

Power of Stories in Language Learning

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The fact that our brains are more engaged when we listen to stories is widely accepted and is an area of research. Yet, the question still remains: why does the narrative structure of a story, where events unfold in a sequential manner, have such a profound impact on our learning?

The answer is quite straightforward: our brains are inherently wired for stories – telling and listening. At the heart of every story is a series of cause-and-effect connections, which is the type of sequential thinking that is the basis of how we naturally process information. Whether we are carrying out daily errands, working, or spending time with our loved ones, we constantly construct, even if only briefly, stories in our minds to make sense of our actions and interactions. Storytelling taps into our natural inclination for sequential thinking and helps us process and retain information more effectively. This is particularly true for very young children, whose brains are still developing and are highly receptive to new information and experiences. It exposes them to new ideas, concepts, and experiences, and they learn about cause-and-effect relationships, problem-solving strategies, and the consequences of actions. They also develop language skills, vocabulary (which improves learners' ability to recall and use new words in context), and a deeper understanding of emotions and empathy.

The focus of this article is to understand why integrating storytelling into everyday classroom activities to teach content can be an invaluable tool to enhance student learning by supporting language development in young learners.

Before going deeper into an explanation of why storytelling was, and continues to be, important for young learners, a definition of storytelling is necessary since it is different from reading a story aloud or other types of performance reading. Several definitions abound, but one that appears unambiguous is Roney's (1983) where he suggests that 'In its most basic form, storytelling is a process whereby a person (the teller), using mental imagery, narrative structure, and vocalisation or

signing, communicates with other humans (the audience) who also use mental imagery and, in turn, communicate back to the teller primarily via body language and facial expressions, resulting in the co-creation of a story.'

In primary language classrooms, storytelling is a dynamic and versatile practice that typically unfolds across three distinct stages.

Stages of storytelling

First, pre-story activities entice and engage children with the story while also introducing or reinforcing pertinent language and vocabulary. Next, during-the-story activities sustain children's attention, guiding and supporting their comprehension of the tale. Finally, post-story activities encourage children to actively employ the story's language and share personal responses.

Through these stages, children cycle through the different phases and go through a process of revision of not just content but, in many ways, storytelling is a holistic approach towards cultivating a deeper understanding of language, expanding their vocabulary, and developing critical thinking skills, all while enjoying the captivating power of stories.

Sometimes teachers assume that, by default, their classrooms provide opportunities to use and hear rich language. This is not always true. Teachers need to make intentional plans that integrate language associated with literacy learning (Flynn, 2016), and one such activity is storytelling. During story circle activities, teachers have the opportunity to, for example, promote activities such as wordplay, rhyming, onset and rime,¹ and isolating various sounds within a word, leading to a child's well-developed phonemic awareness and, eventually, good abilities to spell and decode (Soderman et al, 2013).

Once a child acquires about 50-100 words, language develops quickly (Soderman et al, 2013). Children tend to show fluency in speaking around

the age of four or five, with a very high success rate (Bryen, 1996; Cambourne, 1986). Speaking is a child's strong suit, but the language used in communication is more functional than academic. They are using language rather than analysing it. In general, storytelling fits perfectly with these notions because it is primarily oral-language based. It utilises a child's oral language expertise in a functional rather than academic way and, therefore, is accessible to every child.

As a learning tool, storytelling can be used for sharing content in all areas of the curriculum, but it is of great value especially in the English language classroom since it builds awareness of print literature. During story time, children follow along as the teacher reads slowly with her finger moving along the pages of the book. The first step to decoding words is to understand that the text on a page generally tends to move from left to right. Children can also be invited to be co-creators in the storytelling process.

Storytelling allows for a language-rich environment. It has considerations for opportunities that allow students to use language in extended turns (back-and-forth conversations between an adult and a child) and to elaborate on ideas. For instance, when adults in the child's immediate learning environment use longer, more complex utterances and syntactically complex language, it cascades to children picking up the ability to speak in extended turns and using syntactically complex utterances. This type of learning is important because children use context cues, including cues provided by sentence structure, to learn new words. Familiarity with diverse syntactic forms predicts language comprehension and is ultimately related to reading comprehension.

This acquisition is followed by adding action verbs and simple formulaic phrases (*I want, Stop it, Don't want that, Please*). Once there is sufficient receptive vocabulary and evidence that communicating with others is occurring in its most natural form and there is encouragement and opportunities for practice, children are usually on their way to rapid advancement (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2013).

Familiar ground

It is very important during these early stages for

teachers to ensure that children hear, see and read what is familiar. As an example, in a classroom, what is being read in the form of a story must also support what is being discussed in circle time or during small group interactions. Take a story like the following:

One bright morning, as the sun smiled down on the earth, a small seed that Meena had planted in her garden, came to life. The tiny leaves of the sapling pushed and pushed against the black soil, and one day, as they pushed, two green leaves came out of the seed pods. Meena watered them every day and soon the sapling became a plant. As the plant grew, she noticed a small bud on the very tip of the plant. As days went by, the bud began to slowly open, and one fine morning, Meena was greeted by a bright yellow sunflower.

This story can be used not only to teach content but also language. One way is to create an attribute chart. Attribute charts are powerful tools that help children build expressive vocabulary and learn words in a language they are trying to acquire. In the above story, the teacher can show students a real sunflower, have students plant their own seeds and watch them grow. All of this can be done through the mode of a story. Through an attribute chart, a teacher can elicit not only words related to science but also words that describe the flower such as 'beautiful', 'yellow', 'bright' and so on. Of course, there are multiple ways in which a story can lend itself to learning.

Stories and storytelling are particularly effective when teaching English to young learners because they provide clear and unambiguous language in real-life contexts. Additionally, stories are motivating and inspire children's imagination, enabling them to make connections across different subjects. When using stories, learners can easily access contextualised language because it is presented in a familiar context, supported by illustrations and drawings. By placing language in a specific situation, learners can better understand the meaning and context of the language used. This approach to teaching English creates a more cohesive learning experience that helps students connect language to their everyday lives.

One essential skill that young learners often develop naturally, but may not receive explicit instruction in, is listening. Listening is arguably the most critical skill for young learners to cultivate. Children have already acquired this specialised skill before they enter the classroom, as listening is a fundamental

aspect of learning to communicate. Storytelling is an effective way to capitalise on children's established listening abilities and integrate them into the learning process. Teachers benefit from this advantage, as they can focus on developing what students already possess, much in contrast to the skills of reading and writing, which require formal instruction and multiple interventions.

Listening is not a passive activity; it demands significant cognitive processing. When children listen to a story, they must process what they hear and see, as well as comprehend the

language and content being presented. To help children understand the story, teachers should allow for 'thinking time', so that they have the necessary time to carry out the complex linguistic and cognitive processing required.

Storytelling is a vital tool that supports language learning, and it is important for teachers to keep utilising this timeless tool. Storytelling does not require sophisticated technology or expensive storybooks. Instead, teachers and students can collaborate and co-create stories from their daily experiences to create a rich learning environment.

Here are a few storybook recommendations for various ages that are themed around the natural world:

The Poop Book by Tejaswini Apte and Sujatha Padmanabha Kalpavriksh

The Monster Who Could not Climb a Tree by Tanya Majumdar Kalpavriksh

Vatsala Loves Snakes by Arthy Muthanna Singh and Mamta Nainy, Karadi Tales

The Insect Boy by Shobha Viswanath, Karadi tales

Dorjee's Stripes by Anshumanni Ruddra, Karadi Tales

Endnotes

- i Onset-rime is the process of breaking or separating words into two parts: onset is the initial phonological unit of any word, and rime is the string of letters that follow. Rime usually consists of a vowel and a final consonant sound.

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