
*Estudios de
lingüística inglesa aplicada*



**STORYBOOKS IN THE YOUNG LEARNERS' EFL CLASSROOM
AS A RESOURCE FOR TEACHING VOCABULARY¹**

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In the present paper we discuss the line of enquiry and the progression of a research project funded by the Universidad Complutense, Madrid, aimed at exploring the efficiency of different vocabulary teaching and learning methods as applied in young learners' EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classes. The project has been focused on the use of stories as a central teaching resource and as a basis for vocabulary introduction and practice, including among its objectives that of comparing the outcome on vocabulary learning of the use of textbook-based materials with the results obtained through storybook-based teaching.

As the project progresses, the results and information obtained are being incorporated through different means into pre- and in-service teacher training and development programmes. Preparation for the experimental stage included a teacher development seminar on storybook use for teaching vocabulary at the Teacher Support Centre (CAP) of Alcorcón, Madrid. This seminar, in turn, led to the creation of a website and cd-rom containing the materials designed by the participating in-service teachers and other relevant information, which is currently used by students of the Complutense Faculty of Education as a resource for their pre-service training.

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Key words: Young learners, storybooks, vocabulary teaching and learning

En el presente artículo exponemos el punto de partida y la evolución de un proyecto de investigación financiado por la Universidad Complutense de Madrid, cuya finalidad consiste en el estudio de la eficacia de distintos métodos de enseñanza-aprendizaje del vocabulario aplicados en las aulas de jóvenes aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera. El proyecto se centra en el uso de los cuentos como una herramienta para la enseñanza y el aprendizaje de vocabulario en el aula.

Entre sus objetivos principales se comparan los resultados sobre el aprendizaje de vocabulario a través del uso de materiales basados en libros de texto, con los resultados obtenidos sobre el aprendizaje de vocabulario a través de la enseñanza llevada a cabo con cuentos. A medida que avanzó el proyecto, los resultados obtenidos se fueron incorporando a los programas de formación inicial y continua del profesorado. La preparación de la fase experimental del proyecto incluyó un seminario de formación de profesorado sobre el uso de cuentos para la enseñanza del vocabulario en el Centro de Apoyo de Profesorado de Alcorcón, Madrid. Este seminario, llevó a la creación de un sitio web y de un CD-ROM que contienen los materiales desarrollados por los profesores en activo que participaron en el seminario así como otras informaciones relacionadas con el tema. En la actualidad toda esta documentación forma parte del material al que tienen acceso los alumnos de la Facultad de Educación de la Universidad Complutense durante el periodo de formación inicial en los estudios de Magisterio.

Palabras clave: jóvenes aprendices, cuentos, enseñanza-aprendizaje de vocabulario

1. Introduction

Throughout Spain, children are increasingly being introduced to English from very early on in their schooling. One of the challenges that is currently faced by teachers of infant and primary levels is related to improving the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching methodology as applied in class with

their young pupils. In the present paper we discuss a research project whose aim has been to explore different vocabulary teaching methods used with children at the infant (aged 3 to 6) and primary (7 to 12) school levels, specifically focusing on studying the effectiveness of storybooks as a central teaching resource and as a basis for developing classroom materials.

A fundamental issue addressed in the research carried out within this project is the need to improve the strategies and methods used for teaching and learning vocabulary in order to make it more memorable for children. Thus, one of the challenges faced in EFL classes for children consists of finding different ways of approaching the teaching of vocabulary and discovering how these learners can be motivated to use the new words and expressions they are introduced to in class. In other words, children need to participate in activities that engage their imagination and that create opportunities for real communication in English, in which they have a chance to use what they are learning.

A further challenge when working with young learners lies in providing optimal support for pupils' progression from controlled to free practice in the use of new words and expressions. As teachers dealing with young learners know, children can learn words easily; however, they can forget them just as easily, so they need learning strategies that offer them the greatest possibility remembering new words. In this way, when they have a chance to create and express their own messages in more spontaneous communication, the words they have been learning are close at hand, or in other words, easily retrieved from memory.

With these issues in mind, it seems worthwhile to reflect on the principles that underlie the organisation of the introduction and teaching of vocabulary through two easily accessed and popular types of teaching materials for young learners: textbooks and storybooks. Through this reflection we may observe the more relevant features of each type of teaching material and how they can affect the teaching and learning process, especially in terms of efficiency and the outcome obtained.

2. Vocabulary Learning through Textbooks and Storybooks

The great majority of EFL textbooks feature organization by units where new vocabulary is gradually introduced in relation to certain topics. For instance, in textbooks for young learners we typically find units for teaching the parts of the body, clothes, colours, foods, and so on. The target vocabulary is, in other words, arranged according to shared syntactic and semantic characteristics. The language structures that the children are exposed to through the methodology proposed in textbooks is carefully selected and graded, so that, for instance, exposure to verb tenses follows a sequence starting with the present simple, moving on later to the present continuous, and only much later on the past simple and other tenses.

Storybooks contrast in many ways with textbooks, since they are designed above all with the purpose of capturing children's interest and attention and being enjoyable for young audiences. The language used in these works is mainly a vehicle for communication, more specifically, for telling a story, and the selection of expressions used may obey a wide range of criteria but normally is not restricted so as to purposely limit readers' exposure to different types of structures or vocabulary.² As regards the way that storybook vocabulary is presented, it can be said that in general the words are chosen to fit the message, rather than the other way round: in contrast with textbook language, storybook vocabulary most often relates to a situation or sequence of events, rather than a "topic" such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph. Finally it may be pointed out that as far as grammatical structures are concerned, such as verb tenses, the past simple is found much more commonly in stories, and as in other kinds of authentic discourse in English the present simple is much less frequent than other tenses. In sum, the grammatical structures found in stories show many of the tendencies observable in the most frequent uses of the English language in everyday discourse genres.

² One frequent exception to the generalisation that storybooks do not present restricted language are graded readers and reading schemes.

Having observed some of the very basic features of the two types of teaching resources we are concerned with here, a logical question is the degree to which these features affect the teaching and learning process according to the materials used: do the characteristics just observed make one or the other type of materials more effective teaching tools? The answer to this question is not simple, since many different kinds of factors will intervene in the effectiveness of any kind of teaching practice, such as the teachers' attitudes towards the methodology used, the specific materials being applied (i.e. the particular book or resource), the pupils' background and personalities, both the teacher and the pupils' experience in using different materials, the specific techniques put into practice with the materials, and so on.

However, with regards to the question of the way vocabulary is organised in the two kinds of teaching materials under consideration, in the literature there does exist a body of evidence on the relative efficiency of the kinds of vocabulary organization found in each. In experimental studies such as those discussed in Tinkham (1997, 1993) and Finkbeiner & Nicol (2003), the assumption that what is known as "semantic clustering" (vocabulary organisation typical of foreign language textbooks) – as opposed to "thematic clustering" (typically found, for instance, in children's stories) – consists of the most effective kinds of vocabulary organisation for second language learning has been shown to be unfounded.

These authors report experiments that compare results in learning second language vocabulary organised into semantic clusters, versus the results obtained with words arranged into thematic clusters, and with words that hold no apparent relation to one another. In the experiments, the effects on foreign language learners' memorisation tasks of these three types of vocabulary organisation are measured. Their findings showed that learners were most successful at memorising new words when the words were learnt in thematic clusters, that is, groups of words that related to situations or sequences of events (i.e. in Tinkham (1997: 144), *beach, sunny, swim or library, quiet, whisper*). And surprisingly, the words belonging to semantic clusters (also from Tinkham (1997: 144) *dish, bowl, plate or jacket, shirt,*

sweater) were those that the subjects had the least success in memorising. As mentioned above, foreign language textbooks generally introduce new vocabulary in semantic clusters, that is, in relation to topics, rather than in thematic clusters. However, the experiment showed that subjects found even randomly chosen groups of words (*island, potato, beard*, for instance) were easier to memorise than semantically related sets of words.

Among the explanations for these findings suggested in Tinkham (1997), we find references to psychological research on the phenomenon of ‘interference’ and its effects on learning and memory. What the literature on ‘interference theory’³ shows is that the more closely related new information is to other information which has just been learnt or is to be learnt soon afterwards, the more difficult learning becomes. In fact, authors such as Hunt & Elliot (1980) and Hunt & Mitchell (1982) have developed a ‘distinctiveness hypothesis’, which states that increasing differences among information being learnt facilitates easier learning and memorisation.

In sum, our point is that evidence has been found to show that the organisation of vocabulary typically found in foreign language textbooks may actually make its learning more difficult if compared to the way vocabulary is organised, for example, in children’s storybooks. Nonetheless, this constitutes just one of the arguments that may be provided in favour of the idea that storybooks should be seriously considered as effective materials for teaching vocabulary. In the next section we offer further reflections on the usefulness of stories for teaching young learners and some suggestions for how they can be used.

3. Storybooks for Young Learners: Why are they Useful?

In addition to the objectives already mentioned, one of the underlying reasons for carrying out this research project was to explore different

³ See references provided in Tinkham (1997).

approaches to language teaching bearing in mind the learners' age and taking into consideration what children are like and what children enjoy at different stages, particularly children of between 3 and 12 years of age. As Kuhl (2004) points out, at an early age children are at an optimal biological moment for language learning and they learn languages by listening. As in the case of native language learners, child learners approach second languages with no explicit instruction of the grammar rules. Young children detect and internalize the grammar rules of the language they are learning by being exposed to it. Learners first filter the input data and later they create their own output data and, in this data-driven process, learners are able to extract and abstract information (meaning, pronunciation and grammar) from the input data around them. For this reason, exposure to linguistic data becomes an essential factor for language learning, and the linguistic data presented to children in class becomes very relevant in the early years (Gass and Selinker, 2001).

By using stories, teachers can provide children with exposure to authentic uses of the foreign language they are learning. And since children enjoy stories, even if they have to make an effort to cope with the language difficulties the stories may present, they are richly rewarded by the stimulation and fun that the storytelling activity offers them. In addition, the playful and imaginative nature of storytelling activities create a relaxed, non-threatening environment in which children have the opportunity to use the foreign language. Stories offer multisensory experiences (visual, aural and oral, at least) in which children are given opportunities for holistic learning, through which many different learning styles can be catered to. As Mason & Krashen (2004: 184) state, "It is our sense of enjoyment, excitement, and emotional involvement that is a necessary condition for learning, and using literature in the classroom can provide the content base for the magic."

The learning environment plays an important role in L2 teaching and learning because it determines the amount of linguistic data and the quantity and the quality of the language children have access to (Moon, 2000). In bilingual education children have *more* opportunities to make meaningful interaction than children whose only learning environment is the classroom

and *fewer* opportunities than children in naturalistic contexts (areas where the L2 is spoken).

At an early age, first and second language learning is unconscious and children learn the rules and restrictions of languages by interacting with adults and with other children. For this reason, teachers play an important role in second language learning at school because they present the target language in class through activities children like, such as singing, playing, acting out and listening to stories. In this learning context, stories become excellent tools to get teachers talking to children and by talking to children, teachers help children to develop first the listening and the speaking skills and later, the reading and writing skills.

As Cameron (2001: 94) puts it, young learners of a second language usually lack the social interaction which provides the basis for acquiring vocabulary in their first language. But by using stories in class, teachers can provide at least some “rich opportunities for learning vocabulary indirectly, or incidentally, while attending to something else.” This author reminds us also “words encountered in stories are heard in linguistic and discourse contexts, so that important grammatical and collocational information is available about those words. Moreover, the plot and characters of a story are likely to form a thematic organisation for many of the words, thus assisting understanding and learning.”

Stories in general and storybooks and fairy tales in particular can be used with all kinds of students for language teaching, from children to adults and from beginners to advanced level students. They are ideal means for interacting with teachers or with other children and as we have mentioned above, they are considered to be an excellent tool to develop the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Storytelling is a very satisfying activity to carry out in class because it can be accomplished in one session.

Children from all languages are familiarised with the format of stories. Based on the fairy tale structure, this format is common to all languages and includes the beginning of the story, which is followed by the

middle of the story where a conflict or problem occurs, and which is then followed by the end, dedicated to the resolution of the problem. In stories, formulas such as “*Once upon a time...*” or “*They lived happily ever after*” are commonly used.

Stories are an important source of vocabulary, intonation, grammatical structures and patterns in real context. Language in storybooks is not referential like in textbooks but representational and characters in storybooks think, talk, cry or shout just like in real life. Stories help children develop not only language and other areas of the curriculum, but they also help develop children's positive attitudes. In one word, using stories in class can provide opportunities for unconscious and indirect ways of effective language learning.

4. Some Storytelling Tips

Stories can be read or told in class. If teachers choose to read stories in class, they don't need to learn the story they are telling; they can make use of the illustrations to convey meaning and they can change the words and adapt them to the children's level. If, on the contrary, teachers choose to tell stories, they can make better eye contact with the students and use miming and movement to help to convey meaning. It is important that teachers like the stories they are telling the children, and likewise, that that they are aware of the stories children might like.

When choosing stories, teachers should consider the language difficulty and therefore select stories that go from simple to complex. In addition, the stories should not be too long because children may not understand or get bored. Furthermore, it should be ensured that the content is of interest to the age groups, and that stories fit the instructional objectives. Storytelling or reading should include interactive activities because, as we pointed out before, interaction is the basis for language learning.

To offer an idea of some ways of making stories work in class, we would suggest the following examples of activities to be carried out before, during and after storytelling:

- Before presenting the stories to children in class, teachers should create an appropriate atmosphere so that children can listen to the stories without distractions. Teachers can also elicit children's previous knowledge by asking questions to the children and by inviting them to make predictions, using flashcards, posters, photos and illustrations. For example, some of the pictures in a story can be covered or partially covered with self-adhesive paper so that children can be asked to guess what is in the picture and little by little find out what is there as the teacher uncovers it.
- The teacher can exploit many different aspects of the storytelling activity in order to motivate children to use any English that they know or participate in different ways. For instance, if the teacher pretends to make 'mistakes' like holding the book upside-down, using the wrong name for the characters, animals or other objects, and so on, the children will happily correct them.
- During storytelling and in order to convey meaning, teachers can make use not only of language but also of their voices and body language using props, mime and gestures. While listening to stories, children love doing actions or guessing what might happen on the next page or at the end.
- After storytelling, teachers can ask questions about the story and retell the story. Children can also retell the story, continue the story and act it out or sing song and chants in relation with the story. When children are able to write, they can match words and pictures, fill in the gaps or make their own version of it in little books.

Summing up, stories are ideal tools for teaching and for learning English in class and many techniques used by teachers are valid; as Wright (2000) points out, stories are the cornflakes of the classroom; they contain a wide range of nutritional elements. A plate of cornflakes a day provides a good basic set of the elements we need.

5. Methodology Used in the Research Project

Having described the focus of our research project, in this section we discuss another aspect of the activities carried out in order to facilitate putting the principles and ideas developed above into practice. The project contemplated an in-service teacher development component mainly aimed at introducing teachers in innovative strategies for vocabulary teaching and providing them with criteria for selecting and using stories as well as creating materials. A thirty-hour seminar was held in the Teacher Support Centre ("CAP") in Alcorcón, Madrid. The participants, in-service Infant and Primary school teachers, attended 10 hours of theoretical-practical sessions, followed by further purely practical sessions where they worked in groups and by themselves on the development of teaching units based on stories.

The main aims of the seminar were: a) to discover how teachers can facilitate more effective vocabulary learning; b) to train teachers in the use of children's literature in English as the main resource for Infant and Primary level EFL classes; c) to provide teachers with criteria for selecting stories (age, level, stories easily adapted, use of illustrations); d) materials development: adaptation and creation. And finally, to provide useful resources for pre and in-service teachers (through the seminar and the Web site).

At the beginning and end of the seminar data was collected in the form of a pre- and post-seminar questionnaires. The pre-seminar questionnaire consisted of questions about the current conditions at the schools where teachers were working (number of pupils, ages, availability of teaching supplies and resources), teacher's expectations regarding the seminar, as to which stories they had used, how and when they had used them and so on. The post-seminar was aimed at evaluating the seminar and the results. After the ten-hour theoretical-practical sessions, purely practical sessions were arranged so that the teachers could design their teaching units and materials based on selected books. During these sessions, teachers were able to exchange information and get feedback on their units through their peers and the experts on the topic.

A trial of the teaching units developed followed as the participants had the opportunity to put into practice in their own classes the techniques developed in the seminar and the units designed around a story of their choice, as well as to reflect on their use and efficiency. Finally, some teachers had a chance to compare the two methods of learning vocabulary: through textbook or through stories.

The theoretical and practical sessions were centred on how to present language input in the L2 through stories. The content of those sessions was:

- Children's literature: criteria for selecting stories.
- Learning vocabulary through stories. Storytelling reading techniques.
- Activities and materials design.
- Craft activities, dramatizations and songs based on stories
- Design and development of teaching units.
- Learning strategies such as repetition, use of formulaic language, chants, games and so on.

Among the results of the seminar we would highlight the fact that participants submitted records of their experiences and the materials they had developed (teaching units). The material created and the teachers' reflections about their experiences in their classes are shown on a project website and CD-ROM. The website is used as study and reference material not only for the participants, but most importantly, for pre-service teachers at the School of Education at the Complutense University. In this way, in-service teachers and future teachers can share their work.

Those interested in the project can visit our Web page <http://www.edu-elearning.com/director1/proyecto.htm> where they can find information about the project and other relevant ideas and suggestions. These include examples of teaching units developed by the participants in the seminar; recommended stories classified according to categories (chain or circular stories, cumulative, pattern, question and answer stories and so

on), appropriateness for a particular kind of language practice such as repetition of structures, questions and answers, etc. And finally, a selection of resources and ideas on the Internet (suggestions for using nursery rhymes, making books or ways of organising play spaces for young children) are also provided.

As can be seen, the seminar turned out to be a very significant part of our project since it represented an activity through which the participants were able, on the one hand, to receive information and training on the use of stories as a vocabulary teaching resource, and on the other, to establish a network of peers with whom they shared information and some of the materials they had developed. Through the use of Information and Communication Technology, furthermore, we have managed to make the materials created and other helpful information available on the Internet to other practising teachers and future teachers.

An additional advantage that the seminar brought about for the researchers is the fact it gave them the chance to establish contact with practising teachers, some of whom were interested in participating in the experimental stage of the project. This contact was also very relevant to providing the researchers with a real picture of the kinds of challenges practising teachers face when it comes to developing an adequate range of teaching strategies and methods: we found that many in-service teachers are limited both materially and in terms of time. However, by participating in the seminar many of the teachers discovered that, once they had accessed the relevant information on some examples of useful storybooks and ideas on how to take advantage of the possibilities they offered, with a relatively small investment of preparation time and funding for buying storybooks, much could be gained in terms of learning and enjoyment in the classroom.

6. Teaching through Storybooks in the Schools of Madrid

In the present study we have attempted to provide an overview of some theoretical and practical aspects of a research project dealing with vocabulary teaching to young learners of EFL. As mentioned above, the project includes among its principal aims that of offering evidence on the relative effectiveness for vocabulary teaching and learning of the two types of teaching materials we have discussed: textbooks and storybooks. This issue is still pending as the experimental stage of the project is completed. Nonetheless, simply by having held the seminar mentioned above, at which the initial hypotheses were discussed and the researchers, pre- and in-service teacher trainers, had the opportunity to work with in-service teachers, several means for carrying out future research, and applying our findings to the local context within which it is carried out – namely, the schools of Madrid, Spain – have been developed.

Among the information and research possibilities brought together by way of this seminar, we have obtained data on how much teachers actually use stories in class in the particular context of our study. Through the seminar, light was also shed on the need for teacher development in this field. In order to collect further information on this issue, a questionnaire regarding current teaching practice and teacher development needs was completed by 24 in-service Infant and Primary school teachers in Madrid, February 2007. In this survey, we asked the teachers questions such as whether their teaching practice was mainly based on a textbook method or involved combining a variety of materials; whether they often read stories in English to their pupils; whether they believed that hearing stories more often would help their pupils improve their vocabularies; and finally, the kinds of difficulties that they encountered and that prevented them from using storybooks in class.

The most relevant findings of this questionnaire included a fact that we would highlight, this being that all of the teachers questioned affirmed that they would like to receive training on how to use stories in class and develop materials based on stories. In addition, and more significantly, all of

the teachers agreed that they thought their pupils would learn more vocabulary if they used stories in class more often. Many of the teachers stated that they lacked skills and know-how about how to use and exploit stories in their teaching practice, and affirmed that one of the main difficulties that they encountered was a lack of support at school. The great majority of these teachers also claimed that they had quite a good knowledge of stories in English that they could use in class, although only one of the teachers surveyed considered their knowledge of such stories to be very good.

In sum, we have found that the frequent use of stories in the young learners' classroom can be considered an aim that many teachers would like to achieve. However, as the main factor that would help promote this possibility, we would suggest that training and development are the essential ingredients that are currently scarce in this particular local context. Even if teachers do know of stories that could potentially be used in their teaching practice, according to our survey, different obstacles often prevent teachers from doing so: the main obstacle being a lack of training that would offer them knowledge of how to use the stories, and elaborate activities based on such resources. Therefore, it seems that among the basic requirements needed to encourage the use of stories in infant and primary EFL classrooms, a basic library of storybooks is a first step, but more importantly, teachers need time, support and guidance to develop skills and knowledge about how to use stories effectively.

7. Conclusion

Through the different activities brought together within the framework of a Complutense University research project on vocabulary teaching methodology for young learners of EFL, we have focused on the value of the use of storybooks. We have offered theoretical principles related to the relative efficiency of the two types of methodology discussed in this paper, particularly analysing some of the reasons why storybooks constitute an effective teaching resource when working with young learners, for many

different aspects of language use, and particularly for learning and providing opportunities to use vocabulary.

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