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An Early Start: Learning vocabulary and grammar by young ESL learners through Stories

Abstract

This paper is presented to support story-based instruction. It shows the motivating power of a good story and shows how stories captivate children around the world. The story-based interventions on children's English language skills are note worthy. This paper mainly focuses on how the stories help the young ESL learners to learn vocabulary and grammar. The power of literature in language learning has been proved much earlier.

Keywords: - vocabulary, grammar, ESL learners, Stories

Story-based language instruction is not a new idea by any means. Literature has been a staple in first language reading programs for decades, and has found its way to many second language classrooms as well. Amusing illustrated storybooks, or stories with universal themes of interest to children are likely to create an anxiety-free environment and get children involved in the lesson. Humans have a deep-rooted need for stories and children are no different in this regard. The narrative of stories plays an important role in the cognitive development of children, and quality literature will enhance their language development. The universal appeal of a good story guarantees learner motivation, while the value of stories as a

socializing agent is a value added aspect of literature based language instruction in primary school. In a second language class, literature offers rich opportunities to foster children's critical and creative thinking while enhancing their language learning. Pleasurable experiences with literature develop children's love of reading, enhance their language development and promote literacy. The more young language learners read, the more they grow in their reading and writing ability.

First language research has proved that poor oral vocabulary skills are associated with later reading problems of a child and this is applicable to second language learners as well. Reading problems are often followed by conduct problems making learners less receptive to instruction. As the subject matter is also taught in English language, young learners need to acquire a considerable vocabulary in order to gain knowledge from text books and make academic progress. It has been suggested by the researchers that second language learners need to have knowledge of at least 2000 high-frequency words if they are to be able to understand 85% of the texts they typically encounter in school. Vocabulary presents a major challenge to young learners' reading development.

To know a word implies many types of knowledge. To be able to understand and use a word in its correct meaning requires conceptual knowledge, which can be either receptive knowledge, as in listening or reading, or productive knowledge, being able to use the word when speaking or writing. Since many words have more than one meaning, knowledge of a word involves polysemy, the understanding that words can have multiple meanings. Metalinguistic awareness involves morphological knowledge, which will help determine meanings of inflections and derivational affixes. Grammar knowledge of a word means to understand its function in a sentence and be able to use it in a grammatically accurate way. Morphological knowledge is also related to grammatical knowledge, particularly in the case of derivational suffixes. Because words are interrelated to know a word means also to have

semantic knowledge of it. This implies collocational knowledge, what other words can be used with a given word; for example, that we say “beautiful flower” and not “handsome flower”, or “aroma of coffee” and not “perfume of coffee.” Pragmatic knowledge refers to knowing how to use a word in a right situation in the real world and to know the difference between formal and informal uses, the style and register of the word. Being able to pronounce a word or to recognise it in spoken and written language implies phonological knowledge, which does not necessarily mean that the learner is able to read the word when encountering it in a text.

Word consciousness, alertness to words, is essential for comprehending the academic lessons. Developing complex word knowledge, or consciousness, is not a one-step process but happens gradually over time as learners see and hear a given word and use it in their own communication. The likelihood of gains is higher when the target words are repeated more than once in meaningful context. The learner typically must encounter word several times in order for it to be remembered. Story context can illuminate word meanings often much better than dictionary or teacher-provided definitions. Through reading, learners can process unfamiliar words within a meaningful context and register. Extensive reading is an important source of words that are not typically encountered in daily discourse but are part of learners’ lexicon and reading is an ideal medium for vocabulary learning because in speech, words pass ephemerally, while text enables learners to take time to process unfamiliar words.

Acquisition of vocabulary is crucial for young second language learners, and is particularly important for children who are preparing to access academic subject matter in English. While vocabulary learning is a complex process, available research evidence indicates children can acquire new vocabulary from storybooks, whether through reading or listening. Because vocabulary in stories is presented within a meaningful context, learning

does not necessarily require several repeated encounters but can result even from limited exposure.

Children's literature is an excellent and valued source of language experience for L1 and L2 learners and is a major factor in the development of a large and flexible vocabulary, including extensive and varied experience of collocation, lexical patterning and usage, as well as grammatical, phonological, discoursal, conversational, stylistic and narrative patterning. The literature on the use of children's literature in foreign language learning is limited but the evidence of small-scale interventions, with both adult and child learners have generally yielded positive results. Foreign language acquisition research is recently more accepting of the use of adult literature for advanced learners but still tends to recommend graded readers as the best option for lower level learners, mainly because of the quantity of rare vocabulary which is found in children's literature. However, stylistic features commonly found in children's literature, combined with the great range of level in children's literature, seem likely to be sufficient to cancel out this perceived disadvantage. Extensive reading can have great benefits in language learning and there is no doubt that graded readers can be a very useful source of language input for lower to middle level language learners . However, children's literature is also a viable option and in some ways superior to graded readers, especially if learners can be encouraged to replicate some of the common reading behaviours of L1 and L2 young learners. Children's literature has strong motivational benefits, being clearly authentic, being a reading experience shared with large numbers of adult and child members of the target language culture, and having sufficient breadth and variety of form, content and level to allow learners to find attractive texts which they can comfortably and realistically read, cover to cover. Children's literature also has important practical benefits. It has easily identifiable levels, with a strong correlation between level, length of text, and density of illustration, allowing foreign language learners to quickly learn to navigate the

wide range of choices available to them, and unlike graded readers, is easily available in a wide variety of languages. Far from something to be cautious of, children's literature is a valid and powerful option for foreign language learners and teachers, especially in terms of material for extended reading

A debate exists about explicit and implicit acquisition of L2 grammar. Studies examining explicit and implicit learning of grammatical rules of both artificial and natural languages suggest that explicit instruction yields superior results, although some learning can take place implicitly. Implicit knowledge is knowledge acquired over time without the intention of learning. Although implicit knowledge is difficult to explain, we rely on it daily; we tie our shoe laces, ride a bike, or speak in grammatically correct sentences in our L1 without giving thought to how. Explicit knowledge is acquired intentionally, and in terms of grammar involves awareness of rules or attention to form. Many second language specialists have long emphasised the need for authentic texts and connected discourse for both reading comprehension and grammar instruction. Yet, young learner courses still reflect a bottom-up approach to grammar, presenting fragmented discourse and artificial exercises. Framework of the story provides a continuous flow of mental images that help the learners to assign meaning and functions to the forms they hear.

For new knowledge to be processed to the long-term memory, attention is necessary, but attention need not be intentional. In other words, when children attend to an amusing or interesting story, the predictable refrains they repeat can get processed into their long term memory. Children's second language grammar learning occurs through procedural rather than declarative knowledge used by older learners. Yet, instruction in most course books is still based on principles of imitation, repetition, reinforcement, immediate correction of any errors etc. Interesting story books provide the kind of authentic, connected discourse associated with grammar instruction in whole language and content based approaches. There

is a wide range of predictable books for children in English, from very simple stories with one or two repetitious structures and limited vocabulary to more sophisticated ones with more complex and varied, but still predictable structures.

Children in literature- based programs produce grammatically more accurate writing than their age peers in communicatively oriented programmes. Although research in grammar learning from stories is limited and not conclusive, it does suggest extensive reading of story books can have a positive influence on children's second language grammar acquisition. Research also indicates that children do not need to be taught grammatical structures before they encounter them in books. Children can acquire grammatical structures incidentally from interesting books they read, just as they can acquire vocabulary. Storybooks can also be used to teach grammar with carefully planned focus on form.

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