

Using Stories (and Books) as Scaffolding for Our Young Language Learners

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This paper sets out to show how...

- teachers of English to young learners need to support their learners' general cognitive development and learning along with language learning
- the use of stories has a very important role in teaching English to young learners (TEYL)
- the use of stories and books can provide scaffolding for our young language learners in order to allow for acquisition of the target language in a meaningful and cognitively supportive way
- the use of stories and books can be used to encourage our young learners to create more stories and books in the target language
- young language learners can develop a focused and detailed understanding of language through interaction with stories and books

The responsibility of teaching in general and not just a target language to our young language learners: scaffolding their learning

It is important that, as teachers of English to young learners, we remember that when we are teaching a target language to young learners, we are also, and equally, responsible for supporting and extending general learning and development in the learners at the same time. Thus, we need to also be aware that we should encourage our young learners to better understand the world about them, communication in general (not just the target language), how to use stories, books and reference materials and how to interact with the spoken and written word to both enjoy stories and gain information as well as tell stories and impart information.

Crucially, we must help young language learners create verbal stories and written texts for real reasons and a real audience, rather than just for the teacher. In this way our young learners will then need to think more about how they will create their stories or texts in order for them to be successful and suitable for purpose.

Particularly, our aim must be to help children understand and develop generally, as well as in the target language, by assisting or ‘scaffolding’ (Bruner 1983,1986 & 1990) their thinking and learning and by encouraging them to think through and understand what is going on around them. This we can do by:

- making each language learning activity meaningful, purposeful and understandable to them

- using Socratic questioning to guide their thinking in each and every activity, given that they may still be developing thinking skills themselves
- modeling how *we* understand and make sense of things around us as a guide/model
- guiding and extending their learning in a variety of ways and with different activities, in order to cater and address their different learning styles and multiple intelligence use (Gardner 1993)
- creating an opportunity for the *Zone of Proximal Development* (Vygotsky 1978) to occur for each of our learners (i.e. the ZPD being the difference between the development a child can achieve on their own compared to what they can achieve when an adult or more able peer works with them)
- supporting their learning by choosing resources and materials that consolidate and support what has been, is being and will be taught

The use of stories and books in the language classroom for young learners is a wonderful way to scaffold and support this teaching and learning in TEYL.

How stories and books help scaffold learning: why story, in general, is good to use in the language class?

If we remember that stories are actually what most everyday interaction is based on, from face to face short dialogues and greetings to announcements, news items and tv programmes, we can see that story-type language is central to everyday life and communication and must, therefore, be central to the target language lesson.

Take a few minutes at any time in the day, when you can overhear a conversation, and think about what is actually being said, even by adults, and you will find that the conversation mainly involves the telling of stories e.g. *'I was on my way to school today and x happened'*, *'I saw y yesterday'*, *Did you hear about..* and the like. In fact, stories are what we use virtually all the time to interact and inform each other of events, news and happenings.

Even on the television, if we think about what the newsreader is saying, or what happens in a programme, we can see that most of these dramas, documentaries or monologues contain stories. Sometimes the stories are unfinished, as in a series or soap opera, or unpleasant and shocking, as in news items, and sometimes they are quite clearly story-like, as in monologues about events, descriptions of the natural world, or the content of comedy and drama programmes, but it is fascinating to remind ourselves just how much of everyday language is story-like in its structure and language.

Being 'grown ups', it is hard for us to remember that a lot of language interaction is story-like but we do need to keep it central to our teaching and learning in the TEYL class. This being the case, then, it is particularly important that we give our learners all the tools and language necessary, in the target language, for telling stories, not just for listening to them, as this will help them to interact in as natural a way as possible in the target language learning.

Stories and the young learner

The motivating aspect of stories -

Stories can be highly enjoyable and motivating for young learners and can spark off their imagination in lots of directions. Stories really can get them talking and thinking. It is amazing to remember, too, that even ‘grown-ups’ love to hear and read stories! Stories really are very special and if someone doesn’t hear the end of a story, no matter how simple, short or what context it is in they are usually disappointed and frustrated.

Stories can reflect real life -

We need to also remind ourselves that stories can sometimes link with our learners’ own experience of life and events, be they good or bad, and thus, when chosen carefully can, indirectly, help them understand and cope with these life events such as going to the doctor/ dentist/ hospital, the arrival of a new baby in the family, what happens when a pet dies, or when their parents divorce. Stories based on these sorts of life events do, though, need to be handled carefully in the young learner classroom.

Language in clear and unambiguous contexts -

There are also lots of useful devices in story that make them extremely valuable for the language classroom such as the use of lots of repetition, the need for the listener, or reader, to predict what is going to happen next and the recycling and introduction of lots of vocabulary and phrases. Many stories are a very good length to use in a lesson so that you could have one story heard/read in a language lesson in order for the learners to be able to take the ideas from, and the story

itself, out of the class at the end of the lesson (even though follow on activities may last longer than this first lesson).

The inclusion of books –

Alongside stories it is important to remember that we are not just talking about verbal stories but also those that can be found, and used, in books. In addition to stories in books, we should particularly include other books that cover non-fiction as well as a range of story genres that are not just fairy tales or ‘happy ever after’ stories. We need to also be aware that different learner types and genders within our classrooms all need to be catered for so, in order to address this, we must use a wide variety of stories and books in TEYL (some examples of these will be illustrated below)

The use of factual books -

It is important to realise that whilst we often use story books in the language classroom we do not always use factual books in the target language, even though these can be particularly useful for young learners because they are so full of highly contextualised language, can be fascinating and are, therefore, a good resource for the language class.

Contextualised language -

New language can be more easily understood and acquired when it is in context as the concepts and gist of this new language can be interpreted more easily when the language is in clear contexts, especially if there are gestures, intonation, realia, pictures or diagrams that support the language in the story telling or reading.

These help the listener, or reader, work out what the language is about because of the situation it is linked with. For example, the introduction of the word ‘wheelbarrow’ in the story of the *Hatmaker and the Monkeys* (Garvie 1991) is very easy and understandable because the word is in context. ‘wheelbarrow’ is a word that is not used very often in everyday English but it is understood quickly within the context of this story of an old hatmaker who takes his hats to market in a wheelbarrow.

Likewise, the word ‘otoscope’ in *Going to the Doctor* (Usborne First Experiences 2005) is very meaningful, clear and not difficult to understand because it is used in context with supportive illustrations to help the listener/ reader. It is not the use of words that creates any difficulty for our learners but the lack of supportive context which makes things difficult to understand.

Chunks and phrases –

Stories and books can introduce language ‘chunks’ to the young language learner. This emulates how mother tongue acquisition occurs and can enable the language learner to remember this ‘chunk’ and use it as they acquire and develop more language to add to this ‘chunk’

Introducing story markers and signposts -

Both stories and books can introduce the important use of different sorts of reading / listening / story markers and signposts such as: *Once there was ...and so.....but... ...and then... ...once upon a time... ...happy ever after...* as well as

the *This is...here is... look at the...can you see...* signposting found in factual and reference books.

To review, then, stories and books are ideal to use in TEYL and create scaffolding because:

- stories are absolutely central to everyday life and communication
- children like to find out about things around them
- stories and books are known to our students
- the language in stories and books is highly contextualised and is usually directly supported by the illustrations, drawings or pictures that accompany the story (or book), or by the drama, gestures and mime provided by the teller
- stories and books can cater for a very wide range of learner abilities, multiple-intelligences, linguistic levels and interests
- stories and books can include lots of meaningful and purposeful repetition of new and recycled language without boredom for the language learner
- stories and books can give lots of opportunities for introduction of new or prediction of known language for our young learners – another example of scaffolding that aids cognitive development as well as language acquisition
- stories and books can give lots of opportunity for a wide variety of vocabulary building on any subject, focus or cross-curricular area
- stories and books can introduce different genres and situations in the target language, thus showing good examples of specific language used in a variety of contexts

- stories can take the listener/reader on a journey from A - Z via a problem/action – monitoring how this problem or action is solved/resolved is what motivates the listener/reader to want to know ‘what happens next’
- stories and books can be used anywhere in the lesson or syllabus
- stories and books provide excellent models of writing for young language learners
- language is introduced in stories and books in ‘chunks’ and we know that this is, naturally, how language is acquired by our young learners
- stories and books can give us lots of opportunity for individual, pair and group work extension activities in the language classroom
- stories and books can be used anywhere across the syllabus, so can often be used in many different contexts
- stories and books can directly or indirectly introduce target cultures to the language learner in a meaningful and informative way
- And, very importantly...stories and books can be really enjoyable to read, listen to or just flick through!

Listening – a passive activity?

When listening to stories (or reading books), as an adult or child, what is going on in our heads when we listen or read? The simple answer is a really huge amount of cognitive processing! Listening is far from being the ‘passive’ activity some people label it as. Children listening to, or reading, stories or books will be processing everything they hear and see in order to try and make sense of it and this involves a great deal of cognitive activity and time in which to carry out the processing. We must remember to allow for this processing to take place and

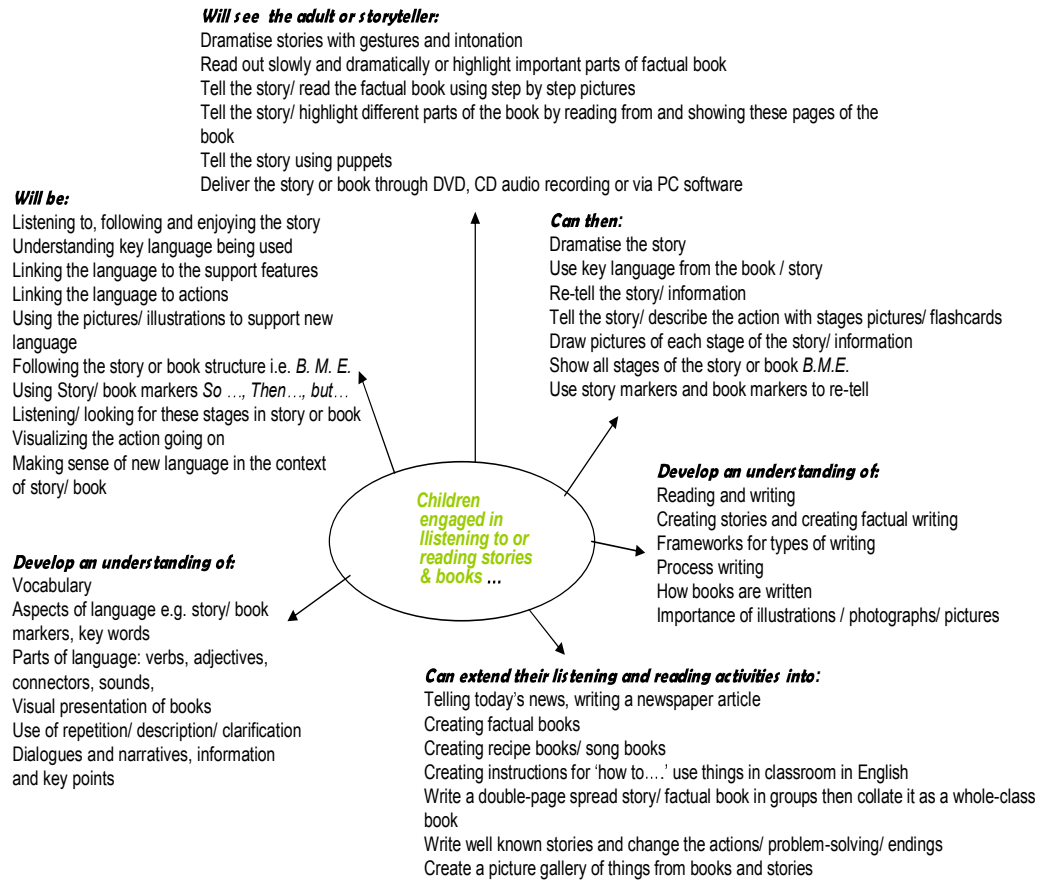
never rush a listening or reading session. We need to create ‘thinking time’ gaps in the telling/reading so that the children can think through what they are being introduced to. This way we allow the learners enough *thinking time* to carry out all of the complex cognitive and linguistic processes they are involved in.

As our young learners are listening to or reading a story or book they will also be using a great number of clues to help them understand what they are hearing or reading and making use of gestures, intonation and facial expressions of the reader and punctuation, white space and illustrations within the book.

If we also make sure that the language we are introducing is highly contextualised so that our young language learners understand what they are hearing or looking at, then we will be supporting their learning of the language.

Finally, we need to remember that whatever story or book is being introduced and read to the learners, no two learners will interpret or understand it in the same way, just as grown-ups interpret stories in very different ways. This is their opportunity to see/ hear their ‘own’ story and we should allow for this in TEYL. This difference in interpreting a story or book can create a great opportunity for discussion about a story or book in the class. For example, if you ask individual learners questions such as ‘What did the hatmaker look like?’ (*Hatmaker and the Monkeys* Garvie (1990), ‘Why did the boy tell us about his grandfather working in the bakery?’ (*My Grandfather Works in a Bakery* Hughes, S (1964) ‘Was it good thing for Goldilocks to go into the bear’s house?’ (*Goldilocks and the Three Bears* (trad.))

In the following diagram, Figure 1, you will see the amount of processing that can actually be taking place when children are engaged in listening to or reading stories and books. You can also see how teachers can encourage learners to extend this processing and interacting in activities in which they become the storyteller or writer themselves.



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 Adapted from Hughes (2006a) 'The all-round use of real stories and authentic books in Teaching English to Young Learners' in
Reading is For Everyone : Publication of IATEFL Hungary Young Learner Special Interest Group, Spring 2006

Figure 1: Actual amount of processing taking place when children are engaged in listening to or reading stories

Some other reasons for using stories or books

There are lots of other reasons for using stories and books with children, though there is insufficient room here to discuss them all in details. The following brief list of reasons, however, highlights why using stories and books can be so valuable in TEYL in order:

- To show children that the target language can be enjoyable and fun as you introduce a whole range of different books for learners to use and read!
- To introduce stories that the learners can then read for themselves over and over again (and over and over again...)
- To support new language with illustrations and pictures, particularly with factual books that offer excellent presentation of contextualised language, with pictures or diagrams.
- To offer the opportunity for buddy reading and listening (where a more able reader/ English speaking pupil will sit and read with a less able reader or English speaking learner), shared reading and listening (where learners read a book together by reading alternate pages and listening to alternate pages and discussing the pictures)
- To cater for different language ability groups within a whole class. Those less able in English can have books with less complex language in them while those more able can have more complex text to grapple with. This way all learners are being challenged and stretched at their own pace, which we know can encourage both learning development and language acquisition.

- To control target language input for our young learners by the choice of particular books for particular lessons or groups of learners. The teacher will be able to establish whether the language in each book they introduce to the class or individual groups is at the right linguistic, content and interest level for these learners.
- To help the learners appreciate a range of stories in the target language and show how versatile it can be. This can include different genres like comics, novels, photojournalism, how-to books, dictionaries, pictures dictionaries and so on.
- To introduce ideas, situations and experiences different from those the learners may have experienced in order to help them think about a larger world than their own.

As Martin, Lovat and Purnell (2004) say:

Children ...need to see ...short stories from which they may derive ideas and models. In fact, explicit teaching needs to be centred on this type of very short story, since this is the sort of story children are often encouraged to write... If we take the reading-writing connections seriously, we know that children will need to explore how authors achieve effects in very short stories (if they are encouraged to generalise from these reading experiences!)

Thinking back to Figure 1 again, above, we can see that through the use of stories and books young language learners can also directly and indirectly develop an understanding of many discrete aspects of the target language use including:

- Vocabulary, general acquisition as well as specialised language in factual books, such as ‘otoscope’ in *Going to the Dentist* by Usborne
- Examples of language chunks in texts or read aloud to them that we know help early language development and use, such as ‘*But he was still hungry*’ in Carle’s *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*
- Story markers – *Once upon a time, and then, so..., but, once..., etc.*
- Key words and phrases that ‘cement’ a story together (e.g. in *Under The Ground* Milbourne & Riglietti)
- The dramatic use of repetition such as that used in *We all went on Safari* by Krebs and Cairns
- The importance of illustration, diagrams and photography and how these can be used in a range of written forms e.g. in *My Grandfather Works in a Bakery* by Hughes
- The way that dialogues, narrative, rhyming & onomatopoeic language can be used to enhance stories and create more drama such as that found in Krebs & Cairns’ *We All Went on Safari*
- The need to show children how to process their writing and edit and polish it so that it is the best it can be for the task.
- The way *planning, drafting, revising, checking & presenting* their own writing can be a supportive and scaffolded way to enable young learners to write in the target language

Using stories and books, both fiction and non-fiction in the target language helps TEYL teachers to take responsibility for both language and general learning. As Latham (2002) reminds us:

The ability to listen to and comprehend stories, and to reproduce or produce them, does have a facilitative effect on cognitive processes, and upon personal development, too.....understanding of narrative involves very complex mental activity, and children who engage in listening to or reading stories on a wide scale are greatly enlarging their strategies for grasping meaning, their knowledge and understanding of the world around them and their imaginations.

‘Wrapped up’ in a story – what’s involved for the learner?

Martin, Lovat and Purnell (2004) describe children being ‘wrapped-up in a story’

when they say:

At the really dramatic moments children’s concentration can almost be felt in the room as their eyes stare at us and their breath is held... The appeal is basic. ...

How do we ensure that all children experience the power of story?

How do we then best utilise this power as a way into children learning?

What is involved when our young language learners are ‘wrapped up’ in a book or story?

They are involved in intense concentration and are focusing on one thing.

There is intense reading/ listening and mental processing of information going on.

Learners are making links with, and sense of, physical, linguistic, verbal and visual clues they see and hear. They are also each making their ‘own’ sense of the story or book.

We must remember that our young learners are using the same cognitive tools to process the story or book in the target language as they would be using for

mother tongue listening or reading so it is important that we support them using, and extending, these cognitive skills.

Different types of stories and books - some examples

However, as mentioned above, it is important to use a wide variety of stories and books in TEYL. It would be a mistake to only use traditional or fairy stories and instead we should use stories and books that are presented in different ways and cover all sorts of subjects for those learners in the language class.

As we have seen, stories and books can be used successfully with all age, ability and interest groups, from the very young to the more mature learners! As teachers, we need to create a good collection of different stories and books and use this wide mixture in the language class in order to aid the learners in target language and general knowledge acquisition, whatever their age or ability level.

Stories and books provide a great opportunity for recycling previously taught language, in a context which is meaningful, purposeful and interesting to our young learners. Additionally, good stories and books are highly adaptable and can extend and support any language syllabus we are using, when chosen and used carefully. They can also help teachers to extend the curriculum and give the opportunity to use language taught in a highly meaningful and memorable context that is transferable by our learners to other situations in the target language such as that found in *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell.

Stories and books can also offer an excellent opportunity to extend theme-based work in the language class by giving further opportunity to think about a range of things linked to that language. In *Sam the Chef by Usborne* language for food is extended and developed in a good story and new language for food and drink is introduced, alongside language for dealing with food and drink such as ‘beating’ ‘heating’ ‘slicing and dicing’ and ‘frying’. Whilst this vocabulary will not be needed on a daily basis by our young learners, we know that extended input of recycled *and* new and specialised language further supports understanding and use of the target language in the long run.

Stories and books can be used to develop other subjects across the curriculum. For example *Mrs Wobble the Waitress*, by Ahlberg and Ahlberg, gives us a great opportunity, with slightly older primary language learners, to think about creating menus (literacy), advertising a café and its opening times (language and maths), making recipes (cookery and science), setting the table and making it look attractive (art), shopping and paying for things (maths) creating and using a chant about food (music and language).

Stories and books can also offer great opportunities for cultural or global input. In *We went on Safari*, by Krebs & Cairns, there is a wonderful link with Tanzania, the language of Swahili and an introduction to the sort of animals and settings found in Tanzania. It also introduces our learners to other languages and counting systems.

Storybooks and factual books can be presented in many different ways, which can encourage our learners to then produce their own writing in many different ways, too, such as strip cartoons, photo journalism, purely picture and no text, text and picture, text around picture etc. Good examples of these are *My Grandfather Works in a Bakery* by Hughes, *Usborne Big Machines Tractors* and *Usborne Big Machines Diggers and Cranes*.

Storybooks and factual books can offer meaningful opportunities for repetitive language to be used that isn't boring or tedious for the learners because they are 'so wrapped up' in the story or book the language is embedded in. For example, in *I know an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*' by Hawkins and Hawkins, there is a great deal of repeated language but, because we want to know what happens next ...and next ...and next, the repetition of language actually heightens the drama and excitement of the story.

How teachers can scaffold learning by using stories and books- a checklist for everyday use

- Allow lots of 'thinking time'
- Create time gaps when reading/ telling for mental processing to take place
- Use a variety of stories and books to cater for the wide range of intelligences and learner types within the class
- Give learners lots of examples of stories and books to physically interact with and use
- Scaffold understanding of the story or book at all and every stage

- Encourage learners to tell us what is in the book or story by ‘telling it again’ to us
- Extend their interaction with, and use of, stories and books by using meaningful and purposeful follow-up activities
- Use realia and props to make the reading/ listening memorable and fun
- Encourage learners to make their own stories and books by using some of the models you have introduced to them
- Reflect on the variety of stories and books we interact with in mother tongue on a daily basis and reflect this in the target language

As in Figure 1 above, language learners can tell you about stories or books you have introduced to them, or their own stories and books:

- By miming or dramatising them
- By dramatising key characters in a story
- By re-telling the story/ main points verbally
- By re-telling the story/ main points using pictures or props only
- By drawing a *story-board* for the book or story
- By dramatising, in groups, the beginning, middle or end of a story or book
- By putting the three together
- By working in groups with one narrator using story markers and the others, as characters, using dialogue
- By creating and using story markers and key words to tell a new version of the story or book

In addition, and as also noted in Fig 1, our young language learners can develop a particular and detailed understanding of language, directly and indirectly through the use of stories and books in the TEYL classroom including:

- Vocabulary and vocabulary building
- Use and repetition of language ‘chunks’
- Use and repetition of story markers/ page markers
- Use and repetition of key words
- Dramatic use of repetition
- Use of dialogues and the narrative
- Use of dynamic words such as onomatopoeic words
- Use of different speeds of delivery when reading/ telling a story
- Regular and supported use of process writing to facilitate success for our learners in target language writing
- Encouragement to use language found in stories in their own writing

As Browne (2001) quite rightly outlines ...

A developmental approach to writing offers learners and teachers many advantages since it encourages children to...

- believe in themselves
- participate actively in their own writing development
- take a chance and to risk being wrong
- develop positive attitudes to writing...
- discover the way in which writing is used
- think about spelling, handwriting and punctuation by considering how words look and how their audience needs to be able to read what has been written

Choosing a story or book for TEYL – the questions to ask ourselves

Given that we have now established how important it is to use stories and books in the young language learner class, here are some questions that will help us choose the most suitable books for our TEYL classes. If the answer to any of the following is negative then we can safely assume the book being considered is not very suitable for that particular class or group of learners:

- Is the language level suitable for these learners?
- Is the cognitive level suitable for these learners?
- Is the content suitable for these learners?
- Is the book interesting or relevant to the learners?
- Is the book attractive, with clear and unambiguous pictures and/or illustrations?
- Do the illustrations and pictures clearly support the language?
- Does the story or book offer you opportunities to create extension activities in the language class?
- Does the story or book make a good model for young language learners to use as a model for their own writing?
- Is it an attractive book?
- Do *you* want to read it, too?

Finally, and above all, we need to remember how wonderful it is when we can get ‘wrapped up in a story or book’ and let this remind us how magical, valuable, enjoyable and supported the language input can be for our young language learners if we use stories and books. They may not only acquire lots of English in

a natural and meaningful way, and a love of stories and books, but they may also remember the stories or books you use with them for a very long time afterwards – what a bonus!

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