

19 Using Big Books and PowerPoint in Storytelling

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1 INTRODUCTION

Stories are a powerful tool in teaching young learners since they appeal to children's imagination and sense of enjoyment, stimulate their interest, and meet their emotional, cognitive and psychological needs (Malkina, 1995). The Basic Education curriculum in Oman promotes storytelling using a big book while learners listen to a recording of the story. My experience of this technique with Grade 1 learners is that they often struggle to follow the events of the story. One reason for this is that each page of the big book covers several events from the story. In this study I wanted to see if using PowerPoint might support learners' understanding of the story better, especially when one story event is presented on each slide in such a way that all learners can see it clearly.

2 STORYTELLING IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1 The Value of Stories

Stories are an excellent way for language teachers to motivate children and to develop in them positive views of English (Ellis & Brewster, 2002). Stories are also a key source of developing language skills. According to Wright (2003: 8), "stories often naturally lead to the use of the four skills in related activities". Scott & Ytreberg (1990) add that stories have great potential for developing listening skills; Moon (2000:109) supports this when she argues that children "enjoy stories and are keen to find out what happens, which gives them a meaningful reason for listening". Asking children to predict what will happen in stories can also develop their thinking and imagination (Harmer, 2001).

Stories also can be the starting point for much language knowledge. From stories, children can develop sociolinguistic knowledge, such as appropriate language in terms of politeness. They can also develop textual knowledge, such as

an understanding of how texts are organized. Stories also allow teachers to introduce systemic knowledge of the language, such as an awareness of intonation and rhythm, as Wright (2003) observes.

Stories also have many features which support language learning and Cameron (2001) lists a number of these. Stories, for example, are a natural source of language repetition. This natural repetition encourages children to use the language by picking up the phrases and the chunks indirectly, for example, by joining in while the story is being told. Secondly, stories expose children to a large amount of comprehensible input and present the language through enjoyable and meaningful situations that capture children's attention and assist their understanding (Scott & Ytreberg, 1990).

2.2 PowerPoint in Storytelling

PowerPoint is defined by Radanov (2008) as a kind of computer presentation that allows the audience to show colourful screens of text and images with simple animation and sounds. Gallagher & Reder (2005) suggest that PowerPoint offers an opportunity to break the daily routine and to add variety to lessons. Steele & Johnson (n.d.) argue that using PowerPoint to teach stories reinforces students' learning and enhances their understanding. Ahmed (2005) adds that PowerPoint can be used for practising and drilling language, while Atkinson (2005) found that using PowerPoint enables the teacher to observe learners' reactions to stories more effectively.

There are also some potential problems with PowerPoint to be aware of. Tufte (2003) notes the danger that teachers might focus on the presentation itself (i.e. what the slides look like) at the expense of attention to its content and to the learners. Gallagher & Reder (2005) add that teachers must be clear about the rationale for using PowerPoint – there should be a good reason for using it.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Questions

My main research question here was: Do my Grade 1 learners respond more to and demonstrate better understanding of stories using PowerPoint or a big book? More specifically, I wanted to examine these sub-questions:

- What are the differences in my learners' responses when PowerPoint and a big book are used?
- How did my learners demonstrate their understanding?

3.2 Participants

For this study, I selected two classes of Grade 1 learners in an urban school. The classes were made up of boys and girls who were mostly 6-7 years old. There were 26 mixed-ability learners in each class and this was their first year of learning English. They had been exposed to PowerPoint before in English and in other subjects, though this was the first time they had experienced PowerPoint for storytelling.

3.3 Data Collection

To compare the effectiveness of two different techniques, PowerPoint and big books, I used an experimental approach. I called the two classes involved Class A and Class B and both consisted of 26 learners. For the purpose of comparison, I used two different stories provided in the second semester's syllabus. The first story was "Lulu's Walk" in Unit 1. "Lulu" is the name of a duck that went for a walk across the farmyard. A fox slowly followed her and tried to catch her. Lulu was not aware of him and whenever he seemed about to pounce on her, something happened to him. At the end of the story Lulu arrived home safely without knowing that she had been followed. The story's language focus was prepositions. It was taught through PowerPoint for Class A (audio recording of the story plus PowerPoint slides) whereas the same story was taught for Class B using the big book (i.e. audio recording of story plus big book pictures on the board)

Then in Unit 3, I taught the "Fox and Crow". This tells the story of a naïve crow that had a piece of cheese and while he was eating, a fox saw him. The fox tried to take the cheese by deceiving the crow. He told the crow that he had a lovely voice and he asked him to sing. When the poor crow started to sing, he dropped the cheese and the fox picked it up. That story was taught for Class B through PowerPoint and for Class A using the big book. Its language focus was answering questions in 'Yes I can' and 'No I can't'. Thus in total I taught four lessons, two using PowerPoint and two using big books and each class experienced one PowerPoint and one big book lesson.

3.3.1 Observation

Observation was used to collect data about learners' responses to the storytelling lessons. Genesee & Hamayan (1994:223) note that "without a plan, observation may be fragmented and disorganized", and therefore I developed an observation schedule (see Appendix) to allow data to be collected systematically. This consisted of a series of questions about learners' behaviours during the stories. I answered these questions myself based on my observations during the lessons and also asked a colleague to observe the lessons and to complete the observation sheet too.

3.3.2 Tests

I also used tests to collect information about learners' understanding of the stories. The first test required learners to look at five pictures and to place a tick (✓) next to those that reflected events from the story and a cross (x) next to those that did not. In the second test I gave learners a series of pictures for each story and they had to put these in the correct order according to the events in the story. To make the activity more interesting, it took the form of making a story book; thus learners had to glue their pictures into a little booklet. In both tests the learners worked individually.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Observation

4.1.1 Lulu's Walk

In terms of their verbal responses, Class A, who did Lulu's Walk with PowerPoint, participated more than Class B (who did this story with the Big book). Class A tended spontaneously to repeat nearly all of the words and phrases such as "over the falaj", "around the hen house" during the second storytelling more than Class B did. Additionally, in Class A the learners joined in and volunteered to say the words and phrases when they were needed but in Class B there was less evidence of such behaviours. PowerPoint thus seemed to make the information in the story easier to remember.

In both classes the learners tried to imitate the characters in the story by repeating the sounds and they asked to hear them again - the sounds of the water and the bees were the most attractive things for them to hear. In Class A, the observer noted that "nearly all of learners raised hands to answer" when I asked them to predict the events. This opportunity for prediction cannot be exploited that well with the Big book as all the events appear on the same page. In the PowerPoint lesson each slide revealed only one event in the story and some learners asked questions after each such as "Is the fox going to catch the duck?".

Non-verbally, the facial expressions of Class A learners showed they were motivated and curious to find out what would happen in the story. At times the learners also clapped when one of their predictions for the story was correct. There was much less evidence of such non-verbal behaviours in the big book lesson of Lulu's Walk. Additionally, the learners in Class A tried to imitate the movements of the characters by jumping up and down as the teacher was miming. Their interest was clear through their smiles and laughter. In Class B the learners also responded positively but their reactions were not as strong as in Class A.

4.1.2 Fox & Crow Story

This story was taught to Class B using PowerPoint and Class A using the big book. In terms of verbal responses, the observation data indicate that Class B responded more than Class A. In Class B, learners imitated the sounds made by the crow and the fox. In both classes, the second time the story was played learners joined in and tried to repeat the phrases and sentences. Class B seemed to be able to remember the story better than Class A did, as shown by their ability to predict the words while the story was being played the second time.

In terms of non-verbal responses, in both classes the learners participated in the stories by using gestures to match the events that were happening. There was more smiling and laughter in the PowerPoint lesson, although this does not mean that during the big book lesson learners were not interested.

4.2 Tests

4.2.1 Test 1 – True or False

As described earlier, in this test learners had to say whether each of five pictures reflected events in the story or not. The maximum score was thus five. Table 1 shows the distribution of scores for each class (i.e. how many learners scored 1, 2 etc.) as well as the average scores for each class after each story. This table shows that the classes who did the PowerPoint lessons scored better on this test. This was true irrespective of the story and the class.

Table 1: Scores on true/false test

Marks (Out of 5)	Class A (26)		Class B (26)	
	Lulu's Walk- PP	Fox & Crow- BB	Lulu's Walk - BB	Fox & Crow- PP
5	20	7	8	18
4	3	5	6	5
3	2	4	4	0
2	1	6	2	2
1	0	3	4	1
0	0	1	0	0
	4.6	3.1	3.2	4.4

4.2.2 Test 2 – Sequencing Pictures

After each story, learners had to put a series of pictures in the correct order according to the story they had been told. Figure 1 shows how many correct answers to this task there were after each story. This shows that the classes who were told stories using PowerPoint scored more correct answers on the sequencing test than those with whom I used the big book.

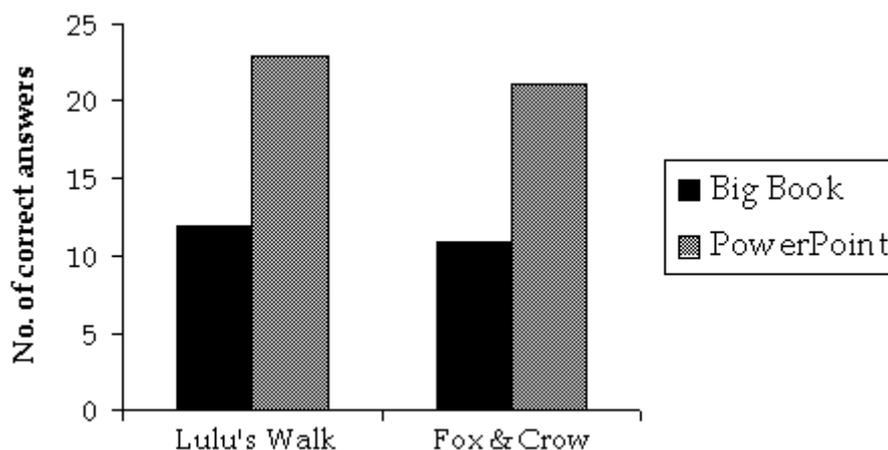


Figure 1: Results of picture sequencing test

5 DISCUSSION

Learners responded well to the stories irrespective of the way they were taught. However, the observation data suggested that in some respects there was a higher level of response in the lessons where PowerPoint was used. This was generally true both for verbal responses, such as repeating words from the story, as well as for non-verbal responses, such as clapping. On both tests, too, learners did better after the PowerPoint stories. This was especially true in the first test, where the difference between the two groups was significant. I am not suggesting that big book lessons were not effective. There is evidence here though that PowerPoint can enhance learners' experience of listening to stories. This supports the arguments presented earlier in discussing the literature.

5.1 Limitations

This study involved two Grade 1 classes in one school in Oman. Although the results are positive I cannot claim that they apply more generally, although I am sure these findings are of more general interest to teachers of English in Basic Education Cycle 1 (Grades 1-4). One other limitation is that my enthusiasm for PowerPoint may have meant that I taught the PowerPoint lessons with more effort and excitement. This will have influenced learners' responses to them.

6 CONCLUSION

As a result of this study I am more confident in my ability to use PowerPoint effectively in teaching English through stories. My learners' reactions to this strategy were positive and observations and tests also showed evidence of learning. On the basis of these results I would recommend that the Ministry of Education make the stories in the Basic Education curriculum (e.g. the pictures) available in digital format so that teachers can easily incorporate them into PowerPoint slides. I think it would also be valuable if workshops were offered to teachers in which they could learn more about how PowerPoint can be used to enhance storytelling in the young learner classroom.

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APPENDIX: OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

Observation schedule

1. Did the pupils repeat the language?

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2. Did the pupils able to predict what will happen next?

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3. Did the pupils raise their hands all the time to answer the questions?

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4. Did the pupils volunteer the key words and the sentences when it's needed?

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5. Did the pupils interact with each other?

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6. Did the pupils join in while the story is being presented for the second time?

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7. Did the pupils enjoy the story? How did they show that?

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8. Did the pupils able to infer the moral of the story?

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Other Comments:

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