

# USING SHORT STORIES IN TEACHING VOCABULARY AND GRAMMAR TO PRIMARY SCHOOL LEARNERS IN THEIR ENGLISH CLASS

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## **Abstract**

*This paper examines some principles to adopt in using short stories in teaching vocabulary and grammar to primary school learners in their English class. Literature is one of the most important resources supporting the grammatical structure of English as a Foreign Language/as a Second Language (EFL/ESL) learners as well as the linguistic components of English language, and thus literature helps students improve their English and at the same time reach communicative competence. Therefore, the aim of this study is to show how short stories can be used effectively for pupils to improve their English and how it can support the grammatical structure of EFL/ ESL learners as well as linguistic components of English language. The paper explains the reasons for using children's stories and criteria for selection of story-books. The paper further explores some principles to adopt in using stories. The major conclusion of the paper is that the language teacher has to plan a number of story- based activities for his/her class and children do the activities autonomously so that cooperation among pupils is promoted and, the pupil- to-pupil interaction is highly developed.*

## **Introduction**

There has been a debate on different approaches for Foreign Language (FL) teaching throughout the history of language teaching. These different approaches have not been the same as a result of change in theories and methods used in FL teaching especially for the objectives of language teaching (Hall, 2015). Furthermore, language teachers have been forced to develop and use new and different methods in the process of language

teaching to be effective in language teaching. Literature is undoubtedly, one of the main resources used as an effective means of language teaching. Particularly, literature was regarded as the most important part of foreign or second language teaching during the period of Grammar Translation Method. The purpose of this method was to enable language learners to read the classical texts successfully through the method of translation (Hall, 2015). This method helped language learners to learn the target language through translation of sentences from target language into the learners' first language and from the first language of learners into the target language. Students had a chance to practice grammatical rules and vocabulary. Language teachers expected from their students to read and translate literary texts because these texts were assumed to represent "models of good writing and illustrations of the grammatical rules of the language (Duff & Maley, 2016).

On the other hand, with the emergence of other methods and approaches such as Audio-Lingual Method, Silent Way, Desuggestopedia and the Communicative Approach, literature lost its prestige. For example communicative approach focused on the language activities and effective communication. Hall (2015) explained the communicative method as "learners negotiating meaning for themselves, learning by doing things with language in authentic contexts" (p. 51). During communicative period, effective communication was important but literature was ignored and it lost its function in the field of language learning and teaching. But there was a problem about the function of Communicative Approach. The main aim was to get and convey the correct message but not to be careful about the correct grammar or pronunciation. In the early 1980s, the attitude toward the use of literature in language teaching seemed more encouraging. Some language scholars and researchers such as Duff and Maley (2016) and Carter and Long (2011) explored that literature was neglected as a language learning material. Zyngier (2014, 213) points out that literature as a language learning material "never went away and has always been a large part of English as a Foreign Language for many learners."

In addition, many language scholars stress that the language of everyday communication is significant in Communicative Approach and the language of literature has no real linguistic difference. Zyngier (2014, 3) as a language scholar also thought that "language of literary texts was not much different from the language of everyday communication" Carter and Long (2011) also claimed that communicative language and literary language have no real difference.

### **Using Short Stories**

Using short story as a material will be a useful technique for language teachers not only to provide various rules of grammar, syntax and phonology but also to improve the students' creativity. As all known, short story as a genre is always simple and short. Therefore, it will not distress the pupils and lead to understand the theme easier. According to Ariogul (2011), short story used as a material in ESL\ EFL curriculum offers these benefits:

- (a) provides more creative, encrypt, challenging texts that require personal exploration supported with prior knowledge for advanced level readers;
- (b) promotes critical thinking skills;
- (c) makes the students' reading task easier due to being simple and short when compared with other literary genres;
- (d) facilitates teaching a foreign culture (i.e. serves as a valuable instrument in attaining cultural knowledge of the selected community).

Furthermore, short story makes contribution to the development of cognitive analytical abilities by bringing the whole self to bear on a compressed account of a situation in a single place and moment (Sage, 2007).

A teacher can follow up these activities while using short stories in his\her lesson:

- a. want students to predict what will happen next, or what happened just before;
- b. want students to select familiar structures of grammar, morphology, syntax;
- c. ask students to choose unknown words and to try to guess the meaning of them before looking at dictionary;
- d. want them to write a background character description of one of the characters;
- e. ask students to imagine they are in the same story as a character and ask whether they have different reactions against the events in the story.

In brief, using short story give a chance to raise the students' awareness towards the target language and culture, and become familiar with different structures of grammar, morphology, phonology and syntax of the target language.

### **Reasons for Using Children's Stories**

Children enjoy listening to stories in their mother tongue. Story-telling is an ideal introduction to foreign languages as stories provide a familiar context for the child. Moreover, if teachers want to attract children's attention they must propose a motivating activity such as story-telling. Children start enjoying literature from an early age by the teacher's use of extensive reading of stories. They develop their literary competence -a combination of linguistic, socio-cultural, historical and semiotic awareness (Carter & Long, 2011). Literature, in general, allows pupils to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different from their own. Consequently, children learn to respect other cultures and to be involved in them.

In addition to this, story-telling provides contexts for talking, listening, reading, writing and other activities such as dance and drama. According to several critics, there are a number of reasons why teachers use children's stories which are explained below:

- a. Stories are motivating and fun creating a desire to communicate. They develop positive attitudes and help children to keep on learning. Positive affective factors facilitate acquiring a second language. Children will learn better if they have a positive attitude towards what they are doing.
- b. Stories exercise the imagination. Children imagine sceneries, characters and so on about a story. For example, if they become personally involved in a story they can identify with some characters.
- c. Stories provide a rich resource for education about human societies, offering insights into life in many different communities and into complex cultures.
- d. Stories are a useful tool in linking fantasy and imagination with the child's real world. So children can make sense of their everyday life. Stories help children to understand the world and to share it with others. "Nine to twelve -year-olds are developing their ability to appreciate other viewpoints. At this age, stories about family and friends should not only reassure children about themselves but also provide them with new insights into how other families and children cope with various situations. Children at this age enjoy stories that extend their experiences (Brumfit, Moon & Tongue, 2011). On the other hand, there is a need to

make language learning easier for young children by relating it to their experiences in everyday life.

- e. Literature has a social and emotional value, which are vital parts of its role in the development of children's language learning skills and literacy. Listening to stories in class is a shared social experience. Storytelling provokes a response of laughter, sadness, excitement and anticipation, which can encourage the child's social and emotional development. In addition, there is always a sort of interaction between the reader and his listeners so s/he can ask for the listeners' collaboration to say what happens next, for instance. Listening to stories is a natural way of acquiring language. The child learns to deduce what happens next, to deduce the meaning of words from the context or visual aids. This helps to build their confidence. Moreover, children need to develop a series of characteristics to enable them to fit into the society they live in, to become aware of themselves in relation to others, to share and co-operate. They can achieve this by listening to stories. For instance, children learn about other experiences and they can compare those experiences with theirs.
- f. Children enjoy listening to stories over and over again. This allows certain language items to be acquired while others are being overtly reinforced. Little by little they make sense out of the listening. In addition, repetition also encourages participation in the narrative, thereby providing a type of pattern practice in a meaningful context.
- g. Telling stories is an example of input -input of language through listening and reading- for the child to activate and develop his own learning mechanisms. Moreover, the process of making input comprehensible is an active constructive process (Genesee, 1994). An important condition for language acquisition to occur is that the student understands input language that contains a structure 'a bit beyond' his/her current level of competence. So they can understand most of it but still be challenged to make progress (Galeote, 2012). Neither should the input be so easy as to make the learner become bored because there is nothing new for him/her. Stories introduce some new vocabulary and sentence structures. In general terms, children acquire first the general semantic characteristics of words (Galeote, 2012). Their meanings are contextualized and can be inferred from the pictures or teacher's

gestures. Moreover, the teacher usually reads slowly and gives them time to think about the meaning and look at the pictures. Many traditional stories abound with powerfully repeated phrases such as 'Goldilocks' - Who's been sitting on my chair? And who's broken it? Added baby bear... Who's been sleeping in my bed? Baby bear ads: and who's still sleeping there now? These examples can be used as an almost subliminal grammar input (Morgan & Rinvoluceri, 2013). On the other hand, story-telling is an activity to develop the child's understanding as he is in the silent period -taking place in the first stages of second language acquisition- in which he is just receiving and making sense of input but he is not able to speak in the second language properly.

- h. In Primary Education the children's capacity for conscious learning of forms and grammatical patterns is still relatively undeveloped. Howe and Johnson (2012) argue that it is often forgotten that in primary education understanding is mainly semantic. Not only does listening to stories allow the teacher to introduce or revise new vocabulary, but also sentence structures and English pronunciation in meaningful contexts by means of pictures, gestures, intonation, facial expression and so on. Children acquire them unconsciously as they listen to the story for the meaning -in order to know what is going on. Consequently, children must be active participants in the construction of meaning. Moreover, it is easier for them to remember the vocabulary and grammar as they were given in a meaningful and motivating context.
- i. Listening to stories develops the child's listening and concentration skills via: visual clues (pictures) or general knowledge. In this way school kids can understand the story and they are motivated for language learning. The teacher can maintain their attention for example by asking them to listen for the gist -that is, looking for the plot of the story. So, the pupil gets the idea that s/he can understand the text without knowing the meaning of every word. Children need a lot of practice in order to understand a tale. Moreover, the use of these stories, for example, which usually contains a lot of direct speech, helps the learner develop a sense of how intonation is used to express attitudes and feelings.
- j. Stories can be used to reinforce conceptual development in children (colour, shape, time, size etc.).
- k. Stories are a way of getting children to learn for themselves. That is, the case with the following:

1. Reinforcing thinking strategies (comparing, classifying, predicting, planning etc.)
  2. Developing strategies for learning English (guessing the meaning of new words, training the memory etc.)
  3. Developing study skills (understanding and interpreting charts and graphs, organizing work and so on.).
1. Story-telling is a powerful way of helping pupils to learn in all areas of the curriculum. According to Howe and Johnson (2012), the reason is that narrative is a universal way of organising events and ideas. Stories can be chosen to consolidate learning in school subjects across the curriculum, which is appropriate to the pupil's cognitive level. This is true with:
- a. Mathematics (telling the time, numbers and measuring).
  - b. Science (animals, outer space, flowers, how seeds grow. . .).
  - c. History (pre-historic animals, traditional holidays, understanding the passing of time).
  - d. Geography and the environment (shopping and shops in the local area, neighbourhood parks).
  - e. Art and craft (drawing, making masks, making puppets).
  - f. Music and drama (singing songs, playing instruments, miming, dramatizations).

Story-books can be used to provide variety and extra language practice. However, the teacher must not use story telling only for teaching grammar and vocabulary because children would not be so motivated and ready to listen to a story.

### **Criteria for Selection of Story-Books**

Stories must be chosen depending on the age and the linguistic level of the pupils. Moreover, there must be a particular purpose when selecting a story so that it will carry the ideas the teacher wishes to focus on. Another important question to think about is whether to use simplified or authentic story-books for the children. There are many authentic story-books written for English-speaking children, which are also suitable for those learning English. Moreover, authentic story-books are full of examples of real language although simplified stories can be easier for the Primary Education pupils (Ellis & Brewstwer, 2011).

Children sometimes already know the story the teacher is going to tell. Genesee (1994) argues that choosing stories, which are culturally familiar, may be especially helpful because prior knowledge of characters and plots may make the stories potentially more comprehensible to the learners than unfamiliar ones. If a child already knows the story in his first language he will be able to follow the English version of the same story. S/He already knows the plot and the teacher can facilitate his/her understanding by using body language or using pictures. Stories can be chosen to support a cross-curricular teaching approach. They can develop ideas in a variety of different subject areas. They can explain concepts by providing illustrations of practical applications (Wright, 2016).

The teacher has to grade the input the children receive by means of stories from less complicated to more complicated ones. If the story is very difficult to understand the teacher can modify or simplify it. Ellis and Brewster (2011) give some possible solutions. The teacher must check the clarity of the text and the vocabulary. Consequently, it may be necessary to substitute familiar words or expressions for more unfamiliar ones. That is usually the case with idioms. They are difficult to understand for children so the teacher will change them for easier words. It is also interesting to check the word order, as it can be difficult to understand. The teacher can sometimes perform actions to make the meaning more explicit. S/He will also check the grammar. It is better to avoid too many tenses or complicated structures. The teacher must check the sentence (its length and complexity), as it is easier to understand a short sentence. So, a long sentence can be split into two sentences. Moreover, the teacher must also check how ideas are explained so that children understand them. If the number of ideas is excessive the teacher can also leave out some of them to reduce the length of the story without spoiling the overall effect. Apart from this, the story-book selected needs a good storyline, in which the children will become actively involved since they can anticipate what may happen next. The story must not only be easy to understand but also appealing to the children.

Another important feature to take into account is the quality of illustrations. They should appeal to the young readers and help them to understand the meaning of the story. Illustrations are crucial to books for young learners, particularly for those for whom English is a second language. They should support the text and stimulate the reader. Good illustrations will enhance children's understanding of the text, and promote lots of exciting discussions (Brumfit, Moon and Tongue 2011). Children like stories full of illustrations



in bright colours and with interesting characters. They make the meaning of the story easier to understand than a story without any illustration at all. A story with illustrations is accessible, useful and relevant for children learning English because they can understand the story on their own.

In selecting stories for the classroom Morgan and Rinvoluceri (2013) consider two main criteria: if it is a story that the teacher would enjoy telling and if it is a story that pupils might find entertaining. Ellis and Brewster (2011) also give criteria for selecting storybooks. For them there are several points of view: The first is linguistics (that is, the difficulty of structures and vocabulary, the facility of pronunciation given by rhymes, rhythms or intonations and the content, if it is relevant and interesting). The second is psychological (if there are attractive visuals, if the story encourages participation by using repetitions or prediction, if it is motivating and if it arouses curiosity). Finally, the third one is cultural (if the story creates positive attitudes towards the target language and the target culture and, finally, if the language is authentic and appropriate for the children). Wright (2016) has got similar ideas about choosing a story as well. He argues that the story chosen must be appealing to the children. They must like it. The story must be suitable to the students' age, linguistic level and maturity. The school children must understand it in order to enjoy it. The story gives them the opportunity to listen to English. However, neither should the paragraphs be too long or too descriptive. Children can get lost with those paragraphs. It is easier for them to understand characters speaking because their conversation is more concrete and closer to the pupil. In addition, the story must be appropriate for the pupils and for the ideas the teacher wishes to focus on. Finally, it is better if the school children find the storyteller interesting.

The teacher must pay attention to selecting the appropriate time and place for story-telling, making sure that there will not be any interruptions, choosing the right story and creating the right mood.

### **Some Principles to Adopt in Using Stories**

Reading stories aloud attracts the children's interest in language and books. It exposes them to good models of Received Pronunciation English. Story-telling is a positive motivating activity, which helps them to develop the habit of reading from a very young age. It helps children to become better readers, writers and users of language in the future. The teacher must think about whether reading the story him/herself or using a CD or a DVD. Both a CD

and a DVD provide variety by allowing pupils to hear English spoken with another accent. The voice in the CD and the DVD provide a constant model. Moreover, some recordings contain amusing sound effects and there are also adapted voices for different characters, intonation patterns and so on (Ellis & Brewster, 2011). A DVD also provides the movements of the characters and the sceneries giving clues to understand what is going on. However, the teacher's reading becomes more flexible for the children. They are going to share something. The teacher can stop and ask pupils questions. They can relate to the story to their own experiences by means of these questions. This is not possible with the CD or the DVD. Consequently, it is considered better to use teacher story-telling than using the CD or the DVD.

Many critics claim that the environment, which is created in class for the story-telling, is important. It must be relaxing. The layout of the classroom can also help to acquire this relaxation in the class. Just asking the pupils to sit in a circle on the floor can change it. Children understand it is going to be a different kind of activity. The teacher attracts their attention. Both the teacher and the pupils are going to share something special. If the school children change the layout of the class it is also a way of sending a message that the story-telling time is fun and relaxing. Children must feel comfortable in class while listening to stories. If they are relaxed and comfortable, then they are more open to what they are about to hear. There are different ways to achieve it, for instance: playing music, showing a puppet, wearing a hat or just showing the plastic bag where the teacher has got all his/her stories. According to Vale and Feunteun (2015, 21):

It has been often demonstrated that a relaxed learning environment supports the learning process. Moreover, when learners feel relaxed and at ease with their classmates, it encourages a wider sharing and exchange of ideas. In this atmosphere, learners gain the confidence to lend and receive support from peers, to take risks with new language in front of the class, and to relate to the teacher without fear of possible ridicule and correction. Furthermore, a supportive atmosphere may lead towards more co-operative work among the pupils.

In this kind of atmosphere the child's affective filter is lowered and acquisition of the second language takes place more easily. Children feel secure and happy in the classroom. So they become independent in the acquisition of the second language. Dunn (2019) applied several principles to the field of second

language teaching. One of the concepts he developed was that of the 'affective filter.' He sees the affective filter as being the emotional disposition of an individual, which acts upon the learning processes. A high affective filter causes the learner to be a relatively inefficient learner. This is likely to result from anxieties, disturbances or inhibitions. A low affective filter, which may result from feelings of relaxation, well-being or success, maximizes learning efficiency (Ellis, 1985). Consequently, using story telling produces a low affective filter in participants because children feel relaxed in these circumstances. The teacher plays an important role in developing a classroom environment, which encourages talk. This can encourage children to value each other. Moreover, this freedom also allows the teacher to discover what the children think (Wright, 2016).

The teacher reads a story, which the children do not have direct access to. Therefore, there is an element of surprise for the children, as they do not know what is going to happen in the story. The teacher attracts their attention in this way. Once the story is finished the teacher can put several copies of the story in the classroom book corner so that the children can look at them in their own time. This provides a natural introduction to the written word in English and to developing reading skills. When the teacher reads the story s/he must take into account that the child's level of concentration might not be very high. S/He can read the whole story or part of it, depending on the length of the story, in a session. S/He can also read the story several times in different sessions. The repetition of the story recycles language previously introduced and pupils learn to predict and participate in the story. This builds up their confidence (Wright, 2016). Their confidence grows as they realize that they can remember more items of vocabulary and sentences, so, they can repeat them along with the teacher. Besides, taking part in story telling becomes a kind of game activity.

The introduction of the story is one of the most important elements in story-telling. Depending on how the introduction is presented, the story might be a success or not. Vale and Feunteun (2015, p. 82) argue, "Reading is a quest for meaning which requires children to be active participants in the construction of meaning." The teacher must help them by giving the tools to construct the meaning of the story before and while reading the story. Many critics agree on this issue and give pieces of advice for this moment. Moreover, the pupil's enjoyment will increase enormously if the teacher ensures that their understanding is supported in several ways.

- a. Relating the literary text to the school children's personal world by asking questions. Children relate the theme to their knowledge and understanding (Carter & Long 2011).
- b. Setting the scene by drawing upon the children's own experiences or their knowledge about the subject and language used in the story.
- c. Providing a context for the story and introducing the main characters. This helps pupils to feel involved and to link their experiences with that of the story to set the scene.
- d. Either providing a brief outline of the main story-line before-hand or reminding pupils of what has happened so far in the story.
- e. Explaining keywords, expressions or cultural information, even in their mother tongue if necessary.
- f. The teacher can elicit key vocabulary and phrases and involve the pupils in predicting what will happen next in a story.
- g. The teacher can also provide visual support with realia, published materials, the teacher's and pupils' drawings on the board, cut out figures, masks, puppets or the illustrations in the story in order to make the story understandable.

Reading like this is seen by many teachers as the most reliable path to the development of reading skills (Brumfit, Moon & Tongue, 2011). For this reason, it is interesting for the teacher to build up a resource bank of potential stories across a number of topics to use any one for story-telling. Also, having a repertoire of ideas and a collection of prototype materials to support the narrative of the stories helps the teacher to tell the story (Kennedy & Jarvis, 2011).

On the other hand, a teacher's story telling skills are very important. There are a number of techniques s/he can use in order to make the experience more enjoyable and successful. The teacher must notice if the pupils are accustomed to story-telling or not. If they are unfamiliar with story-telling the teacher should begin with short sessions that do not demand too much from them and over-extend their concentration span which is quite short. Many critics agree

on the importance of story-telling and give some ideas in order to improve the story telling techniques.

- a. If possible, the children should sit on the floor around the teacher. This is a way of attracting pupils' attention. They are going to do something different to what they usually do. That is why they sit on the floor. Then the teacher makes sure everyone can see both his/her face and the illustrations in the story.
- b. The teacher reads slowly and clearly, giving his/her pupils time to think, ask questions, look at pictures and make comments.
- c. The teacher sometimes makes comments about the illustrations as well. When s/he says a word s/he also points to the illustration at the same time to make him/herself understood. Besides, s/he involves his/her pupils by asking them to point to the illustration and so on.
- d. The teacher encourages his/her pupils to take part in the story-telling by repeating key vocabulary items and phrases. He pauses and looks at them and puts his/her hand to his/her ear to indicate that s/he is waiting for them to join in.
- e. Using gestures, body language, facial expressions, varied intonation, pace and tone, disguising his/her voice for different characters as much as possible to help convey meaning. This keeps the pupils' attention and stresses important words. S/He can involve his/her learners by asking them what is going to happen next while s/he is making the gesture or miming to let them know. So the teacher holds their attention.
- f. S/He can also use the CD and the DVD to allow pupils to listen to the story or watch it, whenever they wish and to reinforce the learning of slower pupils. The teacher can also assess his/her own skills as a story-teller in a number of different ways.
- g. Using CDs, when possible, to provide him/her with a model he can copy and try to rehearse with.
- h. Familiarizing with the book, the story and illustrations. Deciding where to stop his story telling in order to invite the pupils to join in, which vocabulary to stress and so on.

- i. Making the story come alive through the use of intonation, gesture, body- language and so on.

A classroom needs to have a class library in which children have regular and frequent access. Children learn a lot about language, literacy and books when they are allowed a daily time for free-choice reading. Consequently, the teacher should make books available to the children. This will provide them with an introduction to the written word in English. Children can make the connection between what they have heard and memorized and what they see written and illustrated on the page. Several critics emphasize the importance of having a book corner in a classroom. The book corner of the classroom can offer not only stories but also CDs and DVDs with the recording of the stories so that the pupils can listen to them and watch them at home. This happens because the teacher allows pupils to have open access to the book corner. The book corner can consist of a book-case or shelving at its best. A table or cardboard boxes covered in coloured paper can also be used to display the material. It is better if children can easily see the covers of the books. This is more attractive and makes selection much easier. Moreover, this book corner can be decorated with children's drawings, posters or collages, which have been inspired by stories, read to them in class. There are also other things such as flowers, plants, a carpet, cushions that make the book corner cozier, attractive and interesting. This is a way of drawing the pupils' attention towards the book corner. The teacher should involve his/her pupils as much as possible in the organization of the book corner. This is important because looking after the book corner encourages children to take responsibility for the care of the books. In addition to this, if pupils may borrow the books the teacher will need to devise a lending system. In the first weeks the teacher has to act as a librarian to show the children how to organize a library. Then he can appoint two children as librarians each month. According to Dunn (2019, 92), the librarian's duties are to:

- a. keep the library running efficiently;
- b. check that borrowed books are returned;
- c. make pupils aware of new books; and
- d. help teachers to process new books.

Children should have free access to story-books and they become more responsible as the pupils take care of the story-books themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Using story-telling is a motivating activity. The teacher of English fulfills most of the objectives for the English subject in Primary Education given by the Ministry. However, there are more reasons to use them in class. Stories exercise imagination and it is also a way of helping pupils to learn in all areas of their curriculum. However, it is not an easy activity. In addition, the children have to develop their concentrating and listening skills by means of the illustrations or while listening stage tasks. The teacher has to plan a number of story- based activities for his/her class. Children develop the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, but with an emphasis on oral skills. Children do the activities autonomously so that cooperation among pupils is promoted and, consequently, the pupil-pupil interaction as well. They become autonomous in their own learning processes and children learn to learn for themselves.

### **Recommendations**

1. Stories should be used in teaching vocabulary and grammar at the primary school level.
2. Service teachers should be trained, in workshops, to develop story-telling skills, while intern teachers should be exposed to the skills in the course of their training.
3. Class room environment should be well organised and arranged for effective story-telling activities.

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