

And they spoke English ever after... Story-based English learning for early beginners

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Nadine Hellmuth (Kontakt: nadine-hellmuth@web.de)

Introduction

Since language is made up of words, people thought the words must be learned first, then sentences, and so on. But this is not the case. Words are best learned as part of something larger: something that tells you about the words: something that makes up a story. So it could be said that the basic unit of memory is the story. You can remember the parts of the story best because you remember the whole story. (Kline/Martel, 1992)



Although storytelling is one popular method in the primary English classroom, the question remains of how young learners profit from storytelling for learning and using a new language.

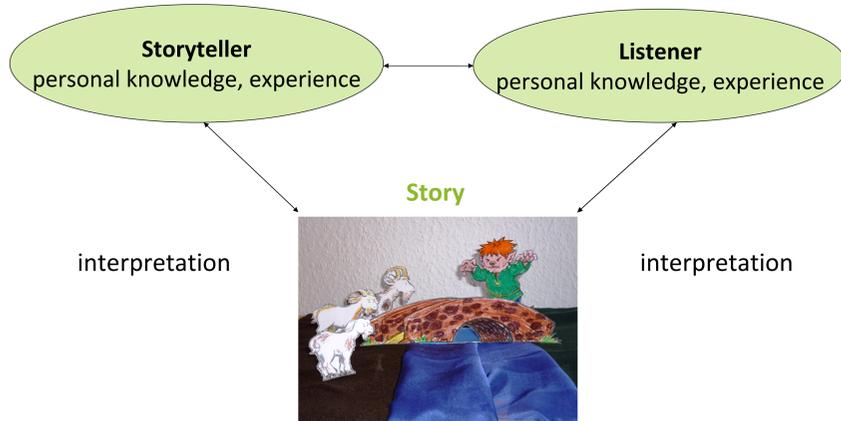
Throughout this paper, the main question is where possible chances and limitations of storytelling

become obvious, and if story-based English learning represents more than a single-skill approach helping early beginners to learn to speak English.

The title "And they spoke English ever after..." alludes to fairy tales representing the medium 'story' in general. 'Ever after' underlines that English at primary level has to prepare the ground, and last but not least, children should learn to 'speak' English, i.e. learn to use the language for communication.

Theoretical background of the method "Storytelling"

Storytelling as an interactive discourse event



(cf. Legutke/Müller-Hartmann/Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2009; Cameron, 2007)

Reasons for storytelling

Storytelling matches **principles of foreign language learning**:

- **authentic input** in **meaningful contexts** → encourages children to use English for communicating ideas, thoughts and feelings
- **visual support** → **use of the target language** is emphasised
- approaching topics on the cognitive, affective and social level; activating different learner types (**holistic learning**)

Storytelling provides different **concrete learning opportunities**:

- developing and applying appropriate **listening strategies**
- transfer of language used in a story to similar situations
- getting relevant information about the **target culture**
- dealing with a piece of **literature** (adopt different perspectives, develop empathy etc.)

Choosing and presenting appropriate stories

Choosing a story that is linguistically and cognitively appropriate

Some genres seem to suggest themselves due to their characteristic features:



fairy tales (bring along a tradition of oral presentation; their underlying structure is familiar to children)

authentic picture books (the relationship between text and pictures makes a story more complex and gives it more depth)

action stories (employ Total Physical Response (TPR) → maximum active involvement of all children)

Presenting a story

Reading out a story encourages a positive attitude towards literature.

Telling a story freely provides more opportunities for adjusting it to the learners' level and their reactions.

A story-based unit

The following unit is based on (the analysis of) the Storytime material for the story "How Santa got stuck down the chimney" and takes into account the observations of the use of this story in a second grade.

Pre-storytelling activities set the frame for listening to a story.

- Introducing main characters, places and vocabulary
- Activating thematic context knowledge

1. Lesson: Christmas decoration

- Introduction of 'decoration words' (e.g. "candle", "tree ball")
- Handicrafts: decorating a Christmas tree



2. Lesson: My Christmas tree

- Description of the prepared Christmas trees (using the new words in context)
- Decorating the Classroom

While-storytelling activities aim at keeping the listeners' attention and interest. Therefore, listeners can be involved actively.

3. Lesson: Santa got stuck

- Eliciting typical 'present words' (wishes) from the children
- Presentation of the story with the help of picture-cards (*Storytime 1/2 Erzählkarten* Braunschweig: Westermann 2008)

4. Lesson: Santa got stuck again

- Playing dominoes ('reading' the new words)
- Listening to the story again:



sequence picture-cards; find the right presents for the characters

Post-storytelling activities "either focus on activities that lead to a 'consolidation of the language' presented in the text or on activities that offer 'extension of content'" (Müller-Hartmann/Schocker-von Ditfurth, 2007).

5. Lesson: Filling Christmas sacks

- Practice of question-answer structure ("What is in your Christmas sack?" ...)
- Writing (drawing) your own list of wishes

6. Lesson: 'All I want for Christmas...' – Christmas wishes

- Asking others about their Christmas wishes (practising authentic dialogues)
- Listening activity ("Santa packs his sleigh")

7. Lesson: Merry Christmas

- Song: "We wish you a Merry Christmas"
- Creating Christmas cards (copy simple greetings)

8. Lesson: Christmas customs and traditions

- Talking about how the children celebrate Christmas
- Information on English Christmas traditions



Conclusion

We have to arrange activities around a story so that a whole unit develops that not only focuses on improving the children's listening competence but involves other skills, too.

Young learners can definitely profit from storytelling and theoretical considerations can be realised in the practical field. However, there is no automatic transfer from the language used in a story to the language available to the learners in authentic communicative situations, which as such also have to be provided. Stories are a perfect example for authentic language use, since they are an authentic part of childhood and provide enough interesting content that can enter communication. In order to learn speaking English, learners need many opportunities to talk. The 'tale' of learning English needs time and freedom to unfold so that children can speak English 'ever after'.

"Without talking they cannot become good at talking. They can learn about language, but the only way to learn to use it is to use it." (Halliwell, 2000)