‘Storyline’: a task-based approach for the young learner classroom

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The Storyline approach is little known in language teaching contexts although it has much in common with task-based education. Learners play the parts of characters in an unfolding narrative, collaborating on tasks in small groups, a method which combines the use of language skills with practical work. A word often used by participants in a Storyline topic is ‘fun’. This article reports on a study in which I attempted to identify the features that particularly appealed to a class of Swedish 11–13 year olds, and how working in this way impacted on their learning of English. The data show that learners were strongly motivated by particular tasks and that the experience of taking part in a Storyline brought specific language benefits.

Introduction

The Storyline approach was developed in Scotland in the late 1960s as a response to the introduction of environmental studies into the primary curriculum. In an attempt to address the challenges of interdisciplinary teaching, teacher trainers at Jordanhill College of Education, now part of the University of Strathclyde, created a story-based framework in which different curriculum subjects could be included. Originally known as ‘topic work’, the name Storyline was adopted in the 1980s. A fictive world is created in the classroom with learners, working in groups, taking on the roles of characters in an unfolding story. They keep these roles throughout the Storyline (which might last for several weeks), speaking and writing in role. Although much of the work is carried out in the group, there are also opportunities for pair and individual work.

Storyline topics are self-contained, situated in a particular time and place, and with a clear beginning and end. The story develops as the learners work on tasks that are designed on the basis of curriculum content and which integrate theoretical knowledge and subjects such as art and drama. Artefacts and written work depicting the developing story are displayed on a frieze (or classroom walls).

Today the Storyline approach is used in many countries as geographically, culturally, and linguistically diverse as, for example, Thailand, Uganda, Turkey, parts of Europe, and the United States, at all levels of education (see the website Storyline Scotland for more
Within second language education, Storyline is little known. The only scholarly work, to my knowledge, to feature it is Kirsch (2008), the only teacher resource book in English, Wright (2009), and the only published teaching materials, Ehlers, Järvinen, Brandford, and Materniak (2006). In their Comenius project, teacher trainers in Germany, Finland, Poland, and the UK collaborated to produce materials and train primary teachers.

That Storyline is not better known in language teaching is surprising. Firstly, it has much in common with task-based education, which emphasizes meaningful use of language in a communicative context bearing some resemblance to real life (for example Ellis 2003). The most notable difference is the narrative framework of Storyline within which tasks drive the story. Tasks may be devised to consolidate learners’ existing knowledge of grammar and lexis, or to introduce new material. Once the Storyline topic is finished and the class returns to its usual lessons, the newly introduced language may be worked with in more traditional ways.

Secondly, the research literature on young language learners provides theoretical support for this approach (for example Pinter 2006): young learners learn holistically and where their attention is focused on meaning; story, drama, imagination, thematic work, and the inclusion of practical skills are important ingredients. Concerning the latter, the less proficient have a chance to display other talents, which can foster the positive self-image considered necessary for successful language learning (for example Lundberg 2010).

During my ten years of working with the approach as a teacher trainer in Sweden, it has been my experience that both student and practising teachers, and their learners, commonly describe their Storyline experience as ‘fun’. I wanted to investigate what aspects of Storyline contributed to a positive experience and what impact this might have on the learning of English. The chosen conceptual framework for the study was sociocultural theory, in which social context, affective factors, and learner interaction are considered to be influential and in which the research focus is on the process of learning (for example Lantolf 2000).

In the spring of 2009, I conducted a five-week case study with a class of Swedish 11–13 year olds (Ahlquist 2011), who had been learning English since the age of seven. For two hours per day, four days a week the learners took on the roles of families who had just moved into a newly built street in a fictive town. They worked in groups of four. Though this was not the first time the two teachers and the learners had worked with Storyline, their English lessons were normally textbook-based with little pair and group work. Further, the learners were normally taught English within rather than across year groups.
Drawing on materials designed for L1 Storyline topics (McNaughton 2006; Lundin 2008), I created ‘Our sustainable street’ based on the syllabus targets for English. For example, learners should be able to talk about themselves, write short descriptions, follow spoken instructions, be able to work with others, and learn about everyday life in an English-speaking country. The topic also included syllabus goals from natural science, social studies, and art. Apart from introducing the lexis of sustainability, the aim of the Storyline was for the learners to consolidate the lexis and the grammatical structures which they had already met. Based on the syllabus for English, the learners set themselves goals, which they evaluated halfway through and at the end, for example to become more confident of tenses or question words.

In order to study the link between Storyline features and learning from the perspectives of the learners, teachers, and myself as participant observer, I collected data from learner questionnaires, observation notes, weekly written learner journals (in which they stated task preferences and reflected on what they had learnt), interviews with teachers and a sample of the learners in order to follow up their questionnaires, and examples of learners’ writing. All the data, except my observation notes, were collected in Swedish.

In the rest of this article, I will outline the Storyline topic and describe the tasks which established the characters. Storyline tasks are introduced in the form of so-called ‘key questions’, which structure the story; the first key question of a Storyline often deals with people: ‘Who are you?’ I will then present and discuss my findings. (An overview of ‘Our sustainable street’ is shown in the Appendix.)

Key question 1: ‘Who are you?’

To begin creating identities, the learners were asked to think about the details they would need; these were listed on the whiteboard. Sheets of A4 were headed with the words ‘appearance’, ‘personality’, ‘hobbies’, and ‘jobs’. The class was divided into two (four groups in each half). Each group (or family) within the four was given a word category and a short time to write as many words as they could in L2 (or L1) on the paper. The paper was then passed to another group, who had a shorter time to add to the list before it was passed on again, and then a third time. Once the list had returned to the original group they had to find L2 equivalents in the dictionary for any L1 items on the list. The lists from both halves of the class were subsequently combined and rewritten by one of the teachers, in both L2 and L1, and stuck on the classroom walls as a resource when the learners created their character.

The families then prepared a short oral presentation, using notes as prompts, to introduce themselves. The oral presentation became the basis for each learner’s written description of themselves for ‘Spotlight on us’, a newsletter for the residents to learn about each other. The texts, targeting the present tense, were corrected by the teachers before being revised by the learners in readiness for publication in the newsletter, which was then displayed on the frieze.
The final stage of the character creation was a self-portrait based on the personal descriptions. Often in Storyline, young learners make physical models of their characters. Because the learners had made models in a previous topic, the teachers decided to use self-portraits, displayed on the frieze. To signal the start of a Storyline session, the learners donned an accessory, such as a scarf. Lead-in work usually took the form of a mingle in which the characters engaged in small talk based on different aspects of the story, such as bumping into a new neighbour at the bus stop.

At the outset, the frieze comprised only a strip of brown paper representing the street and nine sheets of green A4 paper: the plots of land. As the learners completed tasks about their home in the next key question (estate agent’s description, drawing of their house and car), they were allowed to move in. One plot of land was unsold, until the arrival of a problem family in the fifth key question.

During the course of the Storyline, the families:

■ took part in a project to live in a more sustainable way;
■ discovered that outsiders were dumping rubbish on a piece of wasteland adjacent to their street;
■ petitioned the council to turn the wasteland into a park;
■ designed the park;
■ interviewed the mother (teacher-in-role) of the problem family;
■ celebrated a year in the street with a party.

Findings and discussion

In this section, I have synthesized the findings from the data sets. On the questionnaire, the learners chose five features of the Storyline that they liked most (Figure 1), stated and explained their favourite, and wrote in what ways Storyline had helped them learn English.

As can be seen, the most popular features were found to be Art and Group Work. Practical work was never tired of, and where there was only one item per group, there was often conflict over who should do this.
Reasons for the popularity of Group Work included:

- being with friends
- getting help
- things being easier.

As with Art, this finding is supported by observation notes, journals, and interviews with both learners and teachers. Some groups had difficulty cooperating due to domination by some learners, withdrawal by others, some not taking responsibility, conflicts of personality, and unwillingness to compromise. The teachers noted, however, that the less proficient persevered where they would have given up alone.

The research literature suggests that all levels of proficiency benefit from collaboration, depending on an individual’s ability to give and receive help (for example Wells 1999). This was seen in the study: conflicts in one group were caused by the tendency of a highly proficient and dominant boy to tell the others what to do or even begin working alone. The two less proficient learners in the group wrote that they had not learnt so much during the Storyline, and a common thread in the journal of one is the conflict in the group. When asked in interview if she would like to work with Storyline again, she replied ‘yes, in a different group’. While the teachers considered that some were more suited to a tighter lesson structure, this was not confirmed by the expressed views of those learners, and despite the problems, the popularity of collaborative work is underlined by the low ranking of Working Alone.

There were some differences between boys and girls. The girls’ preference for working with other girls (observation notes) was explained by the teachers as boys not always pulling their weight. Boys rated Variety, No Textbook, and Role Play slightly higher than girls, who rated Imagination higher. Writing was also more popular with girls while boys preferred Speaking. In neither case did Made Up Story rate highly. This is possibly because the learners had more chance to influence the characters than the story.

**Effects on learning**

**Speaking**

Regarding speaking, the journals and the interviews reveal a problem identified in the literature: learners of this age are often embarrassed to speak English because they are afraid of being laughed at and do not want to be corrected in front of their friends (Carless 2008). In the study, some learners showed willingness to speak English both in group discussion and in class presentations. However, others spoke as little English as they could and when faced with this, those who would have spoken English also reverted to Swedish, with two exceptions. Willingness to speak English was not necessarily linked to proficiency level, though the teachers noted that the more proficient younger learners in particular were pushed to perform by the older ones and benefitted from the latter’s greater lexical knowledge.

However, the research literature recognizes a role for the L1: it keeps everyone informed and engaged, and helps maintain communication.
These functions are related and were illustrated on many occasions. In the following example, the learners have read about their new neighbours and the teacher is checking their understanding. The use of L1 allows the learners to support each other and enables everyone to understand:

\textbf{Lr22}: they have a dog, it was a mongrel.

[this word was new for the learners, some do not remember it and are confused]

\textbf{Lr30}: blandras (mongrel).

\textbf{Lr12}: hunden skäller mycket (the dog barks a lot).

\textbf{Lr1}: barks.

Where learners felt their speaking had improved, reasons given included ‘we did a lot’, ‘spoke English all day almost’, ‘it was fun’, ‘different things’, and ‘daring more’. The last point indicates reduced anxiety, as in the explanation why this learner speaks more:

no one laughs at me now, they didn’t before either but now I know.

This underlines the solidarity of the Storyline class, which is further seen in journal references to the ‘family’ rather than the ‘group’. The observation notes support this: even if individuals were reluctant to speak English, as a group everyone wanted to show their work. Over time it was observed that most became less reluctant to speak. This could be seen in the warm-up sessions, where some initially stuck to the periphery or positioned themselves near a friend. Strategic manoeuvring gradually decreased.

\textbf{Writing}

It is in the learners’ individual written texts (character description, email to a friend halfway through, and the longer letter to a friend at the end of a year) that there are clear signs of development in many cases, with instances of structure not yet or only recently met in textbooks. For example, ‘then we meat [sic] a old women she’s name is mrs brown’ (this younger learner had not met relative clauses in class work). The teachers commented on the amount of freely produced text and improvements in grammar, with all but one meeting syllabus targets and many well on the way to meeting those of the next level (which include correct use of question words and writing longer continuous text with a clear message). Some learners who had set themselves a target of understanding the tenses felt they had achieved this, while others were less sure because, for example, ‘we haven’t worked with this recently’. This reflects a traditional textbook approach to learning and illustrates the need for teachers to evaluate more frequently with learners what they have learnt.

Additionally, the teachers noted that where the email template was used the learners were more careful with their writing (handwriting, lexis, spelling, syntax). This underlines the benefit of writing which is perceived to be meaningful and which encourages the learner to push their morphosyntactical and structural boundaries. In the girls’ case especially,
a positive affective link can be seen between the writing tasks and use of imagination; of the email, one learner writes (questionnaire) ‘it felt like writing to a real friend’. Interaction with an imagined reader can be seen in many examples, such as: ‘How is your younger sister Molly?’ Further, some learners comment on the following as benefits of writing: they

- learn best this way
- know more about word order
- have learnt more words
- can spell better.

**Lexis**

It is in the lexical field that many learners find it easiest to measure gains. This was the case in my study, and the learners’ self-assessment was supported by the teachers with the explanation that, ‘They’ve lived with these words’, which underlines the way in which words are recycled in the story. For example, the families took part in a project to live in a more sustainable way. They attended a lecture on climate change (based on work they had done in Swedish); this was introduced by brainstorming L2 names for concepts such as ‘pollution’. The lecture was followed by a written quiz in which each family worked together, and checked their answers by reading a printed version of the lecture. The families then worked on and presented collages of pictures and words showing their personal impact on the climate (based on an analysis of a description each individual had written about a typical day in their lives).

While the subject of sustainability was hard for the less proficient, this topic provided (in the teachers’ view) the challenge that the more proficient needed and which they rarely get in mixed ability classes. Although it seemed to me that many did not rise to this challenge (not using a dictionary, losing patience where they did not immediately understand), the teachers maintained that these learners had made more effort than normal. All learners were more inclined to use a dictionary where the task was timed or had an element of competition.

**Listening**

Concerning listening, it could be observed that for the first two weeks of the study, the teachers, while consistently speaking English, had to add explanation in Swedish. By the third week, however, they could ask if everyone had understood, be told ‘yes’, and see the groups start work. Any uncertainties were dealt with in the group. Some learners became aware of improved listening skills and the reason for it (‘we had to listen because it was important information’) or because there were more people than usual and therefore more noise. One notes that he can now distinguish between British and American English, the two varieties spoken by the teachers. Again, some have a traditional idea of what constitutes learning: ‘we haven’t done much listening’ (that is, not listened to a CD with the textbook), and some find it hard to know if they have learnt:

I don’t know if I’ve got better at listening but I understand more when someone explains to me.
In their questionnaires, the learners were asked to describe the difference between their usual lessons and Storyline. Usual lessons are described as being about textbook, vocabulary tests, listening to CDs, translation and exercises, while:

in Storyline we did so many different things and most were interesting and fun so you put more in and understood most so I learnt a lot along the way.

Another learner comments on being ‘active’, and a third notes that ‘in Storyline you learn more’, explaining in the interview, ‘the more fun it is, the more you learn’.

In this study, the learners commonly use the word ‘fun’ to describe their Storyline work. Based on the collective data, what constitutes ‘fun’ includes:

■ working in groups with friends
■ making things
■ doing different things, things which are interesting
■ that it feels real
■ using imagination
■ being able to write freely.

These impact on learning in a number of ways: the learner may feel emboldened to use the spoken language (an important precursor to doing so), be inspired to write longer and/or more linguistically complex texts, and display increased ability to understand spoken English.

Storyline should be something learners look forward to taking part in. For this reason, it should not be the only way of working with English or it can become just another language lesson. On the basis of this study, I would argue that the Storyline approach has significant benefits for the young language learner classroom. These benefits can be optimized in a number of ways: learners should have the opportunity to work in different group constellations as well as in pairs and individually. Where the less proficient are concerned, it is important to supplement oral with written instruction, if necessary in the L1. Some learners may benefit from knowing in advance what they are going to do. It also helps to have two adults in the room, one concentrating on managing the task and the time, the other providing direct help where needed.

As stated at the beginning, the Storyline approach is today used at all levels of education. This study was conducted with 11–13 year olds. The topic of families moving into a new street is suitable for even younger children, incorporating the grammar and lexis that they meet in the early years (present tense, simple questions, lexis of colours, food, family, animals, home, etc.). Learners who are older than the group in this study will have greater L1 knowledge of sustainable development and the Storyline can be more ambitious, involving research and integrating ICT: for example, the families might enter a competition to produce the town’s new web page, advertising its ‘green’ credentials.
However, whether the teacher has a suite of computers at their disposal or only some paper and pencils ultimately does not matter. Meaningful tasks within an engaging narrative framework provide conditions in which learners are inspired to learn.

References


Storyline Scotland. Available at http://www.storyline-scotland.com (last accessed on 1 June 2012).


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