Why Storytelling is Important

Children love stories. Stories are magic, they can create other worlds, emotions, ideas and make the everyday seem incredible. They can teach us empathy and take us on terrific journeys. They can make us laugh, cry, jump with fright and then comfort us with a happy ending.  From a very young age we learn how to enjoy a story both for pleasure and to help us make sense of the world and ourselves. In this article I’ll look at why stories are important for ESL students and I’ll share some simple story-based activities that can be adapted for different ages and abilities.

Stories in Class

In the ESL classroom stories have a special place and value. Students can listen to the sounds and rhythms of English just as native speakers will have done to acquire their first language. Students can identify vocabulary and expressions that they have learnt or heard regularly and see them in use. Frequent telling can help them to learn new phrases and expressions with the correct emotional resonance.  Storytelling with participation uses experiential learning to ask about what is happening to the characters and what they should do next, or offers a student the chance to be that character and hear/say their words in a true context.

Storytelling brings language learning alive and creates a participatory and immersive experience that allows Young Learners to enjoy hearing the language in a dynamic, sometimes stylistic and entertaining way.  Participation using key vocabulary and phrases can create an awareness of rhythm and structure. This atmosphere of play and creative expression creates an appetite for more similar experiences. Students who have enjoyed storytelling in class often ask for more stories and also feel motivated and encouraged to create and tell, act out or illustrate their own stories in a variety of ways.

The act of storytelling appeals to different learning preferences and personalities ensuring that from the shyest to the most active of students, everyone has a chance to participate in a way that they can enjoy. This ranges from listening quietly to taking part as an actor.

Storytelling also helps students to enjoy and be aware of intonation and tone of voice, natural sounding expressions and phrases as well as interaction between native speakers.  For older YLs they offer the opportunity to retell, rephrase, enact or summaries what they’ve heard, to rewrite the story or to create their own as a group or individual.

Stories also offer a link between the classroom and home. Students may have the same books in their own language at home; they may read with a parent or family member and be able to identify vocabulary in English; simple stories in English can be read again by a parent at home. Many stories also have talking books, YouTube videos, animations or films in VOSE that could be enjoyed after the session.

Stories offer everyone a chance to enjoy language and discover new worlds, new words and new things about themselves.

 In Summary:

Stories can…

* Enable children to empathize with unfamiliar people/places/situations.
* Offer insights into different traditions and values.
* Offer insights into universal life experiences.
* Help children consider new ideas.
* Reveal differences and commonalties of cultures around the world.
* Promote a feeling of well-being, fun and relaxation.
* Increase children’s willingness to communicate thoughts and feelings.
* Encourage active participation.
* Increase verbal proficiency.
* Encourage use of imagination and creativity.
* Encourage cooperation between students.
* Enhance listening skills.

(Source: British Council Teach English website)

**Different methods for storytelling**

Have you ever wondered why certain children seem extremely uninterested in story time? By using different storytelling methods, you may be able to capture their interest. Here are few ways to add a little variety to story time with your group.

**Storytelling with movement**  
Stories that involve movement make it possible for children to physically participate in the story. Encourage children to make a specific gesture when they hear a certain word or to perform various actions mentioned in the story. For example, in Little Red Riding Hood, children can pretend to carry baked goods in a basket, to be the wolf, or make a squeaking sound when a door is opened.

**Storytelling with a magnetic board or felt board**  
The greatest advantage of using this method is that it makes it possible for children to tell

stories in their own words and involve their favorite characters.

**Recorded stories**  
This way of listening to stories helps children develop their autonomy and makes it possible for them to escape the hustle and bustle of group activities for a short while. Furthermore, this method helps children develop their own mental images.

**Storytelling with accessories**  
Fill a box with items that are mentioned in the story you wish to read to your group. For example, if you are planning on reading Little Red Riding Hood, your accessory box may include a picture of a wolf, a recipe for baked goods, baked goods, a picture of a grandmother, etc. As you read the story, take the items out of your box in the order they are mentioned in the story.

Of course, this method requires a lot of patience since children will want to touch and explore the items as they are presented. They will most likely want to discuss them too. This makes this method great for developing their vocabulary.

**Storytelling with puppets**  
Dollar stores often sell all kinds of puppets. They are therefore inexpensive accessories that are sure to attract children's attention.

**Storytelling using picture clues**  
Picture clue stories involve a combination of words and pictures. They are great for developing reading skills. Even if children are unable to read actual words, they can participate in the act of storytelling.

Remember to have fun whenever you share a story with your group!

