



Why stories? *by Andrew Wright* - Chalk and Talk - Issue 1 May 1998

We all need stories for our minds as much as we need food for our bodies; we watch television, go to the cinema and theatre, read books, and exchange stories with our friends.

Stories are particularly important in the lives of our children: stories help children to understand their world and to share it with others. The hunger for stories is constant. Every time the children enter your classroom they enter with the need for stories.

Why stories?

Stories, which rely so much on words, offer a major and constant source of language experience for the language learner. Stories are motivating, rich in language experience and inexpensive! Surely, stories should be a central part of the work of all primary teachers whether they are teaching the students' mother tongue or a foreign language.

Motivation

Because children have a constant need for stories they will always be willing to listen (or read when the time comes).

Meaning

The children want to find meaning in the story so they listen with a purpose. If they find meaning, they are rewarded through their ability to understand the foreign language. If they do not understand they are motivated to try to improve their ability to understand. So often the content of activities in foreign language learning has little or no intrinsic interest or value for the child...

Listening and reading fluency

In conversations with native speakers the most important ability is to be able to understand a sustained flow of the foreign language in which there are words new to the listener. The ability to do this can only be built up by practice.

The learner must develop a positive attitude to not understanding everything and must build up the skills of searching for meaning, predicting, and "guessing". (They are experts at doing this in their first language!)

Language awareness

Stories help the students become aware of the general 'feel' and sound of the foreign language. Stories also introduce the learners to language items and sentence constructions without their necessarily having to use them productively. They can build up a reservoir of language in this way. When the time comes to move the language items into their productive control it is no great problem because the language is not new to them.

Communication

Listening and reading stories and responding to them through speaking, writing, drama and art develops a sense of audience and of sharing and collaborating. Learning a language is useless if we are not skilful communicators. Story sharing builds up this crucial sense of awareness of others.

General curriculum

Most stories can be used to develop the students' powers of awareness, analysis, and of expression as well as relating to other aspects of the curriculum content like cultural and social studies, geography, history, mathematics, and science.

Danger! Story health warning!

Although stories can be used by language teachers to introduce and practice specific language features, there is a danger in this that the learners will be "turned off" by stories and begin to see them as just a teacher's trick to teach the foreign language. For the learner, stories are mainly about enjoyment and interest. If the teacher uses stories merely as a teaching vehicle the learners will withdraw their willingness to offer the enormous potential of their need for stories.