

Tips for Using Stories

Posted by Peter on 17 August 2009

Written by Sue Clarke.

On the British Council's site for young learners - [LearnEnglish Kids](#) - there are lots of stories which you can use to motivate your students. These stories have been specially written for children learning English. They range from quite simple to quite demanding in terms of the level of difficulty so choose carefully. The stories are currently divided into four sections:

>> Short stories: Animated Flash movies for learners aged approx 8-12. These are suitable for lower level learners and above.

>> Longer stories: Texts over a number of pages with soundfiles that users can download and listen to. These are for learners aged approx 8-12 and are more suitable for learners with higher levels of English.

>> Stories for little kids: Animated Flash movies for learners aged approx 7 and under. Language levels vary but the subject matter is more suitable for younger children. Younger children will need support to use these stories.

>> Fairy Tales: Animated Flash movies of traditional stories. These are suitable for all ages, and are appropriate for lower levels and above.

You can find all the story materials at <http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories.htm>. As a teacher using a story in the classroom, there are many ways of using and exploiting the stories to help children understand and add to their enjoyment. On these pages you will find tips for using and exploiting the stories in the classroom.

A. Activities to prepare children for reading

1. Using illustrations

It is always a good idea to exploit pictures to help the child understand and visualise the story. The stories have

illustrations which can be used to introduce the story, elicit vocabulary they know, introduce difficult words in that story, and generally excite the interest of the child for the story. This illustration is from the story 'Carnival Crime'. Ask learners to look at the picture before reading, and ask questions such as 'who are the people?'; 'what are they wearing?' (and why?); 'what is the cat holding?'; 'what has happened?'; 'how is the woman feeling?' etc. Learners will be introduced to vocabulary, will be more able to understand the text, and will be more engaged in the reading task (was I right? Is it a necklace or a watch?)

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-carnival-crime-1.htm>

2. Pre-teaching vocabulary

Many of the stories on LearnEnglish Kids are related to a topic. These topics can have 'specialist' vocabulary which may cause problems in comprehension. You will usually find links to other related exercises on thematic vocabulary which can be taught first. For example, you will find lots of related activities to practise the names

of the animals in the story 'ABC Zoo' as well as flashcards that you can download to introduce the animals.

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-abc-zoo.htm>

3. Introduce the theme

Many of the stories are related to a topic. It can be a good idea to familiarise learners with the topic before reading, by trying activities related to the topic on the site, by setting a task to find out about the topic (this could even be for homework), or by discussion (in your own language with lower level learners if you like). For example the story 'Football Crazy' is about a girl playing in a boys football team, breaking down barriers, adults

treating boys and girls differently. This is an important issue for children. Before reading the story you could

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ask your learners to name famous footballers, and once you have a list you could see how many famous players are women. Then you can ask more questions such as 'why are there so few famous female football players?', 'what about other sports?' etc. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-football-crazy.htm>

4. Input cultural background

Many stories assume a knowledge of cultural norms in the UK, for example, the daily school routine. Children are usually interested in finding out the differences between their own culture and the lives of children in the UK. Some stories have more overt cultural background. In the story 'Hairy Henry's Holiday', typical sights of London are mentioned, such as 'Big Ben', 'The London Eye' and 'Madame Tussauds'. You could use a map or guidebook to London to find out what these are before children read or listen to the story.

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-henry-holiday.htm>

B. Activities during reading

1. Use a variety of ways to read

There are many different ways to approach the story. It is quite likely that younger learners will want to read/hear/or listen to the story several times, particularly the shorter, flash-animated ones. This should not be discouraged as it helps learners to equate oral and written forms which is important for the development of reading skills. In the classroom it is important to vary the kind of reading.

>> The teacher could use a data projector for a class to listen to/read a story as a whole-class activity

>> The teacher could read the whole or parts of the story to a class with the text

>> The learners can read by themselves silently, either on-screen whether at school or even as homework

>> Some stories can be read as texts with illustrations and then children can watch the flash movie version, or this order could be reversed.

2. Sustaining reading

If the story is very long then it is important to keep the class motivated to read. The teacher could stop at convenient 'cliff-hanger' points and ask the class 'what happens next?' This use of prediction skills makes the learners want to read on to the end of the story to find out if their own idea is correct. In a classroom this could be done as a 'guessing game' if the teacher is controlling the pace of reading. A few of the stories on LearnEnglish Kids have built-in puzzles to keep the learners interested - for example in the story 'Spycat', students have to type in the destinations from anagrams, and finally solve the coded message.

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-spycat.htm>

3. Total physical response

With very young or active learners the story can be mimed while the teacher reads or the children listen. A story like 'The Snowman' could be used for this. The actions of waking up, running into the garden, building the snowman and the 'melting' are all easy to mime. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-snowman.htm>

4. Characters and voices

In stories which have a lot of characters you could ask students to read the dialogue of the characters. The teacher could read the dialogue of characters in different voices first. For example the story 'Alan and the Alien' is fairly long, but could be livened up with acting out the alien funny voices and nonsense words! You could even

create a class project which involves rewriting this (or another) story as a play which could be performed - perhaps with costumes. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-alien-1.htm>

You can download a version of Goldilocks to act out with younger children:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-topics-goldilocks.htm>

5. Vocabulary help

If a child is reading individually at school or at home they could also use Cambridge Dictionaries Online to

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check on the meanings of unknown words, if the learner is at a high enough level to use this independently.

This is available at <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

For younger learners there are many accompanying worksheets and online interactive games to practise vocabulary from the stories. In particular the Fairy Stories section contains material accessible and motivating to all levels. You can find a wealth of vocabulary materials on Goldilocks, Jack and the Beanstalk and Little Red Riding Hood: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-fairy-tales.htm>

C. Post-reading activities

1. Quick comprehension check

It is always a good idea to do a quick comprehension check when your learners have finished reading the story, or at the end of each page of text. This may take the form of a few 'gist' questions about the text in oral form, asking children for a response e.g. why is this person sad, which character did the children like etc. This could be done in written form. Many stories have worksheets for follow-up work, for example 'Eric the Engine' has a follow-up worksheet with a sequencing activity to check comprehension.

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-fairy-tales.htm>

2. Make a poster/illustrate the story

You can use any story as an opportunity for some creative drawing and illustration, perhaps with vocabulary labels in English. For example, in the story 'Carnival Crime', you could ask a learner to draw the carnival costumes in the story and label them. As a follow-up they could design their own carnival costume or a costume for a festival in their country.

3. Stimulus for writing

Many stories lend themselves to acting as a stimulus for creative writing, depending on the level of your learners. Younger learners or learners who have a lower level of English could use one of the simpler stories as a model for a story of their own. Examples are 'My Dad' (learners write about a member of their own family) or 'Magic Spell' (learners choose their own ingredients and outcomes). Learners with a higher level of English could write more complex stories, for example, their own story based in a haunted house (where did they go? What did they see? What happened?)

Other ideas for follow-up writing are writing a letter to a character in a story, writing diary entries for a character in a story, or writing extra dialogues between the characters.

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-my-dad.htm>

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-magic-spell.htm>

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-haunted-house.htm>

4. Role-play/acting out

Interpreting stories as role-play can be as simple or complicated as you like. It could start with miming basic actions, then speaking or improvising dialogue. In the classroom the teacher will need to be organised in advance with moving furniture, providing simple props etc. You could even use facepaints.

Stories like 'The Monster Shopping trip' are simple to act out. You could draw the presents on card:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-monster-shoppingtrip.htm> For the really ambitious class project you could make masks for the characters. There are downloadable masks available for the characters in the Goldilocks story available at britishcouncil.org/kids-print-mask-goldilocks.pdf and for the story of Little Red Riding Hood you can download a set of finger puppets of the characters to help you act out the story in class. These are available at britishcouncil.org/kids-stories-red-riding-hood-puppets.pdf

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=476>,