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## Teaching English to young learners through stories: Implementing story-based language teaching methodology in pre-service teacher training

**Rezümé** A mesealapú idegennyelv-tanítás előnyeit a nyelvpedagógia már régen felismerte és elismerte (l. Ellis & Brewster, 1991). Ennek ellenére a kárpátaljai magyar iskolákban ez a nyelvtanítási eljárás nincs elterjedve. Ezért fontosnak tartottuk, hogy megismertessük angol és ukrán szakos hallgatóinkat ennek az eljárásnak a módszertani alapjaival. Vizsgálódásunk során a részt vevő 25 diák kutatási naplóját elemeztük. Az eredmények azt bizonyítják, hogy a mesealapú tanítás pozitív hatással van a tanulók beszédértésére és szókincsfejlődésére. Kutatásunk pedagógiai implikációjaként pedig hangsúlyozzuk, hogy reményeink szerint a mesealapú nyelvtanítás mint nyelvpedagógiai eljárás bekerül a kötelezően tanítandó témák közé a szaktanárképzésben *Az angol nyelv oktatásának módszertana* c. tárgyból a II. Rákóczi Ferenc Kárpátaljai Magyar Főiskolán.

**Резюме** Метод навчання іноземним мовам за допомогою казок є вже давно відомим і визнаним (див. Ellis & Brewster, 1991). Попри це в угорськомовних школах Закарпаття цей метод не розповсюджений. Мета роботи – представити студентам, майбутнім вчителям англійської та української мов, основи методики навчання іноземним мовам за допомогою казок. У ході дослідження проаналізовано результати, які отримано від 25 студентів – учасників дослідження. Отримані результати засвідчили, що навчання мови за допомогою казок має позитивний вплив на розвиток мовлення та лексичного запасу учнів. З точки зору підготовки майбутніх фахівців, вчителів іноземних мов, у Закарпатському угорському інституті ім. Ференца Ракоці II було б доцільно до дисципліни „Методика навчання англійської мови” включити теми, пов’язані з методом навчання за допомогою казок.

### Abstract

The value and benefits of teaching a modern language to young learners through stories have been established and acknowledged by researchers (Ellis & Brewster, 1991; King, 2003; Lugossy, 2007; Mattheoudakis, Dvorakova & Láng, 2007). In Transcarpathia in western Ukraine, however, this teaching strategy is not widely spread, despite the proven motivating characteristics of stories and their positive influences on language learning success. Therefore, we find it of utmost importance to introduce English major students (pre-service teachers of English) to the methodology of using stories in the young learner English classroom.

English major and Ukrainian major pre-service teachers participated in the research we have carried out. Their journals were collected and analysed qualitatively. The results show that the story-based teaching has positive impacts on young learners' listening comprehension and vocabulary development. Besides, it raises learner motivation towards learning the English language. Expected advantages and benefits of the research project were that trainee teachers would learn the methodology of teaching modern foreign languages to young learners through stories and the methods of researching the same process; also, trainee teachers would have hands-on practice opportunities to apply theory in practice.

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## 1 Introduction and rationale

Transcarpathia is situated in the south-western part of Ukraine. It is one of the 25 administrative regions of Ukraine with a population of about 1.2 million people, among whom 156,000 are Hungarians living in minority in the country. The education of the minority is realized at all the levels from primary and secondary to tertiary education. While there are 106 primary and secondary schools with the Hungarian language of instruction, there is only one such college of higher education in Transcarpathia (the II. Rákóczi Ferenc Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education). Although this college trains economists and accountants, its main focus is teacher training.

The research detailed in this paper was motivated by the authors' firm belief in the innovative approach to teaching English to young learners through stories in Transcarpathia, and their eagerness to implement it in the teacher training curriculum as a constructive element.

## 2 Review of the relevant literature

Today English teacher training at our institution strives to follow the constructivist model for teacher training (Nahalka, 2009) in which our English major students are provided with information on the various foreign language teaching approaches, methods, and techniques. They are not told, however, how to best teach a foreign language. On the contrary, they are encouraged to 'construct' their own understanding of the processes going on in language teaching. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we, teacher trainers familiarize our students with a range of variety of useful and applicable methods so that they could make competent decisions in practice when teaching in reality. One of these methods is the teaching of foreign languages through stories.

Stories or fairy-tales are excellent teaching resources especially with young learners because (1) children love listening to them, (2) they are motivating and enjoyable for children, (3) they develop learners' listening skills, and last but not least (4) stories can be flexibly used within the syllabus (Gorszkiné Siró, 2007). Claussen (2005) also states that if children listen to stories regularly, this improves their speaking skills and enriches their vocabulary. Claussen adds that it is helpful when learners are asked to retell (describe orally) the story they have heard as this fosters their language acquisition and language development. Further justification for using stories in the young learner classroom is given by Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002; cited in Mattheoudakis, Dvorakova & Láng, 2007, p. 60) who claim that when listening to stories children tend to identify with the characters of the stories and speak and act in their personalities. This way they become personally involved in the story.

Based on the above discussion a question arises: why are stories neglected by teachers in Transcarpathian Hungarian schools when their benefits in the young learner classroom are so evident? In Ellis and Brewster's (1991) view, the reason for this teacher resistance to apply stories lies in their lack of confidence to be able to tell or read aloud stories for children at an appropriate professional level. In addition, a lot of foreign language teachers are not trained to apply story-telling in teaching so they are not confident enough. Also, it might be possible that some teachers are simply not aware of the real value of this method and do not use it because of their personal beliefs (Mattheoudakis, Dvorakova & Láng, 2007).

## 3 The study

### 3.1 Participants

Participants were 25 Year 4 college students out of whom 18 were majoring in English and 7 in Ukrainian. All the English majors were female students aged 20-25,

while there were 6 female and one male student among the Ukrainian majors aged 20-21. Prior to the research, they all covered a minimum of six weeks of teaching practicum in their Years 2 and 3 where their main tasks included observing the English and the Ukrainian teaching processes in the school context, as well as giving some lessons of English or Ukrainian on their own, but these lessons were not story-based ones. The participants applied the story-telling technique in 21 different Transcarpathian Hungarian schools. We have assigned codes to the participants during the analysis of their data.

### **3.2 Instruments**

Two direct research instruments were applied to collect data. These were a reflection journal and a self-report questionnaire, both with open-ended questions. In the reflection journal (see Appendix 1) we asked our participants to describe and evaluate their own experiences during story telling (5 questions) and provide us with comments on the effectiveness of the whole process. The second research instrument, the self-report questionnaire (see Appendix 2) contained ten open-ended questions about the facts and about the participants' perceptions of their story telling processes. Both instruments were filled in in Hungarian, the participants' mother tongue.

The indirect research instrument was the text of the well-known story of "The enormous turnip". The story was selected because this is a story known both in English and Ukrainian. Evidently, the English major student-participants were presented the English version of the story, while the Ukrainian majors were given the Ukrainian version. They had to tell this story to the children in the schools during the second phase of our research.

### **3.3 Procedures**

The first phase in October, 2009 was the theoretical part during which we presented the methodology of story-based language teaching to the students and had them understand the role of stories in the young learner English classroom. Also, in research sessions held with the students we trained them how to reflect on their own teaching (Richards & Lockhart, 1996) to be able to write reflection journals as research instruments which we later analyzed. The second phase taking place in November and December, 2009 was the practical one in which the trainee teachers spent their compulsory six-week teaching practicum in various schools in Transcarpathia (both urban and rural) and applied stories with young learners. The trainees had to measure the learners' comprehension with the help of tasks they had prepared during the first phase of the research. Also, participants were asked to write up their experiences, thoughts and reflections on the process of implementing stories with young learners in a separate reflection journal. In addition, during the second phase of our investigation a questionnaire was administered to the student participants. It enquired about the experience of teaching English through stories from the learners' perspective and from their own one.

The analysis of the data was mainly done qualitatively in December, 2009, while the conclusions and implications were drawn in January and February, 2010.

## **4 Findings and discussion of the results**

The participants of the research project were 18 English and 7 Ukrainian major students who were willing to participate in our research project and agreed to give a story-based lesson. They also agreed, on the one hand, to estimate their own work and performance, on the other hand, reflect on the process of story-telling and share their experiences and perceptions with us. In the present study first the findings of the students' reflection

journals are discussed, and then the experiences gained during the story-telling lessons are described.

In the course of planning the project we had an assumption that stories are very rarely read or applied in foreign language lessons in the Hungarian schools of Transcarpathia, though it is a common knowledge that stories and tales influence the development of the children's personality and they need them as stories serve as a link between the world of fantasy and reality (Gorszkiné Síró, 2007).

The reports of the students show that all of them except for two students enjoyed the lesson and only a few of them were a little anxious before the lesson about discipline in the classroom or due to the fact that they were not familiar with the learners of the particular class. However, even in these cases the atmosphere in a very short time became friendly and the lesson was spent in a good spirit.

The second, third and fourth questions dealt with the way the story was told: if the teachers (i.e. our research participants) strayed from the subject or lost the thread of the story, and if they enjoyed the whole process. The answers were negative to Questions 2 and 3, as the text of the story was relatively short, the language and the plot were simple. Only two participants answered that they confused some characters as they had to keep discipline but they could control the situation. Most of them paid attention to articulation and clarity; three English majors also observed learners' reaction (whether they understood and enjoyed the story) but this did not distract their attention from their original aim. All the students (participants) without exception claimed that they enjoyed the story-telling process and were satisfied with their own performance.

As to the fifth question, 64 % of the students reported that they did not experience anything new during the story-telling, explaining this answer by the fact that they had no previous experience, did not participate in a lesson of this type (i.e. story-telling lesson) neither as learners or listeners nor as teachers, the situation was completely new for them. This fact could as well be an advantage as they had no basis for comparison and had neither positive nor negative expectations as to the method. All of them stated that they had left the classroom with positive feelings and impression. Among the rest of the students some found new elements in the story itself as they knew another version of it and they experienced change in the learners' behaviour and reaction. In spite of the fact that the story was familiar with many learners they were interested in it and were very attentive. It is worth mentioning, that two Ukrainian major teacher trainees remarked that

*In the process of story-telling it was unusual that while working with the traditional methods the learners usually looked at me with bored faces and it seemed to me that their thoughts were somewhere else, but while I was reading the story everybody was attentive and their eyes were sparkling. (SPU 2)*

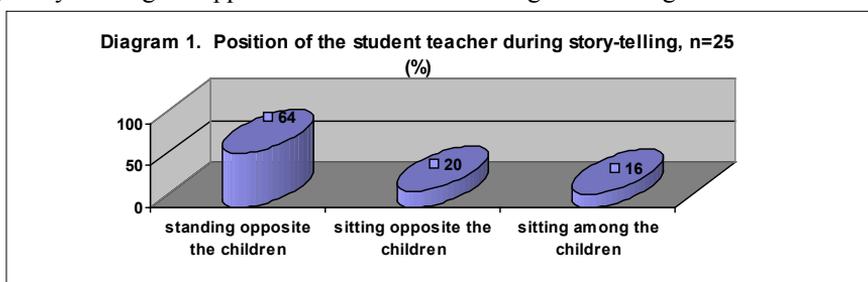
*I experienced that this method was all new to them [i.e. the children] in contrast to the boring everyday activities, they listened with sparkling eyes. (SPU 4)*

Due to the fact that the participants had a chance to decide the way they wanted to work on the story, this process in different classes was different. There were between 12 and 15 learners in a class. The proportions were different even in the way the learners were seated in the English and the Ukrainian classrooms. While in the English lessons in 11 cases out of 18 the learners were sitting in a circle or semi-circle, only one Ukrainian major trainee-participant reported about this type of classroom organization. In all the other cases no changes were made in the classroom, the children were listening to the stories sitting at the desk in a traditional way. The Ukrainian majors' opinion was that in a traditional setting the learners would be more disciplined and attentive. Those English majors who did not rearrange the classroom found it too small and reported that they simply

had no chance to do this. By the end of the lesson the trainees realized the disadvantages of sitting at the desks behind each other: the learners could not relax, were stiff and did not see each others' reactions. The trainees considered the advantages of sitting in a circle or semi-circle to be the following:

- relaxed and friendly atmosphere (the atmosphere of intimacy);
- good mood;
- informal relationship between the teacher and the learners as well as between the learners themselves.

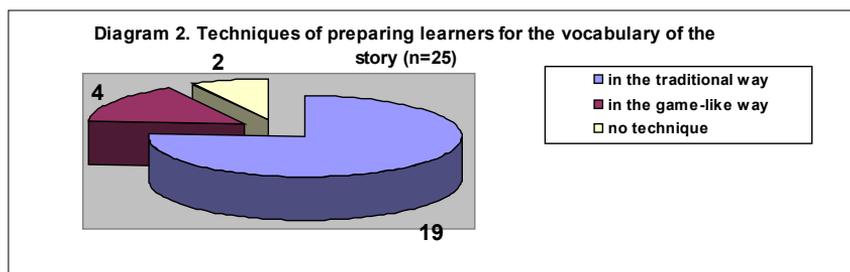
The disadvantages noticed were that rearranging the furniture was time-consuming, noisy and it gave opportunities to off-task talking and moving around.



Another important point is where the story-teller takes his/her seat as compared to the listeners. 64% of the trainees was standing at the blackboard or table facing the learners, 20% was sitting opposite the children with the purpose to be well seen and heard by all the listeners and to be able to keep eye-contact with them, to follow whether they understood the story or not. Only 16% of the trainees decided to take a seat among the learners reasoning that this way the atmosphere would not be authoritarian.

90 % of the participants of the project used visual aids at the lesson, mainly pictures or drawings of their own. (See Appendix 3 for a sample illustration of the story.) The visual aids were mainly used during the story-telling process to introduce the characters. Other trainees changed the tone of their voice when reading different roles to show different characters.

In a lesson of this type it is important that the learners' language and vocabulary level were appropriate and they were prepared for understanding the story. We asked about the way our participants solved this question. Diagram 2 shows that two trainees did not pay any attention to this problem because they considered the story was well-known to the children. Only four trainees used memory cards and pantomime for introducing the vocabulary of the story. The majority introduced the new words and structures in a traditional way: explained the meaning, wrote the words on the blackboard and practised the pronunciation of the words or phrases. This was done because they found time to be short; they had no opportunity to prepare the students in the previous lesson(s).



During the theoretical part in Phase 1 of our research, the trainee-participants' attention was drawn to the fact that story-based teaching provides an opportunity for integrating the interdisciplinary approach but only 32% of the trainees referred to other subjects. They activated learners' knowledge in literature and biology. The rest of the trainees did not try to activate any previous knowledge, only mentioned that the story might be familiar with the learners. Some trainees tried recalling cases when learners helped to solve a problem in their own family.

Except for two Ukrainian major students, all the trainees agreed that their lesson was successful, the learners understood the story, were cooperative and enjoyed the lesson. All the participants received positive feedback from the learners and from the whole story-telling process.

## 5 Conclusions and pedagogical implications

Our hypothesis that story-telling as a language teaching technique is not paid enough attention to in foreign language teaching in Transcarpathian Hungarian schools despite its advantages was supported. For this reason our aim in the future is to prepare our pre-service teachers for applying this method so that they can use it in their future work. As a consequence of our empirical investigation, the topic of teaching foreign languages to young learners through stories will hopefully be included in the syllabus of the discipline 'Methodology of English language teaching to young learners' in our institution.

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## **Appendix 1** **Reflection journal (English version)**

Please answer the following questions after you have told the story of “The enormous turnip” to children.

1. How much were you anxious during story telling? How much did you feel comfortable?
2. Was there such a moment during your story telling when you lost the thread of the story? How did you solve the situation?
3. Was there such a moment during your story telling when your thoughts did not focus on the task at hand?
4. Did you enjoy the story telling process?
5. Did you discover anything new in the story? Did you experience anything new in the process of telling/teaching a story in general?

## **Appendix 2** **Self-report questionnaire (English version)**

Please answer the following questions after you have told the story of “The enormous turnip” to children.

1. How many children were listening to the story? How old were they? In what way were their seats arranged? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this seating?
2. Did the children interrupt the story telling process by their comments on the story or the process itself?
3. Where were you, the story-teller, sitting during the story telling process?
4. Did you use any visual aids (e.g. pictures, posters, puppets, etc.) during the story telling?
5. Did you use any background music? What was it? Why?
6. What techniques did you apply to introduce the characters of the story to the children?
7. How did you connect the story with the learners’ schemata?
8. How did you prepare the learners for the language / the lexis of the story?
9. Did you refer to the integration among the school subjects? How?
10. In your perception, did you tell the story clearly, in good tempo? Did the children ask back for information they did not hear/understand?

### Appendix 3

Illustration to the story 'The enormous turnip' by Beáta Molnár (English major student of the Ferenc Rákóczi II. Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute)

