

Here's one you've heard before

Michael Jones

explains how children with language learning needs benefit more from whole class sessions when they have been pre-taught the content of the lesson, either individually or in small groups

Sharing picture books and storybooks with an adult is regarded as one of the most important ways of developing young children's spoken and written language, as well as their knowledge and understanding of the world. We know that regularly sharing books with adults gives children a vital foundation for the development of literacy. Recent research also points to the link between children hearing stories and sharing storybooks, and their ability to retell a story, or make up stories of their own. This ability to narrate is particularly important for the development of children's creative writing. As well as the benefits for learning, sharing books in a positive way helps to develop emotional bonds between children and adults.

During story time and the Literacy Hour large groups of children are expected to concentrate on an adult



talking, with a book as the main focus of attention. Most children in KS1 find this sufficiently stimulating to keep their sustained attention, but these sessions can be challenging for very young children and those with language learning difficulties. This may be due to lack of experience, problems with concentration, or because they have specific language learning needs. Some children lose interest and 'switch off', while others show challenging behaviour. Whatever the response, or lack of it, many children miss out on this valuable experience. Children learning English as an additional language may also fail to benefit, as they only have the pictures and the text to refer to.

I work with children with speech and language learning needs in mainstream settings. Many of these children do not respond to picture books and stories; either individually with an adult or as part of a larger group. This is often because they don't understand the



vocabulary in the stories, or the subject matter may be outside their experience. They may also be at the stage where they only respond to books with colour photographs, and find it difficult to follow a simple story. They are therefore missing out on a crucial way of developing their language and literacy.

Approaching stories with children with learning difficulties

My experience and reading has shown me that children with language learning needs benefit more from whole class sessions when they have been pre-taught the content of the lesson, either individually or in small groups. I work with small groups of children with language learning needs, preparing them for a story that is shared later with the whole class. This stimulates their interest in books, and develops their language, as well as helping them to enjoy and benefit from story time and the Literacy Hour.

The targeted children benefit from the pre-learning in the small group and learn new vocabulary

The approach is simple, but effective, and is based around small groups of children having fun sitting in a circle. They are introduced to the basic vocabulary in a storybook or picture book through games that involve handling and naming artefacts from the book. At the end of the session children may share the story with the adult. Later the adult shares the same story with the whole class, with the same artefacts. The targeted children benefit from the pre-learning in the small group and learn new vocabulary. Their ability to respond in the whole group story session also improves.

Choosing a book

Choose a book that will appeal to the children, and possibly relates to the class topic work. Novelty picture books, like *Buzz Buzz Bumble Jelly*, a very funny flap book by Nick Sharratt, are useful for children at



an early stage of being involved with books. They develop vocabulary, and make children laugh (laughter being a vital ingredient of this approach!) Picture books like *How do I put it on?* by Shigeo Watanabe, about a bear that gets in a muddle about putting his clothes on, are fun, and teach important ideas and vocabulary, as well as generating interest. These books help to form a link between picture books and those with a simple narrative.

An ideal first storybook for sharing is *Cock a Moo Moo*, by Juliet Dallas-Conte, where a cockerel forgets how to crow, but saves the farmyard animals from a hungry fox. Like many good stories for young children, it has a simple storyline, with repetitive and predictable action and language. The illustrations are also bold and colourful. Other stories that I use

include traditional tales like *The Gingerbread Man*, *Chicken Licken* and *The Little Red Hen and the Grains of Wheat*. *Balloon*, *Hug* and other stories by Jez Alborough are very popular. A great favourite of children and adults alike is *Mrs Wishy Washy* from Nelson's *Story Chest* reading scheme.

Collecting artefacts

Decide on the main characters or artefacts in the book, then collect these and put them in a bag or box. Most can be gathered from around the class; e.g. plastic animals or puppets. Failing that, I have got most of what I need from car boot sales, charity shops or jumble sales. A collection of farm animals will equip you for sharing a huge range of children's stories! *Story Sacks*, which combine a story, artefacts and related games, can also be used.

Preparing the group

I work with a group of about six children, of varying abilities. I place a small, decorated tablecloth on the floor, and we sit in a circle around it. Children learn that they should not touch the cloth, unless it is part of an activity. They are encouraged to sit with legs crossed. During games they always take turns starting at the leader's left, working clockwise around the circle. It's a good idea to have the most able child on your left, so



he can start first, and give a good example. The least able, or less confident child usually has his turn last. These arrangements encourage good listening. Children observe and learn from each other, and don't have to worry about when they will have their turn. Taking turns in the same way for each game also gives less confident children the chance to contribute.

Starting the session

Start the session with some quiet music. I usually ask children to close their eyes and 'get in the mood' for some quiet games and a story. This develops anticipation that something special will happen, and helps children to relax. I often use a piece of gentle African or Gypsy music, as my 'signature tune'. The same music will be used during some of the games. I play a 'name game', by introducing myself, and asking the children to chant my name. They say their names one at a time and the group chants in response. Singing a name song can also help reluctant children to join in.

Establish the pattern of turn taking by passing round a toy that makes a noise. A current favourite is a Maisy Mouse cuddly toy that laughs when you press her tummy. Others are a voice-sensitive singing and dancing plant, and a pig puppet that sings 'Old Macdonald'.

Games

I play games that involve hiding artefacts from the story under the cloth. To establish the principle I play some music and ask children to close their eyes. I

tap one of the children on the head, and ask him to hide under the cloth. When the music stops, the children have to guess who is hiding. Children don't mind that it's obvious who is under the cloth. They also don't mind responding to questions like "Is it a

boy or a girl?" "Has she got long or short hair?" or even being asked inference questions like, "Why do you think it's a girl?" We call the child's name, and she



jumps up from under the cloth. This has proved to be a firm favourite, even with six-year-olds.

Having established the hiding principle, I hide artefacts and toys from the story. Children take turns to take out an object from under the cloth, and are encouraged to say something about it. If they are unsure of what to say, I ask the other children to help. As they take out objects I might say "That's good, we've got a fox in our story, and he's very hungry", or "You've found a hippo, can anyone say its full name?" Here we are developing their speech, language and listening skills, as well as their ability to participate in a group. I am also building up anticipation of the story to come.

Children who aren't stimulated by flashcards become highly enthusiastic when they are presented in this games format

Children respond enthusiastically to the popular children's party game of 'Pass the parcel'. We pass around parcels, with the artefacts wrapped inside. I always make sure that each child gets a parcel, to maintain interest, and improve listening and participation.

From objects to pictures

Once I've introduced the artefacts, I may play a simple game with pictures, e.g. matching pictures hidden under the cloth. Children take turns to choose a card and put it on the cloth, matching cards whenever they can. If the story is about farm animals, I use farm animal snap cards. To accompany Nick Sharrat's *Ketchup on your cornflakes*, a highly amusing flap book about unlikely combinations of objects, I use LDA's 'Things that go together' cards. It always pleases me to see children who aren't stimulated by flashcards become highly enthusiastic when they are presented in this games format.

Closing the session

I plan to share the book with the children at the end of the session, using the toys and artefacts. Groups vary in their ability to sustain focused attention, and it may be necessary to concentrate only on the games. In these cases I always show the children the cover of the book, and some key illustrations. I tell them that this will be the story that everyone will be sharing at the end of the morning. We finish the session by closing our eyes, listening to the music, and thinking about the games we have played and the book we have enjoyed. If the children are still keen, I might end by letting



them play with the toys, and look at the book themselves. This can be very rewarding, as children often act out the story, or retell it using the book.

When I share the book with the whole class I try and recreate the atmosphere of the small group. I play the same music, spread the cloth on the floor in front of me, and introduce the artefacts one at a time before I tell the story.

This is a very popular approach, and during my visits to schools and pre-schools I have built up a following of eager participants. Staff are often surprised at how well the children concentrate and participate. I tend to follow the same format for each session, with slight variations on the games. I also use the same book, with the same children, on a number of occasions. This predictability and familiarity help the children to participate. The repetition within the group, and from one group to another, encourages vocabulary learning and use of language. We have found that children with language learning needs who have been in the



small group are able to participate better when the story is later shared with the whole class.

This approach can help children onto the first rung of the ladder of sharing books that is crucial for their language and literacy development.

Michael Jones has worked as a Speech and Language Therapist and teacher. He supports schools and pre-school settings in Luton to meet the needs of children with speech, language

and communication difficulties. For a list of useful storybooks, contact Michael at jonesmi@luton.gov.uk

Useful further reading

Bromley, H (1999) 'Storytelling: having a go with the box (1-3)', *The Primary English Magazine*.

Burrell, A & Riley, J (2004) 'Young children should be seen and heard', *The Primary English Magazine*.

Collins, M (2001) *Circle Time for the very young*, Lucky Duck Publishing.

Delamain, C & Spring, J (2000) *Developing Baseline Communication Skills*, Speechmark Publishing.

Gibbons, P (2002) *Scaffolding language, scaffolding learning: teaching second language learners in the mainstream classroom*, Heinemann.

Park, K (2004) Interactive storytelling: from the Book of Genesis, *British Journal of Special Education* 31:1.

Riley, J & Reedy, D (2003) 'Communication, language and literacy: learning through speaking and listening, reading and writing' in Riley J (ed) *Learning in the early years*, Paul Chapman Publishers.

Wells, G (1985) *The Meaning Makers*, Heinemann.