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Effectiveness of Stories in Primary Level: An Intervention Study

Babita Chapagain

Shadananda Multiple Campus

Author Note

Babita Chapagain (ORCID 0009-0009-6174-834x) is an MA, MEd Hornby Scholar (2014-2015) of the University of Warwick and a master's degree holder from Kathmandu University. She is an advisor of the Research Management Cell under Shree Shadananda Multiple Campus, Dingla, Bhojpur, Nepal. She is the Director and Teacher Educator at the Integrative Education Research and Recreation Center. She also works as a Teacher Training Consultant at the British Council Nepal.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to her. Email: babitasharma34@gmail.com

Abstract

Several studies worldwide in the field of language acquisition have examined the importance of using children's literature across the primary curriculum. However, in Nepal's public primary schools, this is a very rare practice. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the effects of story reading aloud to children and of story-based activities in a primary-level classroom, and to determine whether this approach is relevant in our local context. A review of selected literature discusses the impact of literature across the curriculum on children's overall development. The rationale for using different reading-based activities and the specific selection of stories is presented. The methodology section describes the details of how the reading intervention was carried out, including the specific context. Data were gathered from multiple sources, including children's writing samples and response journals written by the children, their class teacher, and me as a researcher. Findings revealed the possibilities of scaffolding children's creative thinking, creative writing, and their learning of subject content. Children were motivated to read, and my regular conversations with them enabled me to scaffold their English learning in a very low-resourced classroom.

Keywords: children's literature, story-based activities, scaffolding, creative thinking, and reading aloud

Effectiveness of Stories in Primary Level: An Intervention Study

Introduction

There was a puzzle in my mind: whether stories, including story-based activities, are effective tools for scaffolding children's speaking skills and reading comprehension, and whether this approach is possible in a remote school context with inadequate resources. The key idea of this study emerged from my professional quest, as my experience taught me the importance of piloting any big or small new project rather than just throwing away a new concept in the name of innovation, being the so-called 'expert' from the outside. As a teacher trainer, I realized the importance of studying the local context and circumstances before introducing new ideas or methods at my training centre. In my training sessions, I often conducted several story-based activities to provide teachers with hands-on experience with the effectiveness of using stories in the classroom. Although the teachers enjoyed the training and believed that stories can play a powerful role in language learning, they were unsure whether they could apply what they learned at the training centre in their classrooms. Instead, they came up with questions such as 'how is extra reading possible while both teachers and students are busy completing the course syllabus fixed by the school and preparing for exams?' Or 'we don't have enough reading materials.' Therefore, I was willing to take this small research as an opportunity to see whether children's literature, beyond textbooks, could be used widely during regular school hours or after school, and to explore the benefits of story-based activities, particularly in reading, writing, and speaking.

The study was based on the following research questions:

1. Are literature-based activities beneficial to children's learning English as a foreign language? Which activities lead to what sort of language practice? How?
2. What are the challenges in integrating children's literature into the curriculum in the context of Nepalese public schools?

Literature Review

If we look back at the history of access to books, "it is hardly surprising that Nepal

does not have a culture of reading for pleasure and learning” (Koirala & Bird, 2004, p. 128). Many teachers and parents seem unaware that literature is an inseparable aspect of human life. In fact, literature brings powerful effects on people of all ages, including children. Based on research over the past 30 years, Irma Ghosn (2013) argues that children’s literature has a positive influence on young ESL learners. Literature is a very effective medium for helping children learn a new language (Ghosn, 2013), and teaching through stories is “a natural way to help children develop skills in a second or foreign language” (Linse, 2007, p. 46).

Reading aloud to children provides the learners with a strong foundation for language development. It is important for the teachers to read authentic (non-pedagogic) books to children on a regular basis, following “a real books approach because stories’ meanings and discussion are seen to be such a central element in children’s literacy development” (Campbell, 1992, p. 54).

Similarly, dramatization is another interesting story-based activity. It is considered another important story-based activity. Reader’s theatre and drama compel learners to better comprehend the story and understand how language works in a particular situation. Children enjoy and are stimulated to perform well when they get to represent stories through drama. They learn in a naturally playful environment where they can perform repetitive, meaningful tasks (Pinter, 2011). Children learn to speak simultaneously when they participate in dramas, speaking aloud, imitating the characters, and making predictions. Therefore, it is very important for the teachers to promote reading and give children “ample opportunity to interact with real books” (Parker & Parker, 1991, p. 180) by surrounding them with good texts in the classroom.

Research Design

My research was based on the active participation of learners from diverse backgrounds. With close coordination with the head teacher and other teachers, a three-month intervention was implemented in grade four at a community school in Nepal. The target students were nine- to ten-year-olds who had been learning English for four years as a compulsory subject but were still struggling with reading and comprehension. They also had very poor speaking skill and since their learning was entirely based on textbooks, the learners had very limited exposure to English. A total of 15 students participated in this research.

Age-appropriate stories were gathered from various sources because it was difficult

to access stories relevant to the context. Apart from buying twenty important books written by famous authors. The Very Hungry Caterpillars were bought, thirty additional stories were developed during the Writer's Workshop event organized by me in a school about a year ago, where twenty primary teachers of the community, as well as our trainers' team, wrote stories, went through several drafts in the creative writing process, and prepared complete pieces of stories. The materials produced in that event were a good addition to the materials required for this intervention. All the books that were bought, collected, or developed were interesting, predictable stories with patterns and repetition, and most of the books gathered were picture books with varied sentence structures.

The sessions were conducted for fifth graders in a primary school in Prithivi Nagar, Jhapa district. Prithvi Nagar is a unique village where people from more than 10 ethnic groups, i.e., Rai, Tamang, Limbu, Satar, Magar, Gurung, Tharu, Newar, Chhetri, Dalit, and Bahun, with distinct linguistic and cultural backgrounds, reside in harmony. My targeted learners, from diverse ethnic backgrounds, learned English as a foreign language.

I was allowed to take forty-five minutes lesson each day (except Saturday) throughout my study period. During the intervention, I read stories aloud to children every day and engaged them in several reading-based activities, including vocabulary activities, reader's theatre, dramatization, book talks, story reviews, and writing response journals. The learners were involved in tasks such as collaborative story writing, individual story writing, and group artwork.

This was an intervention study carried out to gather in-depth information on the effectiveness of reading stories and story-based activities in a specific context. This qualitative research played a vital role in this intervention because of its locally situated, context-oriented nature and its focus on understanding participants' perceptions and transforming the existing situation (Richards, 2009). To find the result, observational data were used, including classroom interactions, events, samples of children's reading and speaking during various activities, and children's responses to particular concepts. The class teachers' and parents' responses were also taken to provide additional data to strengthen our study.

Statement of Significance

Although many teachers in Nepal strive to create a school environment that motivates children to learn English, they often rely solely on textbooks that focus on isolated

parts of the language (grammar and vocabulary). Explicit examples and ideas for using literature across the curriculum could be very helpful. As many countries around the world have conducted numerous studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and/or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) on the effectiveness of using stories in classrooms, schools in Nepal cannot remain aloof to this idea. This study created a paradigm that allows me to explore this area further for my professional development. The significance of this research was to provide concrete evidence to demonstrate whether reading stories is an effective medium for scaffolding children's speaking and reading comprehension. A positive result will definitely benefit learners and provide a path for other key stakeholders.

Consent

Ethical approval was obtained from the municipality's education department prior to data collection. Consent from the school's local authorities was obtained at the time the agreement was made. The school communicated with the parents in this matter.

Statement of Ethics

Confidentiality and anonymity of all information and pictures collected during the research were of utmost importance, and thus they were rigorously maintained throughout the research and beyond.

Study Outcome and Implication

As I explored the data gathered throughout my study, I found some positive effects of the story-reading intervention. In regard to my first research question, i.e., whether or not literature-based activities are beneficial to children's learning English as a second language, the children's write-ups I gathered made it evident that through the use of literature, we can scaffold children's learning in the context where English is being taught as a second language, causing several benefits such as:

- develops a love for literature in the learners and motivates them to read
- scaffolds children's creative thinking as well as creative writing
- scaffolds the language of the learners through regular conversation
- provides children with the knowledge of subject contents

The simple example I presented here reflects learners' actual reading abilities. On

my first day, I gave them some picture books with simple words and asked them to read aloud, assuming they would do well given their 5 years of English learning experience. However, to my surprise, all the students struggled with reading, and they spelled each letter separately before pronouncing any word, even for basic words like the, would, he, play, etc. It shows that it is not a single child's problem; everyone faces this difficulty because they were brought up in circumstances that lacked a "linguistically and culturally rich reading environment" (Gibbons, 2002, p. 84).

Here, I have made an attempt to justify how the four main story-based activities, 'Reading Aloud', 'Dramatization/ Reader's Theatre', 'Book Talk', and 'Story Review' motivated my target learners to love literature and start reading with some interest.

Reading aloud to children

Reading aloud to the children was the core of my project. Although at first I was not sure whether my target learners would enjoy listening to the stories in English, on the first day, I realized they were not used to it. However, as I began my session on Day 1 by reading aloud big-picture books like "How Many" and "In Patan Dhoka We saw...", they listened to the stories with great enthusiasm and continued to show interest in stories throughout my two-week programme. Their comments, randomly extracted from their response journals, reflect their experience during the reading sessions, where they wrote their opinions about the stories, and they have also expressed how much they looked forward to seeing me on the school premises so that I would read stories to them.

Same stories were read aloud repeatedly a few more times, and I tried to model good reading strategies (Gibbons, 2002) by pre-introducing vocabulary before reading and while reading, stopping time to time to make them think to recall the events, answer other reader questions, or to make them predict what might happen next. Despite their limited English proficiency, the children listened to the stories and imitated the characters' dialogue during the read-aloud. They showed great interest in the stories introduced to them and responded in different ways.

Readers' theatre/dramatization

During Readers' Theatre, the learners got a chance to practice reading, and it provided "a meaningful purpose of the reading" (Gibbons, 2002) as each of them got to choose the dialogue of one of the characters from the story to read aloud. I

was glad to note the slight improvement my learners had been making. For instance, students gradually began to stop reading every letter separately as they had before and could pronounce in a way that was clearly understood by the listeners. Similarly, the opportunity to dramatize a scene from a story gave the children a chance to practice speaking as they began having a little conversation, playing the roles of the characters, an owl and an owlet, from the story “Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People’s Ears”. They were even emotional after listening to the story where an owlet is killed by a monkey. Thus, story reading created an environment in which children could dramatize the situation and practice speaking at the same time.

Book talk

The benefit of this activity was that the learners had to dig into the story and understand it better as they explained it to others and told a selected part of the story to pique listeners’ interest in reading the book. As I observed them giving book talks, I noticed that the learners made a great effort to talk about the books they had read in class. For instance, one student managed to summarize the text in her own language without reading it line by line, despite having had hardly any exposure to reading story books in the past, and with all these activities being new to her.

Their effort is evident in the fact that some students could say at least the title of the story, and gave their view that ‘The Party for Bob’ was a nice story. Although they could not speak much, in their second Book Talk, they kept trying to talk about a book and succeeded in saying the story’s title and conveying that Grandma made cookies in the story. They also learned the importance of sharing and caring for family members and friends.

Story Review

In this activity, the children were asked to write the title of the story, the author’s name, the characters, the best part of the story, the rating, and new words. Most children had difficulty with this task; they managed to write very little that reflected their understanding of the story. Thus, authentic reading materials, i.e., stories/storybooks beyond their course books, stimulated learners to engage in various activities that used the language, and learning naturally took place.

Scaffolding children’s creative thinking and creative writing

Although it was a mini workshop carried out over a short period due to time constraints, children demonstrated their incredible imagination in their stories.

Children created a collage of a red goat. Although they imitated the author's style, they also explored it and wrote their own pieces. For instance, a story written by the entire group, inspired by a story I had read aloud to them, made me believe in the tremendous potential of using stories to develop learners' creativity and language. The title of the story that I had read aloud to them was 'In Patan Dhoka we saw...'. The children worked together in pairs or threes, wrote similar stories, and compiled their work into a book.

As I went through their creative pieces in a compiled class book, I noticed how they began the story; it was clear that they not only imitated the writing style from the story I had read to them, but they also showed their creativity by starting the story sentence differently, building on what they already learned. For example, the first sentence of the original story was 'In Patan Dhoka, we saw some people worshipping in a temple'. In the story they came up with, I could see that the students had started telling the reader right away what they saw in particular in Patan Dhoka. Whereas, the children wrote 'In B Gau (the children's village) we saw many beautiful things'. Thus, they have proven themselves to be creative by opening the door for the readers to understand what the story was about. Then this opening sentence was followed by another sentence, 'We saw a girl riding a bicycle'. That shows one particular thing they saw in B Gau. As I observe their writing, it is clear that responding to stories, particularly fiction, played "a powerful role in children's creative development" (Cremin, 2009, p. 101), enabling them to create their own storybook.

This collaborative task not only allowed learners to learn from each other in groups and be creative, but also gave them the opportunity to read it aloud together so that I, as an instructor, could assist them in reading. They read more easily the second time after I corrected them, whereas at the beginning, the words they pronounced sounded more like 'Weesawwwwaaaaamaaaanwalkingggg' and did not sound quite normal in terms of the stress they placed on words.

In addition to writing stories in groups, the children also worked individually during the creative writing session. For instance, in the story I read to them, the speaker says he is an artist who painted various animals, including a blue horse. One student wrote a similar story: I am a teacher, and I teach English, Science, Nepali, and Math. Likewise, another student wrote that he painted a green parrot, a black buffalo, a pink butterfly, a gray cow, and a red deer. It shows that the same story inspired two of them differently. One student was interested in the profession and replaced the artist with a teacher, whereas another student was inspired by the different colours

the writer used in the story. This language practice could be connected to the idea of using a 'mentor text' to inspire learners to read books as writers, thereby enhancing their creative writing.

Likewise, after listening to the story "The Very Hungry Caterpillar", a student created another story and read it aloud to the whole class. I could observe how tactfully she has replaced a caterpillar with a snake and changed the names of the food in her story. All these examples show how the children have built on what they have learnt from the story, which not only expands their creative horizons but also gives them an opportunity to practice writing.

Thus, as seen on the data presented above in this section, it is clear to me that the use of literature boosted my target learners' creativity, and the children developed creative pieces themselves, such as stories, drawings, and artwork that represented their real-life experiences as well as their power of imagination.

Scaffolding the language of the learners through regular conversation

I had conversations with the children quite frequently during most of my reading sessions. At that time, they were generally asked to respond to the stories that I read aloud to them. After I read a story, the type of questions that I asked them were like what they enjoyed the most in the story, which stories they enjoyed the most, what might happen in the story or what they learned from the story or sometimes I asked if they could recall something from the story or if they wanted to share some similar or different stories related to their real-life experience. In those conversations with them, either they were corrected, or they repeated words or phrases after me and learned how language works in conversation. By asking children to guess what might happen in the story or by asking them to tell more about what they think will happen, and asking children to recall events of the story I had read aloud to them, I was encouraging the children to express their opinions and knowledge about the subject matter introduced in my reading sessions. While the children were corrected from time to time, they were learning from their errors, which were more developmental and natural, arising from their lack of competence and experience in answering such open-ended questions. I made sure they were not corrected every time they made a mistake, as that would make them nervous and obstruct their learning, rather than providing support. However, they were corrected after repeating the wrong sentence several times.

There was an example where a student said, 'I'm a bird.' I asked a cross-question, 'You saw a bird?' and continued with other questions like 'how many birds did you

see?’ to get more information until I understood that he was actually trying to say he saw two birds, which together had four legs. They usually repeated and echoed back the corrected version after I corrected them. Thus, they were learning either pronunciation, the grammatical structure of a sentence, or they could practice using a certain part of speech in the right place in a sentence.

Likewise, I had succeeded in making a student use ‘a’ in front of the word deer, and I believe that if he gets the right environment to continue practicing speaking like this, he may not forget this specific concept of the article. A similar conversation occurred in which the same student used his prior knowledge and, by thinking through my questions, scaffolded his learning of that term. If I had told him at the beginning of the conversation that a caterpillar changes into a butterfly without asking him questions, he would have lost the opportunity to participate in the interaction, and he might not have remembered the word easily. From my own learning experience, I can say that such interaction makes learning memorable. This experience can be connected to Vygotsky’s theory of language learning, which holds that children learn by interacting with peers, teachers, or parents who are considered ‘experts’ or ‘know better’.

Providing children with the knowledge of the subject contents

Since most of the stories I had selected were, in one way or another, connected to the themes of their content, the learners naturally acquired subject knowledge through the discussions during each read-aloud session. For instance, a student was practicing multiplication by finding the answer to the question: how many wings do two butterflies have if one butterfly has two wings?

When the children were asked what they learned from the story, a student finally came up with an answer that a caterpillar changes into a butterfly. Besides listening to a story, the children were also very excited to observe things in their surroundings. One interesting example is, after the discussion on how a caterpillar changes into a butterfly, a student came to class the following day with a caterpillar in a small container, causing great excitement in the class, and I had to convince him that it would survive only in a bigger jar with the leaves inside, as it requires food. Similarly, I noticed that reading stories to children has led them to have serious discussions about life and the environment. Although they have not been able to express it very it is clear that they were inspired not to be selfish and not to destroy trees. Thus, all the discussions after reading scaffolded their learning of subjects such as Moral Science, Mathematics, Environmental Science, and English.

Although my reading sessions were held after school, the children did not seem tired of listening to stories or engaging in story-based activities. As seen in the following conversation, how excitedly children told the names of the stories they liked the most among the stories that I read to them, and how they all spoke out loud together that they liked ‘story’ the most

While I was reading aloud, the children were always eager to read dialogues along with me. Since most of the books I had used had many repetitive words and phrases, they could easily predict what the next dialogue would be after reading a few pages. For instance, in the story “The Giving Tree,” the boy comes to the tree many times, and, as children knew what the tree would say every time the boy came, they also knew a few dialogues the boy would use, as seen in Excerpt 4 above. Besides “The Giving Tree”, the stories like “How many, Tiki Tiki Tembo..., I am an artist who painted a blue horse, Door Bell Rang, Bir Bahadur and his dreams” were other good examples of stories with a lot of repetition. Thus, the learners experienced a social environment in the story that consisted of repetitive, predictable language that engaged them and helped them learn, as Berk, Laura E., and Adam. Winsler (1995) claims that the story’s social environment can provide scaffolding. Thus, read-aloud sessions were proven to be a powerful tool for scaffolding their second-language learning by involving learners in reading, listening to texts, and responding in many ways. Over the last couple of days, I observed my learners making an effort to speak and read, and showing tremendous interest in stories. Some of them were even going to ask their parents to buy storybooks, which was a great sign of motivation.

Overall, the target learners confidently performed readers’ theater and songs on stage, and their stories and journal writing were evident, supporting my study. Children’s interest in participating in our activities and their write-ups about how they felt while performing reader’s theater and writing stories strengthened my data. Looking at how the children performed different story-based activities, I am quite convinced that reading stories, as well as story-based creative writing and dramatization, help learners better understand the story. Consequently, their productive skills improve, and they can express themselves better through speaking or writing. During this study, I observed that the children, who were struggling to read basic words and to have basic English conversations, even after studying English for five years, were very motivated to read English stories. They even began to pronounce words to read aloud themselves instead of sounding out each letter, and even made a big effort to read during ‘Readers’ Theatre within such a short period of time.

Now, as a teacher trainer, I can speak to my trainee teachers, based on this evidence,

about how stories can have a positive impact and why they must not only be introduced but also used widely in primary-grade classrooms. For that reason, this study, in a way, opened the window for other interested researchers to conduct another longitudinal study. It could be a quest for them to find out whether children really need such a long time to learn basic English, as my target learners did, even though authentic materials, such as stories, are widely used from the beginning at school. What happens if teachers are aware enough to start making an effort to collect reading materials from various sources or to develop their own stories, working collaboratively with the head teacher despite difficult circumstances and limited resources? This result also led me to believe that teachers can make a difference in ESL classrooms for young learners if they have a good selection of stories with beautiful pictures, varied sentence structures, and repetitive patterns.

Conclusion

Finally, looking back at my research questions: whether stories, including story-based activities, are effective tools for scaffolding children's learning of English as a second language, and whether this approach can be adapted in a remote school context with inadequate resources, my answer to these questions after this study is 'yes'. It was fully satisfying to discover that the stories were not only effective but also enjoyable and meaningful tools for helping children learn a second language, even without making them feel that they were learning. Overall, from what the children said, how actively they participated, and how they reacted in my class, I could feel the joy that stories brought to the learners. Introducing selected story books had a meaningful effect on their learning English.

Therefore, I conclude that, for the sustainability of this kind of innovative practice, English teachers need to realize that, in addition to using textbooks, children's literature can be integrated into the curriculum or used without integration. In any case, they could greatly broaden children's learning opportunities, motivating and supporting them to learn English faster and in a fun way, so they find it easy to fit into the global community.

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