

Reading Storybooks in the EFL Classroom

by Charles Howell

There's nothing like a good book. One of the few things that I actually do spend what little time and money I have on are books. I can't get enough of them. People have asked me why I love reading so much. The biggest reason I can think of is that I've been doing it all my life. I've been reading since I was old enough to sit on my mother's lap.

Granted I wasn't reading at the age of two. But almost every night my older sister and I would climb into the big chair with Mom and she would read stories—first to us, and later with us. It didn't take either of us long to figure out that the letters she pointed to at the bottom of the page went along with the words she was saying. And after a few times reading the same book (okay maybe a few dozen, but we loved those stories) we were able to read them along with her.

I have always encouraged the use of storybooks in children's education. In classes where the children have finished learning basic phonics we work together to sound out the words on the pages. The children are engrossed in the simple stories and quickly learn to take the letters at the bottom of the page and read them, not just as individual sounds, but as words, as parts of sentences in a story. Storybooks can be a great part of

any EFL class, especially for children who can read or are beginning to learn to read. But what about when the kids haven't started phonics yet?

Even if the children are not at a point where they can read the book, having it read to them is beneficial in many ways. Storybook reading can help your students learn and acquire English effectively. Reading a storybook to students will:

- stimulate students' listening comprehension,
- clarify pronunciation,
- increase vocabulary, and
- eventually help them learn to express their thoughts in English.

If the book is well-chosen, it gives children access to normal everyday English at a level that they can almost understand. Stephen Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (1985) suggests that learners acquire new vocabulary and grammar when they are exposed to and understand language that is one step beyond their existing stage so the storybook should ideally be at a level slightly higher than the students' current level. What they don't get from the words, they will likely draw from the pictures and the rest of the story, and this will lead to their natural understanding of the new language.

If children can see the text, they will also naturally begin to follow along with the words as you read the story. My 3-4-year-old class can recognize a number of words from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, and are eager to read along with me for most of the story. I generally do not advocate the whole word method as an effective way to teach students to read, but as a side benefit to story-time, I know that in the near future, when this class begins phonics, being able to quickly relate back to words they know will be a big help.

You will have something that you can talk WITH your children about. So much of EFL teaching is the teacher showing the children how to do something, or teaching a new language point. But when my class started storybook reading with a story I wrote called *The Cow and the Kangaroo*, an interesting thing happened. The story is about a kangaroo that brings a cow lots of different things to eat. After I put the story down I stopped a moment to catch my breath before moving on to the next activity. It was then that one student said "Grass... Yucky!" (at the end of the story the cow is eating grass). And so we started discussing which of the "foods" that the kangaroo had brought the cow we would consider "Yucky!" And which were "Yummy!". Since that day, we've stopped to talk about every book we've read, and the conversations have gotten pretty good.

This trend has progressed quite well in my school with children feeling comfortable to talk about things in each story that seemed interesting to them. In the book *Franklin's Bad Day* by Paulette Bourgeois, there is a scene in which two of the characters, Franklin and Bear, are walking by their friend Otter's house. When the children learned that Otter has moved away, one of my students stopped me in the middle of the story to let me know that there was a toy boat under the dock at Otter's house. He was so concerned about that boat. Whose



caption here

boat is it? Did Otter know it was missing? Was Otter sad? Another child noticed the castle that Otter and Franklin had made of wooden blocks, and we decided to make a castle as a class.

When I first started using books in my classes, I thought of it as a separate section of that day's class. When it was storytime, I would get down 4 or 5 of the books from the shelf in my classroom and have the students choose which one they wanted me to read. While I still give the children some choice as to what we will read when we have storytime, I am now much more careful to have activities prepared for during and after storytime that build upon the language used in the book.

Before I read a story in front of my students I read it to myself a few a times, and then I read it out loud a few times. I try and take the time to develop a unique and appropriate voice for each

character, as this makes the experience more entertaining, and easier for the students to understand. After I have finished practicing how to read the story, I make a list of all the new language patterns and vocabulary groups that the students can learn from the book. This will be a big help later when I'm trying to decide what kind of toys to have ready for the kids to play with when they are finished with the story.

Let's take a look at the book *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle. This book is excellent for reading in the EFL classroom. Most of the children will have seen it. There is a lot of useful target language that can be taught, such as counting, days of the week, sizes, foods, feelings "hungry", "stomachache", "better", and even the life cycle of a caterpillar. It is a book that the children would be willing to read every week for the next few months

and it has enough repetitive language that some of your students will start "reading along" on the second or third time. There is also *My Own Very Hungry Caterpillar Coloring Book* that you can buy so each student has their very own copy to take home. You can spend some time coloring a few of the pages in class, thereby including colors, "please" and "thank you" in the lesson when the kids ask for crayons.

See Figure 1 for target language that can be acquired from 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar'.

Reading aloud is an enjoyable and effective means of providing access to natural English in the classroom. It can be an effective component of a balanced EFL class, and should be utilized as often as your schedule permits. Reading aloud with your students will not only help them to master pronunciation of new words and more vocabulary, but can foster a love for reading, show children how to read a book properly, and introduce the idea that reading (in English) can be something that is done for fun.

Here are some online resources to help you use storybooks in your classroom:

- Aesop's Fables
<http://www.aesopfables.com/>
- A nice collection of fairy tales with lesson plans and materials as well!
<http://www.first-school.ws/theme/fairy-tales.htm>
- mini-units based on fairy tales
<http://www.teachingheart.net/f.html>
- online interactive Clifford books
<http://teacher.scholastic.com/clifford1/>
- More resources
<http://www.dltk-kids.com/rhymes/index.htm>

References

- Bourgeois, P. (1997) *Franklin's Bad Day*. New York: Scholastic Inc.
- Carle, E. (1987) *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. New York: Philomel Books
- Carle, E. *My Own Very Hungry Caterpillar Coloring Book*. New York: Scholastic Inc.
- Krashen, S. (1985) *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. New York: Longman

Figure 1: Target language that can be acquired from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*

Target language	Reinforce using
Apple, Pear, Plum, Strawberry, Orange Chocolate cake, Ice cream, Pickle, Salami, Swiss Cheese, Lollipop, Cherry Pie, Sausage, Cupcake, Watermelon.	In the classroom we have a large selection of fruits and other foods. I try to make sure that these toys are "easily accessible" on days we are reading the story
The numbers 1-5	Counting cubes or Duplo blocks are a great review for numbers
The days of the week	We might sing one of the days of the week songs. (For examples see http://teachers.net/lessons/posts/622.html ; http://familytlc.net/issues/october2002/music_3_2712.html ; and; http://proteacher.net/archive/posts/2001/10/08/11410.html)
On, out of, through, inside	Hide toy animals in boxes and in various places in the room. Then ask "Where is rabbit?"
Hungry, Stomachache, Better	Practice feelings by singing Richard Graham's "How are You?" (see http://www.genkienglish.net)
Tiny, Big, Fat	When playing with animals, we have a set of BIG animals and a set of small animals. Comparing these is a good reinforcement for this point.