

Promoting Reading Through the Storytelling Activities

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Reading is a quite important skill for the growth of our society. There is a strong connection between reading and getting aware of and participating in the culture. Strong readers have the capacity to interact more effectively with both cultural and social dimensions in the world they live in. Moreover, acquiring skills which enable people to be conscious world citizens is strictly connected to reading, knowing, and learning. For this reason, it is so important that children acquire this power, otherwise it will get lost. Unfortunately, reading is neither common nor pleasant any more. All over the world, there is a severe crisis in the reading skill itself. Both students and adults know it very well even if they are often interested in different things. The massive use of media, such as TV before and the NET nowadays, has been detaching people from reading, both books and newspapers. In order to raise curiosity and interest, educational non-formal methods at school such as storytelling, as a new methodological approach to increase the pleasure of reading in young people, both in mother language than in foreign language activities, at school have proven to be very successful.

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Introduction

The importance of reading along with motivation and increasing of reading skills is fundamental for the growth of our society. There is a direct connection between reading and participation to the culture. The strong readers use culture in a stronger way and at the same time they participate actively in the cultural activities and social life of the places they visit or they live in. Moreover, reading increases curiosity and desire to learn and to know and implement the competences of everyone, students, adults, citizens of the world. In any field, a cultured member of the society can make the difference with positive effects for all those who work or live within that particular context. Therefore, what is important is to make arise in the students an increasing love for reading and for books themselves. In order to foster this attitude, it is advisable to make a strong link among school educational plans and books. Books are intended not as curricular textbooks but as narrative; in this sense a sort of cooperation with bookshops and public libraries is really a great opportunity. A visit to bookshops or to a library to choose books for the school library or for the class library or attending an event such as a meeting with an author need to be promoted to get students in touch with a world that, in their daily life, sometimes is unfamiliar.

Therefore, students need to get acquainted with the atmosphere and the setting of a bookshop or a library, having the chance to choose a book, to explore among several kinds of literature, being aware that apart their smartphones and TV, there is another world, a world which can reveal to be not so far from their own and that

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can be integrated in their daily routine. As there is a large literature for both children and teenagers surrounded by a parallel world made up of movies, TV series, and videogames, it can be simpler to get students closer to read books through the topics or the characters they love most. This could be the starting point to create and motivate students to take as basis their own passions and attitudes. So a visit to a bookshop can be initially planned to search for the books on the topic they care for a first time, searching for a different book related to the previous topic or a book of the same author the second time, and so on. The frequency of attending the bookshops can improve the building up of a future reader and can involve families too as school alone cannot entirely fulfil this task, but the involvement in being familiar with books has been acquired. In cooperation with libraries and bookshops, it can plan a meeting with authors when sections of their books are introduced and read to young audiences. This can involve more deeply students in reading, as it is also the occasion to realize that behind the books there is a person whose main aim is to tell a story to an audience and to feel how they react. These activities even if they privilege mother tongue education can be easily applied to the proper level of foreign language competences. Reading in fact is essential for foreign language learning and there is a strong framework of educational comprehending learning paths in foreign language teaching literature. In particular, through these events students can be led to getting in touch with an ancient but nowadays renewed technique based on reading aloud, the “storytelling”.

The Art of Storytelling

“Storytelling” belongs to the past, especially to a past where no written texts existed and professional storytellers, at courts, as an instance reported legends or historical events. In these days promoted especially by school and municipality librarians, this ancient tradition is going to assume the main role to recover the pleasure of reading in a world where all go on too fast to stop and think over. At its core, “storytelling” is the art of using language, vocalization, and/or physical movement and gesture to reveal the elements and images of a story to a specific, live audience (Evans & Metzger, 2000). In fact, orality is a form of expression closely linking together we can say that the main purpose of telling a story in the classroom is to amuse, stimulating the students’ imagination (Fontana, 2009), body, voice, and expression. Stories have always inhabited the world of schools, but many teachers still have not figured out how much they can help them in their educational mission. Nevertheless, along with this climate of joy and interest that a story awakens, it can achieve other goals, such as educating, instructing, developing intelligence, being the starting point to teach some programmatic content, or even be one of the instruments to try to understand more about the students in their personal field. Generally, teachers think it takes a special talent to tell stories, but it is not. We all have a storyteller inside us and we just need to find and refine it (The Mensa Foundation, 2015).

A central, unique aspect of storytelling is its reliance on the audience to develop specific visual imagery and details to complete and co-create the story. In order to capture the attention of young unused readers visual and audio inducements prove to have success in order to rebuild the attitude to reading that has been lost so much. Of course, education to reading has to be supported by families and of course, all these activities made with children can urge parents and relatives to get closer to reading attitudes. Stories begin with the oral tradition, as they are passed on by being heard and retold. Later, people begin to write the stories down, but it is always charming to hear stories told aloud. Every day people tell a story to someone and young people do it as well. Therefore, to increase the pleasure of reading a starting point can be this as well.

Storytelling and the Storyteller

Anyone can be a storyteller as stories are everywhere “as long as there have been people, there have been stories”. Stories surround us every day as far as we tell something to a friend or to our family we are “storytelling”. Stories begin with oral tradition and then later people begin to write them down.

Therefore, a teacher can be a wonderful storyteller of course and storytelling is a powerful means to approaching reading for young learners (eTwinning project, *Values*, 2015-2017).

Storytelling, of course, is not merely telling a story, but there are different techniques to follow so that telling story can involve your audience and fulfil the aim we chose, that is promoting interest in reading.

Here are some tips for storytelling I have been using in my lessons of English as a foreign language with my students. The examples and exercises have been taken from activities carried on by me in English as a foreign language with students aged 12-13 level A1 (QCER) attending last two years of low secondary school, in I C Laura Lanza B di Carini school, Italy, in the Intercultural Lab of the school.

Before reading to your audience, it is better to make some tests focusing your attention on.

Choosing the book and the paragraph to be read or make a short summary to be read. Of course, narration cannot be too long and so it is better to focus the attention on short stories for storytelling or résumés of longer ones. Reading should be carried on several times in order to retain the main contents, the attitudes, and tempers of the main characters, the action time, and main happenings, having in mind a short summary of what has to be read.

The voice: The tone of the voice has to be adaptive to the content of what we are reading and has to follow the rhythm of the narration. The moment we are reading, we have to enter the feelings of the character, with his/her attitude of the moment, the pace of the action. We can try to read the same paragraphs, slow, loud, soft, sadly, happily, and then decide which reflects better what we are reading.

The movements: Storytelling takes much effectiveness from the use of gestures, moving arms and legs to stress the actions we are narrating, hands and facial expressions to convey the feelings we need to express. Practising facial mimic and gestures is important. So imagining different situations, we have to try to perform them.

Examples: Walk across a room and imagine.

For example: You are scared and you are crossing a dark street... How would you walk? Fast, nervously, which expression would you have in your face? Closed lips, wide-open eyes, etc. Alternatively, imagine you are in the countryside on a sunny day and are having a walk... How would you move? Calmly walking, smiling, relaxed, ..., etc.

Objects: Meaningful small objects can be a good support to tell a story. They are tips to visualize the actions described and they can explain in a better way the attitudes and temper of the characters, the place where the action is taking place. Also drawings can help, like small sample of scenarios, to provide substance to narration.

Now it is time to perform as a storyteller.

It is important:

The book: Choose a book with a nice cover, for examples for younger children an image or a pop-up book, and show it as long as you perform, show you turning the pages and turn your eyes alternatively from the pages to the audience in order to gain the attention, making strategic pauses to involve it.

As the narration has to be always interesting, and body and voice are both involved in the performance. It is useful also to introduce the story to the audience “Today I am going to tell you about...” involving the audience at times with questions “Do you know who.....was?” or “Have you ever heard about.....?” or asking to perform some little actions a clap, a wonder expression, etc. End your narration with a closure soliciting a reaction from the audience, laugh, claps, etc., in order to realize if the narration has been effective or not!

It is important to keep in mind to:

(1) Move your body in the storytelling “V”. The storytelling “V” is when you shift where you are facing when different characters speak. This helps the audience know who is talking. Move your body towards one direction when you are one character and then move it to another direction when you represent a different one. Remember which way you faced for each character;

(2) Use hand movements and face movements (called “expressions”) to help tell the story;

(3) Use different voices for different characters;

(4) Speak faster, slower, higher, and lower;

(5) Make sure you speak loudly enough so that everyone can hear you;

(6) Say the words clearly, so that everyone can understand you.

Storytelling With Students

This activity can be proposed to students.

Each student can choose his/her own short story to perform.

Read the book and then help them with charts (see Figure 1) to build up a little summary focusing their attentions on main characters and their attitudes, feelings, main actions, and times of narration.

Main Character					
Gender	Name	Age	Physical Description	Nature	Main actions performed in the passage
Male	Dudley	Teenager		Fickle	Mocking and laughing about Harry
Male	Harry	Teenager			

Figure 1. A chart to be filled with main information about the main characters of the book.

Make them exercise with expressions recreating the feelings of the characters. It is important at the beginning to use a short part or to divide the narration through different students. Some can read and some can interact to show objects or they can do a pre-activity to realize drawings on the main characters or on the setting of the story that can be shown by their schoolmates as they are narrating. In this case, we will have a collaborative performance.

A part of the students will be the audience in turn to react and support reading. At the end of the activity, they will have to answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the title of the story?
- (2) What time is it set?
- (3) Who are the main characters?
- (4) What do they do?
- (5) Describe their temper using these adjectives: mild, nervous, gay, sad, sombre, etc.
- (6) Did you like the story? Why?

Results

Results we have been experienced are an increased awareness of the importance of reading, a shift of attention towards other contexts apart from TV or the web, the socials, and other activities our students dedicate their spare time to, and moreover an increased curiosity towards the world of books as not boring curriculum activities but as a means to learn to know and to empower creativity apart from the overwhelming world of videos and streaming, which make young people thoroughly connected (Leto, 2016). This activity therefore increased the interest in scheduled reading activities, which have been carried on in the school context for years, reading lessons in class, reading debates, and public reading, which are held every year within the educational academic plan of the school. This involving methodology gave a new dimension and attention to the students who felt no more passive readers but performers. In particular, during several public reading events the school organized to promote reading and narrative, they acquired a certain consciousness of what they were reading. Moreover, the activities led in foreign languages implemented the reading and oral skills of the students stimulating also the curiosity towards vocabulary acquisition, one of the basic assumption on which modern foreign language teaching lies, supported by innovative transversal methodologies, such as CLIL (content and language integrated learning).

Conclusion

In order to acquire life skills and educational, social life long competences, reading is necessary. As new technologies implement the quality of our living conditions, sometimes, on the other side, there is a price to pay in terms of lack of culture brought by extreme standardization. Despite of this, reading is one of the skills that should not get lost. Through storytelling technique, an activity that can stay on line with modern more appealing ones, reading a book can dress again a new life; young people can retain the opportunity through new tools to grow as responsible and aware tomorrow citizens of the world.

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