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## **Expressive Reading and Dramatization of Stories in Teaching English to Young Learners**

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### **Abstract**

The paper presents an action research project developed in the practicum of the Master Degree in Teaching English in Primary School at the University of Minho, Portugal, focusing on expressive reading and the dramatization of stories in a 4<sup>th</sup> grade English class. The project objectives were: to identify initial perceptions of children about English language learning; to analyse their receptivity to expressive reading and the dramatization of stories in English; and to understand the effects of expressive reading and the dramatization of stories on learning. After a phase of context analysis, four teaching sequences were developed around four picture stories, with a particular focus on one of the stories that was dramatized and presented publicly. Data was collected through learner questionnaires and informal observations of learner performance. Results allowed us to conclude that the pedagogical experience was successful in this class. It promoted children's contact with stories in English and stimulated their interest for expressive reading and the dramatization of stories, along with the development of language skills.

**Keywords:** teaching English to young learners; stories; expressive reading; dramatization

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## Introduction

The practicum model in teaching master degrees at the University of Minho entails the development of small-scale, learner-centred action research projects where student teachers explore a teaching topic and collect data to evaluate teaching and learning (see Vieira, 2016). This paper presents a project developed by the first author (Pereira, 2018) in the practicum of the Master's Degree in Teaching English in Primary School. It was carried out in a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class in a Portuguese primary school during the school year of 2017/2018, with the supervision of the second author as the faculty supervisor and third author as the school cooperating teacher.

Since 2015/16, English has been a compulsory subject in grades 3 and 4 in primary education in Portugal, which is taught for two hours a week by specialist teachers. The use of stories for developing children's communicative competences and creativity is recommended in national guidelines. Children's stories are broadly favourable to the development of language skills, intercultural competence and citizenship values (Ellis & Brewster, 2014), thus representing a useful teaching tool to promote learning.

The universe of children's stories was central to this project as a starting point for developing reading and language skills, but the primary focus was on expressive reading and dramatization, which are seldom explored in English classes. Drama activities were recommended in the national guidelines produced about one decade ago when English was introduced as an optional extra-curricular activity in primary schools (Dias & Toste, 2006). In a research synthesis on the use of educational drama in L2 learning, Belliveau and Kim (2013, p. 18) point out its major benefits: 'fostering communication competence, embodied and engaging learning, contextually-situated interaction, confidence and motivation in learning and using language and deeper engagement with literature (...)'. The assumption here was that the expressive reading and dramatization of stories might enhance children's motivation to read, their understanding of texts, their ability to use language expressively, and their active participation in learning.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first section addresses the importance of stories for expressive reading and dramatization in teaching of English to young learners (TEYL), the second describes the project objectives and methodological procedures, and the third presents main findings. Finally, conclusions and implications for further work are presented.

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### **The Use of Stories for Expressive Reading and Dramatization in TEYL**

In current national guidelines regarding TEYL in primary schools in Portugal, stories are presented as one of the resources to be used in class (Bravo, Cravo & Duarte, 2014, 2015a, 2015b). The benefits of using children's stories in language learning have been pointed out by several authors (e.g. Ellis, 2016; Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Ghosn, 2013; Kaminsky, 2013; Mourão, 2016; Serrurier-Zucker & Gobbé-Mévellec, 2014). Ellis and Brewster (2014) highlight motivation, personal involvement and language acquisition as major reasons why stories should be used in TEYL. They also stress that as children interpret a story, they engage in an 'imaginative experience' that develops their creativity (Ellis & Brewster, 2014, p. 6).

As regards the exploration of picturebooks with children, Ellis (2016, p. 28) points out their potential value for developing 'multiple literacies', like visual literacy, emotional literacy, cultural literacy or digital literacy. Ellis further refers to *learning literacy*, which 'is linked to learning how to learn and to learner autonomy. It involves developing awareness and understanding of one's own learning processes, personal preferences and learning strategies' (Ellis, 2016, p. 30). This means that children talk and reflect about reading processes, difficulties and progress, so as to develop metacognitive knowledge and self-regulation strategies. In the project reported here, the use of children's stories sought to promote visual literacy, emotional literacy and learning literacy with a focus on expressive reading and dramatization.

According to Norlie (1918), expressive reading engages the reader in interpreting text and conveying the author's message in a natural and effective way:

By natural is meant that the utterance shall be in the reader's conversational tone, or as near to it as the message and the occasion will permit. By effective is meant that the utterance shall be given with an emphasis suited to bring out the message for the occasion. By message is meant the thought and feeling and purpose of the author (Norlie, 1918, p. 21).

Through expressive reading, learners explore their own voice for conveying a message with emotional and bodily support, mobilizing a complex set of language skills like comprehension, pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, and fluency. As the author points out, the core of expressive reading is 'expression', and 'To get expression there must be first something

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to express, there must be impression' (Norlie, 1918, p. 22). Stories easily generate reactions and emotions and cause an 'impression' that can then be pedagogically explored for 'expression'. The teacher's role is crucial on various levels, from providing an adequate reading model to supporting children in practising expressive reading skills and involving them in their self-assessment of performance.

It is important to note that although expressive reading is directly related to reading, it can contribute to the development of expressive language use in general, as expressive speech suggests the speaker has an understanding of content, emotional experiences and artistically expresses the basic components of what is said, and as a result influences the listeners (Gramatkovski, Kochoska, Ristevska & Sivakova, 2017, p. 101).

Expressive reading can be enhanced through the dramatization of stories as a form of Readers Theatre, 'an interpretative activity in which students repeatedly read a script based on a story in preparation for an oral reading performance' (Keehn, 2003, p. 43). Readers theatre is often used to improve reading performance with regard to comprehension and fluency (see Griffith & Rasinski, 2004; Keehn, Harmon & Shoho, 2008; Young & Rasinski, 2009). However, story dramatization in our project was mainly understood as a multisensory approach in TEYL as discussed by Serrurier-Zucker & Gobbé-Mévellec (2014). They point out that 'What is interesting in drama is the process of activating a story, which activates the young learners themselves as they engage physically and emotionally with imaginary situations while communicating in a foreign language' (Serrurier-Zucker & Gobbé-Mévellec, 2014, p. 15). Therefore, even though the product of dramatization (performance itself) is valued, it is the process of providing a creative language learning experience that is considered most important. As Zafeiriadou (2009, p. 4) argues, 'a language pedagogy insisting on results instead of process may have a negative effect on students' motivation and involvement. Educational drama activities should raise positive feelings because they are essentially "play" situations'. The author also stresses the multidimensional value of dramatization as role playing, as it involves spatial dimensions (length, width and height), psychological dimensions (identification, internalisation, and empathy), mental dimensions (representation, assimilation, imagination), social dimensions (participating by taking on a role, interaction and acceptance by others), and personal dimensions (self-development, self-esteem and self-actualisation) (Zafeiriadou, 2009, p. 9).

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Drama-based activities in language teaching may entail different levels of teacher direction on a continuum from controlled language exercises and scripted drama to unscripted 'process drama', where a pre-text is used to trigger the imagination of a 'dramatic world' that unfolds through improvised interactions in class (Liu, 2002). Nevertheless, drama activities always entail putting the learner at the centre of the learning process. According to Davies (1990), this brings about important benefits as regards students' confidence and motivation to use the language:

Drama in the English language classroom is ultimately indispensable because it gives learners the chance to use their own personalities. It draws upon students' natural abilities to imitate and express themselves, and if well-handled should arouse interest and imagination. Drama encourages adaptability, fluency, and communicative competence. It puts language into context, and by giving learners experience of success in real-life situations it should arm them with confidence for tackling the world outside the classroom. (Davies, 1990, p. 97)

In arguing for the use of picturebooks as a starting point for drama, Serrurier-Zucker & Gobbé-Mévellec (2014) stress the power of images:

As for the images, they open up avenues for the imagination to give shape to, voice and act out the story; they constitute a factor of motivation and allow for immediate reading where language might be an obstacle; their attractive colours and forms appeal to children's emotions, contributing to the strong affective charge conveyed by picturebooks. (...) Finally, and this is what interests us most, there is a certain theatrical content in the picturebook which invites its dramatization. (Serrurier-Zucker & Gobbé-Mévellec, 2014, p. 17)

They further underline the symbolic value of theatre in picturebooks as a 'safe place' for expressing emotions and dealing with inner concerns:

The characters and the roles they might adopt in the story constitute questioning spaces – and the picturebook becomes an imaginary stage, which can represent a cathartic value for the young reader as well as for the protagonist, a safe space in

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which they can experiment by playing. (Serrurier-Zucker & Gobbé-Mévellec, 2014, p. 17)

Expressive reading and dramatization were side by side in the activities developed in the project described below. In fact, while expressive reading was central to it, the dramatization of one of the stories – *Little Red Riding Hood* – enabled an even more creative exploration of expressive reading with the reinforcement of gestures and physical movements along with echoes, tonal variations expressing feelings and emotions, among other types of expressive manifestations. As Young and Rasinski point out (2009, p. 5), ‘Students are more likely to practice or rehearse (assisted or repeated readings) if they know that they will be performing a reading for an audience’, and rehearsals are thus aimed at ‘reading with meaningful expression to help an audience of listeners better understand the passage’. Children’s learning literacy was also enhanced in the project, through raising their awareness of what expressive reading entails and involving them in self-assessment, which provided invaluable data to assess the approach from their perspective.

### **Project Objectives and Pedagogic-Research Strategies**

The action research project comprised a total of ten 45’ lessons in a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class of 25 children: 15 girls and 10 boys, aged from 9 to 10 years old. Four teaching sequences were planned and implemented around two picturebooks and two picture stories presented in the adopted coursebook (Abreu & Esteves, 2017):

*Dear Zoo*, by Rod Campbell (1982/2010) (picturebook)

*The Ugly Duckling* (picture story from the coursebook)

*Little Red Riding Hood* (picture story from the coursebook)

*Ketchup on my Cornflakes?* by Nick Sharratt (1994/2006) (picturebook)

These stories are simple and short enough for training expressive reading, and potentially capable of arousing children’s enthusiasm and interest. The main focus was on *Little Red Riding Hood*, a traditional story that children already knew in their L1, which was dramatized, performed publicly at school, and later recorded on video to be presented at a national reading contest where it won a prize. Table 1 summarizes the project objectives, pedagogic-research strategies, and type of data collected.

Objectives	Pedagogic-research strategies	Data collected
1. Identifying children's initial perceptions about English learning	Initial questionnaire - <i>Tell me about you</i> - and dialogue with children (Obj. 1)	Children's perceptions about: learning English; reading and listening to stories in their mother tongue and in English; willingness to dramatize a story
2. Analysing children's receptivity to expressive reading activities and the dramatization of stories in English	Development and observation of expressive reading and dramatization activities around stories (Obj. 2, 3)	Children's difficulties and progress in expressive reading and dramatization activities
3. Understanding the effects of expressive reading and the dramatization of stories on children's learning	Informal observation of rehearsals and the final performance of the story <i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> (Obj. 2, 3)	
	Self-assessment questionnaire: <i>Reflecting on reading stories</i> (Obj. 2, 3)	Children's perceptions of expressive reading activities and their learning

Table 1. The action research project: objectives, strategies and data collected

At the first stage of the project, the questionnaire *Tell me about you* was used to learn about children's perceptions of English learning, the use of stories and their willingness to dramatize a story. All the children showed positive attitudes towards learning English as well as reading and listening to stories, although six expressed doubts regarding the use of stories in English, and two said 'no' to the possibility of dramatizing a story. It is important to note that they were already used to listening to stories in English in an extra-class activity given by their English teacher (the third author) in the school library. Actually, this was one of the reasons that motivated the development of this project as an extension of that storytelling activity.

The four teaching sequences, summarized in Table 2, followed a learner-centred approach by encouraging children's active participation and self-regulation of learning. According to Jiménez Raya, Lamb and Vieira (2007), learner-centredness is at the heart of pedagogy for autonomy in language education.

Teaching sequences	Activities	Materials
1 <sup>st</sup> sequence 1 lesson	Listening to and exploring a story Dialogue about reading stories in English Initial questionnaire	<i>Dear Zoo</i> by Rod Campbell Questionnaire <i>Tell me about you</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup> sequence 3 lessons	Listening to and exploring a story Expressive reading activities Dialogue about expressive reading Making of a poster on expressive reading Self-assessment questionnaire	<i>The Ugly Duckling</i> (coursebook) Interactive board/ Video (story) Poster on expressive reading Questionnaire <i>Reflecting on reading stories</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup> sequence 5 lessons	Listening to and exploring a story Expressive reading activities Dramatization of the story Making scenery Public presentation of the story Self-assessment questionnaire	<i>Little Red Riding Hood</i> (coursebook) Poster on expressive reading Interactive board/ Video (story) Play script for dramatization Scenery, props and costumes Questionnaire <i>Reflecting on reading stories</i>
4 <sup>th</sup> sequence 1 lesson	Listening to and exploring a story Expressive reading activities Self-assessment questionnaire	<i>Ketchup on my Cornflakes?</i> by Nick Sharratt Poster on expressive reading Interactive board Questionnaire <i>Reflecting on reading stories</i>

Table 2. Summary of the teaching approach

Expressive reading activities were done after listening to and exploring the stories, which involved checking comprehension and learning new vocabulary. The presentation of the stories on video helped to promote visual and emotional literacy, and provided reading models later practised with the teacher's help. Story sentences and sentence chunks were repeated after the teacher's model, using body language and expressing different kinds of emotions according to the story or indications provided by the teacher (e.g., *Now imagine that he was very angry!*). Repetitions were mostly done in chorus to enhance children's self-confidence, which proved to be very useful to practise pronunciation, accent, rhythm, pauses, and body language. Simple role play activities were also done, where children reproduced dialogues based on the stories (see Figure 1).





Figure 1. *The Ugly Duckling*: role playing with finger puppets (coursebook material)

In the case of *Little Red Riding Hood*, apart from these kinds of activities, the story script was handed out to the children for dramatization purposes (see Appendix 1). Dramatization involved rehearsals in class and outside class, and all the children were involved: one played the narrator, four played the characters (Little Red Riding Hood, Grandma, the Big Bad Wolf and the Woodcutter), and the others played the roles of trees and flowers from the forest, echoing words or lines from the characters to emphasize moods and atmospheres. The children made the scenery (see Figure 2) with the help of other school teachers. The story was performed publicly in school and videotaped for a national reading contest promoted by the Ministry of Education (Ministério da Educação, 2018).



Figure 2. *Little Red Riding Hood*: making scenery

Two strategies were used for developing the children's learning literacy as defined by Ellis (2016). The first one was a collective metacognitive dialogue about what expressive reading entails, carried out after the children had first experienced expressive reading tasks. The teacher asked them what is important in expressive reading and noted down their ideas on the

interactive board, in English, for example: 'it's fun'; 'we can play'; 'it's great'; 'it's beautiful'; 'role play'; 'pretend'; 'pronounce the words well'; 'express feelings'; 'adapt the voice', 'make sounds', 'body language' (see Figure 3). Later on, children copied those ideas onto a class poster that remained on the classroom wall, and they were invited to comment on their expressive reading performance with reference to that poster.

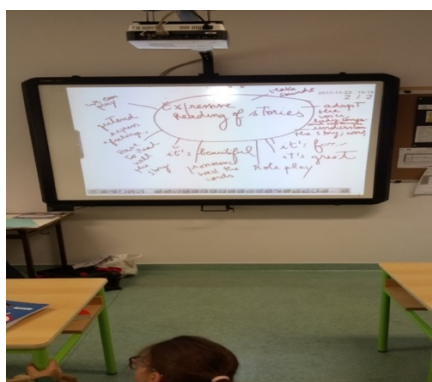


Figure 3. Collecting children's ideas on expressive reading

The second strategy for developing the children's learning literacy was the self-assessment questionnaire *Reflecting on reading stories*, written in the students' L1, which was used three times to collect data on:

- what children liked/ didn't like about the lessons;
- whether they found expressive reading/ speaking easy or not;
- what difficulties they experienced in expressive reading activities;
- whether they were willing to go on reading stories and developing expressiveness, and why.

The data collected was useful for understanding children's perceptions, to dialogue with them about learning and to adapt teaching if needed, all crucial aspects of learner-centred action research.

### **Main Findings**

Overall, the activities developed around the stories enthused the children and awakened their interest in similar activities throughout the project. Most of them were very interested in listening to stories, doing exercises related to the stories, thinking about and practising expressive reading, and learning new vocabulary. Table 3 summarizes their positive responses

(‘liked’) in the three self-assessment questionnaires, related to the stories *The Ugly Duckling*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Ketchup on my cornflakes* (no self-assessment was done with the first story – *Dear Zoo* – because it was explored in one lesson and the children filled in the initial questionnaire at the end of that lesson).

<i>I liked...</i>	1 <sup>st</sup> S-AQ (n=25)	2 <sup>nd</sup> S-AQ (n=23)	3 <sup>rd</sup> S-AQ (n=26)
Listening to the story	25	23	26
Doing exercises about the story	22	21	24
Practising expressiveness	25	22	25
Thinking about expressive reading	19	21	24
Learning new vocabulary	23	19	25

**Key:** S-AQ = Self-assessment questionnaire

Table 3. Children’s positive responses to lesson activities (self-assessment)

The children also recognized that expressive reading is not very easy and pointed out difficulties, which might be related to linguistic and attitudinal dimensions (Table 4).

<i>Difficulties</i>	1 <sup>st</sup> S-AQ (n=25)			2 <sup>nd</sup> S-AQ (n=23)			3 <sup>rd</sup> S-AQ (n=26)		
	O	S	N	O	S	N	O	S	N
I could not pronounce the words well	0	16	9	3	18	2	1	19	6
I could not say the sentences with feeling	3	10	12	3	11	2	2	9	15
I could not make the necessary pauses	1	10	14	4	11	10	2	5	19
I messed up and lost rhythm	1	10	14	2	11	10	1	8	17
I felt ashamed	1	9	15	4	10	9	4	5	17
I was afraid to make mistakes	5	13	6	5	10	8	8	6	12
<i>Total occurrences</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>68</i>	<i>70</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>71</i>	<i>41</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>52</i>	<i>94</i>

**Key:** S-AQ = Self-assessment questionnaire; O = Often; S = Sometimes; N = Never

Table 4. Children’s perceptions of difficulties (self-assessment)

Difficulties were particularly indicated in the second self-assessment questionnaire related to the story *Little Red Riding Hood*, probably because this story is more complex than

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the others and self-assessment took place when it was still being explored, when children were not yet very confident in reading it expressively. However, the observation of the final performance, which was presented in school for other children and video-recorded for the national contest, showed that they were able to dramatize the story quite successfully, and the fact that they won a prize in the contest is also an indicator of the quality of their work.<sup>1</sup>

Dramatizing this story involved not only memorizing the lines and acting it out, but also making appropriate scenery, stage props and costumes, which involved the use of arts and crafts with the collaboration of families and other teachers in school. All this contributed to enhancing children's motivation, involvement, and sense of accomplishment. An aspect worth mentioning is that the story dramatization was an inclusive experience, especially for two children with visual impairment, who were able to participate successfully. One of these children played the narrator in the final performance. Also, children who had more difficulties in English felt motivated to participate and improved their self-confidence and language abilities, which was particularly enhanced through chorus repetitions and cooperative learning in pairs and groups.

### **Conclusion**

The project was a significant learning experience for these children. The expressive reading and dramatization of stories appeared to foster high levels of motivation and involvement, a creative and emotional approach to learning, and the development of communicative skills. Dramatization further enhanced meaningful memorization and language use in a communicative setting.

It was also important to engage children in metacognitive reflection, namely through raising their awareness about expressive reading and improving their ability to evaluate difficulties and progress. By collecting learner data through feedback questionnaires, it was possible to get a better understanding of learning processes and adjust teaching strategies as needed. Nevertheless, other strategies might be used to monitor and evaluate the impact of using stories for expressive reading and dramatization, such as stimulated recall techniques and structured observations of children's performance, which would allow for a better grasp of learning processes and outcomes.

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We are well aware that more time would be needed to develop children's expressive reading abilities, especially since they had never done this kind of work before. Nevertheless, results show that using picturebooks and picture stories from coursebooks for this purpose is an approach worth exploring, as it enhances children's motivation to read, their understanding of texts, their ability to use language expressively, and their active engagement in learning. It is therefore our conviction that stories should be explored more than they usually are to enhance the expressive use of language in the classroom, and a wide range of stories can be used, provided they are motivating and appropriate to the children's level of language. The teacher's role is central in providing authentic reading models, creating a relaxed learning atmosphere, offering support and positive feedback, and providing opportunities for reflection on learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Their performance can be seen at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPRHjfO9Zx8>

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## Appendix 1

### *Little Red Riding Hood* script (coursebook material)

**Narrator:** Little Red Riding Hood is a little girl. She always wears a red coat. One day, her mother tells her that her grandmother is sick and asks Little Red Riding Hood to take her some biscuits.

**Mother:** Take this basket and these biscuits to your grandma's cottage. Don't leave the road and beware of the wolf!

**Little Red Riding Hood:** I promise I will be good mummy.

**Narrator:** Then she sets off into the woods.

**Little Red Riding Hood:** Grandma, Grandma, here I come. Grandma, here I come.

**Narrator:** In the woods she meets the Big Bad Wolf.

**Big Bad Wolf:** What are you doing, Little Red Riding Hood?

**Little Red Riding Hood:** I'm walking to my grandmother's house, Mr. Wolf. I'm taking her this basket full of biscuits because she is very sick.

**Narrator:** The Big Bad Wolf runs to the grandmother's cottage before Little Red Riding Hood can get there and knocks on the door.

**Grandma:** Come in.

**Narrator:** The Big Bad Wolf opens the door. He grabs grandma and locks her up in the cupboard. Then he puts on grandma's clothes. He gets into her bed and waits for Little Red Riding Hood. Little Red Riding Hood arrives at grandma's cottage and runs to grandma's bedside.

**Little Red Riding Hood:** My! What big eyes you have got, Grandma!

**Big Bad Wolf:** All the better to see you with, my dear!

**Little Red Riding Hood:** My! What big ears you have got, Grandma!

**Big Bad Wolf:** All the better to hear you with, my dear!

**Little Red Riding Hood:** My! What a big nose you have got, Grandma!

**Big Bad Wolf:** All the better to smell you, my dear!

**Little Red Riding Hood:** What big teeth you have got, Grandma!

**Big Bad Wolf:** All the better to eat you with!

**Little Red Riding Hood:** Help me, help me, help me please!

**Narrator:** A woodcutter hears her screams and comes running to the cottage. He rescues Little Red Riding Hood and grandma too. Grandma hugs Little Red Riding Hood. They are safe again. The Big Bad Wolf runs away into the woods again. Now Little Red Riding Hood understands why she can't speak to strangers.