
Sharon Ahlquist and Réka Lugossy

Stories and Storyline

Hong Kong: Candlin & Mynard ePublishing, 2015, 160 pp.

ISBN: 978-1311935861

Reviewer: Janet Enever

In recent years, the steady increase in the number of publications around the theme of integrating story and children's literature in the FL classroom has been very encouraging (e.g. Birketveit & Williams, 2013; Bland & Lütge, 2013; Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Ghosn, 2013), yet many teachers continue to be uncertain of how to achieve a balance between the enjoyment of stories and ensuring a satisfactory language focus in lessons. This publication sets out to provide the guidance and reassurance that teachers might need. It includes a rich variety of practical ideas for using stories and children's literature in the primary and secondary school English-language classroom, supported by a comprehensive theoretical rationale for the value of learning languages through stories. The book is substantially based on the classroom teaching experience of the authors, together with empirical studies conducted both by themselves and by their students. The experienced voice of the practitioner is evident on every page of this must-read.

The book breaks new ground on two counts. Firstly, it is published as an e-book rather than a print version, thus facilitating speedy purchase and immediate access from anywhere in the world – assuming Internet connectivity (no print version is currently available). Secondly, it includes sections on theory, classroom teaching ideas and procedures for classroom research. It aims to provide a comprehensive guide for school-based language specialists – from the student teacher, to the more experienced teacher and with many recommendations for teacher educators also.

With a central thread relating to the significance of narrative running throughout, the book falls neatly into two sections: the first draws mainly on the use of children's literature in the classroom, with the second section introducing a pedagogical approach for using story known as the Storyline Approach. Additionally, the linked website provides

supplementary texts and tasks for classroom use, a reference list of well-known picturebooks, relevant websites for resources and guidance for using stories.

The introductory chapter sets the scene with an excellent overview of the characteristics of learners in the three age groups the authors have chosen to focus on: very young learners (5-9 years); young learners (10-13 years); older learners (13-16 years). The authors' substantial experience of teaching each of these age groups is combined with a solid knowledge of recent research related to individual characteristics, providing well-informed summaries which teachers may rely on. Perhaps the one note of caution that should be mentioned here is the tendency to draw on research from Western contexts. Cultural influences and differing notions of childhood in many Asian regions may offer a slightly different perspective on understandings of individual characteristics for each age range, but many familiar topics are likely to be relevant for all.

From this promising start, Lugossy guides us through a further four chapters, underpinned by a central argument related to the power of story as a narrative form which shapes the minds of children through their cognitive development, expanding their knowledge of the world and their ability to grasp meaning with only limited knowledge of the FL lexis. Her commitment to the potential benefits of using stories is summarised in the conclusion to Chapter 2, proposing that stories:

- organize and transmit human knowledge;
- are crucial in developing personal and social identities and in building communities;
- boost motivation in the classroom;
- provide the basis for social interaction and language learning in the L2 class;
- form the basis for speaking, reading, listening and writing tasks. (p. 26)

Having set the scene for the exciting potential of picturebooks in the EFL classroom, in the following three chapters Lugossy goes on to provide clear guidance on ways of integrating them in various types of curriculum, answering the many concerns that teachers new to this experience may have. She addresses such key questions as: How to

integrate? Which books to select? How to teach grammar through stories and whether authentic stories (written for first language speakers of English) are preferable to stories specifically designed for teaching languages. Included also are three well-worked examples of using particular picturebooks in the classroom. Her choice of *A Dark Dark Tale* (Brown, 1992), *Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig* (Trivizas & Oxenbury, 1995) and *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi* (Van Allsburg, 1979) provide some very interesting and innovative ideas for how these stories might be used with the three age groups in focus throughout this book. As a final part to this first section of the book, Lugossy introduces teachers to the idea of conducting small-scale classroom research during the process of using stories with children. Her suggestions are both realistic and manageable, demonstrating what valuable information a teacher might gain even from carrying out a simple procedure such as inviting children to reflect on whether they enjoyed a particular story. As a way into classroom research, she wisely recommends an action research framework, a technique for developing and refining practice which many teachers may already be familiar with even though they may not themselves have categorized it as research.

The second section of this book brings a considerable step change – both in the theme of chapters 6-10 and the change of author, with Sharon Ahlquist providing a detailed account of a technique for using story in the classroom called the Storyline Approach. She explains that this pedagogical approach was first developed some 50 years ago in Scotland for use in L1 contexts, where teachers were encouraged to develop an integrated curriculum, combining a number of subject areas within a story framework. From these early beginnings, teachers have adapted this approach for the teaching of English as a second, additional or foreign language in a number of countries. From Ahlquist's home base in Sweden, she has used the approach extensively herself and now includes it in her University teacher education programme, inspiring many teachers to explore its potential and to carry out small-scale studies of its classroom impact.

In Chapter 6, Ahlquist introduces us to the Storyline Approach, describing it as 'a kind of task-based approach' to story telling, where learners are organized in groups, participating in tasks situated within the framework of a story. Essentially, this technique requires the teacher to introduce a narrative framework for a story, which the children then

develop through a range of drama activities, discussion and written tasks, often performing 'in role' as they communicate with each other to complete each of the set tasks. Activities for the development of all four language skills can be woven into the task-based framework, alongside the potential for dramatic expression.

From this beginning Ahlquist goes on to provide a number of detailed work plans for how a teacher might proceed in developing a storyline with the class. She combines these with many interesting examples of how both teacher and learner might conduct some classroom research to explore the effects of the approach on the learners' developing L2 competence – much as Lugossy has in the first section of the book. This call for more research is significant in connection with using the Storyline Approach since it appears that little has yet been done in relation to its use in FL classrooms. Ahlquist herself conducted a fairly large-scale study in Swedish classrooms (Ahlquist, 2011), but she reports that no other published research findings are yet available. In her own study, she notes particularly the difficulty of conducting a formal assessment of what learning has been achieved, although it was evident that emotional confidence in the use of English had increased substantially for many of the learners.

As a reader, I found the style of this book very accessible and appreciated the authors' skill in often moving seamlessly between theoretical arguments and their own rich classroom experience to provide an inspiring rationale for embedding story in each and every classroom context. The further inclusion of the supplementary materials, booklists, resource suggestions and weblinks are particularly helpful, though inevitably the listings have gaps (e.g. the new edition of Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Mourão's 'Picturebooks in ELT' blog). For me, Chapter 3 was *the* key chapter in its successful coverage of all the questions teachers might ask about why, how and when to use picturebooks. This chapter deserves reading and re-reading to fully appreciate the depth and quality of experience offered here for teachers to draw on.

I have just one or two concerns that should be mentioned in relation to the audience for this publication. The focus is quite Eurocentric, with no mention of how to use story in classes with 50+ children, although the excellent links to online picturebooks and shared readings offer much potential here. Lugossy appropriately notes how Internet access to picturebooks can facilitate the display of the book via a large screen for the whole class to

enjoy both text and illustrations – a feature which might have been expanded upon with regard to the difficulties in sharing picturebooks in large classes. Similarly, I was a little unsure about the possibilities of using the Storyline Approach in contexts where English is a *foreign* language, with children having little or no exposure to it outside the classroom. Certainly some adjustments to the balance between the use of L1 and the FL in many contexts would be needed if young children are to be able to maintain satisfactory levels of communication while engaging in the story tasks. That said, I would highly recommend this book for its innovative structure and comprehensive coverage of the topic. Throughout, the authors have successfully balanced sound guidelines for how to use stories in the EFL classroom with a thoroughly explored theoretical underpinning for their use. Teachers just starting their careers and the many teachers still feeling a bit uncertain of how best to integrate story in their lessons should gain much inspiration and reassurance from this book – one for all teacher educators to recommend!

Publisher's website: www.candlinandmynard.com

Bibliography

Brown, R. (1992). *A Dark, Dark Tale*. London: Random House.

Trivizas, E., & Oxenbury, H. (1995). *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*. London: Mammoth.

Van Allsburg, C. (1979). *The Garden of Abdul Gasazi*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.

References

Ahlquist, S. (2011). *The Impact of the Storyline Approach on the Young Language Learner Classroom: A Case Study in Sweden*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Leicester: Leicester/UK. Available at

<http://hkr.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:457424/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

Birketveit, A. & Williams, G. (Eds). (2013). *Literature for the English Classroom*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget.

Bland, J. & Lütge, C. (Eds). (2013). *Children's Literature in Second Language Education*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Ellis, G. & Brewster, J. (2014). *Tell It Again! The Storytelling Handbook for Primary English Language Teachers*. London: British Council. Available at:

http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/sites/ec/files/D467_Storytelling_handbook_FINAL_web.pdf

Ghosn, I.-K. (2013). *Storybridge to Second Language Literacy. The Theory, Research and Practice of Teaching English with Children's Literature*. Charlotte, NY: Information Age Publishing.

Mourão, S. *Picturebooks in ELT blog*. Available at <http://picturebooksinelt.blogspot.com/>

Janet Enever is Professor of Language Teaching and Learning at Umeå University, Sweden, specialising in early foreign language learning, language globalisation and language policy. She coordinates the AILA research network in early language learning and is series editor for the Multilingual Matters new series: *Early Language Learning in School Contexts*.