

Using storytelling to teach vocabulary in language lessons

What this study was about

[The study](#) looked at how storytelling can improve children's second language skills, especially their learning and use of vocabulary (words and sentences). It also looked at teaching methods and ideas used during the storytelling sessions.

What the researchers did

The study involved six children in Year 6 (age 10 to 11) who were learning a second language (L2) in a London school. The school was in a deprived area with a high percentage (2009: 80%) of ethnic minorities, and of new arrivals with little or no English. The six children reflected the varied make-up of the class. Only one was born in England, three of them spoke a non-English language at home, three were boys and three were girls, and there were two children each designated as high, middle, and low achievers (a new, and a recent arrival) in literacy and numeracy. The teacher was a native speaker of German, and the children had been learning German since year 3 with two 30-minute sessions a week. The children were used to storytelling sessions, and enjoyed them. The study took place over two additional storytelling events at which only these six children were present. Each event comprised 6 sessions: an introductory session when the story was read, four half-hour sessions to practise language in meaningful self-chosen tasks, and a final session or presentation. The first event presented a repetitive story with key structures. The story used in the second event was more complex and less repetitive. The second event involved a presentation given in the sixth and last session based on a task such as drama, the production of a finger puppet show, and a written script. The teacher spoke only German during the sessions, but some preparatory work had been done before the study started.

The teacher assessed the children's L2 knowledge before they began the study. The researcher [observed](#), and recorded the storytelling sessions, conducted three [interviews](#) with the teacher, looked at schemes of work and other documents, including story books the children had produced themselves. After each event the children retold the stories in pairs so that the researcher could assess their understanding and recall. The children were assessed again six weeks after the first event had finished and two weeks after the second event ([delayed post-tests](#)); the children worked in pairs to record any new sentences or words that they remembered. For the first assessment the children were allowed some character cards as stimulus, but not during the second assessment.

What they found

During both storytelling events children experienced authentic language over several weeks. The use of stories led to significant learning of vocabulary. All children had gathered the gist of the first (simpler, more repetitive) story at post-test. The two low achievers recalled only two words out of seven in one of five key sentences. The two middle achievers remembered all the words in two sentences, whilst the high achievers remembered all the words in the five sentences. The repetitive nature of the story facilitated retention and recall. All children had very good L2 retention six weeks later. Memory performance seemed to be related to ability. For the second story (more complex sentence structures, less repetitive) the number of words and structures recalled depended on both the type of task and the child's engagement. There were no differences between the low, middle and high achievers because the children chose to work in mixed-ability groups and supported each other. The girls, who collaborated in the drama group, recalled more sentences than the boys, who wrote a finger puppet show and a story. Bilingual learners recalled the most words: 'the bilingual child labelled lower ability 10 months earlier, outperformed everybody the second time' (p. 45).

The teacher used varied techniques to engage the children, and ensured story comprehension through tone of voice, mime, gesture, actions, drama, and props. Activities included poems, songs, mime, drama, and dialogue. The teacher organised meaningful tasks that encouraged creative use of language, allowed children some control over their learning, and encouraged them to work together. The variety gave them many opportunities to use the new vocabulary and structures in different contexts. The storytelling and the follow-up activities provided opportunities for both incidental (by chance) and intentional learning. The teaching method also created opportunities for both implicit (absorbing) and explicit (drawing children's attention to form) teaching and learning.

Things to bear in mind

The study did not look at the effect of children's bilingualism, which is likely to have affected the strategies of some. Stories can work well, but teachers need to plan how to use them.