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Using Children's Literature with Young Learners

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The biggest practical challenges in using English language children's literature rather than readers created specifically for EFL/ESL students are:

- choosing an appropriate book
- preparing to teach, from writing lesson plans to developing supporting teaching materials
- brainstorming creative teaching ideas

This paper will serve as a guide for those who would like to use literature in the classroom with their young students, but aren't sure how to begin.

Introduction

For some readers, the very word literature brings to mind dusty, difficult books stacked in a rarely frequented corner of the library. Typically, in an EFL/ESL context, literature is associated with advanced university students or other high level adults. However, children's literature is an important part of English language literature as a body of work, and using it for EFL/ESL teaching has many benefits for students.

Given a creative teaching approach and suitable supplemental activities, children's literature can be used successfully as the content base for an integrated-skills EFL/ESL classroom. Appropriate selections give students exposure to new, illustrated vocabulary in context, provide repetition of key words and phrases that students can master and learn to manipulate, and provide a sense of accomplishment at the completion of study that finishing a single unit in a textbook cannot provide. Turning to the last page of a well-read book is a pleasure, and students feel a sense of accomplishment when they have mastered a piece of literature written in English, regardless of whether it is *The Cat in the Hat* or *Ulysses*.

The suggestions here are based on my teaching experience with first, second, and third grade EFL learners from fairly low to intermediate levels of proficiency. Most of these students were still developing a vocabulary base with which to navigate their new language, and so were in the pre-production to early production stages of language acquisition (Haynes 2001). As such, every phase of this approach aims to increase students' exposure to English and to help them build their English vocabulary.

Choosing a Book

Choosing the right book may be the most difficult, and most important, part of teaching literature. In a study of the increasing popularity of using literature in the second language classroom, Radhika O'Sullivan (1991, Selecting Literature section, para. 1) observed that, "It is all very well to point out the advantages of teaching literature but the key to success in using literature in the ESL classroom depends primarily on the works selected." If the selection is too easy, students will feel bored and you will have difficulty designing enough activities. If the selection is too difficult, students will feel frustrated and you will be overwhelmed. The following guidelines may help you narrow down the field of choices.

When evaluating potential books, look at:

- The length and complexity of the story. Simple, short stories with repetitive language work best for young EFL learners.

- Does the book look overwhelming? Type that is too small, or too many words on a page, can intimidate young students.
- The level of vocabulary. How much of it will be review for your students? If students know less than 75% - 80% of the vocabulary, they may lose confidence in their ability to understand the story.
- Illustrations should be interesting and should help students understand both the vocabulary and the story.
- Finally, select a book that you think you will enjoy. It will be difficult to convince students to be enthusiastic about a story you don't like.

A selection of recommended titles is provided in the Appendix.

Preparing to Teach

Lesson Planning

Before you start designing worksheets and wordlists, make sure that you know where you're going. Think about your teaching objective, consider how much time you have to spend with the book, and then create a plan so that you have a systematic approach in mind as you design materials.

Allow Enough Time

Spending enough time with the book is very important. In order for young students to fully absorb an English language book, they must interact with it extensively. Dr. Seuss's *The Foot Book* contains 131 words, 47 of which are the word feet or foot, yet spending five or six hours on a simple book like this is appropriate with young, beginning learners. Even more advanced young learners need plenty of time. *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, a book based on a popular children's summer camp song, is very short and simple by adult standards, but my second grade EFL students spent over ten hours and sixteen class periods studying it. They were never bored, and, in fact, their enthusiasm for the book seemed to increase in proportion to the time they spent studying it. This observation is supported by Sabrina Peck (2003, p. 141), who advises teachers of young learners that, "Many children do not tire of practicing a repetitive and rhythmic text several times a day, many days a week."

Use What You Find

Look for features of the book that you can highlight in the classroom. For example, *The Foot Book* uses opposites and counting. You can work these two concepts into your supplemental activities. *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* is a great springboard for teaching vocabulary about nature (forest, river, cave, mud, snowstorm) and prepositions (over, under, through). *Inside a Barn in the Country* provides an obvious focus on animal names and sounds.

Developing Materials

Developing materials yourself, while challenging and time-consuming, can be very rewarding. Not only is it a good learning experience which may help give you insight into your teaching, it also allows you to target the types of activities that will be most valuable to your students, and to tailor them exactly to fit their needs. To go a step further, Brian Tomlinson (1999, Introduction section, para. 2), asserts that the most meaningful learning takes place when students are "involved intellectually, aesthetically, and emotionally" in their own education. When teachers choose to use student-created materials, instead of pre-fabricated, one-size fits all published ones, they can begin to accomplish goals like these.

Workbook

Young students need hands-on activities. A teacher-created workbook can act as a basis for one of those types of activities.

Keep things simple. The workbook need be nothing more than a collection of papers stapled together. On the first day of teaching a new book, allow students to illustrate the covers of their own workbooks. This can provide a personal connection to the story at the outset of their study. You can use the pages as a place for students to draw artistic responses to the story. For example, if they've learned

"house/mouse/train/rain" in class, then the lesson wrap-up may include time for them to draw a picture featuring the vocabulary words and labeled in English.

Flashcards

Again, materials do not need to be professionally produced to be effective. Assign different key vocabulary words to different students and have them help make flashcards. You can collect and laminate the drawings and use them for various activities in follow up lessons. It is amazing to see the rapt attention students are willing to give materials they created themselves.

Cassette Tape

Many books are available with a companion cassette tape, which often includes versions of the story set to music or with sound effects. These tapes are well worth the investment and, if possible, students will benefit from purchasing their own copy as well so they can listen at home. The story set to music is more entertaining for your students, who might express it by borrowing from Emma Goldman, and saying, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your EFL classroom."

If no tape is available, don't despair! If you are a virtuoso, you could set the story to music yourself and record it. If not, you could coerce your older, higher proficiency students to read the story and record it as a class project. You could enlist precocious young ones to make drumming sounds at pre-determined intervals or, if you have truly musical students, you could find some way to use their talents. My sixth grade students particularly enjoyed noticing how "easy" the literature for first graders was as it gave them a real sense of their own progress.

Teaching Ideas

Sequencing Activities

Young learners in particular need a very active classroom and variety throughout the lesson. Ten minutes is probably the maximum length of time you can expect students of this age to focus their attention before you need to change gears. One guideline that works well with young learners is to assure that, in any given lesson, there is always a little enthusiastic singing, a little quiet listening, a little enthusiastic dancing, and a little quiet artwork.

The following approach is one that works very well:

- **Sing**. Students sing, recite, or read a passage from the story in teams.
- **Listen**. Students listen to the story from beginning to end.
- **Dance**. Students get out of their chairs for some physical activity. Often, this can be acting out the actions from the story, but there are unlimited possibilities.
- **Draw**. Students sit back down and illustrate new vocabulary.

While considering how you will allocate class time, don't underestimate the students' enthusiasm for listening to a story again and again. In fact, according to Anne Burns (2003, p. 22), a surprising result from her study of second-language learner attitudes toward literacy learning included the insight that "students were almost unanimous in their desire for teachers to read aloud to them." She credited the value of hearing fluent reading in English, listening to the written words, hearing correct stress and intonation patterns, as well as providing a model for imitation as possible reasons.

Types of Activities

- Listen to the story on tape/as read by the teacher without looking at the text.
- Listen to the story and read along.
- Listen to the story and put illustrations depicting parts of the story in order.
- Read the book silently.
- Read the book to a partner, then switch.
- Write your favorite words/new words/words starting with A from the story in your notebook.

- Write a portion of the story in the workbook.
- Answer (or practice asking) simple who, what, when, where, and why questions about the story.
- Play pictionary. Divide students into teams. One member of the team draws a picture on the board while team members try to guess what it is within a limited time period.
- Speed reading game. Call out a word from the text, then let students race to find it. The first one to find it reads the sentence aloud. A word of caution: this game is rather hard on books.
- Have students display the flashcards they made, let them be the teacher and ask the class, "What is this?"
- Make up a dance or do actions to the words of the story. A good example of this kind of story is *The Foot Book*. The text repeats, "Left Foot/Left Foot/Right Foot/Right." Students can get out of their chairs and jump from left to right as suggested by the text.
- Do the opposite of dancing. Have students "freeze" a moment of the text by acting out exactly what is described in the text at some specific moment, and holding perfectly still. You could photograph these moments if you have a digital camera.
- Do a verbal fill-in-the-blank exercise. As you read, stop at random and have students shout out what word comes next.
- Check comprehension of key concepts by asking students to draw pictures. For example, students could demonstrate understanding of the difference between "I like *kimchi*."/"I don't like *kimchi*." by drawing two different pictures.
- A note about memorization. A lot of students really do enjoy memorizing the books. Allow them to recite what they've memorized in teams. Many students love to show off their English, and feel very proud of being able to produce a minute or so of non-stop English.

Conclusion

Using children's literature can be an effective and enjoyable way to teach language. Students who are enthralled by a story forget their worries and anxieties about the new language. In an interview with Tova Ackerman (1994, para. 2), storyteller Dvora Shurman says that, "The best way to teach is not to impose teaching, but to allow the listener to become so involved in hearing a story that his 'defenses' are no longer active." It is our sense of enjoyment, excitement, and emotional involvement that is a necessary condition for learning, and using literature in the classroom can provide the content base for the magic.

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Appendix

Suggested Titles

For Absolute Beginners:

These are very short stories with a few simple words that repeat over and over again. They will not overwhelm beginning students.

- I Like Books by Anthony Browne
- Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See? by Bill Martin, Jr. and Eric Carle (Illustrator)

For Beginners:

These stories have more text, but still use simple vocabulary and a repetitive narrative structure.

- The Foot Book by Dr. Seuss
- Inside a Barn in the Country by Tedd Arnold (Illustrator) and Alyssa Satin Capucilli
- Silly Sally by Audrey Wood and Don Wood (Illustrator)

For Intermediate Students:

These books are well-suited for young learners with a full year of English study experience. Vocabulary is generally simple, but the stories are much longer. They do retain the features of repetitive passages and the first three on the list are set to music, which will help students absorb them.

- We're Going on a Bear Hunt by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury (Illustrator)
- Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star Illustrated by Iza Trapani
- The Itsy-Bitsy Spider Illustrated by Iza Trapani
- Green Eggs and Ham by Dr. Seuss

Resources on the Internet for Finding More Titles:

The Children's Literature Web Guide (David K. Brown)
http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown