

Storytelling in young learner classes

According to David Vale and Anne Feunteun in 'Teaching children English: A training course for teachers of English to children', kids start developing their identity as readers and listeners from the age of three or four years old, because they start constructing their world of meaning and imagination when they are first exposed to different stories of life. It is vitally important that we, as teachers, support this development.

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Constructive and creative comprehension

Storytelling is a kind of reading which requires children to be active participants in the construction of meaning. Children get fully involved while listening to a story and they also feel joy and satisfaction. As language teachers, we are always tempted to regard the teaching of reading and listening only as a variety of comprehension activity but in doing so we sometimes discourage children from becoming "good" readers of English. Using storytelling in class, children develop a constructive and creative comprehension.

What constructive and creative comprehension implies

When children listen to a story, in terms of comprehension response, they get involved in different types of mental processes. First, they create a mental picture of what they are listening to. Then, they can imagine what is going to happen next. Children also identify themselves with the characters and situations in the story relating them to their own experiences. Last but not least, children apply their own values to those found in the story. Therefore, each child's response will be unique because it will demonstrate individual interpretation, it will relate to the whole story and it can be also discussed and shared with others in the class.

Making it happen

Choose a story or write one of your own. When you make the selection, think on the age level and proficiency level of your students. You may use a well-known fairy tale, a scary story or any suitable reader you find in your school-library.

This is what I did when I told my 5th grade students a "scary" story some time ago.

- Ask students to bring a flash-light and a cushion to the class.
- Have the students sit in a circle on the floor.
- Turn off the lights and ask students to switch on their torches and place them in front of them so they light up their faces.

- Tell them the story with much feeling. You may read it but it is better if you know it by heart, don't be afraid of using your own words.
- Use colourful pictures to help you. It is vital you properly use your voice, gestures, facial expressions, mimes, rhythm and speed to help the children understand the story as well as getting them more involved in it. (You may also use background music)
- When you finish, ask students some questions which stimulate a creative and constructive response. For example;
 - How was the house on the moors different from your house?
 - Could you describe the characters?
 - What happened when ...?
 - What do you think it happened...?
 - Why do you think?
 - What would you do if ...?
- Most important of all, take the children back as readers into the whole story without the need to focus mechanically on specific parts of the text.
- As a follow-up activity, you may ask students to change the ending which can be shared with other classes later or to role-play a dialogue between the characters of the story. You may also challenge your students to bring their own stories to tell the class in the target language.
- If you are going to retell another kind of story, you may dress up as one of the characters or you may also decorate the classroom with some of the story setting. Feel self-confident and try all what you think your kids will enjoy.

Conclusion

I am fully convinced that storytelling from teacher to student or from student to student carries many benefits. Students can lose themselves in the characters, plots and situations, they lower their anxiety levels and at the same time, they increase their self-confidence and esteem. As they progress, the students can improve their abilities to comprehend and later produce the target language.

Further reading

'Making it happen' by Patricia A. Richard. Longman

'Teaching children English: A training course for teachers of English to children' by

David Vale with Anne Feunteun. Cambridge Teacher training and development

'The House on the Moors' by Paul Shipton. Heinemann New Wave Readers