

Teaching with Children's Literature. Practicalities for TEFL

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Abstract:

The power of stories in both the mother tongue and a foreign language is equal, as there is something universal about stories. They are familiar to children and use patterns that can easily help them learn. They exalt the imagination and are very helpful for both parents and educators/teachers. The special characteristics of young learners are at the same time cognitive, affective and social. Stories used in teaching address all three with great success. This article aims at looking at some practical aspects of using stories in teaching English as a foreign language to students of young ages.

Key words: children's literature, stories, teaching, young learners

The power of children's literature in both the mother tongue and a foreign language is equal, as there is something universal about childhood's stories. They are familiar to children and use patterns and repeated words that can easily help them learn. They exalt the imagination and are very helpful for both parents and educators and teachers. Stories can be told and retold, invented and re-invented and adapted to all contexts, be it the nursery room or the school classroom. A plethora of activities can derive from telling a story and all of them are probably enjoyable to a large extent. Stories also have the great quality of being universal – the same narrative can be found in various parts of the world, because there is a common world of children's themes, characters and motifs. Children literature is therefore highly suitable to students of younger ages. In fact, the books are quite self-explanatory and it is easy to decide on their suitability for a certain age. Nowadays, a lot of the printed books contain clear specifications about age appropriacy, particularly if they address very young ages, such as 3-6. This is an aspect not to be taken lightly, because children may be a difficult audience. Therefore, the teacher should carefully select what books to bring in the foreign language class. The golden rule would be to choose that piece of literature that students would benefit from the most and would also enjoy the best.

The term young learners is defined today by authors like Scott Thornbury as those students of pre-primary and primary school age or sometimes even teenagers. Referring to the long history of TYLE (teaching young learners), Thornbury points out that in multilingual countries, in fact most of the countries nowadays, pre-primary and primary school children start learning English and this becomes the medium of instruction during their secondary education. However, in Romania this is not the case, except for certain CLIL (content and language integrated language) subjects that occasionally appear in the school curricula at high-school level (certain high-end schools choose for example to teach Geography or History in English, but it is often the case of only British Geography and History; it is true, on the other hand, that most if not all schools offer today Computer Science classes as part of their compulsory curricula and in the technologized classroom students are very much likely to interact with English on a regular basis).

Thornbury points out that recent years have indicated a great increase in the teaching of English to young learners, as a foreign or second language, in state and private schooling institutions alike. It often happens

that young learners have English lessons in a public school as well as a private institution in their own free time. In Romania, children start learning English from the preparatory grade, first having one class per week and then gradually moving to two classes per week. The subject itself appears in class catalogues and students are provided with textbooks subsidized by the Ministry of Education, but not from the beginning, and teachers need to find themselves materials to teach in class. However, it is very common that young learners start learning English from kindergarten, more and more kindergartens having their own English teachers or employing some for this purpose. Parents expect their children to start learning English from the earliest age possible, particularly as English is perceived as a lingua franca, an international language for communication. If not in kindergarten, young learners start their study of English in the preparatory grade, or the so-called grade 0 and continue throughout first and second grade, in the form of an optional subject, requested by parents and approved by the local inspectorates. It is a rare fact that schools, especially urban ones, do not offer such English classes, one per week, to very young learners. Therefore, the starting age for learning English is quite young in Romania and this tends to happen all over the world.

As specialists mention, research into the optimal age for learning a foreign language is still inconclusive, some researchers arguing that the earlier the start the better, while others believe that rush may have a bad outcome and at a young age, children learn very quickly and easily so there is no need to decrease the starting age. As for the means of teaching, the same Thornbury mentions immersion into the target foreign language, be it total or partial immersion. The partial one involves the above mentioned CLIL lessons, content based teaching, which has been successfully implemented around Europe, including Romania. These content-based lessons take place once or twice a week, they are sometimes optional and require, in Romania, a separate curriculum to be approved by the local inspectorate. Total immersion into the target language is less frequent in Romania and usually takes place in private schooling institutions, where students study all subjects in English, have native teachers and are encouraged to communicate in English only. Such schools, for example those following the Cambridge system, the so-called Cambridge schools, have recently appeared in Romania as well and are much welcomed.

The special characteristics of young learners, Thornbury explains, are at once cognitive, affective and social. The most relevant cognitive factors are the little knowledge of the world in the case of children and the fact that they are still developing concepts, language and even their memory. It is also worth mentioning young children's inability to conceive the abstractness of the language. Furthermore, children have a limited understanding of metalanguage and may fail to recognize or correct errors. Additionally, very young learners cannot focus for a long period of time so they need to be taught in chunks and they tend to remember 'episodes' rather than things that happen - this explaining the huge success of educational programs for children on TV and nowadays on numerous internet sites.

One such program is the famous 'Sesame Street', started in 1969 as a method of educating the disadvantaged children in the United States. As its own producers underline, Sesame Street television series aimed at meeting the needs of young children and helping them reach their potential:

Our goal is to provide educational experiences through media to help children grow smarter (building their academic skills in science, mathematics and literacy), stronger (both physically and mentally) and kinder to others.[...] to this end, we have delivered research-based, goal-directed content across a variety of

media platforms, including the television show, books, games, mobile apps and community-engagement initiatives for over 45 years.[...] We respond to the contemporary needs of children through a comprehensive whole child curriculum that is adapted on an annual basis with guidance from external early childhood content and research experts...[...] our particular focus shifts depending on what educational gaps need to be addressed by providing children appealing content with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed.

The great success of Sesame Street, confirmed and reconfirmed statistically over and over again may be explained by their offer of very attractive programs which engage children, delivering at the same time well-defined educational content developed in teams of teachers, experts and researchers. Media proved, in the case of Sesame Street, to be very efficient in educating children. Today, Sesame Street has travelled the world, from Egypt to China, from Bangladesh to Indonesia, apparently quite successfully. For instance, an Arab version called Alam Simsim was launched in the form of an outreach program in cities like Cairo and Beni Suef in Egypt. The NGOs that partnered this initiative and research data collected emphasized real positive changes in children's behavior and awareness of health issues. The same happened in other Arab and Asian countries, where disadvantaged children benefited from Sesame Street's input on health issues, vaccination, terminal illnesses or social tolerance. The lesson of this great educational accomplishment is that if the Muppets are able to deliver sensitive messages by enveloping them in entertainment, surely so is the EFL teacher capable to model and instill positive learning attitudes in the case of young classes, by delivering the target language in a manner that engages the student and creates a constructive learning atmosphere.

Some general, common characteristics of young learners are that they have a preference for holistic as opposed to analytic learning and a greater tolerance for ambiguity- they go for the overall gist rather than for single words' meaning, while being predisposed to understanding messages even when they are not aware of other details of a story. This makes children's literature particularly suitable for teaching in general, and teaching a foreign language such as English, in particular. Furthermore, affective factors in teaching young learners include a lack of self-consciousness of children, who tend to express themselves freely. However, there is a continuous need for encouragement and support from the teacher. Young learners are also easier motivated by intrinsic factors such as their interest in engaging tasks or games, in other words learning through play and fun activities; they are less moved by extrinsic motivation such as the need of passing a test. The spectacular explosion of Cambridge Young Learners' tests nowadays proves that even young learners may have such extrinsic motivations: perhaps parents are encouraging them or maybe the general trend is in this direction. In Romania, for instance, the numbers of children taking a Cambridge Young Learners' test in order to obtain a Cambridge certificate for one of the three available levels (Starters, Movers or Flyers) have exponentially grown in the last decade. This may also happen due to the fact that various Cambridge certifications are recognized by the Romanian Ministry of Education and are helpful instead of an entrance examination for the intensive English classes in the 5th and 9th grade.

Rod Ellis discusses based on his extensive research of linguistic literature, the factors responsible for individual differences in learning a second language. He underlines a number of three key factors that occur repeatedly in statistic research. He groups these factors according to whether they constitute

abilities- in other words cognitive capabilities for language learning, propensities, meaning cognitive and affective qualities predisposing to language learning, learner cognitions or conceptions and beliefs about learning the target language, or learner actions (strategies). He also mentions that learners are influenced by certain factors which, under close consideration, reside entirely in the skill and dedication of the EFL teacher. These factors are, according to Ellis: the opportunities for learning, in other words the amount and quality of the target language offered by the teacher and the simplification of acquisition processes responsible for language development. Although it is clear that learners contribute themselves to their learning process and natural aptitudes play a certain role, it is also obvious that young learners are predisposed towards an easier acquisition of a foreign language and it is in the power of the EFL teacher to offer as many, varied and engaging opportunities as possible.

According to Bernard Spolsky, language learning in an EFL or ESL class is much facilitated by three factors: exposure to the target language, motivation to learn the language and opportunities to use the language. It is important that learners should be sufficiently exposed to the target language, have enough opportunities to use the language for their own purposes and to express their own meanings. Literature in the target language represents one of the meaningful ways to increase this exposure. First of all, children literature, if well selected, represents a familiar territory for young learners and they feel comfortable there, which is a pre-requisite of language teaching to the youngsters. Another important aspect of children literature is that it presents patterns, particularly in nursery rhymes and stories; repetition is beneficial for young learners and patterns emphasize that sense of familiarity and comfort which is a very fruitful environment in the EFL class. Furthermore, the new language they encounter in literature is meaningful to them, enjoyable and offers opportunities to meet and use the target language in context. As Angi Malderez points out: 'Telling a story (with supportive visual aids and gestures to aid comprehension) in which new language is embedded, often repeated, and (importantly) presented following normal rules of use, can be a useful first step'. Malderez points out that stories, and this applies to all children literature, match children's natural ways of learning, as they offer a lot of opportunities for play and they stir the imagination. Furthermore, literature follows one of the rules of thumb mentioned above: it teaches in chunks which are often repeated, presented in a pattern and easy to grasp.

For all the reasons developed above, it is highly recommended to bring stories and children's literature to the foreign language class. It can be used in various ways, all of them being entertaining and agreeable to young learners, and at the same time relevant and very useful, as significant authors in the field state.

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