome, the dangerous situations are survived. Stories have some morals that are discovered at the end, e.g. those who behave badly are punished, politeness pays etc.

Prototypical features of stories are:

1. An opening (e.g. *Once upon a time ...*)
2. Introduction of characters
3. Description of the setting
4. Introduction of a problem
5. A series of events as steps leading to the solution
6. The resolution of the problem
7. A closing (e.g. *They all lived happily ever after.*)
8. A moral, which may or may not be explicitly stated.

There are even more features that can be found sometimes in stories:

1. The reader knows more than the central character, e.g. we know about the danger that the character will face later.
2. One incident seems to lead inevitably to the next.
3. The surprise event breaks the predictability and inevitability. E.g. we expect something will happen next but something else happens. Familiarity, predictability and surprise (change) are well balanced in good stories.

In the textbooks there can be found many stories, which lack some or even many of the features mentioned above. It is mostly because their main focus is on some part of grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation. In these stories the characters just move through the sequence of activities with no plot. E.g. *Daily routines*.

Language in stories

Thanks to parallelism (repeated pattern) also the language is repeated. The repetition combined with predictability enables children to understand unfamiliar words thanks to the context. In some stories also alliteration appears that contributes to pronunciation training. E.g. *red riding, big bad*. Alliteration is the use of words that have the same initial consonants. Strong contrasts in stories bring opposites and enrich children's word power. E.g. *the innocent girl, bad wolf*. Stories with their metaphors reflect the real world. E.g. forest represents dangerous world outside the family. Children get acquainted with the features of the stories and when they start to write their own stories they involve familiar pieces of language or characters they know.

In the stories there are two main uses of language: narrative and dialogue. Narrative text concerns the series of events. It talks about what happened and therefore the past tense is used. Dialogue uses the language as it would be spoken by the characters. Therefore present tenses are used. Simplified versions of stories for children at school usually use present simple. When pictures are presented as a visual support, present continuous has its place. If

children are familiar with the stories in their mother tongue they expect the right tense. Some stories are only narrative while in others, the text is entirely dialogue.

Good stories

Good stories are those that are enjoyed by the readers or listeners. Characters and a plot engage children. Such stories create a strong feeling of satisfaction when the end is reached. What helps the teacher to choose a good story?

1. The content should engage the pupils. Characters should be interesting and the plot clear. If the pictures are added, the teacher should consider their role.
2. The values and attitudes in the story should be acceptable. The teacher should assess morals embodied in the story. Some stories can help children feel positive about other countries and cultures. They can broaden their knowledge of the world.
3. The organization of the text should be clear. The closer the structure is to the prototypical format the more accessible the story is to children.
4. The balance between dialogue and narrative should be evaluated. Dialogues can be an opportunity for acting out. Narrative may offer repeated patterns of language. In repetitions even familiar words can appear in new meanings and situations. New language in the story may be grouped into three parts:
 - Language which is familiar to children and which is recycled.
 - New language that will be learnt because it is useful to children now.
 - New language that will not be learnt, or will be learnt probably later, maybe in next grades.New key words or key phrases should be pre-taught. The language learning opportunities should be evaluated.

Language learning tasks

A story does not have to be about teaching reading only. Listening to the teacher, then read or tell a story can be other tasks. Basically we use the three well-known stages when working with stories: preparation, core activity and follow-up.

In **preparation** activity we can brainstorm vocabulary. Pictures from the story can be presented to children and they can be asked for words about the pictures that they already know. The **core activity** usually consists of three stages, too. We start with the first reading. Pictures can support it. In a second reading we point and repeat key words or ideas. We may also ask children to predict what happens next. In the third stage children are asked to express their feelings and respond. Vocabulary learning is a part of **follow-up activity**. Pictures can help again. Children can illustrate the story and find five new words belonging to the picture/story.

If children like the story they want to hear it again and again. This can be done in future lessons. Vocabulary and grammatical pattern will be re-activated.

Speaking skills

The dialogue from the story can be separated, simplified by the teacher and then spoken by the pupils.

Retelling a story is a very demanding task. The language demands will have to be reduced. Pictures as prompts can support retelling. When children have heard the story several times they may spontaneously use short phrases from the story.

The story can be used as a starting point for further speaking events:

1. Characters can be transplanted to other situations.
2. The problem/plot of the story might be transferred.
3. Characters can take part in other events that may or may not be linked with the story.

Story-based teaching is a subchapter of theme-based teaching

. They both provide many opportunities of language work and holistic approach.