

Storytelling as a Method of Instruction

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Working with Eklavya Foundation's *Mohalla Education Activity Centre* (MLAC) and government schools, we have gained some insight into how children learn languages and how we can assist them to do so through songs, stories, folktales, poems, etc. Here are some of my experiences with how stories help primary-grade children achieve expected learning outcomes, such as listening attentively and speaking without hesitation, looking closely at a picture and describing it, sharing and describing experiences based on their life and environment, questioning, reasoning, comparing. Storytelling aids in the development of linguistic skills and is an easy link to the school environment and curriculum.

Storytelling and language

When I pick up a book to tell a story, I first show children the pictures. The joy on the children's faces when they hear the title and look at the pictures is priceless. Storytelling has to be inclusive, and every child must be listened to, and their participation ensured. Otherwise, their enthusiasm will quickly fade.

Since discussing a story gives children a wonderful opportunity to use language, showing children pictures, talking about them, asking questions, and listening to their experiences that are similar to those in the tale are crucial elements of language development. It has also been noted that when all the children in the class talk together, even children who hesitate to express themselves feel free to speak.

Folktales are particularly suitable for children since they represent everyday life, necessities, nature and struggles and children can relate to their own environment. Children from classes I to III in a primary school in Hoshangabad were told the story *Shaljam* (Turnip, Eklavya), a folk tale with beautiful illustrations. I showed the children the pictures and asked them what they saw. Trees, plants, roads, houses, fields, rivers, huts, mountains, human

beings, animals and flowers were some of their responses. They even named the flowers: *gainda* (marigold) and *shevanti* (chrysanthemum). As all the children were speaking, a class I child joined and pointed out three small birds that no one else had seen.

Introducing a story

Before beginning a story, I find it useful to discuss all the issues related to it because in this way, we can introduce the children to numerous things in their surroundings while narrating the story. Along with this, children's experiences can be included in the classroom, and work that follows (including discussions and activities) can be focussed on the ideas offered by them.

When I asked, 'Has anyone seen a turnip, and how does it look?', many children raised their hands. Some children thought it looked like an onion, others said radish or carrot, yet others said cabbage, and a child stated it was purple, like brinjal. Another question arose from this: Has anyone noticed the turnip growing? Two or three hands went up. 'Under the soil,' remarked Aryan from class III. I asked what else grew underground. Carrot, radish, groundnut, and that thing...which is red like blood, yes... the beetroot, potato, onion, garlic, the children exclaimed in unison.

'Tell me, have you ever eaten turnips before, and how did you eat them—raw or cooked?' And I discovered that very few children had eaten turnips. According to one child, it is chopped and eaten with roti. Another had eaten it raw as part of a salad. A third child stated that he ate it in the form of a curry. Another child told us that his mother had made turnip and pea pickle and they ate it with *dal-chawal*. This led to a discussion. My final question was, 'OK, tell me which pickles have you eaten?'

The children began talking about mango, lemon, gooseberry, chilli, jackfruit, fish, and turmeric pickles. Continuing the conversation, I added that I had eaten garlic, ginger, mushrooms, red chilli, *karonda*, and a mixed pickle with carrot,

cauliflower, turnip, and peas. Since the children were not familiar with *karondas* (small, sour berries), I *Googled* it and showed them the plant and fruit.

We had not even got close to the story until now. The talk had focused solely on the turnip. I showed the children all the pictures in the story one by one and asked them to figure out the story. The children chatted a lot about each picture and the vegetables shown growing. They observed each picture carefully- a milkman, a girl turning on the tap, the grandfather watering the field, the grandmother collecting vegetables in a cart and so on.

As we turned the pages, we came to the part where the grandfather calls the grandmother because he is unable to dig up a turnip on his own. Since she too is unable to pull it out, she summons the girl. When I asked if the turnip would come out now, the children responded in the affirmative because, they said, the girl is stronger than her grandparents. A child told me that even in her home, her father could move items that her grandfather could not. However, when the youngsters saw the picture on the next page, they concluded that the turnip had still not emerged. Perhaps a lot of strength is required since it is firmly rooted, they said. They noticed that the mule, hen, and chicks were laughing at the scene. Next, the girl summons the mule, who catches hold of her plait to help in the pulling of the turnip. One by one, all the animals on the farm joined the task of pulling out the turnip. They clutched each other fiercely till the turnip finally emerged.

All the children burst out laughing because they were having so much fun looking at the picture where everyone falls on each other when the turnip comes out.

I asked them how a small mouse could pull out a turnip when so many others could not. One child thought that the mouse had nibbled at the roots, which was why it finally came out, or perhaps it was helped by a friend.

Even without narration, by just looking at the pictures, our story ended here. However, I re-enacted it with some children dressed as the story's characters (the turnip, the old man, the old lady, the girl, the mule, the dog, the cat, and the mouse). The children enjoyed watching the story unfold in front of their eyes. According to the

narrative, everyone eventually fell on top of each other and began scuffling on purpose.

Using questions to aid thinking

Did they have any questions or concerns about the events in the story or the ending, I asked the students. This helps to find out what their thoughts are after hearing the narrative.

This form of conversation on stories, I believe, opens up many dimensions of the language while also allowing us to touch on numerous topics at once. Exchanges with the children, on what they liked or disliked about the narrative, such as which parts of the narrative they did not like, or what could be improved, increases participation. The impact is palpable. As seen here, the children made a spontaneous attempt to think of and express a line at least on practically every picture.

Using storybooks optimally

In our experience, the main challenge for teachers is determining when and how to use storybooks since they are constantly under pressure to complete the syllabus. Teachers suggested that we come to their schools and do the activities with storybooks and give them ideas that they would be able to follow. We organised Reading Fairs for these schools. These Reading Fairs included activities, such as storytelling, finding the given words and pictures in books, playing snatch-the-book game by providing clues about the book (its colour, picture, name) to help children get closer to their expected learning outcomes.

The goal of this entire exercise was to demonstrate the importance of storytelling in language acquisition and ensuring teachers' involvement in activities, attempting to break their hesitation of telling a tale through gestures, talking and understanding. As a result, the next time I went to school, the children told me that they had read all the books I had given them. Some stories were read out to the students by their teacher, while some they read themselves during their leisure time. They requested us for more books. Children are now in love with storybooks!

Keeping the children's interests in mind, we can explore many exciting ways to enliven and strengthen their communication skills through storytelling. By predicting what will happen next in the story, children progressively become

acquainted with the rules of the language. Storytelling can be a highly beneficial and engaging

activity to help children learn to read in the early years of primary school.



Figure 1. Learning to enjoy a book



Gayatri has spent many years working in the Eklavya Foundation's Children's Library in Hoshangabad. She is currently working with children, teachers, and the community on the teaching-learning process in government schools in the Hoshangabad block as part of the *Jashn-e-Taleem* project. She enjoys spending time with children and writing about her experiences with them. She can be contacted at gayatri@eklavya.in