

SHARING SHORT STORIES WITH CHILDREN IN EFL CLASSROOMS : A WAY TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS IN EFL EDUCATION

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The purpose of this paper is to share some experiences teaching literature studies with children of third, fourth and fifth grades in a private school in Bogotá to demonstrate that English can be taught through the exploration of literature. The opportunity to offer learners a chance for literacy through reading stories is rewarding when you witness the joy children feel when opening a colorful book full of surprises and beautiful illustrations. It is important to mention that there are many teachers willing to devote time to read to and with students in the classroom to promote reading habits and to make language learning an interactive, authentic and creative process. But it is also true that for many traditional teachers it is hard to believe that literature is a powerful tool for learning a language, learning about a culture, and if used creatively and efficiently, developing thinking skills in learners.

This paper, based on the application of literature as a recursive process of drafting meaning with children, reveals significant results related to the quality of interaction, the authenticity of language used and the performance in English as a foreign language to confirm that book sharing in literature studies provides powerful stimulation for genuine communication in the language classroom.

During my teaching practice in Glendale, Arizona I became acquainted with the positive effects of using short story reading with ESL learners whose native language was Spanish. After this positive, very productive experience with literature, I wanted to try a similar approach, adapting it to the teaching of English in an EFL setting in Colombia. This idea of including short stories in the language learning process, I thought, would permit both learners and teachers to have a broader perception of the foreign language and the foreign culture.

In addition to my own teaching experience I was also reading in the field of teaching literature in ESL/EFL contexts. That reading supported my intentions and my ideas about how ESL/EFL learners develop their language skills when reading literature. My reading was specifically focused on information with regard to literature as a support to language acquisition, benefits of using literature in ESL/EFL classes and ways of teaching English through the use of short stories.

Benefits of using literature in ESL classes

According to Sandra McKay (1986) literature offers several benefits to ESL classes. It can be useful in developing linguistic knowledge, both on the level of usage and on the level of use. Secondly, to the extent that students enjoy reading literature, it may increase their motivation to interact with a text, and thus ultimately

increase their reading proficiency. Finally, an examination of a foreign culture through literature may increase the understanding of that culture and perhaps encourage imaginative writing.

In addition, research shows that reading aloud to children has a significant effect not only on literacy acquisition (Durkin 1966 ; Clark 1976), but also on language development (Chomsky 1972, Wells 1986). For the child who is acquiring English as a second language, this literacy input is vital. English-as-a-second-language programs that emphasize skills and workbook activities can deprive these young learners of the richly supportive context offered by good children's books.

The use of engaging and motivating children's literature can offer second language readers an exciting entrance into second language literacy (Benzon & Denser 1989 ; Roser, Hoffman, & Faest, 1990 ; Trachtenberg & Ferrugia, 1989). Books portraying familiar faces, events and ambiances with which children can link their own schemata for background experiences may make comprehension easier and school less threatening (Freeman & Freeman, 1992). They can provide ESL learners with a basis for meaningful communication as they share reactions to stories (Flickinger, 1984, Freeman & Freeman, 1992 ; Mims, 1989, Pugh, 1989) and can also offer natural opportunities for generating language by reacting to and retelling stories with puppets or other props ; and can stimulate children's interest in reading books.

Introducing literature as an innovation in EFL

Given this information, I decided attempt to exchange more traditional teaching of English as a foreign language for contextualized teaching through literature

experiences in the classroom. Specifically, in order to apply this new approach, I decided to work with teachers at my school to select short stories to be shared with students in more active classroom sessions. Teachers' input was very valuable in the selection of reading books because they based their judgments on their previous experiences reading to children and their knowledge of students' preferences and level of understanding. Then I decided to team up with a student from the graduate program at the Distrital University who is teaching at that school in Bogotá, to implement strategies to teach English to children of the third, fourth and fifth grades.

The new approach to teaching EFL consisted of a program based on literature reading called *Celebrating Reading* through which students would be able to enjoy while learning and reading stories in the foreign language. It follows a holistic view to teaching that conceives of language development. This program required teachers to devote most of their class time to reading, exploring, discussing and writing about stories with students.

The literature sessions done with the students, include pre-reading activities, reading aloud and/or listening to a story from a cassette, literature discussions, writing reports about the story, creating their own story and watching videos about the story (when the book had a corresponding video). The pre-reading activities were developed by the teacher in order to gather information from student's background experiences that were related to the topic of the story and to elicit students' ideas in the form of prediction of the content of the story. Pictures and illustrations, book covering, etc., were an excellent source for predicting meaning and content when doing pre-reading activities.

The reading activities were developed in different ways: the teacher usually read aloud to students who sat in a circle to listen to the story; however, at other times students listened to the story from a cassette and followed the reading; and at other times they took turns reading aloud or they did silent reading. While reading, the teacher tried to create the appropriate environment and context in order to make children feel they were experiencing the story itself. The teacher also used different voice tones that permitted students to identify characters, what was happening, and what kind of story it was that they were reading. This particular group of students who had extended literature sessions met for literature studies four times a week for a period of sixty minutes. A story may have taken from one to four sessions to finish and along with reading, students colored, illustrated, wrote, reread, and acted out the stories.

Videos from stories were presented after the story was read and students had the chance to compare the author's style and content in the book with the language used in the video.

Another post-reading activity could be to have students make a poster that included characters, features and a message or moral from the story read. The poster would be used as an advertisement for the video of the story to be presented next and to celebrate the reading of one more literature piece. Poster making can also be a challenge for students if it is a contest among them.

Selection of reading books and activities

The decision to use literature as a more creative, active approach to teaching

English as a foreign language to children involved a great deal of thinking and deciding on the type of stories to read to them, considering that the reading should be done progressively from easier to more complex readings that would include different forms of language.

Regarding the degree of difficulty in understanding the readings it is important to remark that stories that were familiar to students and which had previously been read by them or to them in their native language, represented a lower level of difficulty than stories that had never been read before. This highlighted the importance of moving from the known (familiar stories) to the unknown (unfamiliar stories) as a way to encourage learners to take risks and to experience non-threatening situations that may help them feel more confident in participating actively in reading and discussing in English.

To explore this aspect, teachers decided to read the story of **Pinocchio** to the third, fourth and fifth grade students (a story we assumed 100% of the students already knew). The students showed a lot of enthusiasm and positive attitudes towards the reading. Several activities were developed out of the story of Pinocchio.

The first activity, (prereading) was asking students what they knew about Pinocchio's story. At this stage 90% of the students in the classroom raised their hands and were willing to say something in English or in Spanish but the important thing was to participate. There were sentences like "*He was a mentiroso (liar)*", "*The nose was big, and long*", "*Era hecho de madera*" (*He was made of wood*), "*He was a títere (puppet)*", "*He wants to be un niño de verdad (a real boy)*", "*He had un hada*

madrina (a fairy godmother)", and "*su papá era un carpintero*", etc. Learners were so eager to participate that somehow they managed to say half sentences in English and half in Spanish or all in Spanish. They were very excited about the fact that they knew something about the story already. They were also excited because they were going to read the story and because they knew they would see the video soon after that.

The next activity students engaged in was coloring. Students were given photocopies of the book *Pinocchio*. They loved coloring the illustrations and at the same time they were coloring, they became familiar with the characters and their names. After coloring, the reading started. The teacher read aloud to them, offering changing voice tones to recreate the story and make it seem more lively. She dramatized the story using voice and actions. In cases when students needed help understanding a sentence, for example *Pinocchio's* first sentence in the book "*...In a very starry night ...*" the teacher would draw stars and a moon on the blackboard to exemplify what the sentence meant without stopping for translation or questions about the meaning of words and in order not to take students out of the rich, fascinating context they were already in.

The reading of the story went on for about five sessions. There was a lot of discussion; students participated bringing out their comments about the rights and wrongs of *Pinocchio's* life and the identification of the message offered in the story. When the reading was finished lots of expressions and attitudes were used in a real way through standard English pronunciation.

For the next selection of readings, there was a set of three books for second and third graders from which the students could decide which story they wanted to have read to them. For fourth and fifth graders, the readings were part of an anthology with a variety of genres from the *Celebrate Reading Program* published by Harper Collins, from which students could select according to their interest. The stories chosen by the learners were read aloud by the teachers in the classroom. After reading aloud, students could take their books home and read the stories again by themselves. Both anthologies and reading books could be exchanged for another book at a similar reading level in the library after students were finished reading them. Students from sixth to eleventh grades also had anthologies from the same program as the fourth and fifth graders had but at a higher level of proficiency in English.

Selections varied from grade to grade because teachers used their experiences with reading to young learners, their interest in exploring different genres with students in the classroom and the possibility of getting the books at reasonable prices. They also monitored the length of the readings to make sure that very young learners would not get bored with kindergarten students and first graders as a way to initiate them in the pre-reading activities and to introduce them to the pleasure of reading.

Very soon after the school year began in February, teachers started to receive feedback from the children about the book selections they had made. They also learned about students' preferences for reading. I followed the first three months of the *Celebrate Reading Program* by observing teachers using literature and

reading activities in the classrooms with third, fourth and fifth graders and by talking to them about students' outcomes. I found that the results were very positive. During these three months third graders read eight stories from *I Can Read Books* by Alvin Schwartz and others, successfully: *Pinocchio**, *The Teeth*, *In the Grave Yard**, *The Green Ribbon**, *In a Dark, Dark Room*, *The Night it Rained**, *Tip Top Adventures* and *The Pirate*.

The fourth graders read five longer, more complex stories during this same time period: *A Pet for the Gooks*, *The Two Ducks and the Fox*, *Pinocchio**, *Thomas And the Library Lady** and *Gorillas in the Midst*.

The fifth graders read four stories a bit lengthier than the others during the same time period: *My Lost Dog*, *The Piper of Hamelin*, *The Partridge and the Crow* and *Pinocchio*.¹

As a result of this continued interaction between the teacher and the students about stories shared together, students showed a better performance in English. English grammar structure seemed to have been assimilated and internalized in a deductive way judged by the students' written stories. Students would continue being read to in class until the end of the academic year in November and hopefully more books would be ordered for the school library to help satisfy the students' desire and thirst to read and enjoy more story books in English with their teachers, their classmates, their parents and eventually on their own.

¹ The titles with and asterisk are the ones students liked the best

One way to demonstrate improvement achieved in the performance of EFL learners using literature was through the analysis of the students' own writing. Students not only had learned more vocabulary words but had also gained a better command of the language in written and oral form. The third grade teacher I teamed with to implement this approach to teaching had students create their own stories with words they learned throughout the reading of the story "Pinocchio". The following excerpts from the stories written by the students not only show the use of words such as: *tiny*, *wonder*, *woodcarver*, *sneak*, *woodenhead*, *warn*, *newcomer*, etc., in an appropriate, authentic context, but also the command of the language they have and the creativity they used when writing their own stories.

"We come in the classroom and to watch a teacher very fine, your last name is Cricket he is a newcomer. I wondered before you arrived Where did you live? He answered, to me: In London, In London!"

"One day Charles go to the woodcarver and sollicite a tiny toy, the woodcarver names' are Pepe, Pepe paint the toy with a amazing brush..."

"One day the mother to Juanito buy a workbench because Juanito is a newcomer in the school and needed for make task before buy the workbench the seller warned is magic..."

"One night bery starry, one puppet went out of his city. His body was bery rare his head was one woodhead, his stomach was one workbench, his arm was five strings."

Before students started writing their own stories, the teacher explained the meaning of the words with examples and illustrations

based on the context, then she asked the students to write a story of their own using some of those words they had learned from the story. All the students started writing their own story and when they finished, they shared them with the class. This was probably one of the first times students wrote a complete story in English; they felt the sense of authorship and enjoyed sharing their stories with others. The process of writing, of course, took several stages of drafting, editing, rewriting but although students' stories were not perfect, the product was excellent in my opinion.

With this writing exercise, the teacher wanted to demonstrate how useful and efficient the use of literature was as a way of increasing students' vocabulary. She checked students' outcomes under the criteria of creativity and vocabulary used; she also looked at the illustrations as another way to express meaning in the story.

CONCLUSIONS AND TEACHING IMPLICATIONS

Literature□ as it was presented through this paper, creates a powerful tool for EFL teaching because it provides an appropriate environment for learning, authentic situations and a meaningful, memorable and enjoyable context for learning. The following guidelines for literature studies are presented by fifth grade teacher Leslie Mangiola (Urzua, 1992) for teachers to consider when using literature with their students.

1. **Don't lose sight of the purpose of literature.**- the children, first of all, should enjoy reading and not see it as arduous.
2. **Do remember that literature studies are not just for those who are top readers.** They are for all readers at all levels.

Do remember that uninterrupted reading is very important. When children run across words they don't know (and they should be told that we all do), encourage them to substitute a word that keeps the sense of the story rather than to use a dictionary.

These three suggestions by Mangiola clearly state the purpose of reading literature: pleasure; the type of readers who can do literature reading: everyone; and how to go about the possible difficulties when reading: prediction.

The fact that recent publications of EFL textbooks consider literature as an essential part of language learning and that more and more readings are presented through the books should make teachers think about the best ways to exploit this important source of language. I say this because it is sometimes the teacher's approach in introducing literature that makes it an interesting or an uninteresting experience for students and this experience may determine their positive or negative attitudes towards the English class from then on.

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