

The role of stories in language learning

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Resumo

Apresento a minha perspectiva sobre a importância das histórias no ensino de línguas em geral e especialmente no ensino de línguas a crianças. As histórias são motivadoras e, enquanto textos completos, apresentam vários aspetos da língua em contexto, como por exemplo vocabulário, gramática ou referências culturais. Nas histórias para crianças as imagens desempenham um papel fundamental, uma vez que ajudam a compreensão do texto escrito. Refiro particularmente a utilização de histórias bilingues, *Freda and Fernando on the River Tagus*, *Freda e Fernando no Rio Tejo* e *Darcy A Dinossaura*, *Darcy The Dinosaur* de que sou autora.

Palavras-chave: as histórias no ensino de línguas, ensino de línguas a crianças, histórias bilingues.

How do we communicate? Most people will say: «By using words». In fact, there are many more factors involved in language and communication than isolated words.

For years, we tended to teach just at word level and simple sentence level, which meant that our students had a KNOWLEDGE of English (or other language) but they could not COMMUNICATE effectively because we were not exposing them to the full range of COMMUNICATIVE ABILITY.

Imagine this scenario: the teacher goes into the classroom, shows some flash cards, and says the words: cat, dog, bird etc. and gets the students to repeat. Will that turn the learners into speakers of the language?

In my opinion, as language teachers we have to do certain things to help our students learn a foreign language:

- Engage them. Arouse their interest and get them involved.
- Provide them with what Krashen called ‘comprehensible input’. In other words, natural language that they can follow with little effort presented within a meaningful context.
- Give them an opportunity to use the language.

I believe that the best way to do this is through stories. Stories have been around since caveman started painting on walls and is still the main motivation why people read and watch films. Not only that but they are the mainstay of our daily conversation with others. «Did you hear what happened to Bill?» «What happened on Coronation Street last night?»

You may think that my advocating the use of stories is confined simply to teaching young children but I believe that stories should be used at all ages and levels. For the following reasons:

- MOTIVATION. However difficult a class is and however negative some students' attitude might be to learning a foreign language, few people can resist a story, as long as it is within their sphere of interest.
- WHOLE LANGUAGE APPROACH. We tended in the past to break language up into its components, teach the components to the students and then teach them how to stick the bits back together again. The problem there is that we lost the instinctive 'that sounds right' approach which comes from familiarity with hearing whole chunks of language.
- VOCABULARY. Some people advocate pre-teaching vocabulary before reading a story but presenting isolated words out of context may not help much. I believe that we should learn vocabulary through a story; meaning will be conveyed through illustrations, mime, context and words that are already known to the learners.
- GRAMMAR. Sometimes we spend a long time trying to get a grammatical idea across when it would be natural in a story. 'One day the three little pigs left home.' In this one sentence, we have an example of the Past Simple tense and the use of the adjective in front of the noun.
- CONNECTORS. So often, we have trouble teaching connectors but they come into stories naturally. '**So** the little pig bought some hay **and** built a house. **Then** the wolf came.' (Consequence, addition, sequence).
- DIALOGUE. Stories are a wonderful way of presenting dialogue in a meaningful context. 'Little pig. Little pig. Let me come in.' 'Run, run, as fast as you can. You can't catch me. I'm the gingerbread man.'
- CULTURE. Language is a reflection of the culture in which it sprang up and to teach students a language outside of its cultural context is to deprive them of a true understanding. Words like 'bullying', 'saudade' and 'siesta' can only be really understood in context.

- INTRODUCTION TO LITERATURE. A language should not be divorced from its literature and it is important to encourage our students to read more widely by showing them that they can tackle a story and extend that to full-length works.
- MIXED ABILITY. It is difficult teaching large classes of mixed ability but all learners can get something from a story. In this sort of scenario, the more proficient speakers will volunteer to retell the story and those who are having difficulty will get an opportunity to hear the story again. The ones who understand more can explain (using L1 if necessary) anything the others have not understood. Tasks can be graded according to ability.

USING STORIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

ADVANTAGES

One of the great advantages of doing stories with young children is that they are still trying to understand words in their own language. Therefore, they apply all sorts of strategies to work out what is being said and they rarely ask what a word means. They love being read to and they will happily listen to the same story over and over again.

HOW?

The teacher can tell the story by showing pictures, drawing on the board, dramatizing etc. Alternatively, the children can sit on the floor round the teacher's chair. The teacher can read the story showing the pictures in the book. The children can then be encouraged to borrow the book in turn.

WHICH STORIES?

With very young children, the old favourites are best, as they usually know the story already (The 3 Bears, The 3 Little Pigs, The Gingerbread Man etc.) but there are some good modern ones such as The Gruffalo, The Tiger that Came to Tea etc. If these are not easy to come by as books, there are plenty on YouTube or some can be printed from web sites.

THE ROLE OF BILINGUAL TEXTS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Bilingual texts can give learners support at any age but I am going to focus on the Primary School years from 6 to 10. This is the stage at which we must foster their love for the written word as reading is the key to all subsequent learning. How can bilingual books help?

AUTONOMY – The student can tackle the L2 version but look at the L1 version if they

can't understand something. When I was working at the British Council, my pupils took a book to read every week. Often the parents or grandparents would tell me that they helped the child understand the text.

My great-nephew, Sam (7), received a copy of *Freda and Fernando on the River Tagus/Freda e Fernando no rio Tejo* for Christmas. After he had read the English version, he started trying to read the Portuguese version. He has visited Portugal but never studied Portuguese. His natural curiosity made him want to try.

INVOLVEMENT OF FAMILY MEMBERS – In households where nobody speaks the target language, parents, grandparents etc. can read the book with the child.

IMPORTANCE OF BOTH LANGUAGES – When we are teaching a foreign language to learners, they sometimes resent their own language being pushed into the background. Bilingual texts give equal validity to both languages.

DISCOURAGING WORD FOR WORD TRANSLATION – In a bilingual text we can see each language functioning naturally with its own idiosyncrasies.

This will encourage learners not to apply the 'Google translator' approach to their writing. Here is an excerpt from my book *Freda and Fernando on the River Tagus* and what each version looks like on the Google translator.

ENGLISH TO PORTUGUESE

As he pulled up alongside, he decided to welcome the newcomer: «Hello, I'm Fernando. What's your name?» he said with a smile.

Como ele parou ao lado, decidi acolher o recém-chegado: «– Olá, sou Fernando. Qual o seu nome?» ele disse com um sorriso.

PORTUGUESE TO ENGLISH

Ao encostar, decidi dar as boas vindas ao recém-chegado: - Olá, sou o Fernando. Como te chamas? – disse com um sorriso.

When touching, decided to welcome the newcomer: – Hello, I'm Fernando. What's your name - said with a smile

MIXED ABILITY – In a mixed ability class, the students will always be able to understand the story, however weak their command of the L2, so they will not feel disadvantaged.

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING THE TWO LANGUAGES – Having the two texts side by

side will help learners to see where words are the same or nearly the same and where they are different. It will also help them to get a ‘feel’ for each language.

TWO BILINGUAL PICTURE BOOKS IN ENGLISH AND PORTUGUESE BY SHEILA MARGARET WARD

Freda and Fernando on the river Tagus / Freda e Fernando no rio Tejo

SYNOPSIS

Freda and Fernando are two ferryboats that live and work on the River Tagus. Every day they take their passengers back and forth from Almada to Lisbon and back and they are very proud of the work they do. One day a new catamaran appears and informs them that he is going to replace them and that they are going to the scrapyard. However, when the catamaran gets stuck in the middle of the river, Freda and Fernando are needed to tow him to the dock.

CONTENTS The book contains the bilingual story with illustrations, the lyric of the song, activity pages in both languages and two pictures to colour.

Darcy the dinosaur / Darcy a dinossaura

SYNOPSIS

Darcy is a very polite and well-meaning dinosaur but she causes trouble because she is very short sighted and she knocks things down with her long tail. Consequently, she has problems with Archie Archaeopteryx and Vic Velociraptor but she proves to be a great help to Cathy Cave-woman.

CONTENTS The book contains the bilingual story with illustrations, the lyric of the song, activity pages in both languages and three pictures to colour.

SOME WEB SITES ABOUT BILINGUALISM

www.thepiripirilexicon.com

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/279976909_Bilingual_books_Promoting_literacy_and_biliteracy_in_the_second-language_and_mainstream_classroom

www.hanen.org

http://www.babycenter.com/0_raising-a-bilingual-child-the-importance-of-reading_10340871.bc

FACEBOOK GROUPS

Bilingual children’s books Portuguese English

Bilingual kidspot

Bilingual Education Activities

Bilingual parenting

References

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