

How storytelling can work as a pedagogy for EFL young learners

What this research was about and why it is important

Storytelling has a long tradition in education including language learning and teaching because of its extensive benefits in language development. For a long time, teaching English as a foreign language to young learners means learning grammar and vocabulary without use. In a broad sense, children have been viewed as dependent and incapable. Hence, they are likely to be controlled, managed, and imposed on rather than respected. This understanding has influenced education in general and language teaching in particular. Our research generated a living theory of using oral storytelling to teach English as a foreign language to children through making sense of language in use through stories. We found that storytelling pedagogy is highly generative to explore as an alternative pedagogy that can foster lifelong learning and maintain interest in learning.

What the researchers did

- We organised storytelling workshops where stories were told in English to Vietnamese children, followed by learning activities for children to discover the stories and their characters. Each of the stories were carefully selected and told two or three times depending on the language and complexity level.
- Stories were told through a combination of language and sensory engagement with relevant teaching aids to support children's meaning making, to support children's learning through words, sentences, images, touching, sound, body language, and verbal language. After each workshop, we had a conversation with children about the story and their learning.
- We gathered evidence of how children engaged in storytelling by looking at their language production, understanding, responsiveness, and emotion.
- We examined the storytelling teachers' acts and learners' acts to find out how storytelling can work as a pedagogy.

What the researchers found

We found that:

- storytelling as a responsive strategy engaged children's thinking, understanding, feelings and imagination.
- storytelling works effectively with acting, role playing, realia, voice changes, facial expression, questions, sounds, and a combination of Vietnamese and English where necessary to enable comprehension.
- storytelling became a linguistic model for children to learn pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar in context.
- both the children and storytelling teacher enjoyed storytelling as a way of teaching and learning.
- children were aware of the story language and self-initiated learning the new words in different ways.

Things to consider

- This study of the elements of storytelling pedagogy assisted in understanding the role of stories and storytelling in teaching English as a foreign language to children. Storytelling interactively and joyously facilitated children's understanding of the story language and countered passive and unimodal teaching of EFL to young learners.
- The beauty of language through stories and storytelling inspired both learning and teaching, which is often lost when teaching solely vocabulary and grammar rules.
- We recommend that further studies look at long term retention of story language and the intimacy of story sharing with children as learning motivation.

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