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The Value of reading aloud in Heritage Language Development

In many heritage language (HL) classes teachers strictly follow a textbook, often produced in a land where the HL is the majority language used for most oral and written communication. 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 and can also be used in the home to enhance literacy development. This article will discuss the advantages of using children's literature in the HL classroom, especially in the form of read alouds, where such stories can be found and how they can be used.

Advantages of reading aloud

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. However, listening to stories also has additional advantages:

- Helps children become familiar with language patterns (grammar, phonics)
- Exposes children to stories that they might not be able to read on their own but are able to understand
- Exposes children to a broad range of vocabulary that they might not otherwise hear
- Helps children develop interest in reading
- Helps children with learning differences to engage in a story more easily
- Teaches children about life, values, and many different topics
- Shows children a variety of illustrations which makes the reading more engaging for children
- Builds family-child bonding
- Leads to reading success.

Holdaway (1979), an American researcher working in Australia, found that pre-schoolers who had favorite stories and had been read to daily in the first 5 years of their lives, 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 older children in a HL classroom context many times. Often children will listen the first time and then join in the next time the story is read. They enjoy the familiarity and may begin by completing the end of sentences after having heard it several times. . .and eventually, after having heard it many times, remember the entire story.

From this holistic and intimate experience with books and a significant caregiver (parent or teacher) many children seemed to learn much about reading in their mother tongue. When the HL is spoken in the home or when parents have a command of the HL then this same approach can easily be replicated. If the HL is not available in the home then teachers can still follow a similar approach in the classroom. By reading stories aloud and adding intonation, visuals, voice changes, gestures and short explanations the teacher can convey the meaning of a story that the children would not be able to read by themselves. If the acquire phonetic clues, language patterns (especially of high frequency phrases), new vocabulary, and a sense of the values of the culture.

Building family relationships

Reading aloud at home also builds stronger relationships between all family members. Stories offer children opportunities to ask questions and thus help parents point them in the right direction. In reading aloud parents act as role models of fluent reading. Knowledge of stories contributes to deep cultural understanding as well as the development of logical thinking, especially if parents stop at times to talk about the story and ask questions such as "What do you think will happen next?", "Why do you think the character did that?", "How do you think (name of the character) feels about what happened?", "What would you do in this situation?"

Comparing responses between family members opens children's minds to a multiplicity of viewpoints, too!

Selecting stories

Not every story written in the HL for a native speaker is appropriate for a HL class in Canada so select your stories carefully. Pattern stories (such as those of Eric Carle or Bill Martin Jr. have been translated into many languages) 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 the familiar North American world view of many HL learners. However, the latter requires someone to elicit language from the children, including words that many beginner HL learners have not yet learned.

Books from the HL culture are the obvious choice for most read alouds because the illustrations and story structure, dilemmas and resolutions reflect (and teach) the culture.

However, such books can also be hard to find. Thus, as a HL teacher use your knowledge to help your school develop a collection of children's books for your own use as well as that of parents. Suggestions for developing a school collection include:

- ask community members to donate books
- contact libraries in countries where your language is spoken for lists of favorite children's books
- ask community members who will be traveling to places where the language is spoken to acquire books for the library (and reimburse them with pleasure).

- contact family members who live abroad and have children for their recommendations of favorite stories
- review books published by Multilingual Matters ([http:// www.bilingualfamilynewsletter.com/](http://www.bilingualfamilynewsletter.com/))
- ask businesses in your community to donate funds to purchase books organizing fundraising for book purchases.

How can stories be used

Any activity involving reading should be thought of in three parts: pre-reading, reading and post-reading. Before using a story decide what your purpose is and how the story can be used to elicit an output from your students (during the post-reading students can see and hear the text being read they can also pick up or stage). Stories read for pleasure can create positive memories and attitudes toward the HL. Students can record the titles of stories they have heard as well as how much they liked them. Please see Appendix A. By planning backwards and thinking about the story as a catalyst for some output or proving it activity, more language learning can be gained in the classroom.

Thus in the classroom context it is useful to have a fit between the story and an end task that will be connected to the story. For example, follow up projects that demonstrate comprehension include writing a diary entry about an experience in the story, writing a timeline about the events in a story, writing the next chapter or new ending to the story or drawing a picture of the setting in which the story is imagined to have taken place.

Pattern stories are also well received in HL classrooms and can be followed up by students' creative adaptation of the model. They provide a good model of new information, language, patterns and a model for a valuable output that children can emulate. The new story is a product, evidence or proof of what the children have learned, The greatest value of the pattern story is the number of times a story pattern can be adapted without feeling bored! Holdaway's research about favorite stories pointed to the significant role that pattern stories played in developing children's reading appetite.

An example of a pattern story based on Bill Martin Jr.'s *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* :

Brown Bear, Brown Bear
What do you see?
I see a purple horse
Looking at me.
Purple horse, Purple horse
What do you see?
I see a green fish
Looking at me.

A few tips to remember when reading aloud to your students:

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

It is important to be aware of the attention span of the children, and to expect a wide range of times that different children are willing to sit and listen. Just having learners sit and listen to the HL story may also be an output!

In order to help children develop the understanding that books are written and illustrated by real people (even though they cannot see them), always read the title of the book, author and illustrator before beginning to read the story to your students.

As you read the story use an interesting voice or voices to represent different characters. This will add fun to the experience for both the teacher and students. Since some chapters or stories may need two readings to get through, read a manageable chunk in each sitting. If children enjoy the story they will look forward to the next part.

Pausing to ask and answer questions while reading a story can help a teacher check for comprehension. Questions may range from predicting what might happen next to the 5 Ws to more personalized referential questions that ask learners for their own response to the story. The pleasure of predicting, especially if the 'guess' is accurate, serves to motivate children. Over time choose a variety of genres of stories to read to your students: myths, legends, mystery, historical fiction, science fiction, classics, biographies, fairy tales, etc. This will whet children's appetites for the wealth of book genres that awaits them as they become more fluent and more mature.

Closing

HL teachers can help children develop literacy in the HL in two significant ways. First, by making read alouds a part of weekly lessons. Second, by informing and encouraging parents to read aloud to their children daily or as often as possible. By scouting for possible HL books that parents could read you will help parents (and their children) to begin this important habit. Don't forget to remind them of the Multilingual biblioservice with Alberta's public libraries! The more books that children and parents can choose from the better. For more information about reading aloud please check out the following websites:

<http://www.littleonesreadingresource.com/positive-effects-of-reading-aloud-to-children.html>
<http://www.helium.com/items/845614-reading-aloud-children-offer>
http://homeschooling.suite101.com/article.cfm/summer_reading_list
<http://ezinearticles.com/?Why-is-Reading-Aloud-So-Important-for-Dads?&id=992255> <http://www.answers.com/topic/reading-value-of-reading-engagement-for-children>

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