

Storytelling for Young Learner English Education

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Abstract

In an age of globalization, countries around the world are introducing English at younger ages in national curricula. This has created a need to find ways of teaching that compliment how young learners acquire language. In this article, the author describes some of the key characteristics of young learners and explains how using stories in language instruction caters to those specific characteristics. By way of illustration, the author provides details of how one particular English program for young learners in Japan has used storytelling as the foundation for the English syllabus.

Introduction

English education for young learners (EYL) in Japan continues to be the focus of new government policies. Operating under the assumption that earlier is better, the makers of these policies are aiming to introduce English into the national curriculum at younger ages. In Japan, by the year 2020, English will become a formal subject in the elementary school fifth- and sixth-grade curricula. Classes will use sanctioned textbooks, and students will be given formal grades in the subject. In many schools throughout Japan, school administrators have already initiated this change in order for teaching staff to adjust to the new government mandates before they become official. Additionally, along with the new English curriculum, the pre-existing *foreign language activities* classes, previously targeted at fifth and sixth grades, will become required for all third- and fourth-graders.

Perceiving an advantage for their children, regarding entrance into higher-level schools and with future employment, parents are not waiting for the government to act. With an abundance of private English schools targeting programs at younger learners, parents can easily introduce their children to the English language even before elementary school. However, all programs are not equally effective. The unique characteristics and needs of young learners must be carefully accounted for and catered to in order to harness the benefits of starting second language learning at young ages. The present paper will describe a syllabus based on storytelling that has been used at a kindergarten in the Kanto region of Japan since 2006. It will outline

how this kind of syllabus works well considering the unique characteristics of young foreign-language learners. Finally, it will describe what the author sees as the next step in the continual improvement of the syllabus after over ten years of using stories as the platform for EYL instruction.

Characteristics of Young Language Learners

Talking about the said syllabus based on storytelling, it is helpful to first look at the characteristics of young learners. In this section, we will look at some of the characteristics of young learners and try to show how those characteristics apply to the teaching of language.

Tolerance to Ambiguity

Children spend their first few years of life interacting with parents and other caregivers with only minimal understanding of what is going on around them. They are carted here and there by mothers running daily errands without much knowledge of where and why they are going. They are spoken to and asked questions, but they need not respond—and very well cannot—because they won't fully comprehend most of what is being spoken to them until later in life. This indicates that children naturally cope well with a high level of ambiguity while still striving for meaning and using prediction and guessing to fill in the gaps (Wright, 2008). Parents read books to their children at bedtime, but they don't expect them to understand much of the story. They point to the pictures in the books and even ask questions. However, this interaction—on the parent's part—is not with the purpose of gathering information. Quite the opposite—it is about slowly supplying children with more understanding about the story. It is in this way, that children learn more about the world around them.

As teachers of young learners, it is important to make classroom activities as understandable as possible by making routines, giving concrete examples and by using other scaffolding techniques wherever possible to fill in the gaps in understanding. However, it is also important to realize that young children are comfortable with partial understanding (Bland, 2015). They use context and experience to make guesses about what is happening and what is being said to them. They use prediction quite effectively to know how to react in even new contexts by using what Piaget called *accommodation* techniques based on prior experiences and skills (Cameron, 2001). Thus, teachers should use the objectives of their lessons to guide them in knowing what to spend their time on teaching and understand that in most cases, children will make up for untaught vocabulary with their ability to predict. Teachers can, however, learn to predict the places these skills of young

learners may fall short due to lack of context and make up for it with extra support.

Interaction

Children learn through interacting with their environment (Pinter, 2006). As they encounter things in their immediate world, children jump into a process of action, observation and reaction. It is mainly through this process that they develop. Even at the very beginning of life, children engage in this process by simply putting things into their mouths. The act of putting an object in her mouth is the way the child interacts with her environment. Realizing that it does not taste good or feel pleasant to the touch is her observation. Spitting it out is the reaction she has to that observation. This cycle happens over and over again as the child grows and learns.

In the same way, young children learn language by interacting in search of meaning. From the outside, the initial process may look passive, but by listening to the voices around them and mimicking the sounds they hear, children are developing the hardware necessary to make those sounds understandable. As they develop to the point that they are able to make those sounds, they begin to hear more discrete details of what is said to them and thus are able to reproduce words. While this formation is taking place, there are simultaneously many other areas of learning also at play. For example, when the child learns to move her mouth in the way to form the utterance, “Mama,” it is not a random combination of sounds or a random word she heard someone say. The child learns also what the effect of that word is when it is spoken. Her mother comes to her, or she sees a smile and is picked up. Thus, even from less than a year of age, the child learns the effects of language.

Attention Spans

Because of their natural desire to find meaning in the world around them, children are made to learn (Cameron, 2001). Even more than adults, children have the ability to use all of their senses to interact with their environment. However, this also makes managing a classroom somewhat difficult for teachers in a traditional setting. Teachers in the classroom must be able to harness the curiosity of young learners and keep their focus on the task at hand. When the difficulty or quality of a lesson or task does not match a child’s ability or interest, that natural desire to learn what is being taught will wane. The child may become sleepy or disruptive, or she may create a task on her own that is more interesting or more compatible with her abilities at the time (Cameron, 2001).

Young children, generally have short attention spans due to competing input through the senses. A child can stay focused on a particular task for around 5 to 10

minutes when the activity is interesting and much less when it is not (Shin & Crandall, 2014). Additionally, some children will find a particular activity more enjoyable, while others will soon tired of it. For that reason, changing the kinds of activities regularly helps to keep children interested. Creative teachers are able to switch between more active tasks and slower-paced activities while not altering from the content or learning goals stated for one lesson. Indeed, it is important for teachers to be flexible in the amount of time spent on one activity or task in order to either extend the time allotted for it in the lesson if the activity is being accepted well by children or end it early if enthusiasm is waning.

Scaffolding

Though the brains of young learners are exceptionally capable of learning language, they have yet to develop the ability to manage multiple tasks or tasks that involve complexity. The term “scaffolding,” coined by Jerome Bruner in the 1950s, has been used to talk about the support parents and teachers give young learners (Shin & Crandall, 2014). Scaffolding is strategically used where children are lacking the skills necessary to complete tasks successfully. This could be done in the form of asking questions such as when a parent asks a child working a puzzle about the color or pattern on a particular piece in order to direct the child’s attention toward the area the piece could potentially fit. Scaffolding can also be more overt as in giving advice about how to complete the task. As time goes on and the learner becomes more competent at completing the task, the types of support will gradually change or be taken away, allowing the learner autonomy when they are ready.

Scaffolding should be used in the learner’s Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is what the child is able do with the help of an adult that they would not be able to do otherwise (Pinter, 2006). It is in the ZPD, that learning is most successful. Through dialogue, the teacher can focus the young learner’s enthusiastic search for meaning to allow learning to take place and the child to be successful at the task at hand. One example of scaffolding used in the language classroom is to build routines into the schedule. Through this technique, teachers provide children with context and repetition of language. Therefore, when the teacher tells the children to, “Put away your bags” on a daily basis, learners become accustomed to the routine. Using contextual clues, the learner with less comprehension can make predictions about the meaning of the command to complete the task. Then, the teacher can begin to add slight variations to the command to build onto that understanding and further promote learning. This type of scaffolding technique enables young children to learn effectively.

Repetition

Repetition is a part of a child's life from the beginning. Children learn by doing tasks over and over, gaining confidence every time a task is completed successfully. Things like mealtimes, baths, and naps as well as more complex tasks such as brushing teeth or tying shoes are routines that give consistency to every child's life, which in turn gives them a sense of safety and well-being (Morrison, 2008). More than adults, children have a natural inclination toward repetition for learning. For that reason, most nursery rhymes are made up of repeated phrases with repeated rhythms. Children's songs also have repetition involved because children seem to enjoy the predictable nature of these songs (Cook, 2000). In the age of on-demand movies and TV shows, children often watch the same shows again and again until they can recite the lines of each character from memory. Although this sounds boring and tedious to adults, children learn through this repetition.

Though young learners are used to learning through repetition and seem to enjoy it, they are selective about what they want to repeat. While repeating nursery rhymes or singing songs, children are engaging with the actions or with the meanings in the rhyme or song. Each time children watch a movie or TV show, they are pulling more and more meaning from it. However, repetition without comprehension is less likely to be enjoyable for children, and they are less likely to learn anything from it.

Repetition with regard to language learning, regardless of L1 or L2, is not a new concept. It is generally accepted that the more times a person encounters a word or phrase in context, the more likely the person is to recall it. The first time a learner understands the meaning of the word or phrase is the beginning of a process of learning (Cameron, 2001). With each additional encounter, the person's understanding of the word will snowball, adding layer by layer of meaning. So, repetition is key in the process of language comprehension and retention. That being said, repetition without any sort of meaning attached, as is often still the case in many EYL classrooms, is of limited value for language learning.

Modeling

Providing a model for children to follow is something that is involuntary for parents and teachers. Children are always watching and listening to what the adult figures in their lives are doing and saying. Likewise, whether good or bad, children will imitate things they see on TV or other forms of media. We can see this in daily life easily. Mothers often find their young daughters in front of their mirrors with make-up spread all over their faces. Fathers are likely to hear their children using language they have said, whether it is something they are proud of or not. This behavior is

natural, and children learn when provided with a model to observe and follow.

When teaching a foreign language to young children, intentionally modeling the language is vital. When children hear the language in various contexts and they become comfortable with their understanding of its use, they will begin to understand it and eventually use it. Even before the production of a particular form being taught, learning is taking place each time it is modeled in context. Thus, in an EYL context, it is more natural for teachers to teach a grammatical form by simply modeling it and emphasizing it in use (Cameron, 2001). Because repetition is key to modeling, consciously using the form while interacting with children in various contexts and for various reasons will emphasize (and teach) that form. Even outside of the “lesson,” teachers can use their interaction with children to reinforce what they are teaching. Using key phrases in normal interaction outside of lessons brings the language to a new level of reality for children.

In the next section, based on the natural characteristics of young learners as described above, we will explore how storytelling is a particularly useful way to introduce language in an EYL context.

Benefits of Using Stories for EYL

Stories are fundamental to human life regardless of culture or status. We are entertained and taught truths about life through stories from a very young age. Thus, stories are meaningful to children and hold enormous potential for teaching (Shin & Crandall, 2014).

The natural ability young learners have to tolerate only partial understanding makes them particularly adept at learning through stories. Unlike adult learners of language, who often have a need to fill in gaps in linguistic knowledge when a breakdown in understanding occurs, young learners simply make do with the understanding they gain through context to find meaning (Wright, 2008). The meaning-focused attitude children bring to language learning allows them to tolerate the ambiguity that is a part of listening to stories in a foreign language.

Therefore, teachers are able to slowly and methodically introduce language that is encountered in stories before and between each telling. Each time the story is told, the children have more understanding, and predictions they have made about meanings are confirmed. This, in turn, makes stories more enjoyable the more times they are told and boosts confidence in the new language.

Introducing the grammar and vocabulary of a foreign/second language through stories gives specific contexts for language use, which is crucial to meaning-focused young learners. Because interaction is fundamental to the way young learners acquire language, children learn grammar and vocabulary by interacting with it in context. Though the use of flashcards and body language are valid ways to show the meaning of vocabulary items, it is essential to a child's overall understanding and retention to also put the new language into contexts that children can understand. This is easily done through the contexts of stories. Additionally, while grammar explanations for adults are common, young learners acquire grammar by being made aware of it through meaningful repetition in varied contexts (Cameron, 2001). Young children do not have the attention spans or cognitive abilities necessary to handle the way adults learn language. Instead, teachers can introduce language from stories using chunks of grammar. For example, the dialog of a story illuminating how a character is feeling could be taught as the chunk, "I'm happy" along with some other adjectives as possible responses to the question, "How are you?" The grammar is not broken down and taught, but instead is taught as a language conglomerate. Then, this grammar, along with the other vocabulary taught, can be related back to the story during the next telling. As children become developmentally ready, they will begin to slowly breakdown the chunks of language on their own or with the help of adults around them.

Because the attention spans of younger learners are short, using stories as themes for entire EYL units is an efficient way to teach language. By treating stories as themes, teachers can change activities regularly based on learner needs and yet still use and reuse language from the story. For example, the teacher might start by talking with children in their L1 about the general topic of the story. Then, the teacher might tell the story. Depending on the needs of the learners, this could be done using pictures as with picture books, puppets or even a slideshow with a projector. After the telling of the story, some language items from the story could be highlighted using realia, flashcards or some form of body language. Following that, the teacher may choose to have children do some art using the story as the theme. A song could be made with lyrics and actions based on language or events in the story, and singing the song could be used as another activity in the unit. All of these various activities change up the pace of the lesson and yet still provide children with input of the target language. Keeping in mind the importance of input in varied contexts, teachers will continue to use the target language to engage learners during activities in order to continue to build on their understanding.

Using stories as themes for EYL instruction acts as scaffolding for efficient learning. Stories provide narrative language as well as dialog between characters that act as models for young learners to use. When teachers involve children in the telling of the story by either distributing parts to certain children or by designating repeated lines of the story for the entire class to say each time, children are able to practice some of the language collectively within a meaningful context. Children gain confidence and understanding each time they hear the telling of a story, and the young learner's capacity to listen to the same story over and over enables it to happen in a meaningful way. Furthermore, through the various activities done within the theme, children encounter and interact with the language from the story often. This allows children to use what they have learned previously to interact in slightly different contexts, increasing their ability to understand. It is this kind of meaningful repetition in various formats and contexts that makes stories so useful for EYL teaching.

Story-telling in an EYL Syllabus

As stated in the introduction, stories have been used as themes for a syllabus for an EYL program in Japan for over ten years. At the beginning of that time, the storytelling was done with classic stories such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and "The Three Little Pigs." After some experience, however, it was decided that creating stories with consistently more useful language for children would be beneficial. In this section, we will describe the way storytelling is used alongside other supporting activities in this very unique program. Though the specifics of this program may be difficult to replicate, the content of the syllabus should provide some useful ideas for other teachers of young learners.

In this EYL program for four-year-olds, class meetings are held once a week for 30 minutes at a local kindergarten. Because of scheduling conflicts, some weeks are not consecutive, but each story unit involves five meetings. The main teachers of the class are Japanese university students in a preparation course to become English teachers, but most have little or no experience teaching English. The two classes of four-year-olds have 25 to 30 children each, and the teacher-student ratio is about 2:1 due to the large number of university student-teachers. Admittedly, this teacher-student ratio makes some activities feasible that would be difficult in most classroom situations. However, it is hoped that experienced teachers will be able to adapt the ideas presented here to their own settings, using the ideas they believe to be helpful.

At the start of each story-based unit, teachers begin by telling the story. In this case, the story is presented in the form of a puppet show using simple stick puppets, but it could easily be done using a picture book. Because of the number of teachers

available to do the puppet show, the children are broken into two smaller groups of about 15 each. This allows children to sit closer to the puppets and the storytellers, which helps them stay focused on the story. The majority of the teachers act out the story using puppets, but whenever possible, two or three teachers sit among the children to provide scaffolding. These teachers direct the attention of children toward important visuals in the show, repeat keywords in English, and also provide some commentary in the L1 where it is thought that the context is insufficient for guessing important content. Later in the unit, some of this scaffolding is gradually taken away as children begin to understand the story better.

After the story has been told (which generally takes about five minutes), the children are divided into smaller groups of five to seven. In these smaller groups, teachers introduce selected vocabulary and structure taken from the story. This is done using pictures, flashcards, body language and realia. Generally speaking, the characters (which are commonly animals) are taught first because they are most important to the story and are the easiest language items for the young learners to understand. In each of the three following meetings, more new language is introduced in the same way. Teachers try to select language from the story that is important to understanding and yet can be introduced systematically. That being said, because the stories used in the class are self-created, often language is intentionally used in the story for the purpose of teaching as a set. For example, in order to systematically introduce adjectives, four or five adjectives will be used in the story intentionally to create a pattern for teaching and understanding. Similarly, the grammar connected to the adjectives is introduced in chunks alongside the adjectives. For example, when teaching the adjective, “sleepy,” teachers will introduce it by isolating the word, but will also use it in a chunk of useful grammar, as in, “I’m sleepy” or “She is sleepy.” This gives the young learners a model to show them how to use the adjective immediately.

Due to the direct instruction outlined above, after each new week of a story-based unit the children hold a slightly better understanding of the language encountered in the story. To ensure that is the case, language introduced the previous week is always reviewed before the story is told again. This is often done in small groups before the puppet show. However, when reviewing the characters in the story, it is easier to do the review time in larger groups just before the story is told again. It is common in these review times that children are able to understand and use the language taught the previous week better than they could directly after it was taught. This indicates that some positive effects with regard to retention of language taught occur when spacing between teaching and assessment is built into a program.

After teaching the new language each week, children are given a fun task to create an opportunity for them to interact with that newly introduced language. The nature of the task chosen—whether productive, where the learner is expected to produce the language, or receptive, where the learner is only expected to understand the language—is decided based on the difficulty of the language being introduced (Cameron, 2001). In general, at the beginning of each unit, receptive skills make up most of the objectives for these language tasks. An example of a task focusing on receptive skills might be to put cards of various animals face-up on the floor. The children gather around the cards, and the teacher says, “Touch the lion.” The children then race to touch the lion card. If asking children to produce the target language, for example, teachers may show children a picture list of various popular cartoon characters and ask, “What do you like?” The child is then expected to use the chunk, “I like ___” with one of the characters names. Then, the teacher gives the child a picture of the character.

The final component of the class is a song sung at the end of each meeting during the unit. The music for the song is made using software called, Garageband, and free downloadable MIDI sound files. By putting a MIDI sound file into Garageband, one can manipulate the notes of all instruments in the file to change the song and adapt it to simple a melody useful for a children’s song. Though this requires a moderate ability on a computer, it does not require a lot of music knowledge. If that kind of adaptation is not possible, any music can be slowed down and used to create songs to sing with children. Lyrics for the songs are made from themes and language in the story. Songs generally repeat patterns of language multiple times and involve movements for children to do while singing. When it is time to sing the final song, the teacher in charge stands in the middle of the room and says, “Let’s sing a song! Make a circle.” On that cue, other teachers help the children to hold hands and form a circle. As this becomes routine, children need less and less help following the cue on their own.

During the fifth meeting of each unit, the language introduced throughout the four previous meetings is reviewed. During this class, children interact in games and activities that require them to understand and sometimes use the language taught during the unit. In most cases, at the end of the unit, children are still in the stage of development where receptive activities are more appropriate for their levels of understanding. However, in some cases, activities that require young learners to produce the language are done in order to challenge those who developmentally have an advanced understanding. In these cases, teachers are there to help children who cannot produce the target language. By conducting this final review, teachers are able

to see how much of the language is retained at the end of the five weeks of classes.

Further Improvements to the EYL Syllabus

The syllabus described above has been developed over the ten years this program has been running. Over time, it was added to and refined, and the skills needed to create the materials needed were developed. Likewise, moving forward, the program will continue to change as we understand more about this unique language-learning situation for young learners. In this final section, we will describe a few changes that would likely make the program more effective as we see it now.

One important change that would improve this EYL program is to increase the number of meetings. Currently, one five-week unit is conducted over one university semester. Because the teachers in the program are university students taking a class, many weeks of the semester are spent training these students how to teach. Other time is spent making materials and lesson plans. However, if the time required for training and preparation could be shortened, the children in the EYL program would be able to receive more input and more consistent instruction. This would be beneficial in a number of ways. First, the children would become more familiar with their teachers and any affective barrier that exists from shyness or nervousness would diminish. Additionally, the children would become more accustomed to the routines built into the program and would be able to use those more effectively as scaffolding for language learning.

Likewise, with an increase in the number of class meeting times, story-based units could be redesigned with meaningful repetition in mind. By creating two or more stories that have different narratives and different characters, but also intentionally have key overlapping language, children would receive more input of that language in more varied contexts. This would increase the confidence of young learners as they encounter language they have seen before and have an understanding of. It would also keep interest at higher levels by introducing new storylines. In this way, retention of the language of focus would likely increase as well. Currently, as previously stated, the class meets only five times each semester. With this amount of input, the chance for long-term retention of the target language is lower. However, if classes could be provided once every week or three times each week, the amount of repetition would likely improve retention of the material being taught.

Conclusion

Contrary to the beliefs of many government policy makers, learning a second or foreign language from a young age does not guarantee positive results. The

environment in which the language is learned and the quality and amount of exposure are also very important factors to ultimate success. Young learners have unique needs and learn in ways different from all other groups of learners. Through their L1 experience, children are familiar and even comfortable with a certain amount of ambiguity. Unlike adults, they don't have a strong need for absolute understanding regarding language. Instead, children learn by interacting with their environment and using their five senses to collect information for understanding. That said, the natural result of having highly-tuned senses can cause young learners to become distracted easily and have shorter attention spans. These particular needs of young learners must be accommodated for using scaffolding techniques to help bridge the gaps.

This paper has laid out a case for the use of stories as the main themes in EYL syllabi. It has described how stories used as themes can help to provide meaningful repetition, while at the same time, keeping the interest of young learners. Similarly, it has shown how stories provide context for deeper understanding and scaffolding for learning to take place. Finally, it is hoped that the description of the ongoing program that has been using these concepts for over 10 years will bring shape to theory and allow other EYL professionals to visualize how storytelling can be used in their own contexts. The amount of materials for EYL instruction available to teachers and administrators has never been so vast. Nevertheless, the simple format of the story may still be the key to capturing the interests of young learners.

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