

## TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH STORYTELLING

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### **Abstract:**

The article focuses on ways to apply storytelling to young learners and its effects on the development of L2 acquisition in the case of these particular learners. It also provides examples of stories and the ways that they have been used during the English classes. There is a focus on other skills, besides listening, while the length of the stories together with the difficulty of the activities related to them depends on the level of the pupils: the more the pupils advance, the more complex the tasks become and the longer the stories are. Besides the fact that the article exemplifies how to use stories while teaching English, it also mentions the success/lack of success of the stories and the pupils' reactions to them.

**Keywords:** *storytelling, level, pre-, while-, post-listening activities, procedure.*

### **Introduction**

Many methods and approaches in teaching English have been used throughout time. However, writing about them would not be relevant for the present paper. Storytelling is one of the most appealing teaching approaches when it comes to young learners, if not their favourite approach of all. Therefore, some examples of how stories can be used during the English class might prove helpful for many teachers, especially if they are Newly Qualified Teachers.

It would be interesting to see:

1. what kind of stories we can use in the classroom;
2. what levels the stories should be, considering the age of the learners;
3. how long the stories should be so as to avoid boredom;
4. what kind of activities we should associate with the stories.

Furthermore, even if we are talking about pupils that are hyper active, that have attention problems or are at beginner level, a story will always be welcomed by young learners, as their imagination has no boundaries. There are some textbooks that take the storytelling approach, and the content of a unit revolves around aspects taken from the story. There are a lot of activities (pre-, while- and post-listening) that can be associated to it.

In the following pages, there are three examples of leveled stories, connected to activities that a teacher can apply in the classroom, with positive effects on both the learners' motivation to learn English and on their pace of advancement.

### **Literature review**

According to an American online journal,

“Storytelling is an ancient tradition that has, over time and across cultures, served many purposes, from education and the transmission of values to political mobilization and pure entertainment. It can take many forms, from oral and written narratives to gestures, movement, art, music, movies and more.”<sup>1</sup>

Let us enumerate some important aspects of storytelling:

- one of the oldest forms of teaching;
- one of the ancient means of preserving culture and history in times when writing did not appear yet;
- stories take many forms: fables, parables, myths, legends, or real life examples;
- one can teach either a moral via a story or aspects connected to a foreign language (vocabulary, grammar, literary concepts);
- according to Andrews et al. (2009: 6), “A story, then, facilitates instruction directly through verbal or linguistic means and indirectly by aiding in the mental construction of a sequence of events enacted for or by the learner.”
- it has grown very popular as a teaching tool both in schools and outside it – for example, it has been used for developmental training sessions in all kinds of professions, including in the army, where soldiers are presented with different scenarios which they have to solve as part of team-work;
- there are four instructional methods closely linked to storytelling: case-based, scenario-based, narrative-based and problem-based instruction (Andrews et al., 2009: 7);
- the storyteller(s) can be either the teacher or the pupils - in an article by Mokhtar et al. (2011: 163...169), it is argued that by allowing pupils to

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<sup>1</sup> “Storytelling Approaches to Program Evaluation: An Introduction”, adapted by Sylvia Sukop; original report by Joseph Tobin and Gustavo E. Fischman, funded by The California Endowment, 2007.

act out stories in groups, the communicative skills are enhanced and interactive skills are developed<sup>1</sup>;

- stories develop the young pupils' imagination and listening skills, besides involving them actively in the process of teaching/learning a foreign language;
- for older learners, stories are also a means of helping them learn how to summarise, paraphrase, give quotations and maybe even develop their own literary writing skills;
- other forms of storytelling are the animated films and cartoons – there have been many children who have gained the foundations of their language development through watching animated films or cartoons that have not been translated or dubbed in their mother language. Besides this, the cartoons/animated films are more interesting for young learners to watch than the stories read by the teachers.<sup>2</sup>

To sum up, there are a lot of benefits of applying storytelling in the classroom, and of encouraging pupils to use it outside the classroom as well (e.g. watching animated films/cartoons at home). Whether the pupils are listeners or storytellers themselves, a class revolving around a story is prone to become a successful one. However, it depends on the teacher to choose motivating subjects, to keep pupils as motivated as possible in paying attention to the story itself.

### Research methodology

Teaching young learners can be a very challenging task. Their attention span is very limited (between 5 to 10 minutes, depending on the age), they get bored fast and their minds cannot yet understand abstract things. The best solution to maximize learner opportunities is probably to combine several methods and approaches and alternate them during the English class, so that the pupils are as engaged in the acquisition process as possible.

Before proceeding to actually describe the approach to storytelling that I have used, it is important to mention that the learners are aged 4 to 8. However, the present paper will focus on applying storytelling to the first graders. Furthermore, as a teacher in a private school, I was told from the very beginning

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<sup>1</sup> In the abstract, the authors write:

“It is found that by going through the process of preparing and performing the drama, the students have gained confidence and are more comfortable with the language.” (p. 163)

<sup>2</sup> “Children are good observers and they make use of such contextual clues like movements (body language), intonation, mimics and gestures, actions and messages in order to understand and interpret language itself.” (Brewster et al., 2002, Cabrera and Martinez, 2001, Halliwell, 1992, Slattery and Willis, 2001) – cited in Arıkan et al. (2010: 5213)

that I must use only English during my classes, regardless of the level of my pupils.

Storytelling is a rich means of teaching a foreign language or a life lesson to learners, especially young ones. It is an ancient form of teaching, and great storytellers have confirmed throughout time that it is a successful method<sup>1</sup>. The following pages will focus on three examples of how storytelling can be used effectively in the classroom.

As a teacher in a private school, I am among the lucky ones who have at their disposal a lot of materials to choose from. Firstly, and most importantly, the textbooks have a story-based approach. Secondly, the school library has quite a nice collection of both printed and electronic textbooks, for all levels, that a teacher can use. And finally, the internet is rich in resources if one has the necessary patience to “google” stories.

Last autumn, besides the textbooks, I considered it really important to bring some extra stories in the classroom. In contrast to what the textbooks<sup>2</sup> offer, I made use of other stories, levelled differently, from simplified ones at the beginning up to level 1 readers towards the end of my observation period<sup>3</sup>.

Here is an example of a simplified story that was used in September, with the first graders:

### **Story 1:**

“The girl reads the maths problem. ‘John has three apples. He gives one apple to Mary. He gives another apple to Billy. How many apples does John have?’ She thinks. Three apples minus two apples is one apple. John has one apple. The answer is one. She shows her answer to the teacher. Her teacher smiles.” This story illustrates the instructional storytelling method known as “problem-based instruction” (Andrews et al., 2009: 7).

Procedure: Due to the close relationship between the teacher and the pupils, the former observed that most of them were fond of mathematics. Therefore, the teacher looked for something that would incorporate mathematics into language teaching. As pre-listening activity, the teacher warmed up the pupils with questions such as: “What fruits do you like?”, “How much do you like maths?”, “Can you count up to 10?”. Following these questions, the teacher announced the pupils that she had prepared a very interesting story for them, in

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<sup>1</sup> One should think, for example, of the way historic or cultural facts were transmitted orally from one generation to another. Also, let us think of the spread of several religions of the world through parables and other such stories. Furthermore, Jesus Christ is considered to be the greatest storyteller of all times, even by agnostic people, who grant him merit for his witty stories.

<sup>2</sup> The Learning Ladder 1 – for the first grade;  
The Learning Ladder Starter - for preparatory class;  
New Yippee! blue – for the large groups;  
New Yippee! green – for the middle group.

<sup>3</sup> The observation period: September 17<sup>th</sup> – March 31<sup>st</sup>

which they had to pay attention and solve a maths problem. The teacher read the story slowly, stopping every now and then to reinforce certain ideas. As she read it, she drew the apples on the board. The teacher stopped reading the story after she asked the question “How many apples does John have?”. At this point, she asked the pupils to solve the problem. After the children found the key to the exercise, the teacher finished reading the story. After finishing this story, the teacher observed that the pupils were very happy to have been involved directly in the story and to have solved a problem. Furthermore, they asked for more stories of this kind.

The story above illustrates the degree of difficulty of the stories that were used at the beginning of the school year and the response of the pupils towards them. It was observed that the pupils’ reactions were positive, and that they understood them, so the next logical step at that stage would be to find more challenging ones.

The stories provided for the first graders by their textbooks can be read by the teacher, played on CD or told using an e-book. Since one cannot actually pause the tape while listening to somebody reading from an e-book, I prefer the first two variants. In the following paragraphs, I would like to exemplify with two stories taken from different chapters, done with my first graders, using the first two approaches to storytelling mentioned above. The following stories, as opposed to the first example above, show how big the progress of the first graders was.

Worth mentioning is that I.A has 13 pupils and I.B has 10 pupils, and both are classes with multi-level learners of English. Also, the stories were accompanied by large flashcards: on one side there were the pictures related to the story and on the other side there were lines from the story, corresponding to the picture from the back of the flashcard. The stories have a repetitive structure, containing words that are constantly revised.<sup>1</sup>

The first story under discussion was studied in the first week of February with I.B. Here is the transcript:

#### Story 2:

##### *“Freddie’s a Greedy Frog”*

**Freddie’s sister:** Mmm! What’s that, Mummy?

**Mummy:** It’s a cake for our tea.

**Freddie’s sister:** Yummy! Yummy! I like cake. Can I have some, please?

**Mummy:** No! Wait for teatime.

**Freddie’s brother:** Mmm! What’s that, Mummy?

**Mummy:** It’s lemonade for our tea.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a phrase associated to jazz, “repetition and revision”, according to which a certain structure is repeated and revised constantly throughout a song, as is the case of certain vocabulary items in the above stories.

**Freddie's brother:** Oh, yummy! Yummy! I like lemonade! Can I have some, please?

**Mummy:** No! Certainly not!

**Freddie's brother:** Oh, please, Mummy! Just a little bit!

**Mummy:** No! Wait for teatime.

**Freddie:** Oh, I'm hungry! I'm really hungry! Yummy! Yummy! Cake for my tummy! Oh, just a little bit more! But shhh! Don't tell Mummy! Oh, I'm thirsty! I'm really thirsty! Yummy! Yummy! Some lemonade for my tummy! Oh, just a little bit more! But shhh! Don't tell Mummy!

**Granddad:** I'm hungry!

**Mummy:** Do you like cake? There's cake for tea.

**Granddad:** Oh, yes. I do! I really like cake. What about you Freddie?

**Freddie:** No! I don't like cake.

**Grandma:** I'm thirsty!

**Mummy:** Do you like lemonade? There's lemonade for tea.

**Grandma:** Oh, yes, I do! I really like lemonade. What about you Freddie?

**Freddie:** No! I don't like lemonade.

**Narrator:** Mummy is angry. She is very angry!

**Mummy:** Oh Freddie! You naughty frog!

**Narrator:** And Daddy is angry. He's very angry!

**Daddy:** Oh, Freddie! You greedy frog!

**Freddie:** I'm sorry Mummy! I'm sorry Daddy! I'm really sorry!

**Narrator:** Grandma has a surprise.

**Grandma:** It's all right, Freddie. Here's another cake and some more lemonade. And this time, they're for everyone. Do you like cake and lemonade?

**Family:** Yes, we love cake and lemonade.

**Freddie:** Thank you, Grandma.

Procedure: The aim of this story was to consolidate the vocabulary related to family members and to revise some foods and drinks (i.e., “cake”, “lemonade”, “tea”). For this story, I allowed the higher level pupils to translate for weaker pupils – not full sentences, just certain words that I considered more difficult for the level of some of them. First of all, the teacher showed the pupils the puppets representing Freddie and his brother, fictitiously called “Philip”. She asked the learners who they could see and whether they remembered how old Freddie and Philip were at that time.<sup>1</sup> The teacher wrote the title on the board and read it to the pupils. Afterwards, she explained what the word “greedy” meant and asked the pupils to guess what the story would be about. Next, the teacher asked the pupils what they liked to have for teatime, or as a snack.

Following these pre-listening questions, the teacher started reading the story, pointing to the flashcards in order to elicit new vocabulary. After finishing

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<sup>1</sup> The teacher often used these puppets during the English lessons and she created identities for both of them.

reading the lines from the second flashcard, the teacher stopped to ask what the pupils thought would happen next. Before showing the 7<sup>th</sup> flashcard, the teacher asked the pupils how they thought Mummy and Daddy would react. Previous to reading the lines from the last flashcard, the teacher asked the pupils how they thought the story would end. At this point, the pupils were still allowed to use L1 for such answers.

After the story, the teacher asked the pupils whether they liked the story or not, and what they thought the story taught them. Also, she asked them to summarise it, and she did so as a whole class activity: each learner had to say one or two sentences. And just to check how well they understood the story, the teacher asked some other questions: “What did Freddie eat?”, “What did Freddie drink?” “Would you do the same as Freddie?”, “Does Philip ask for lemonade, or cake?”. The follow-up activities were very interesting for the pupils: they first had to think of the story and put some stickers in the right place and then to match the family members to some items that were specific to them (e.g. Mummy and the apron); these two tasks were important to check how attentive the children had been to details. And two other activities were related to logical thinking: in one they had to match Freddie to some plates with different portions of cake according to how much he had eaten of them, and then to order some pictures considering the amount of lemonade drunk or cake eaten. These two last activities connected to logical thinking were done during the following class, as there was not enough time left.

The pupils really loved this story, and what they liked the most was the phrase “Yummy, yummy for my tummy!”. Ever since that story, whenever they are hungry, they hold their tummy with their hands and say “Teacher, tummy ...ouch”, and if they like eating or drinking something, they just repeat it – “Yummy, yummy for my tummy!”. They also managed to consolidate the lexis for family members and learn some other words. Thus, I consider these the most relevant markers that prove the success of the lesson.

The second example of story from the textbook is connected to the lexical consolidation of body parts. It has been done with I.A at the end of the second week in March. As it can be imagined, the level of the pupils (from both first grades) had increased between February and March<sup>1</sup>. During this storytelling class, no translations of any kind were allowed, and the story was played on the CD player as the teacher pointed to the large flashcards. Here is the transcript:

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<sup>1</sup> It has been observed that, out of 23 pupils in total, 16 have a very good level, they are skilful learners, the pace of advancement is smooth, fast and constant – there are worksheets as well as class activities and observation periods that prove this; 4 are in-between good and poor, and 3 are very slow at coping with new information and are behind as compared to the others, although I work more with them than with the others. However, every child has his/her own pace of advancement and I try not to stress them in this respect.

**Story 3:****“Roxy’s Day at Home”**

**Narrator:** It’s Monday morning and it’s time for school.

**Roxy’s mummy:** What’s the matter, Roxy?

**Roxy:** Ooh! My tummy hurts.

**Roxy:** And my head hurts!

**Narrator:** Roxy can’t go to school today. She’s sick.

**Roxy’s mummy:** Oh, dear!

**Narrator:** Roxy’s mummy sits on the bed. Then...

**Roxy’s mummy:** Oh, Roxy, look at your face. It’s full of spots! And look at your ears. They’re full of spots.

**Narrator:** Roxy’s mummy checks her temperature.

**Roxy’s mummy:** Are you hot?

**Roxy:** Hmm... a bit, yes.

**Narrator:** Then Roxy’s mummy looks at her hand.

**Roxy’s mummy:** Look at my hand.

**Roxy:** It’s...it’s...full of spots.

**Roxy’s mummy:** You aren’t sick at all. You naughty girl!

**Narrator:** Roxy’s mummy is very angry.

**Roxy:** I’m sorry, Mummy.

**Roxy’s Mummy:** Well...you can work at home today!

**Roxy:** But...

**Roxy’s mummy:** First, wash the dishes.

**Narrator:** All day long Roxy cleans the house. Her friends are at school.  
(song)

Wash the dishes. It’s hard work! Hard work!

Hard work. Hard work. Sweep the floor. Clean the windows. It’s hard work!

Hard work! Hard work. Hard work. Scrub the door.

**Narrator:** Later that day, Roxy sees his friends. They aren’t at school now.

**Freddie:** Hi, Roxy! Come and play in the park!

**Roxy:** I can’t.

**Morris:** Why not? What’s the matter?

**Roxy:** My back hurts.

Procedure: This storytelling class started with a game of “Simon says” after the warm-up routine, followed by the song “Head, shoulders, knees and toes”, which the pupils had already learnt during the preparatory class. After these pre-listening activities, the teacher explained the procedure of the storytelling activity: she would play the story on the class CD while pointing to the large flashcards, stopping every now and then to ask questions. As the teacher played the story, she would stop every once in a while to ask pupils to describe what they saw on some of the flashcards. They only used English during the while-listening part and, for the post-listening tasks, the pupils used Romanian only when asking for the teacher’s guidance in order to give the

summary in English. They were also allowed to use Romanian to say what they thought the story taught them. Going back to the while-listening stage, besides asking for picture description, the teacher also asked prediction questions (before flashcards 5 and 8). As the teacher asked such questions and waited for the answers, she paused the the story on the CD.

During the post-listening stage, the pupils undertook five activities:

- make a summary;
- say what they thought the story had taught them;
- think of the story and remember where Freddie was so as to tick the correct picture (out of 3 pictures);
- tick or cross the pictures, considering whether or not they are correct (and then colour the correct pictures only – however, so as not to waste time, the teacher asked the pupils to do this as homework);
- match the pictures representing some items (i.e., a landscape painting, a cake, a jumping rope, a book, a flower) to the friends (who at that moment were at school). Each of them was doing something but the picture was incomplete, so the pupils had to match them in order to get a complete picture.

There were some indicators showing this was a successful storytelling lesson:

- the pupils could make the predictions properly during the while-listening activity (at this age, children are very intuitive and can make correct guesses);
- they were very attentive and actively involved in the story, saying it was beautiful or that they knew what would happen next;
- they enjoyed themselves (I saw this from their body language and their face mimics);
- during the post-listening activity they constantly asked “How do you say...?” in order to give full answers in English, which showed how eager they were to participate in the activities;
- each pupil wanted to say what they thought the story had taught them;
- they managed to consolidate the vocabulary successfully – this was shown by the post-listening activities and the follow-up activities in the next lesson.

To conclude, the three examples above illustrate how storytelling can be applied successfully during the English class. If the teacher also uses realia to explain unknown vocabulary, the pupils are likely to assimilate new words faster and more efficiently. Since the class teacher knows the pupils better, (s)he can choose how to adapt his/her materials to meet the learners’ needs and proficiency level.

## Conclusion

To sum up, storytelling can be a very effective teaching tool as long as it is adapted to the pupils' proficiency level, interests, age and needs. It is more efficient in the case of younger learners, who have not developed their abstract thinking yet, and who are very creative and imaginative. An important aspect to consider when bringing stories to class is that the teacher should start with something shorter and easier and, as the pupils progress, (s)he can increase the length and difficulty of the story and follow-up activities as well. Also, it is worth mentioning that, if combined with other methods and approaches to teaching, it really helps pupils advance slowly but surely on their path as learners of a foreign language - in our case, English.

The follow-up activities must be doable and fun, so that the pupils can cope easily and eagerly with them. As teachers, we do not want to overwhelm our pupils, but rather motivate them and engage them actively in the teaching-learning process. And finally, from time to time, we should listen to what our pupils would like to do and bring to class something that would meet their wishes, so as to motivate them and give them the feeling that their work and progress are acknowledged.

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