

A story-based approach to teaching English - A classroom experience -

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Abstract

To learn a second language using stories can be one more tool to reach the curriculum goals. Stories can be used to arouse interest and increase motivation among students who are learning a second language. This article deals with a personal experience on how to use stories as additional material to the text book when teaching English as a second language. For this purpose, I will describe the problem encountered in the classroom, my proposal to improve the situation, based on authors who provide primary school teachers with ideas and innovative strategies. Finally, I will discuss the results that I obtained in the above research.

Key words: English as a second language, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), storytelling approach, bi-literacy, first language.

Resumen

Aprender un segundo idioma, a través de cuentos, puede ser una herramienta más para conseguir los objetivos del currículum, a la vez puede despertar el interés e incrementar la motivación entre los alumnos, que están aprendiendo en una segunda lengua. Este artículo muestra una experiencia personal sobre la utilización de los cuentos, como material complementario, al libro de texto, en la enseñanza de la lengua inglesa, como segundo idioma. Para ello, describo, en primer lugar, la situación-problema encontrada en el aula, así como el planteamiento para mejorar dicha situación. El proceso está basado en ideas de autores, que proporcionan a los docentes (educación primaria), no sólo ideas, sino también estrategias novedosas. En segundo lugar, muestro el resultado conseguido en dicha investigación-acción, que me ha llevado una situación de búsqueda en la enseñanza de idiomas a niños.

Palabras clave: Inglés como segunda lengua, Inglés como Lengua extranjera, enfoque de cuentos, alfabetización en dos idiomas, primera lengua.

1. Introduction

English language teachers have always resorted to using course books when teaching English as a second language, but sometimes this method falls short of fulfilling their established goals. Stories are one of the best ways for children to not only learn the language but also learn content, cultural aspects, how to solve everyday problems, etc. In addition, storytelling helps students acquire and develop individual reading tastes, skills and creativity.

The following paper, divided into six parts, will present a research project on the use of a story-based approach with material complementary to the traditional English course book. First, the context in which teachers work, including problems encountered when teaching, will be described. Second, the research question will be presented. Third, proposed reasons for using a storytelling approach in an English class will be described. Next, required elements for planning a story-based unit, including custom-designed lesson

plans, will be analysed. Finally, obtained results will be outlined, along with a conclusion containing a personal statement.

1.1. Context.

The context of this paper will be based on my experience as a first grade bilingual teacher in a state school in Madrid. Madrid's bilingual project aims at developing bi-literacy and bilingualism in Spanish and English. Consequently, learning English is one of the main subjects and two additional subjects are carried out using English as a vehicle for teaching and learning new content.

1.2. Problem

As a professional teacher, before the school year begins, I familiarise myself with the necessary materials needed to plan units for teaching English. During this time, I thoroughly research how particular topics are employed, which types of exercises should be implemented to present the language, whether or not these proposed activities lead to communication and how the different units relate to one another.

After this analysis last year, I realised that the use of particular course books were not enough to achieve proposed objectives and teach relevant content, as the textbook presentation did not contain a striking or interesting context for students. Despite this, I planned my lessons around the student's book, using warm-up activities and suggestions from the course book. However, I observed that these were ineffective in reaching my students and encouraging learning. Students showed a lack of interest in the tasks and became incredibly distracted. Their attitudes negatively influenced my own attitude and enthusiasm for teaching. I asked myself what I could do to make lessons more motivating and interesting in order to engage my students and encourage them to participate and show curiosity during class. In essence, I wanted to present content in a more meaningful manner without completely discarding the textbook.

1.3. Observation

Since the beginning of the school year, the last 30 minutes of each day have been dedicated to reading aloud. Students sit in the reading corner and listen attentively as I read a selection from a chosen book. The children's attentiveness during story time inspired me to try using stories as a tool for teaching language and literacy during their English class.

2. Research question

The research questions include the following:

- Will storytelling help students learn the English language?
- Could storytelling be used to motivate English-learning students?

3. Reasons for using storytelling.

Teaching English as a second language does not simply consist of instructing students in the development of linguistic elements, but also helping students understand socio-cultural aspects, enabling them to engage in real and effective communication. One way to expose students to socio-cultural differences is through the use of literature.

According to Duff and Maley (1990), the use of literature in the classroom offers the following advantages:

- It offers a wide range of styles, vocabulary, etc.
- It deals with matters that concern children and are related to their personal experiences.
- It is open to multiple interpretations and opinions, bringing about genuine interaction and participation in the classroom.

Children enjoy listening to stories in their first language and are more likely to transfer that desire when listening to books read in a second language. Therefore, motivation and interest increase. Furthermore, stories are a great way of introducing, practising, revising, and improving pronunciation skills and teaching culture using the target language. Moreover, the four basic linguistic skills can be interrelated with other concepts. This integration favours the development of learning strategies, especially those using KWL¹ charts, making predictions, completing graphic organisers, etc. In addition, the use of stories favours an interdisciplinary and comprehensive methodology. For instance, if students are studying plants in science, the same topic can be reviewed in English using a story such as “Jack and the Beanstalk”. In maths, they can learn to complete graphs showing different types of beans. In Spanish, students may then be asked to write a journal entry concerning their observations of the growth process.

4. Plan of action.

One unit in the traditional course book deals with food. Therefore, one suggested lesson plan that I have created includes designing a parallel unit around the story *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. However, there are a number of considerations that must be considered before a lesson plan is implemented.

Before choosing a story, the following aspects have to be considered:

- Whether the book is authentic or has been adapted and simplified for children whose first language is not English.
- The book’s relation to the curriculum (school, family, Christmas, clothes, food, etc.); the content must be relevant, interesting and meaningful.
- Whether the book provides attractive visual support to help students understand content.
- Its language suitability as it pertains to student levels, preferably books using repetitive structures requiring repetition. Through this, students develop memory skills and build oral confidence.
- The length of the story and organization of ideas.
- Its relation to the target language and culture.

Once the story that will be used to deal with the given topic is selected, how to use it to effectively teach the new material must be determined. Ellis and Brewster (1991) believe that the following ideas should be a part of this type of lesson plan:

- It should provide a context for the story and present the main characters. In doing so, students will link their own experiences with those in the story.

¹ Ogle (1986) created this instructional technique known as K-W-L: What I **K**now, what I **W**ant to Know and what I **L**earned.

- It should identify linguistic objectives, for example, what vocabulary and sentence structures the teacher wants students to learn for sound, word and sentence levels.
- Teachers should decide how long to spend on the story, for example, if it will be read all in one day or over the course of several lessons.
- Teachers should determine how to present, practice and revise language and vocabulary. For instance, students may match pictures with words or label pictures to present lingual aspects. Students can sound out letters and words and create a graphic representation using individual white boards. Students can also write sentences for each word and draw a picture in their writer dictionary.
- It should contain rhymes and songs that would reinforce the introduced language.
- It should contain links with arts and crafts.
- Teachers should decide on follow-up activities related to the topic.

After having considered all elements needed to thoroughly and successfully carry out the storytelling aspect, the unit can be designed.

The procedure for making these teaching and learning experiences more enjoyable for students was as follows: For my personal lesson plan, I asked students to sit down in our reading corner. I then explained them the new procedures for the English class: they would read a story in English, work with the story, learn new vocabulary, complete arts and crafts projects, organize role play activities, etc. The students' reactions were positive, as it was something different and they were curious about the whole process.

Before showing the book, I asked them, in Spanish, about caterpillars so that I could ascertain their level of knowledge concerning this subject. I then introduced the characters and new vocabulary using flashcards. After presenting the vocabulary, I showed them the cover of the book and we talked about what they saw (title, pictures, etc.). Next, I read slowly and clearly, making use of gestures, facial expressions and intonation that could help students follow the story. As the story was entertaining for them, they participated by repeating the names of the fruits and the days of the week. However, I only told half of the story during the first lesson period to create more expectation for the following day and then allowed students to make predictions. The presentation of the story and vocabulary was connected with the introduction of the definite article *a/an*. I displayed context cards with "a/an" in the pocket chart. Students then guessed where to place food names, such as orange, banana, plum, strawberry, etc. Following this, I asked them why some fruit belonged to the "a" group, while some belonged to the "an" group. I was surprised that one student was able to deduce that all food in the "an" column began with a vowel. Then, the entire class deduced the second rule. To finish off the lesson, I used the course book to create a practice session, which students completed in pairs and then corrected as a class. I was very pleased with how interested the children were in completing the exercise and discussing the answers amongst themselves.

5. Final conclusion

Favourable results were observed following the conclusion of the food unit using the story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. Students were motivated throughout the unit, participating in exercises and fulfilling all assigned expectations. Each student created their own *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* mini book to take home and read to their family. Not only did they like the idea of working through a story, but their attitude towards the course book also changed as activities were presented in different and creative ways, helping students

feel more confident and motivated to complete them. Furthermore, during the last session, each student commented on the activities that they liked the most, those they understood best and those they did not enjoy. The overall results were very positive, with students continuously asking what the next story would be.

When following a story-based approach, unit topics must be meaningful, as this approach provides students with a link between their experiences and interests and the English language. Using stories as a point of departure from traditional units is an appealing way for tackling topics, learning vocabulary and grammar and engaging in activities using a more interactive manner than those implemented by simply following the course book.

In conclusion, when reflecting upon my teaching practices and student performance, I have become more aware of the continuous research a teacher must complete in the classroom to overcome a lack of interest on the parts of both students and the teacher. Teachers must prepare meaningful classes and reinforce students' strengths by creating supplementary materials that will help students on several learning levels.

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