STORIES, STORY-BASED TEACHING AND STORYTELLING IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract: In the actual context of globalization many things change, however some remain stable and their value unaltered. One of these is education, unanimously considered of great importance for future generations. So, in this general context of globalization, could apparently benign topics like stories and storytelling as educational tools have importance anymore? Some would argue in favour of it, and this paper aligns with such opinions, based on the fact that stories, despite their national characteristics, constitute a global treasure that children worldwide enjoy from time immemorial. Nowadays, just like in the past, stories and the art of storytelling have a real educational value, internationally recognized and widely used. This paper aims to approach this issue and underline the global nature of stories, their common features and values and also their importance in teaching, both by promoting the cultural diversity and the universal patterns as well.

Keywords: stories, story-based teaching, young learners, education, language acquisition

The purpose of this article is to explore recent research into the field of story-based teaching and story-telling worldwide and the extent to which it is being considered by teachers of foreign languages, particularly EFL teachers, as well as linguistic studies. After a brief introduction in the history of story-telling and story-based teaching, the article will look into more detail at developments in the field along with more detailed discussions of some key points and research projects, as well as the debate around them. The article will address next the implications of story-based teaching and story-telling for the very young and young students and will include some hands-on material and personal research done regarding this topic. Finally, the conclusion, apart from summing-up on the ideas presented in the article, will also raise a number of questions that remain to be investigated in future research.

Stories are as old as the world. From time immemorial, people have used stories to entertain, educate and connect. Oral tradition is a very important part of the human tradition and a prerequisite of all cultures around the world. From stories told by the eldest to the young sprang a tradition of story-telling as old as history, which has kept unaltered over time and is as valuable today as it used to be hundreds of years ago. Stories collectors, who set up the basis of the current stories heritage in most cultures we know are as famous as can be, the Grimm brothers being perhaps one of the most familiar to generations of readers. Furthermore, the value of a good story is well-known and well-recognized by all educators and teaching has benefit greatly from the use of stories in classes of all types, from literature in foreign languages classes

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to anecdotes in physics and mathematics classes. Everyone loves a good story and teaching in general should take advantage of this, as learning tends to become more and more a pleasant experience, particularly in the field of foreign languages and especially for the challenging young ages who respond well only to enjoyable activities. Selecting the appropriate activity and setting the right pace is not an easy task for an educator and the article will highlight some key points underlined by my personal research with young learners.

Authors like Brewster, Ellis and Girard[1],[2] have lengthily researched the value of stories and story picture books in young learners' classroom of EFL with a focus on developing teaching techniques and activities suitable for each group in particular. Storytelling has important benefits for children's affective development, as well. These authors have underlined in their studies that young students identify with the characters in the stories they are exposed to, a fact that basically personalizes the teaching process and also are eager to get involved in the action of the story itself. The distinguished linguist Stephen Krashen has extensively researched the systems of second language acquisition, discussing the 'acquired system' and the 'learned system'. the first one, named 'acquisition' is more of a subconscious process almost identical to the manner in which a child acquires his or her native language. As a method of teaching, it implies meaningful interaction with the target language and natural communication, with the learners focusing on the communication itself, not its form or structure. According to Krashen, 'learning' is less important than 'acquisition': for example, the only way for grammar teaching to result in successful language acquisition is if students' interest in the subject is aroused and the target language, namely EFL is used as a medium of instruction. Krashen's theory applies very well, from the point of view of this article, to story-based teaching, especially in the case of young ages.[3]

Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules, and does not require tedious drill.

Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.

The best methods are therefore those that supply 'comprehensible input' in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the second language, but allow students to produce when they are 'ready', recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.[4]

The methods discussed by Krashen above are common facts of story-based teaching: stories offer the low anxiety teaching situation mentioned above, as they are a pleasant tool for educating, familiar to students; furthermore, the stories themselves, however different or lengthy they might be, are something the students like to hear and work with. The activities based on any

[1] Brewster J., Ellis G. and Girard D. (2002), *The primary English teachers' guide*, England, Penguin
[2] Ellis, G. and Brewster, J. (1991), *The storytelling handbook for primary teachers*, London, Penguin
[3]Krashen, Stephen D. (1987), *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*, Prentice-Hall International
[4]Krashen, Stephen D. (1988), *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, Prentice-Hall International

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text, when well selected, appropriate to the level of the students and interesting, allow students to learn better, often without realizing it and to acquire the target language in an enjoyable manner.
Referring to this, in the present globalized context of the internet, available worldwide as a very useful tool for educators and learners alike, the learning environment changes on a regular basis and the pace of progress in growing more and more. The theory of second language acquisition of Krashen mirrors in various theories of teaching around the world, one of them being the more and more popular idea of 'Learning without realizing'. Basically, this is what Krashen suggests and this is what often takes place in the EFL classroom, particularly with young learners. One of the most important methods of teaching the young, and not only the young, is extensive language exposure, meaning the teacher only speaking the target language. Another important aspect is that of selecting appropriate stories and follow-up activities suitable to the age groups. And last, but not least, to set up a challenging yet pleasant class environment that would help students thrive without even realizing it.
Nowadays, the world wide web provides exciting examples of this, for example artists working with learners in order to transform storefront environments into lively public classrooms. These experimental spaces serve as interesting models for creative environments that offer easy access to the public and that generate enthusiasm and participation in a wide range of experiences.[5] Mark Allen, Sean Dockray, and Adam Lerner are some modern artists who used their compelling work to help others learn art without knowing it. This real trend in the modern world is rapidly expanding with success and it is a live example, directly drawing upon everyday world, of how EFL teaching may work, obviously on a different level and with different target groups. In the same line with the new expanding concept of 'learning without knowing', H. Palmer argued, as early as the beginning of the 20th century, that ‘in learning a second language, we learn without knowing what we are learning’ while in teaching a second language ‘we must design forms of work in which the student’s attention shall be directed towards the subject matter and away from the form in which it is expressed’[6].
The TEMOLAYOLE European project- in other words: Teaching modern languages to young learners: teachers, curricula and materials[7]- is yet another significant and quite recent study comprising valuable research from various European researchers and teachers regarding the topic of storytelling in EFL classes. This study, funded by the European Centre for Modern Languages, aimed to study the value of stories and their impact on children's affective, cognitive and linguistic development as well as the potential of stories as a learning tool in L2 classes[8]. Even more, the TeMoLaYoLe book comprises the outcome of experimental studies regarding the implementation of story-based teaching in several European countries, underlining the globalized characteristic of this educational tool. What the studies revealed is that the story-based input could easily be integrated in the general syllabus of primary schools, while teachers involved in

[5] http://www.exploratorium.edu/knowing/pdfs/LearningWithoutKnowing.pdf
[6] Palmer, Harold E., (1968), *The scientific study and teaching of languages*. Vol. 18. Oxford UP,
[7] *The TeMoLaYoLe book, Teaching modern languages to young learners: teachers, curricula and materials* (2007), Council of Europe Publishing
[8] Ibidem

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the research were involved in various tasks related to stories with a high degree of success. The study reflects on the results of this input in at least three different countries, such as Greece, the Czech Republic and Hungary and discusses the similarities and differences in the three educational contexts. First of all, the same input sessions was used in all three countries and the outcome was encouraging, proving once more the value of stories as an educational tool. Secondly, there were certain differences emerging during this study, distinctions attributed to the educational background and different culture of the participants.

Some general conclusions were that stories, used as in ESL classes, 'tend to provoke emotional reactions, such as laughter, sadness, disappointment, anticipation and this helps children develop both socially and emotionally'.[9]
The use of narratives and storytelling in the L2 classroom, as named in the cited paper, has proven, according to this co-joint study, to also have important benefits for children's linguistic development. The three teachers involved in the research draw upon the work of Brewster, Ellis and Girard[10] who state that storytelling can create ideal learning conditions as it provides comprehensible input, also meaningful, capable of activating and promoting the English as a second language acquisition. Although, as it was indicated above, the comprehensible input is a necessary condition for L2 acquisition, it may not be enough. The three authors-teachers further mention the interactionist theories[11] stating that learners need to engage in post-listening or post-reading tasks and language-related activities in which they talk and write about what they have listened to or read[12] . Follow-up activities can make the story more comprehensible and also help learners move from the receptive competence needed for listening and reading to the productive competence necessary for talking and writing[13]. Stories can, according to the study, be the stimulus of a wide variety of language-related activities and allow teachers to introduce or revise vocabulary and structures. Additionally, listening to stories provides young learners with the opportunity to become aware of the rhythm, intonation and pronunciation of L2. The authors conclude that stories may be very useful in young learners' classrooms as they provide an enjoyable opportunity to be exposed to the segmental and suprasegmental features of the foreign language at an early age, particularly in EFL classes taught by native teachers of English who are able to provide an accurate pronunciation and language model.

Drawing upon significant and useful studies as the one mentioned above and as part of the PhD research, I initiated a project research of my own, consisting in teaching English to a small number of classes of primary and secondary level in the local public schools, over a 3

[9] Mattheoudakis Marina, Dvorakova Katerina and Lang Katalina, *Story-based language teaching: an experimental study on the implementation of a module in three European countries,* (2007), Council of Europe Publishing
[10] Brewster J., Ellis G. and Girard D. (2002), *The primary English teachers' guide*, England, Penguin
[11]Larsen-Freeman, D. and Long, M.H. (1991), An introduction to second language
acquisition research, London, Longman
[12]Renandya, W.A., and Jacobs, G.M. (2002), *Extensive reading: Why aren't we all doing it?*, in Richards, J.C. and Renandya, W.A. (eds.), *Methodology in language teaching*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press
[13] Ibid.

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years period. The teaching was planned, carried out, and reviewed regularly by a teacher trainer and an university teacher in the field of English and American literature, supervising the study and its publication in the form of a thesis- the First Degree of English Teaching Certificate, as existing in the Romanian education system nowadays. The stimulus for this personal research was a strongly-felt pedagogic intuition, arising from experience and wishing to meet the requirements of teaching learners of young ages in large groups of mixed abilities. The main purpose of the study was to investigate the outcome of story-based teaching of English as a second language to students from 6 years old to 10 years old. It had in view the compulsory school curriculum in case of the 3rd grades onward, while for the younger students an optional curriculum was devised with the approval of the local school inspectorate. The frequency of the story-based teaching, the rationale of the entire research and, very importantly, the response of the students were in view at all times. The selected stories were first of all appropriate for the age groups and international in their selection, to encourage a global perspective from an early age. The chosen stories ranged from very familiar stories like 'Red Riding Hood', 'Cinderella', 'The ugly duckling' for the youngest students to typical folk stories, including Romanian ones, for the following age group, while more elaborate stories, like real-life anecdotes or excerpts from longer books like 'Pinocchio', 'The Wizard of Oz', 'Alice in Wonderland' were selected for the older students of 9 or 10. A first conclusion, quickly drawn, was that young students were almost unanimously delighted with the use of stories in class, a fact they perceived as fun, amusing and as a welcome diversion from their regular curriculum, which in Romania can be quite overwhelming. Next, it is important to mention that Krashne's theory could not be entirely respected, particularly with the youngest students of 6 or 7 years old, as they had no previous knowledge of English, or very little so they had to be addressed occasionally in their native language, Romanian, in order to understand. This was also due to the fact that large classes of mixed abilities can prove to be challenging to handle at such young ages, instructions being therefore given in their native language. Apart from that, the students generally responded very well to this teaching approach and were eager to listen to the story, read or presented via images, pictures, short films or with puppets. The youngest students benefited most, the study revealed, from familiar stories they could recognize and follow easier even if in English, while the older students tended to prefer new, unfamiliar stories that would catch their attention and made them think. A very important part of the story-based teaching was obviously represented by the follow-up activities, a wide selection of these being used, from drawing and colouring with the youngest students, to listening comprehension, working with the text or even acting and miming in the case of older students. A very important aspect was, at all times, the way the story was presented. Story-telling skills can prove very useful to a teacher using this educational tool, but there is always the possibility of using a recording of a story read either by an actor or a professional story-teller, of presenting a power-point, short film or puppet theatre or even non-verbal teaching tools like illustrations. Sometimes, stories need to be adapted a bit and story adaptation can prove a bit demanding; therefore teachers should practice beforehand. The more imaginative the presentation of the story, the better for the students. Follow-up activities need to

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be suitable for the age group, the story itself and at all times interesting, challenging and covering the language item in view- productive language learning activities in the case of older students. If these two aspects are conveniently covered, results showed that story-telling is always welcome by learners and that its outcome is positive and encouraging.

In conclusion, it can be said that although the use of stories with young learners is still uncommon in educational contexts around the world, particularly in Romania where a traditional methodology is implemented, story-based teaching as a regular activity benefits younger students greatly and it should be encouraged and utilized as much as possible around the classes of English as a foreign language worldwide.

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