# Are You Sitting Comfortably?

## The Role of Storybooks in Primary English Education

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### 1. Introduction

Storybooks have long played an important part in language teaching, as well being integral to linguistic development in the mother tongue. Ellis and Brewster (1991:1) point out that 'storybooks can provide an ideal introduction to the foreign language presented in a context that is familiar to the child', and go on to define "context" in two ways: situational context and linguistic context. Situational context is already shared to some extent, in a sense that children are already accustomed to having new things presented to them through the medium of stories in their mother tongue.

However, in terms of linguistic context the difference is quite obvious: a mother tongue which is used for constant input in the child's usual environment on the one hand, and on the other a foreign language which is unlikely to be encountered outside the classroom, in the EFL situation. With two linguistically distant languages like Japanese and English, there are clearly obstacles to be overcome. Since the writing systems are completely different, consideration is needed in terms of lexical presentation. Moreover, the syntactic differences create problems of word order, leading to difficulties in choosing appropriate texts, especially for primary school teachers who are not English specialists. This will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

### 2. Theoretical reasons for using stories in the young learners' classroom

It is worth reviewing the theoretical reasons why storybooks are considered to be useful in literacy development. Children are constantly trying to make sense of the world around them every time they are exposed to a new environment. Halliwell (1992: 3) suggests that children have the instinctive ability of grasping meaning by other sources such as intonation, facial expression and so on, no matter what language is used to present the story. Furthermore stories are one way of making children's knowledge of the world wider (Cameron, 2001: 168), providing contexts in which children can experience the world using their own imagination. This is especially important in an EFL situation, such as Japan, where English is not commonly used outside the classroom. Since children cannot experience English in a natural setting,

it is important to broaden their ideas in English in relation to their world by offering contexts and language experience. Storytelling can be seen as one way of achieving this. Furthermore, it is motivating and able to stimulate children's imagination. It can also bring extra benefits for children as Ghosn (2002:173) indicates. Good stories for children almost always have a moral which could also cultivate their "intercultural and interpersonal attitudes"

One might argue that in the case where linguistic context of English and the mother tongue is widely different, it is hard for children to learn from stories in a foreign language. However, there are certain things which can be shared across languages and cultures, such as a universal "convention in narratives" (Ellis and Brewster, 1991: 1). Even though the process may be more time-consuming than would be the case in the L1, the positive consequences may well overwhelm the negatives. Needless to say, it is important to bear in mind that everything takes time in the case of teaching children. In addition, teachers should always keep in mind clear goals and an understanding of the level of the students, so that this knowledge will be able to support them.

Vygotsky introduced the ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). This was defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Vygotsky, 1978: 84). In Schinke-Llano (1993: 123), ZPD is described as "the area in which learning takes place". Since Vygotsky includes storytelling as one of the interactions which are crucial for language acquisition, it is important to have the language adjusted according to the capability of the learners, and presented in ways that make it easier for them to understand (Lightbown and Spada, 1999 : 24).

Considering that listening to the teacher reading stories in a classroom is a well-established social experience, it is easy to see its potential in the EFL context. By controlling the flow of the story, by asking questions from time to time to engage children more in the stories, it is possible that the storytelling process can also make children more aware of how to communicate, how to listen and interpret, not necessarily only in words but also by their facial expressions and gestures, when people are telling a story, and how to collaborate in case of questions raised by teachers or classmates (Wright, 1995: 7).

While most researchers see storytelling as a positive tool, Bloor (1999: 130) expresses some doubt about whether children can achieve improvement in the target language only in activities like storytelling without any speaking activities involved. However,

this opposition overlooks the value of stories in ways other than enhancing listening skills, such as being an aid for children's development of vocabulary, understanding of grammatical structure, and literacy skills (Cameron: 2001: 179). Moreover, stories do not necessarily have to be carried out in isolation, but can be integrated with other activities which promote other skills, such as speaking.

## 3. Implications and their demands for teachers of young learners

Having briefly described the demands for teachers earlier, it is important to clarify in depth what kind of extra demands might be placed on primary school teachers in Japan when it comes to employing stories and making full use of them in their classroom.

There are, by and large, three stages where demands are brought to bear on teachers: preparation, presentation and follow-up activities as discussed below.

### 3.1 Preparation

In preparation, teachers need to select what kind of story they will employ in their lesson plan. They have to select storybooks with a critical eye, considering cultural as well as linguistic factors. There are some criteria for choosing a book suitable for learners in order to critically evaluate the quality and learning potential. Firstly, it is important to consider the content of the book: whether it is interesting enough to maintain the children's attention, whether the concept embedded in the context is acceptable to the children's home culture and society. Well-known stories such as fairy tales or Disney stories can be also useful since they are likely to be more accessible and familiar to children (Kuhiwczak 1999: 45). Secondly the use of colour or pictures is also important as a means of making it easy for children to understand. In terms of the story as a whole, how the overall discourse is organized should be considered. It has been suggested that stories which have surprises, or problem-solving situations, are likely to arouse children's interest and involve them in the subject matter (Cameron: 2001: 168). Moreover, problem-solving is considered to be effective for reinforcing memory when children's existing knowledge of language is incorporated with new information (Baddeley, 1990: 145). Therefore, in choosing stories to use in course development, it is important to consider how to integrate them into the syllabus as a whole.

There also is an issue of whether to simplify the linguistic elements in the chosen storybooks. In this context, it is important not to underestimate children's powers of comprehension, especially when they are motivated to understand. Furthermore, storybooks for young learners often have colourful illustration which help and engage them with the meaning, reducing problems of comprehension. However, simplification

might be needed depending on the learners' level. Modifying the story by limiting structures only to those learners know may make it easier for learners to comprehend, but there would be negative consequences such as restricting potential for language development.

In addition, Lightbown and Spada (1999: 168) suggest that, presented with a meaningful context, learners are able to comprehend the general meaning of many structures which they have not yet 'mastered' or 'produced' by themselves. Slattery and Willis (2001: 97) also discussed the potential learning of structures in the medium of stories. Nevertheless, careful consideration for linguistic elements should be carried out by teachers according to their understanding of learners' level, though this may well be more of a case of careful choice of material, rather than linguistic pruning. As suggested by Cameron (2001: 159) and Brewster et. al. (1991: 118), all of the decisions made in the preparation stage should be based on a plan which has "clear language learning goals" the consequences of which would always be beneficial for learners.

## 3.2 Presentation: Storytelling stages in the EFL classroom

Children, in their mother tongue, acquire listening skills first, and this also applies to the situation of English as a foreign language (Scott and Ytreburg, 2000: 21). Especially in a situation like Japan, as mentioned previously, the writing system differs completely from that of English, therefore it makes it much easier for children to learn to listen, compared to the skills needed to read and write. Therefore at the beginners' level, it is likely that teacher is the one to read stories for children. Furthermore the Ministry of Education, so far, seems to favour Primary English Education which focuses on listening and speaking, rather than reading and writing.

It needs to be borne in mind that learning to listen in a foreign language is not a fast process. It takes time to build up the skills for discovering meaning. However, it is possible to introduce new vocabulary before telling children a story; which could be reviewed by using follow-up activities to consolidate their understanding, gradually making meaning accessible.

In presenting new vocabulary, Nation (1990: 51) suggests basic techniques which are carried out by demonstration or pictures and by verbal explanation, such as using objects, gestures, actions, photographs, drawings or diagrams, and pictures in the books, all of which might be suitable for young learners. Verbal explanation is likely to require linguistic knowledge unless translating into the mother tongue. It has been argued whether or not to use translation in the young learner's classroom. In some cases it may be useful, as it can be an aid for learning if it is used in a proper

way (Nunan and Lamb, 1996: 100). However, in a vocabulary presentation, it would be better to give students a clue by other techniques such as showing them a picture of the new word, since this would allow students to make a more direct connection between a word and what it represents (Cameron, 2001: 86).

As has been suggested, most of the activities for story telling are likely to be carried out by teachers. Therefore it is important to point out what kind of skills the teacher needs in order to keep children's attention. First of all, it is important to integrate facial expression, gesture, intonation and actions within the context of a story. Even though children might not be able to understand every word, they can often guess the meaning of unfamiliar words with the aid of those signals (Halliwell, 1992: 4). It also requires sensitivity to children's home culture, especially when the story is set in a different one.

In any country, it is fairly common that young learners' concentration span is short. As Wood (1988: 70) explains, it is more likely for children to get distracted. This is closely related to the fact that young learner's decision to learn English was usually made by external forces such as their parents or the educational system. Since their extrinsic motivation is different, it is important to motivate them intrinsically by creating and providing an enjoyable learning environment. Teachers need to construct their own "toolbox" of ways to draw children's attention. This might include puppets, finger puppets, realia which relates to the content of story pictures, or flashcards. Visual aids such as those can also help to make an impression on children's memory and make it easy for them to remember linguistic elements.

As well as telling a story, teachers should provide interactional "scaffolding", as proposed by Bruner (Brewster, 1999: 3, Cameron, 2001: 8). This is an extended view of Vogotsky, which emphasises the importance of supporting language learning environment by means of a facilitator, in this case the language teacher. Interaction is also effective to keep children focused by asking questions about the content of the story relating to children's thoughts or desires, in order to personalize the story. This might include questions such as "What do you think happened next?" or inviting children to describe characters as they appear, before showing them the illustration from the book.

The social and cultural aspect of the learning situation should also be considered when it comes to an EFL educational situation like Japan. For example, as the children get older, some may be self-conscious and afraid of making mistakes. This form of face-preserving might eventually lead to the fossilization of interests. In Asian cultures, the importance of 'face' should not be ignored in the educational environment. Even

small children have this concept embedded, and can exhibit shyness which often inhibits their ability to speak English with teachers or their classmates. Since there is a lack of opportunities to use English in their daily life, it is important to keep a positive image of learning English in the classroom. At the same time, we should bear in mind the socio-cultural aspects proposed by Vygotsky (1978), since interrelations of what is in children's mind and language is closely related to their intellectual development. When it comes to language learning, the authenticity of the environment and the affinity between its participants are essential elements to make the learner feel part of this environment. Therefore it is important to shift the emphasis to student-centred learning from the Japanese conventional teacher-centred classroom.

### 3.3 Follow-up activities (literacy development)

We have seen that stories can provide a desirable medium in which children can learn many skills. It would be a pity if nothing is done after the storytelling session. In addition, if the storytelling part is mainly performed by the teacher, this leads to largely passive learning. Therefore in order to make students active, it is important to follow the story by activities aimed at actively engaging them. As has been suggested in the previous section, it is important to create a cohesive classroom experience for children by means of linking stories by pre-reading and follow-up activities.

According to the Collins Cobuild Dictionary, storytelling is defined as "the activity of telling or writing stories" (2004: 1428). Therefore it could be used either to practice speaking or writing. It is possible to apply this definition to follow-up activities such as asking students to write (if literacy has been taught) or draw on a particular theme which interests them through the storytelling activities. Even if children might be reluctant to express verbally what they want to say, according to their limitation of English skills, a follow-up activity involving writing or drawing could well serve to assess how they have perceived the story and whether it has conveyed its meaning to the children.

Wright (1997: 48) suggests that getting children to retell a story is also helpful in encouraging them to learn in depth. It helps children to re-organize the information they obtained from the story, and also to adapt its meaning. Accompanying this activity with a combination of teacher asking questions to students (e.g. Can you remember the little girl? What did she look like? What did she do?) might also prove fruitful (Wright, 1997: 49). By doing this, the interaction could turn to meaningful speaking activities, where students would engage in the story in depth, as well as responding to the teacher and context of the story.

Role-play is another option, choosing a character to play in a short dialogue. This is especially possible when dialogue-based stories are used. It is also possible to use drama scripts as a material and play a part based on the script. Furthermore, engaging students in acting is often a successful means of reducing inhibitions (Georgieva, 1998: 55). Pantomime-type stories would be candidates for this kind of treatment.

If literacy has been taught, there is potential for re-writing or reading exercises, such as jigsaw reading. Otherwise, it can be presented with pictures so that it would aid them to recognize the sequence. For example, they could put pictures in sequence, based on their recollection of the story. Research has shown that exposure to reading from an early stage in the foreign language will benefit learners. Therefore even though reading these texts may seem a fairly advanced skill, it should be promoted where possible. It can be accompanied by other methods such as 'phonics' which makes a connection between sounds and alphabetical letters in order to let students become accustomed to reading using the new sound systems (Dlugosz, 2000: 285)

Another suggestion is that just before the ending of the story, the teacher can stop and get students to guess or make their own ending. In the case of this kind of a quiz activity, it is better to clarify to students what information would be important in the later exercise before telling the story. This is because children can listen more effectively when they know what they are listening for (Ellis and Brewster, 1991: 41). The lexis used for pre-information could be effective if those words are keywords or the target form of the lesson.

Clearly, storytelling from teacher to students, or between students, carries many benefits. These activities should be seen as promoting, not separate isolated skills, but language skills as a whole in the classroom which would reflect what is 'real' to language learners (Widdowson, 1998: 332). It is important to integrate skills as has also been suggested by Vale and Feunteun (1995: 196).

## 4. Conclusion

We have looked at the importance of teacher's knowledge and skills in order to make full use of the benefits of storybooks. As mentioned previously, it is important to consider the socio-cultural aspect when teaching a foreign language. Vygotsky's view of ZPD is useful in understanding how children relate form and meaning in language, how they interact in conversations, and how they learn to use language appropriately (Lightbown and Spada, 1999: 26). By employing these concepts we realise the importance of the teacher's role, creating a social interaction within the classroom by using the stories. In the course of using stories in the classroom, teachers have wide-

ranging responsibilities in planning, classroom management, and follow-up activities in order to enhance the language-learning experience as a whole (Widdowson, 1998: 332). Bringing a context into the classroom, and creating real social interaction, can expose young learners to many new experiences. In order to provide this experience to children, teachers need to be careful planners, presenters, as well as the supporters of the students. Needless to say, these decisions should be always made based upon the learning goals they have set.

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