

## **Storytelling is the bridge**

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The goal of second language education is to create autonomous language acquirers, students who can continue to improve in the second language after the course ends. There is growing evidence that an excellent way to achieve autonomy is to be involved in free voluntary, or “recreational” reading. A number of studies, using different methodologies and done in different situations, confirm that self-selected reading is a powerful means of developing competence in all aspects of literacy, and studies also confirm that reading helps aural language development as well (Hedrick and Cunningham, 2002). In addition, free reading is something students can do on their own and continue to improve, and will do on their own because it is so enjoyable (Krashen, 2004).

Three obvious conditions need to be met in order to help students develop a reading habit. First, they need access to interesting reading material, second, they need to develop some enthusiasm for reading, and third, they need to develop enough competence to start reading: As they read, reading itself will supply the necessary competence for more reading.

Trelease (2006) provides us with suggestions for meeting the second and third conditions. The first suggestion is, of course, the use of read-alouds. A number of studies confirm that read-alouds are an excellent means of developing reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge and thereby help children develop competence in the written language. There is also good evidence that read-alouds stimulate an interest in reading: Children are more likely to select books for independent reading that teachers have read to them; In fact, the title of one of these papers tells the whole story: “Sixteen books went home tonight. Fifteen were introduced by the teacher” (Brassell, 2003).

A second Trelease contribution is the idea of the “home-run” book. Trelease has suggested that in some cases, it takes only one very positive experience to create a reader. (Trelease took the phrase “home run book” from Fadiman (1947), who wrote, “One’s first book, kiss, home run, is always the best.”) A series of three studies supports Trelease’s Home Run Book Hypothesis: Many children, it was found, can name the book that first got them interested in reading (Von Sprecken, Kim, and Krashen, 2000; Kim and Krashen, 2000; Ujiie and Krashen, 2002).

An additional factor of importance is the “series book.” Series books are books that utilize the same characters and often a continuous storyline in several volumes, such as the Nancy Drew

and Harry Potter series. This shared background helps ensure comprehensibility, and also stimulate interest, as listeners and readers get interested in the development of familiar characters.

Research supports the use of series books: Lamme (1976) reported that good readers in English as a first language tended to read more books by a single author and books from a series. In addition, Cho and Krashen (1994, 1995) reported considerable enthusiasm for reading and substantial vocabulary development among adult second language acquirers who read books in the Sweet Valley series. Also, Ujiie and Krashen (2002) reported that the books children label as home run books and read more frequently are often series books.

We present below a formula that combines read-alouds, series books, home-run books, and free reading, stating the hypothesis explored in this study:

**Read-Alouds/series books > home run book > time and place to read books of interest > free reading habit**

The prediction is that read-alouds of series books can lead to a home-run book experience. When time and opportunity of read is made available, this in turn will lead to the establishment of a reading habit and autonomy.

English as a foreign language is a particularly important laboratory in which to test these predictions, because EFL programs have, in general not been successful in developing autonomous second language acquirers.

### **The Pupils and the Class**

Eleven “subjects” participated in this study, eight girls and three boys in an after-school class in Taipei. Seven had been enrolled in the class since grade 1, three started in grade 2, and one had joined the class recently. For all students, the class was their primary source of English.

The class met for two 90-minutes sessions per week and was taught by the first author. The first half of each session was conducted with traditional instruction, fulfilling the expectations of parents. The second half of the class, for the first three years, focused on storytelling and read-alouds, with supporting activities. In year four, ten minutes of sustained silent reading before story time was added.

## **Storytime**

Story time always captured the children's full attention. Every time the teacher announced that it was time for a story, the children shouted their approval. This was in obvious contrast to their reaction to the "course work" they did during the first half of the class, which can only be described as "calm and cool" (see Feitelson, Kita, and Goldstein, 1986, for a description of similar enthusiasm for reading aloud in Hebrew as a first language).

The teacher's procedure in the read-aloud sessions was straight-forward: She would first tell the children the name of the author and illustrator, and then discuss the cover of the book, which helped build some background knowledge of the story to be read.

The story was read primarily in English, but Mandarin was used occasionally to facilitate comprehension. The teacher used a variety of strategies that come naturally to those experienced in reading aloud to children, strategies that serve to increase comprehensibility and clarify the meaning of unknown words, and also to encourage students' participation in the act of storytelling (e.g. Snow and Goldfield, 1983; Whitehurst, Falco, Lonigan, Fischel, DeBaryshe, Valdez-Menchaca, and Caulfield, 1988). These ranged from simple labeling based on illustrations ("this is a llama"), asking questions (Is David's teacher angry? Who is Willy's friend? What do you think the bear will do now?), expansions ("a straw. This is a yellow straw."). Students were always very interested in the illustrations, and were eager to share their reactions with the teacher and the other children. The teacher was always careful to give positive feedback to children's responses to the story through praise or confirmation (e.g. "Good!" / "You're right!" / "Good guessing!").

After the reading, the children were asked to react to the story in some way, for example by drawing a picture of what they thought was the most interesting scene in the storybook, simply sharing their opinion of the story, or relating a similar experience about the events in the story that happened to them. These "book talks," done in both English and Mandarin, were similar to those used by Elley and Mangubhai (1983) in their Book Flood project with children in the Fiji Islands.

The instructor noted the influence of the texts on their spoken responses: The children easily picked up words from the stories, (eg "hug," "My mom is a supermom!") and would also respond fluently with short phrases at the appropriate times (e.g. "Read it again!" / "It's so funny!" / "Clarence is so bad!").

## **Reading Materials**

Adults cannot always accurately predict what books children will like (Ujjiie and Krashen, 2006). With this in mind, the teacher selected a variety of picture books that, from her experience, were likely to appeal to the children (See Appendix). Books were selected that could be read in one class period, that is, not more than 25 minutes, and that contained

vivid illustrations.

The teacher typically read the same book several times; the teacher's experience was similar to that of many parents: Children love to hear the same book again and again (in contrast to adults).

The Appendix provides a list of some the books that were read to the children.

### **From Listeners to Readers: Series Books Step In**

Having read picture books to these young learners for almost two years, in year three the instructor introduced series books. Consistent with the research, the students reacted very well to series books: When the teacher was unable to finish a complete story in 25 minutes, students were clearly frustrated, and eagerly waited for the continuation the next day.

The first series book used in the class was from the Marvin Redpost series, by Louis Sacher. The protagonist in these stories is a nine-year old boy, and the stories deal with his school life. Our students clearly identified with Marvin, and after listening to the first Marvin Redpost book, *Kidnapping*, were eager for volume 2, *Why Pick on Me?* This was a major turning point: The success of these two books encouraged the teacher to add silent reading to the curriculum, after three years of reading books aloud to the children.

This was a great leap, from listeners to readers. Specifically, at the beginning of each session, the teacher set aside a 10-minute sustained silent reading (SSR) session in which the children read chapter books on their own.

SSR was added as a regular in-class activity, not as a replacement of the read-aloud and other related activities. During silent reading time, students would read by themselves, either silently or softly reading aloud to themselves, and the teacher would walk around the classroom in order to be available in case students needed help. The collection available to students included books from the Clifford the Big Red Dog, Little Critter, and Sesame Street series (e.g. *Elmo Loves You*).

The children were welcome to pose any questions related to the book to the teacher, who would help either by providing the answer directly in the first language or explaining the novel words using in English.

The following anecdote illustrates the children's enthusiasm for free reading. One day the teacher announced that the students were going to do role-play activities. Upon hearing this, one of the students asked loudly whether there would still be silent reading time after role-play, a request that was eagerly seconded by the rest of the class. Such enthusiasm is rarely seen in any activities in any language arts class.

### **Discussion**

Creating autonomous readers is the ultimate goal of language education. In this study,

read-alouds successfully brought the pupils to the stage of independent reading, confirming the hypothesis that reading aloud and silent reading are natural partners in developing enthusiasm for reading (Trelease, 2006). As noted in the introduction, the class followed the formula:

**READ-ALOUDS/series books > home run book > time and place to read books of interesting > free reading habit**

Read-alouds were the core of the class for all four years and clearly resulted in improved English competence, and interest in books.

Children found the Marvin Redpost series to be compelling. This series provided a home run book experience for many of the children. The teacher realized that this had taken place, and provided a time and place for reading, a ten-minute SSR period each day. The reaction was extremely positive; children clearly enjoyed the SSR time.

Of course, the formula is by itself not enough. The teacher also considered the following conditions to be essential to the students' enjoyment of the class:

- (1) The teacher demonstrated her own passion for and enjoyment of reading each time she read to the class, dramatizing the story in many ways, e.g. imitating sounds and voices, and performing the movements in the stories.
- (2) Class size was small, which allowed the instructor to have better interaction with the pupils and for the pupils to have a better view of the storybook.
- (3) To make sure students could see the book clearly, big books were used and seats were arranged in a circle around the teacher.

We did not demonstrate, in this study, that all of these children went on to become dedicated pleasure readers in English, or that they all developed high levels of competence in English. What we have demonstrated, however, is that the conditions hypothesized to be necessary for this to happen were satisfied, and that the children certainly appeared to be on their way to becoming readers and therefore autonomous acquirers of English.

These results should be enough to encourage educators in EFL to at least consider storytelling to be the initial and main activity in the EFL curriculum. It can certainly be no worse than the tedious curriculum now in use, the assigned textbooks, drilling and quizzing, memorizing and reciting, a curriculum that is clearly insensitive to pupil's development and interests.

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## Appendix

### Book selected for storytelling

Title	Author and publisher
Hug	Jez Alborough (1991) London: Walker Books.
No! David!	David Shannon (1998) New York: Scholastic.
David goes to school	David Shannon (1999) New York: Scholastic.
David gets in trouble	David Shannon (2002) New York: Scholastic.
I like me	Nancy Carlson (1988). New York: Puffin Books.
Ten little monkeys jumping on the bed	Illustrator: Tina Freeman (2001) Swindon: Child's Play.
The farmer in the dell	Pam Adams (2001) Swindon: Child's Play.
The Gingerbread Man	Illustrator: John Sandford (1989) Addison-Wesley.
There was an old lady who swallowed a fly	Pam Adams (1975) Swindon: Child's Play.
Old Macdonald had a farm	Pam Adams (1975) Swindon: Child's Play.
The itsy bitsy spider	Iza Trapani (1993) New York: Scholastic.
The Very Hungry Caterpillar	Eric Carle (1969) New York: Puffin Books.
Effie	Beverley Allinson (1990) New York: Scholastic.
Coco Can't wait	Taro Gomi (1979) New York: Scholastic.
Quick as a cricket	Audrey Wood (1982) New York: Scholastic.
Mouse paint	Ellen Stoll Walsh (1989) Orlando: Voyager Books.
Seven Blind Mice	Ed Young (1992) New York: Puffin Books.
Madeline	Ludwig Bemelmans (1967) New York: Scholastic.
Mooncake	Frank Asch (1983) New York: Scholastic.
Through the magic mirror	Anthony Browne (2001) London: Walker Books.
Piggybook	Anthony Browne (1986) London: Walker Books.
Willy and Hugh	Anthony Browne (1991) Cambridge: Candlewick.
The snowman storybook	Raymond Briggs (1978) New York: Random

	House.
When Sophie gets angry-Really Really angry...	Molly Bang (1999) New York: Scholastic.
Is your mama a llama?	Deborah Guarino (1989) New York: Scholastic.
Doorbell rang	Pat Hutchins (1986) New York: Scholastic.
If you give a moose a muffin	Laura Numeroff (1991) HarperCollins.
If you give a pig a pancake	Laura Numeroff (1998) HarperCollins.
If you take a mouse to the school	Laura Numeroff (2002) New York: Scholastic.
The three little wolves and the big bad pig	Eugene Trivizas (1993) New York: Simon & Schuster.
One Monday Morning	Uri Shulevitz (1967) New York: Scholastic.
UFO diary	Satoshi Kitamura (1989) New York: Scholastic.
\My friends	Taro Gomi (1989) New York: Scholastic.
Daniel's Dinosaurs	Mary Carmine (1990) New York: Scholastic.
Just shopping with mom	Mercer Mayer (1989) New York: Golden Books.
Winnie the witch	Korky Paul & Valerie Thomas (1987) Oxford: Oxford University Press.
The little mouse, the red ripe strawberry, and the big hungry bear	Audrey Wood & Don Wood (1984) Swindon: Child's Play.
I went walking	Sue Williams (1989) San Diego: Voyager Books.
Alicia has a bad day	Lisa Jahn-Clough (1994) New York: Walter Lorraine Books.
Click, clack, moo cows that type	Doreen Cronin (2000) New York: Scholastic.
Giggle, giggle, quack	Doreen Cronin (2002) New York: Scholastic.
The Tunnel	Anthony Browne (1989) London: Walker Books.
Ella the elegant elephant	Carmela & Steven D'Amico (2004) New York: Scholastic.
Ella sets the stage	Carmela & Steven D'Amico (2006) Singapore: Arthur A. Levine Books.
How do dinosaurs get well soon?	Jane Yolen (2003) New York: Scholastic.
What daddy & mommy do best	Laura Numeroff (2000) New York: Scholastic.
The giving tree	Shel Silverstein (1964) London: Harper Collins.
My mum	Anthony Browne (2005) London: Picture Corgi.
Willy the dreamer	Anthony Browne (2000) London: Walker Books.
Lost, and found	Oliver Jeffers (2006) London: Harper Collins.
Piggybook	Anthony Browne (1986) London: Walker Books.