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Using Stories in Language Classrooms

In many heritage language (HL) classes teachers strictly follow a textbook, often produced in a land where the HL is spoken broadly. No matter how well organized and comprehensive such a textbook might be, its central place in a lesson can always be enhanced through supplemental resources. Children's literature or stories are an excellent example of supplemental resources which provide cultural content and increase variety and motivation in the classroom.

Listening to a story – the sounds of the language, the evolution of what happens to a character – and seeing the visuals – either in the book or in one's own mind – are worthwhile ends in and of themselves. But stories can be used in HL classes in other ways as well. This article will answer two questions: why use stories in the HL class and how can they be used.

Why use stories?

First, not every story written in the HL for a native speaker is appropriate for a HL class in Canada. Select your story carefully. Pattern stories (such as those of Eric Carle or Bill Martin Jr. in English) are particularly appropriate for young and beginner level students. The wordless picture book stories of Eric Carle, Mercer Mayer, or John Burningham can also appeal to young learners. These books will reflect a North American world view and thus have a certain familiarity to HL learners. However, the latter requires someone to elicit language from the children, something that many young learners have not yet learned.

Second, there must be a fit between the story and some end task that will be connected to the story. Pattern stories serve to act as a model of a story that can be recreated by learners in a classroom as a class or group story and as such provide a good model of new information, language, patterns and a model for a valuable output that children can emulate. For example, the text of Bill Martin Jr.'s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* follows a pattern that can easily be modeled by elementary children who have had only about 100 hours of exposure to English in their school: *Brown Bear, Brown Bear What do you see? I see a purple horse Looking at me.*

Third, there is no need to teach children to read and write in the HL in order to use stories in the classroom. Children can easily learn the patterns or parts of the story auditorally. With good preparation by the teacher (using gestures, props, visuals and rhythm) children can understand stories and even repeat some of them.

Fourth, Holdaway (1979), an Australian researcher found that pre-schoolers who had favorite stories and had been read to daily, more easily learned to read and write when they began school. These children had usually 'read' (looked at and heard, following each page along with the parent or teacher) from 180-300 stories and had some that they had heard over and over again. These favorite stories confirm the value of reading some stories to elementary children many

times. Often children will listen the first time and then join in the next time the story is read. They may begin by completing the end of sentences. . .and eventually remember the entire story. Fifth, stories appeal to many of our senses and can spark students' creativity. Children can be asked to dramatize or re-enact a story, or part of it. They could also learn the parts of cumulative stories such as This is the House that Jack Built. Children can also be asked to draw parts of a story and then all of the parts can be put together to form a complete version of the story illustrated by the class. Or, a child may be motivated to illustrate the entire story on his/ her own.

How can stories be used?

Before using a story decide what your purpose is and how the story can be used to elicit an output from your students. The occasional story read for pleasure can create positive memories and attitudes toward the HL. By planning backwards and thinking about the story as a catalyst for some output, more language learning can be gained in the classroom.

Using BSLIM to help plan activities with pattern stories

No matter how creative a project, a story or the teacher, lessons using stories must be carefully planned and scaffolded so that all students in the class can benefit from the story. To help see how the story can play different roles at different points in a lesson, it is useful to think about the planning model B-SLIM. BSLIM reminds us that the children 'receive' an input of the second language, need time to 'get it' or learn something, 'use it' or apply what they have learned and then 'prove it' or demonstrate what they can do in a context with minimal preparation time. When a story is read for the pure pleasure of the story itself the story is the input and the pleasure and positive attitude is the output gained by the students. Children can prove their pleasure by smiling or laughing or through comments and feedback made in English or the HL. Students could also record how much they enjoyed and/or understood the story as an assessment strategy.

When a story is read by the learners and then each page is talked about through the guiding questions of the teacher the story again acts as a source of input. Children take in or receive the story. Through the quiding questions of the teacher students can progress further to specifically 'get the idea' of the story. One could say that the output in such an example consists of the words students use to answer the teachers' questions. Such an output can be creative or factual depending on the questions themselves as well as the students' knowledge of the HL. This approach becomes more and more effective as students become more and more able to express themselves in the HL.

When a story is read to students and used to invite students to predict what might come next, learners must pay close attention to the words and images in the story. The teacher's invitation for the students to complete the sentence on a page is a strategy to help students 'get' (or understand) the story. The pleasure of predicting, especially if the 'guess' is accurate, serves to motivate children. However, a bigger output or proof of learning can still be managed in such a scenario. If children can predict the contents of the story in words, then they can probably easily recreate the contents as well. This type of substitution drill wherein children provide their own images and words to revise the story yields a more creative and cognitively demanding output –

the creation of their own group or individual story. The new story is a product, evidence or proof of what the children have learned, and can be assessed in terms of participation, understanding the pattern. . . The greatest value of the pattern story is the number of repetitions that can be done with it without feeling bored! Holdaway's research about favorite stories pointed to the significant role that pattern stories played in developing children's reading appetite.

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