

15 A Survey of Teachers' Attitudes Towards Big Books

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1 INTRODUCTION

Shared reading is widely recognised as a tool for promoting not only literacy but also broader forms of social development in children. In this study I examine the extent to which the use of big books to promote shared reading was a practice used by a group of teachers of English in Oman. I also studied these teachers' attitudes towards this instructional strategy.

2 BACKGROUND

I have found using big books for shared reading a rewarding experience. Learners have also responded very positively. I first became aware of big books during a BA programme I was studying on, on a module about the use of stories in language teaching. Many other teachers of English in Oman studied this module too and I was interested in finding out whether they had also used big books in their classrooms and what they felt about them. Such insight into the use of big books and teachers' attitudes towards them may be instructive for those who are responsible for planning in-service courses for language teachers in Oman.

3 BIG BOOKS & SHARED READING

Children love stories. When I was young my grandmother used to tell me stories. I still remember her stories and I learned so much from them. For example I learned about the history of Oman and about Islamic culture. Her stories were very enjoyable and I did not know that I was also learning. This shows that stories are a very powerful tool for education. One way of taking advantage of the power of stories in the language classroom is using shared reading and big books.

3.1 Shared Reading

Shared reading is a technique which involves all the children reading together with the teacher scaffolding their reading. Pidgeon (1990: 2) defines shared reading as "a text that is shared among the participants for their mutual pleasure and understanding." There are a number of benefits to shared reading through big books:

- *They create social interaction with support from peers.* When teachers ask learners to sit on a mat around them, this may help break the normal formal classroom routine and create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. The shared reading of big books helps children to learn from each other, as well as from the teacher.
- *Big books and shared reading encourage language input.* As Scott & Ytreberg (1990: 34) say, "when children start learning English, they obviously need to be given language before they can produce it themselves". The big book is a

tool which provides many opportunities for language input.

- *Big books support understanding.* Big books allow pupils to follow the story without having to understand every word, because the pictures and text are closely linked. Wright (1995: 6) says, that children "want to find meaning in stories, so they listen with a purpose. If they find meaning they are rewarded through their ability to understand, and are motivated to try to improve their ability to understand even more." Big books support these processes.
- *Shared reading and big books encourage positive attitudes towards literature.* Following from the previous point, when learners do well they will develop positive attitudes to stories and reading. As Williams (1991: 207) says, "children will learn better if they have a positive attitude towards what they are doing and if they are motivated or want to do it".
- *The teacher can make children notice language.* By using big books teachers can draw children's attention to aspects of the language such as vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. As Pidgeon (1990: 4) says, "it is easy, for example, to point out question marks, or to talk about another way of saying 'he went', i.e. to talk about linguistic features".
- *The teacher can model strategies for reading.* By using big books, teachers can draw learners' attention to bottom-up strategies, for example by highlighting the initial letter and phonic decoding of words. They can also model top-down strategies, for example by showing how pictures can help predict what the story is about.
- *Big books and shared reading can cater for a range of abilities.* As Brumfit, Moon and Tongue (1991: 270) indicate, "all individuals are unique in terms of their physical characteristics, personality and facility in performing certain activities." Big books allow the teacher to ask stronger learners to do more complex activities (e.g. predicting) and weaker learners to do simpler ones (e.g. repeat words).

4 METHOD

The aim of this study was to examine the attitudes towards big books of a group of Omani teachers of English. I wanted to understand both what value teachers see in big books as well as what obstacles they feel there are to their use. Data were collected through a questionnaire which I administered to 158 teachers teaching the full range of elementary (and in some cases, secondary) classes in different parts of Oman. These were my colleagues on a BA programme and they had all studied a module on teaching English through stories and for which one of the options for the assignment was to produce a big book. The questionnaires were administered during a study block when we were all together.

5 FINDINGS

Table 1 summarises key information from the questionnaire. It shows how many teachers responded, their gender, and gives a breakdown of how many males and females had made and used big books. These figures show that 43% of the teachers made big books. 34% of the male teachers who made big books used them, while the corresponding figure for females was 51.5%. Overall, about 43%

of all teachers who made big books actually used them in the classroom. Over half the teachers who made big books, then, did not use them.

Table 1: Summary of key questionnaire responses

Information	Males	Females	Total
Respondents	96	62	158
Made a big book for the assignment on the Stories module	35	33	68
Did not make a big book for the assignment on the Stories module	61	29	90
Made a big book and used it in the classroom	12	17	29
Made a big book but did not use it	23	16	39

5.1 The Value of Big Books

One of the items on the questionnaire asked the teachers if they felt big books were useful in teaching reading to young learners. Practically every teacher said yes. In other words, even teachers who did not use big books said they were valuable. The reasons teachers gave in explaining their answers are summarised below.

5.1.1 Variety and Interest

Many teachers indicated that big books are valuable because children are interested by something new and different to their course books. Learners also enjoy the way big books are presented and the way they sit; as one teacher wrote, "pupils enjoy sitting together and repeating the chunks [in the story]". Another teacher remarked that "the attractive pictures and stories are more enjoyable and explain more. That makes the words understood". A third teacher said that big books "give extra variety to the lesson and teachers can attract the pupils".

5.1.2 Vocabulary

Teachers said that shared reading and big books help learners recognise words and provide a chance for teachers to explain new vocabulary. Learners seem to be more able to read the big words of the big book. One teacher noted that the "large font and attractive pictures encourage pupils to read." Also, some teachers felt that big books help learners to memorise words, because they stick in their minds.

5.1.3 Focus on Language

Some teachers pointed out that big books can be used to highlight features of language and hence to enhance learners' awareness of these. Examples the teachers mentioned were punctuation and spelling.

5.1.4 Positive Atmosphere

Several teachers also said that, when learners sit together in a relaxing atmosphere around the teacher, this enhances the social relationship between the learners and the teacher and among learners themselves. One teacher noted that "a big book means shared reading which develops pupils socially".

5.1.5 Motivation

Many teachers indicated that young learners love stories. One teacher remarked that "pupils like listening to stories, they find them very interesting [and this] increases their motivation in reading." Some teachers felt that big books motivate learners because they are enjoyable.

5.1.6 Participation

Many teachers also said that big books encourage learners to participate more. One teacher said that big books "are useful because they engage all pupils." Another explained how surprised she was that when she used a big book most of her learners tried to participate and read, even the shy ones.

5.2 Reasons for Not Using Big Books

Teachers who said they did not use big books were also asked to explain why. The following reasons were mentioned.

5.2.1 Time Constraints

Some teachers said that they were very busy teaching the curriculum and they did not have time to use big books. A typical response here was "there was no time because the curriculum was very intensive."

5.2.2 Learners' Age

Another reason mentioned by some teachers for not using big books is the age of the learners. Some teachers think that big books cannot be used with older children. One teacher said that "my pupils are around 16 years old and they think it is stupid to use it as if they were young ones." These kinds of comments came from teachers who taught in secondary schools.

5.2.3 Language Level

The language level of the big book was a third reason given by some teachers for not using big books. They explained that the big books which they had access to were suitable, in terms of language, for learners at higher levels than those they taught.

5.2.4 Lack of Big Books

Many teachers stated that they did not have access to ready made big books. Therefore, to use them they had to make their own. This was time-consuming and many teachers did not feel they could afford the time required.

5.2.5 Large classes

Finally, many teachers also indicated that the large size of their classes stopped them from using big books. As one teacher noted, "I have 48 pupils in the class, 35 minutes for the lesson, very weak pupils and the inspector emphasises finishing the course book before giving pupils extra work." Another teacher added that the class size made it difficult to arrange learners in a circle to do the shared reading.

6 DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that, overall, the teachers had positive attitudes towards big books. Even though less than half of the teachers said they had made and used big books in their teaching, the vast majority agreed that they could contribute to developing the reading skills of young learners. Teachers who had used big books were aware of many of the benefits mentioned in the literature and which I discussed earlier. It is clear that teachers who had made and tried out big books in their classrooms had found the experience to be a positive one and that their learners had responded well too.

Those teachers who had not used big books, though, highlighted a number of factors which would seem to work against the use of shared reading in English language classrooms in Oman. Three related issues were the demands of the curriculum, the lack of big books, and the lack of time which teachers feel they have both to design their own big books as well as to use them. Especially where inspectors demand that teachers cover their prescribed course book before doing any 'supplementary' work, teachers may find it hard to use big books even where they believe they will be of value to their learners. It would seem that if big books and shared reading are to become part of what teachers of young learners of English do, these issues need to be discussed and ways of addressing them considered.

7 CONCLUSION

There are many reasons why teachers of English to young learners should consider using big books. It was positive to see that many of the teachers who participated in this study were aware of these. This awareness is an important first step in changing the way we teach. However, it is also clear from this study that even where teachers believe in the value of a particular teaching strategy, they may not always be able to put it into practice. It is also true that the reasons they give for not doing so can sometimes be easily overcome, but for others changes in the educational system more generally are required. Such changes are taking place in Oman right now and therefore in the years ahead we may see big books becoming a more common feature of the work of teachers of English here.

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