

The Application of Story-based Teaching Method in English Language Teaching for Young Learners in a Primary School

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Abstract

This paper explores the effectiveness of applying the story-based teaching method in primary school English instruction. Through classroom observations, it analyzes the advantages, applicability, and challenges encountered in the practical implementation of this approach. The study finds that the story-based teaching method can stimulate students' interest in learning and enhance their language skills. However, the stories included in textbooks lack appeal, and the design of classroom activities requires further optimization. By integrating theory with practice, this paper proposes recommendations for improvement, including meticulous lesson preparation, fostering an English-rich environment beyond the classroom, and cultivating students' collaborative spirit.

Keywords

Story-based teaching; primary school English instruction; application; suggestions.

1. Introduction

Using stories to teach English plays an indispensable role in EFL classrooms, so using stories to help young learners acquire the second language is essential for teachers. Regarding other teaching methods, storytelling provides more advantages for young learners to develop English skills. Wright (1997)[1] points out that there are many reasons why using stories becomes a crucial method in teaching children a foreign language, such as motivation, meaning, fluency, language awareness, communication, etc. What is more, storytelling is an ideal method to draw children's attention in a relaxed and enjoyable environment (Fitzgibbon and Wilhelm, 1998)[2]. Since September 2001, English has been a compulsory subject for Grade 3 students in primary school. As young learners have a short attention span and intense curiosity and imagination, the storytelling method is believed one of the most appropriate methods to teach English in primary schools. However, research indicates that utilizing stories into primary English classrooms is not without challenges.

Therefore, it is necessary and essential to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of this lesson and give some practical suggestions in this paper.

2. Literature Review

2.1. What are stories

There is no specific concept of stories, and they are rather general. In EFL classrooms, teachers usually put words, sentences, or content in a story context to teach English while listening to and telling stories. Stories are more frequent and beneficial in young learners' classrooms than in young learners' classrooms (Wright 1997[1], Garvie 1991[3]). Cameron (2001)[4] also states that for young learners, stories provide them with an imaginary world in which they can learn the language while enjoying themselves.

Usually, stories have their structure. First of all, one of the most important features of stories is that they occur at different points in time and appear in a particular chronological order. In

addition, stories have their thematic structure, meaning that there is some change of main interest when the story takes place, such as overcoming difficulties, the triumph of good over evil, or the survival of a significant event (Cameron, 2001)[4].

In addition, there is a characteristic use of language in the story. Considering the learners' cognitive ability and learning level, the language in stories usually has several main characteristics. First, there are juxtapositions of discourse that occur in stories, often reflected in repetitive language patterns. There is usually a combination of predictability and surprise or a combination of repetition and change. The following is the dialogue between Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf.

LRRH: Grandmother, what big eyes you've have got!

BBW: All the better to see you with, my dear.

LRRH: Grandmother, what big ears you've got!

BBW: All the better to see you with, my dear.

LRRH: Grandmother, what big teeth you've got!

BBW: All the better to see you with, my dear.

In this conversation, there are only word changes. The repetition of the sentence pattern gives the child help in language learning. Second, the author carefully chooses words to help readers understand the story when writing the story, including onomatopoeia, phonetic words, and some unusual words. In addition, the words in the story should not be too homogeneous. A rich vocabulary is used to convey the same meaning in the proper context. For example, vast, huge, enormous, hairy, and gigantic can all mean big and can be used interchangeably in specific contexts. Elley (1989)[5] has shown that the storytelling method helps learn words. He argues that the more often a word appears in a story and the more often the teacher explains the word, the greater the likelihood that the word will be remembered and learned. There is also evidence that children learn words without thinking about them.

2.2. Why use stories

Ellis and Brewster (2002)[6] have already illustrated the importance of stories and storytelling in young learners' language acquisition. The educational value of teaching with storybooks and storytelling is unquestionable worldwide, and Morrow (1992)[7] suggests that literature-based instruction - stories - has a positive impact on the language development of elementary school children. Galda and Cullinan (2002) [8]share the same view, arguing that stories enable young people to explore and understand their world and enrich their lives by broadening their horizons. Both emphasize the importance of the storytelling approach to language learning for elementary school students.

At present, using stories to teach English is used in EFL classrooms in primary school frequently. At present, using stories to teach English is used in EFL classrooms in primary school frequently. It provides students with integrated input in a novel way or helping them to acquire competence slightly above their language level (Krashen, 1981)[9]. Because this is the first time that elementary school students are exposed to a foreign language, it is crucial to ensure that children acquire language knowledge to promote interest in learning English rather than rejection. Secondly, the storytelling method can improve different aspects of students' abilities. Teachers can present stories in different ways or activities, such as telling and acting out stories in the classroom. It will improve students' listening and reading skills and develop their speaking and writing to some extent.

2.3. What a good story involves

A good story, to a certain extent, brings enjoyment to the reader or listener. A good story should have the following characteristics.

First, the story needs characters and a plot that appeals to children. Children can enter the magical world created by the story. It means that the learner fully understands and empathizes with the experiences of the characters. Many stories are fantastical, but these characters or settings often have some similarities to the real world in which children live (Cameron, 2001)[4]. For example, a tiger drinking tea in the kitchen, a piglet building a house, a monster trying to live in the house, Etc. Second, a good story requires careful story content, clear formatting, and simple, rich language. Such high-quality stories used in second language classrooms can capture students' interest, motivate them to learn the language, and improve their language skills while reading and listening to the story. However, not all good stories can autonomously promote language learning. According to Ghosn (2002)[10], stories are created for children and are meant to be enjoyable to read, not didactic. However, Cameron (2001)[4] holds a different view, and there is no doubt that quality stories can provide language learning opportunities for learners. I believe that the storytelling method provides a relaxed learning environment for scholars. At the same time, it is a great way to acquire language knowledge and acquire a second language.

2.4. Some factors impacting on YLs learning

Compared to young learners, young learners are more enthusiastic, curious, creative and imaginative, and eager to communicate. They are good at imitating language and movements. In addition, they like to please their teachers and want to be complemented by them (Cameron, 2001)[4]. It is probably the essential advantage that language teachers can benefit from in the YL classroom. However, they also have disadvantages. Because of the cognitive level of young learners, their understanding of knowledge is limited, and their behavior is different. It requires teachers to focus on classroom management and individual student differences during lessons. In addition, they are easily distracted by short attention spans and classroom trivialities that can cause potential problems or become obstacles in the second language classroom. Teachers need to consider these issues when creating lesson plans or during the lesson. So how do you teach a child to learn a language?

3. Context

3.1. The learners

There were about twenty-eight local students in the class, and they were with different language proficiency levels, all of whom were 11 years old. They had three or four English classes and one foreign teacher class in one week; each class lasts 40 minutes. With the popularity of English, all elementary schools were setting up classes for foreign teachers from grade three. Foreign teachers usually play games with students to practice their speaking, listening, and reaction skills. Before the lesson, the students already had learned how to express time in the previous units. In this storytime lesson, the learners would learn new words like windy, warm, rainy, and sentences 'What is the weather like in New York?'. In addition, they were able to apply the knowledge to real-life while understanding the meaning. This paper adopts the classroom observation approach to investigate instructional phenomena within classroom settings.

3.2. Teaching materials

The local government distributes all teaching materials, textbooks, and workbooks. At present, many primary schools choose the English teaching material---People Education Press Primary English Students' Book (PEP), which is an experimental textbook of compulsory education. People Education Press Primary English Students' Book (PEP) is a practical textbook on compulsory education. The textbook's content is very close to the students' taste and life,

besides that, each unit of the textbook has a storytime, so the material is suitable for teaching stories.

This paper takes one particular lesson in Unit 3 as an example. The story is about Zip, who has a cold in Dalian, and Zoom will fly to Dalian to visit her. At the same time, the weather forecast for Dali is being broadcast on TV, and Zoom mishears Dali as Dalian, thinking the weather will turn warm. By the time Zoom got off the plane, it was cold and raining heavily in Dalian. In the end, Zoom also caught a cold. The whole story reflects the theme of mutual concern among friends.

4. Discussion

4.1. Strengths of the English lesson

First of all, in storytelling, the teacher's role is more like a performer than a narrator. It is essential thing for storytellers to use face, voice, hands, mimes, and gestures (Dujmovic, 2006)[11]. Although the story is short and not much content, the teacher's expressions and body language enrich the story. The teacher used different voices to play Zip and Zoom to make it easier for students to distinguish between the characters. Her low voice and frail look showed Zip's cold appearance in the first two pictures. To show the cold weather, the teacher showed shivering, wrapping up tightly, and sneezing, so that the students could understand the story instantly based on the teacher's performance. It is worth mentioning that the teacher walked around the front of the classroom throughout the class, and her gaze was not confined to a fixed position; instead, she deliberately established eye contact with each student in turn. The aim is that the teacher wanted to check that the students understand the story and keep up with the lesson (Heathfield, 2004)[12].

Second, the teacher has a complete and precise teaching model that closely integrates the story and teaching goals, which means the story is used to assist the teacher in accomplishing the instructional goals. In the lesson, the teacher just used the story as a tool; most importantly, it teaches the words and sentence patterns. Before showing the first picture of the story, the teacher showed a video of Zip getting wet outside, which set the stage for Zip's cold in the first picture. This step makes sense; it makes the whole story sound clearer and less abrupt. Or the teacher could say, "Look, Zip is lying in bed. let's guess what happened to Zip?" before showing the first picture. Spaulding (2011)[13] suggests that the teacher should make some attention-grabbing gestures in the classroom, such as asking a question or giving an answer. To not transform the storytelling classroom into a didactic classroom, the teacher should avoid limiting the students' ideas and remember that some entertainment activities are necessary for storytelling. In addition, the lesson process was clear and was divided into three main stages: pre-story stage, in-story stage, and post-story stage (Li and Wang, 2010)[14]. The teacher did not spend too much time presenting new words and sentence patterns in the pre-story stage but integrated the teaching objectives naturally in the in-story step. For example, the teacher focused on the second picture and pointed to the board while mentioning it. The teacher also manages the time well, leaving enough time for students to do other activities and review and consolidate their knowledge after teaching the language.

Finally, the teacher can pay comprehensive attention to the classroom responses of students at different levels. Because of the individual differences in students' abilities and motivation (Snock, 1990)[15], it is challenging for the teacher to teach the lesson. During the class, the teacher asked, "What is the weather like in Dali?" Most of the students quickly thought of the words they had learned in pre-reading when they saw the picture of sunshine. However, the rest of the students could not respond in time or repeated the answer after hearing others say it. In the face of the gap between the students, the teacher carried out stratified teaching. In the subsequent post-reading stage, the teacher emphasized that students could selectively

complete the tasks. At the same time, students who were relatively good at understanding the story could also retell the story; relatively weak students only needed to understand the story with the help of pictures and words.

4.2. Weaknesses of the English lesson

In the post-reading stage, the teacher designs two activities to review and consolidate what they have learned. First, the teacher organizes students to work in pairs and pick their favorite characters to perform the story. The teacher emphasizes that this activity aims to act out the story, not to read it. The purpose of this was to allow students to practice their language skills while also giving them some training in cooperation skills. However, the results of this activity were very different from the expected. Students spent much time choosing roles instead of practicing the dialogues. They gossiped and spoke Chinese during the discussion, which all defeated the original purpose of performing the story. In addition, some students lost interest in the activity once they understood that the general pattern of the activity was role-playing and did not watch the other students' performances. The short attention span of elementary school students also makes it difficult for the teacher to carry out the activity designed initially. Therefore, teachers should consider these issues before preparing lessons. They could design more innovative games and activities to help children practice while those activities should fit the learning objectives.

But in fact, the retelling is less popular with students to some certain extent. After the teacher asked, "Who can retell the story?" no students raised their hands, and the teacher asked again, but no one answered actively. It is challenging to fully understand the content and retell it in a 40-minute class. Therefore, instead of retelling the story, the teacher could use other methods; for example, students would receive pictures of the story. They need to order the stories according to the pictures and the content of the story the teacher has told. The teacher can also prepare small notes that match each picture of the story and ask students to match the pictures to the notes one by one. After a few practice sessions with the students, the teacher encourages them to tell the story to the class without the help of the note. This latter approach is more likely to attract students' attention and increase learners' interest in learning English because the same instructional purpose is achieved.

Second, the limitations of the textbook make the stories less attractive. We will notice that some of the so-called stories in textbooks lack the characteristics that the stories mentioned in the literature review should have. Most of them usually lack a plot. The characters in the story simply experience something rather than a problem that arises and then figure out how to solve it, as in traditional stories (Cameron, 2001)[4]. Zip and Zoom's stories are too simple. As Cameron mentions, they simply experience an event without a plot that rises and falls, making it challenging to attract the attention of elementary school students. In addition, the story is short, with only six pictures. It is challenging to meet the linguistic features of the story, such as parallelism and repetition, in a concise story. Repetitive language patterns promote language acquisition. Therefore, the teacher has to find ways to achieve the teaching objectives.

4.3. Implications for practice

According to the analysis above, the story teaching method plays a vital role in young learners' English learning. From a practical perspective, there are some suggestions discussed as follows: First, the teacher should be clear about the objectives of the class (Cameron, 2001)[4] and prepare the lesson carefully in advance. Teachers need to try their best to know the story well instead of reading words directly from the page (Ellis and Brewster, 2002)[16]. Before the lesson, the teacher should consider what the students will learn, how the activity will be carried out, what will happen unexpectedly, and what the students will learn. The teacher has to read the story repeatedly to ensure that he or she knows every episode of the story very well. When

using the storytelling method, students need to master the words and sentences at first and then understand the content and emotions of the story. To a certain extent, the storytelling method helps teachers accomplish their teaching objectives and improves students' language comprehension skills. However, teachers should pay attention to the fact that using stories can help students develop language skills in different aspects, not only learning new words and sentences. Listening skills and communicative competence should also be developed through repeating vocabularies and sentences in the EFL. But in fact, these two skills are always ignored in Chinese English class. In the future, teachers should pay more attention to these two skills and design some activities to help students overcome their psychological barriers and encourage them to be brave enough to communicate in a second language.

Second, to learn a second language, it is not enough to rely on the English environment provided in the classroom, but also need the input of English outside of school - the help of parents. According to Garton and Pratt (1998)[17], stories in linear aridity of syllabuses and some course books, parent-child story reading is more impressive and valuable. It is easy to show the importance of parents' support for a child's language learning. Therefore, parents can collect more short and easy-to-understand stories or picture books and read them with their children during breaks or play the recordings. If children have free access to English out of schools, like picture books and oral stories, it is helpful for their second language acquisition (Enever, 2015)[18]. Schools can also set up more activities outside of the classroom to provide young learners with more exposure to English, such as English corners, English songs and dances, and speech contests, and encourage students to participate actively.

Finally, teachers need to develop students' sense of cooperation. In performing the story, they need to discuss with each other, choose roles, and base the dialogue on the story. Each student has to participate in the process actively. Otherwise, they will fail. The sense of cooperation is crucial both in elementary school and in their future learning life. Therefore, teachers should be careful when grouping students that it is better to put those with different levels in one group. Make sure that each group has students with a good foundation as leaders, and at the same time lead the weak ones in the group to discuss actively and guide the group members to help each other. Before the regular class, the teacher can design some small games within the group, such as passing a secret password. The teacher whispers a phrase to the first person in the group, and then the last person announces the answer. Adopt an incentive mechanism for the highest score of the group activity with the correct answer.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has described the background of using stories and then given the critical literature review on the storytelling method, consisting of the concept of stories, some characteristics about a good story, the importance of using stories in EFL classroom, and some characteristics of young learners impacting their language learning. Next, it has provided the context of who the learners were and what the teaching content was. After that, the critical discussion was based on the English lesson that observed in the internship school, mainly containing three advantages and two disadvantages, all of which have been deeply analyzed and discussed with the support of relevant theories. Finally, it has presented some practical suggestions for improving English teaching and learning, which are preparing lessons carefully in advance, providing an English environment outside the classroom, and cultivating students' cooperative spirit.

It is believed that the story teaching method is one of the vital mediums to teach the foreign language that provides a relaxed atmosphere and engages young learners' attention. Besides, teachers should be aware and prepared to use stories in EFL classrooms in primary schools.

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