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Learning English through story books

Amazing Young Minds 2003 - Cambridge

Introduction

Paddington, Alice, Winnie the Pooh - there are many characters from English stories that have become well known all over the world. Quite often children from other countries do not know that the setting of the story is another country and that the book has been translated – facts that provide teachers with the opportunity to raise the children's awareness for cultural differences, geographical facts or language aspects. Children's books, in the original or abbreviated version, are often used as an addition or extension to the text- or course book, sometimes to provide individual children with new or challenging tasks.

In this session the focus will be mainly on picture books. The number of picture books published in England each year is greater than in other languages and it is easier to find picture books in English than in some other foreign languages. In addition, picture books address the very young as well as the advanced learners.

Picture books are part of a country's literary heritage and they represent the culture of a country. In reading whole books the culture becomes familiar and accessible and the cultural context may initiate reflection about national identity. Plots and characters engage children in various ways and they can encounter experiences that both touch their senses and emotions and challenge their thoughts. They provide authentic language and learning activities in meaningful contexts and the illustrations strongly support the process of children's understanding.

There is an enormous variety to be found in this genre and it is not always easy to select the books. Therefore, the focus of this session will be to show examples from different picture books (illustrations or passages) and thus experience different ways a teacher of young language learners could work with their learners to develop imaginal skills and learning strategies as the learners experiment with language, literature and ideas.

The crucial questions to keep in mind are:

- Why do we use picture books in the classroom?
- How do we select them?
- How do we use them to develop language-learning skills?

The overall idea, when using picture books, is to promote literacy and to enhance the motivation for learning a foreign /second language through them.

Storybooks in EFL – The Philosophy behind it

The following quotations are being used as background information to raise our awareness towards the importance of using storybooks in school.

“Story in its widest sense is also the carrier of life’s messages and has, I believe, a vital part to play in the education of the young child, particularly in the development of language. I suggest that the teacher, working from a story “bank” rich in all manner of literary genres and crossings a variety of cultures, can produce the kind of learning environment which not only stimulates and carries the children along on the crest of their interest and enjoyment, but offers meaning potential without which the learning of language is rigid.” (Garvie 1991: 56)

„It is childhood... that will bring the next generations of the young to European-ness.“(Meek 2001: 122)

„Quality stories have characters and a plot that engage children, often the art work is as important as the text in telling the story, and they create a strong feeling of satisfaction when the end is reached.“ (Cameron 2001:166)

„It seems a pity to deprive learners of opportunities to hear authentic uses of past tense forms, and the contrast with other tenses, in the meaningful contexts of stories, and I can see no intrinsic reason for supposing that use of past tense would prevent children understand a story. In fact, if they are familiar with stories in their first language, they will probably expect to hear past tense forms and may misconstrue the verbs.“ (Cameron 2001: 166)

„Children delight in imagination and fantasy. It is more than simply a matter of enjoyment, however. In the language classroom this capacity for fantasy and imagination has a very constructive part to play.“ (Halliwell 1993: 7)

„All of these writers and illustrators of picture books, along with figures such as (...) Anthony Browne and Quentin Blake have not only produced bodies of work that are visually exciting, and books that are a delight to read, but they have also been formal innovators.“ (Lewis 2001: 64)

„The British experience of making children’s books multicultural so that, all children could “see themselves” in them is our best example of how critical insistence that fiction for children should reflect social realities brought about changes in publishing practices.“ (Meek 2001: S. X)

„Nor must it be forgotten how important are the teaching aids which lie within the teacher herself, attributes of voice and facial expression and careful use of body language.“ (Garvie 1991: 63)

„If we deny the learner the opportunity to experiment with language and consequently to make mistakes and learn from them, we may be denying him/her an important learning strategy.“ (Williams 1991: 204)

Why storybooks?

Stories are fundamental. Stories very often provide children with an access to literature and culture that otherwise they would not get. There are parents who would like to share books with their children but who have not got the means to do so; books in the classroom may help to bridge the gap between family and school. It is not important to always use the book as a whole – chapters, passages, pictures can initiate the use of language.

- Storybooks are part of a country's culture and thus they combine language learning and cultural awareness
- Storybooks are challenging the imagination
- Storybooks help children expand their own world, sometimes they may even help them cope with their reality
- Sharing storybooks is a fundamental social experience
- Storybooks provide language in a meaningful context
- Storybooks provide grammatical structures (i.e. past tense) in an authentic context
- Storybooks provide children with the possibility to browse, choose their own pace, look carefully at details (different from watching tv)
- Storybooks introduce topics and language in a child orientated way
- Storybooks help children develop creative powers
- In picture books the combination of text and illustration is supportive for the understanding and the interpretation of a story
- Storybooks are literature

How to select storybooks?

The range of storybooks is constantly expanding. Parents as well as teachers may find it difficult to make a choice. In using some of the questions below you may get some support in directing your way. In addition the support of librarians as well as bookshop-assistants may be helpful.

- Are different types of storybooks (animal stories, fantasy stories, stories with rhyming words ...) represented in the classroom?
- Are there differences in the style of the illustrations between the books?
- Are the main characters boys as well as girls?
- Is the book suitable (psychologically) for the age group?
- Can children identify with the main character or with any other character?
- Will there be links to their personal experiences?
- Is the book fun?
- Has it got humour in it?
- How does the language match the children's language skills?
- Does the book match cross-curricular topics?
- Is it a book the children can read themselves?
- Is it a book they can read words or passages from?
- Is it a book they can understand without reading the text?

How to use storybooks?

You can use storybooks in various ways. Before choosing any of the following options it is important to recall your aims for the particular book you have chosen in accordance with the age and ability of your pupils.

- Anticipating the plot from the title, front page, key words, single pages, passages....
- Reading and sharing a book over a period of several days
- Identifying special characters and describing them
- Telling the story from a different perspective
- Making your own book with your favourite scenes
- Making your own follow-up story
- Introducing new vocabulary
- Revising vocabulary
- Introducing new structures
- Working with passages or sentences from a book to trigger the imagination
- Looking at other storybooks either by the same author or with a similar topic or with a similar plot
- Concentrating on listening
- Developing ideas for project work and cross-curricular activities
- Dramatizing the book, dialogues, role - play ...

Some examples for using books

1. **Emma Chichester Clark: Where Are you, Blue Kangaroo?**

Emma Haughton, Angelo Rinaldi: Rainy Day

Transparencies showing the front pages of the two books

aims: gain information from front pages
develop ideas for anticipating stories
introduce technical terms

transparency: My favourite picture book

aim: keep a record about books you like

2. **Anthony Browne: Changes**

Anthony Browne: Willy the dreamer

coloured copies from different pages of the two books

aim: work in pairs and find sentences to go with the picture
use language for different ability groups

(three sentences for beginners– three sentences for advanced learners)

transparencies showing the pages

aim: share some of the sentences with the other learners

3. **Karen Wallace, Jon Berkeley: Scarlett Beane**

transparency from the dust jacket

aims: recognize different vegetables
memorize vegetables

revise the names of vegetables through playful activities

transparency from the last page

aim: develop ideas for project work such as making a collage, cooking

4. **Michael Rosen, Neal Layton: Rover**

transparencies with text only - three different pages

aim: understand the text

make assumptions about the character of the story

transparencies with text and illustrations

aim: tell a story from different perspectives

5. **Trish Cooke, Helen Oxenbury: So much**

coloured copies from different pages

aim: work in groups

ask questions to find out what the book is about (one person is looking at the page, whereas the others cannot see it)

use question patterns/structures

6. **Allan Ahlberg, André Amstutz: Chicken, Chips, and Peas**

title of the book only

aim: predict the storyline

text of the whole story being read out

aim: listen to a story and make comparisons to predicted stories

Resource Books being used in this seminar

Storybooks – Picture books

Ahlberg, Allan, Amstutz, André (1999): *Chicken, Chips, and Peas*. London: Longman.
Browne, Anthony (1997): *Changes*. London: Walker Books.
Browne, Anthony ((2000): *Willy The Dreamer*. London: Walker Books.
Emma Chichester Clark (2001): *Where Are You, Blue Kangaroo?* Collins: London.
Cooke, Trish, Oxenbury, Helen (1996): *So much*. London: Walker Books.
Emma Haughton (2000): *Rainy Day*. London: Picture Corgi Book.
Rosen, Michael, Layton, Neal (2000): *Rover*. London: Bloomsbury Paperbacks.
Wallace, Karen, Berkeley, Jon (1999): *Scarlette Beane*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Books for Teachers

Cameron, Lynne (2001): *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge Language Teaching Library.
Garvie, Edie (1991): "Teaching English through Story". In: Kennedy, Chris and Jarvis, Jennifer: *Ideas and Issues in Primary ELT*. Walton-on-Thames: The Centre for British Teachers. 56–65.
Halliwell, Susan (1993): *Teaching English in The Primary Classroom*. London: Longman.
Lewis, David (2001): *Reading Contemporary Picturebooks*. London: Routledge/Falmer
Meek, Margaret (ed.) (2001): *Children's Literature and National Identity*. London: Trentham Books.
Niemann, Heide (2002): *Mit Bilderbüchern Englisch lernen*. Seelze-Velber: Kallmeyer.
Williams, Marion (1991): "A framework for teaching English to young learners." In: Brumfit, Christopher; Moon, Jayne; Tongue, Ray (ed.): *Teaching English to Children – From Practise to Principle*. London: Collins. 203–213.