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Story-based learning: implementation of a pilot project for early foreign language learning

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Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to outline the rationale for and present the process of introducing an early Foreign Language project based on illustrated stories. The specific story-based project extended in a period of a school year and was implemented to the 1st grade primary classroom, with the purpose to develop children's oral skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), along with enhancing their social skills. An evaluation study revealed the effectiveness and feasibility of the project for very young learners' development in EFL.

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1. Introduction

A plethora of early language learning programmes have been developed for the last two decades in the European context (see Edelenbos, Johnstone, & Kubanek, 2006; Nikolov & Curtain, 2000), while the official documents that aimed at promoting early language learning have been numerous in the European Union. More specifically, the White Paper "Teaching and learning: Towards the learning society" (Commission of the European Communities, 1995) highlighted the need that European citizens should be able to speak three community languages and recommended the teaching of foreign languages at pre-school and primary-school level. This thesis was further supported by the "Action Plan 2004-2006: the promoting language learning and linguistic diversity" (Commission of the European Communities, 2003). In vein with the European policy, an early English foreign language learning programme has been implemented on an experimental basis in 800 first grade primary school classrooms in Greece (PEAP, 2010).

Relevant literature supports the advantages of early foreign language learning (Griva, Semoglou & Geladari, 2010; Johnstone, 2002; Singleton, 1995). It is suggested that younger learners are likely to easier acquire a good command of the sound system of the language and develop their listening skills (Cameron, 2001). Moreover, Moon (1995) accentuates the importance of an early start in the creation of motives and positive attitudes towards language learning, while Curtain (1993) lays emphasis on the development of positive attitudes to other cultures. However,

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despite the cognitive, linguistic and cultural benefits related to early language learning the qualities of teaching as well as the design of activities that are appropriate for young learners are considered to be of primary importance (Curtain & Pesola Dahlberg, 2000).

Stories are deemed to be a valuable tool for young learners' foreign language learning, since they offer both linguistic and personal benefits to the children in a safe and relaxing environment (Shin, 2006), which lowers young learners' stress and anxiety, thus leading to more successful language acquisition (Mixon & Temu, 2006). In such a motivating environment, learning becomes an enjoyable process (Ellis & Brewster, 2002) and children are able to exercise their imagination and creativity (Haliwell, 1992). Furthermore, children can appreciate different cultures and customs (Garvie, 1990). Representing a 'holistic' approach to language teaching and learning they offer the learners the opportunity to practice both oracy and literacy skills.

In this paper an attempt was made to present the design of 8 illustrated stories, which were created for a group of very young learners (7 years old). That story-based project was implemented to 24 first graders of a Greek state primary school with the purpose to develop young learners' oral and social skills. Moreover, an evaluation study was conducted in order to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of the project.

2. Methodology

2.1 The design of illustrated stories

Special experimental material was created for the story-based project. Taking into consideration the level and the needs of that group of students, as well as certain criteria arising from the relevant literature (Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004), eight (8) illustrated stories, entitled "The adventures of little George" were designed to meet the needs of the specific teaching context (Georgopoulou, 2010).

The main character of the stories is George, a young naughty boy, attending the first grade of the primary school. The character was created in order to be easily identified by the children, as he shares the same age and interests with the first graders. The selection of the rest of the characters was based on children's daily life (family members, neighborhood, school), so that to achieve an interconnection between their background knowledge and personal experiences and the plot of the stories.

Taking into account young learners' limited concentration span, the stories were short, not exceeding 6-8 pages, while emphasis was placed on the humorous and predictable plot that could reduce anxiety and create motivation for participation. Moreover, an effort has been made to cover a variety of contexts and vocabulary topics, closely linked to students' experiences and interests, in order to increase their curiosity and participation.

As far as the vocabulary is concerned, the new elements were presented not individually but within the context of the stories. Therefore, an urge to include new grammatical forms and syntax structures, not previously taught to the learners, occurred. More specifically, the following lexical/grammatical items and language functions were used to a great extent: the definite and indefinite article, personal pronouns and the verb 'to be', wh-questions, prepositions, daily expressions, possessive pronouns, plural number, imperative, this / that. As a result, the stories included a wide range of additional linguistic elements, without however affecting the level of understanding. Furthermore, other linguistic patterns such as the constant "recycling" of the vocabulary, the use of formulaic language (i.e greetings and classroom language) and rhymes were used. The stories were written in a dialogue form to ensure the appropriate conditions for dramatization. The development of multicultural awareness and positive attitudes towards people of different age, gender and nationality were attempted.

Regarding the illustration of the stories, the comic format was selected, using bubbles to introduce the text. The colours were bright and provided an immediate link to the text so as to minimize the explanations offered by the teacher.

2.2 *The intervention project*

The project, which was implemented in a first grade classroom, extended in a period of a school year (2009-2010) and carried out in two major phases.

2.2.1 First Phase: The first phase (October-December 2009) consisted of 14 teaching sessions, each one including a thematic group of words/topics (e.g. animals, colors, school objects), and aimed at introducing specific vocabulary through playful and meaningful activities. Every session was performed through four main steps: a) Presentation of the words via flashcards and realia to arouse children's interest and increase their motivation, b) Language games (i.e. construction of puzzles, listen and touch games) that were chosen to add a playful character to the sessions, build-up cooperation and lead to hands-on experience, c) paintings and constructions to place emphasis on the consolidation of the vocabulary learnt, d) revision of the linguistic elements through dice games.

2.2.2 Second Phase: The second phase (January-May 2010) focused on the presentation of the vocabulary previously taught through a meaningful story-based context that would develop learners' motivation. This phase included 20 teaching sessions, two hourly sessions per week. During the first weekly session, the presentation of the story was taking place, while the second session was devoted to the dramatization of the story by the children.

1st weekly session: presentation of the story

Every session included four steps: a) Revising of the main vocabulary: an effort was made to link the background knowledge of the children with the stories to follow, through the use of flashcards and realia. b) Reading of the story: the teacher started reading the story, pointing at the printed words that appeared on the pictures of the story to lead to a connection between oral and written speech. The story was projected to the wall of the classroom while the students were sitting in a semi-circle. Children were engaged in follow-up activities where they were asked to repeat the dialogues in order to get familiarized with the plot. c) Discussion: the children were asked to discuss in groups about the content of the story and help their classmates overcome any problems encountered. This step focused on the development of both receptive and productive oral skills. d) Finally, demonstration of dramatizing the story from the part of the teacher aimed to help learners introduce paralinguistic features and to let them understand that the objective of the dramatization was not the mere reproduction of the dialogues but the use of their imagination and creativity to express themselves.

2nd weekly teaching session: dramatization of the story

Every session consisted of the following four steps: a) Rereading of the story: teacher reread it with the active participation of the children in order to ensure participation of the whole class and overcome any difficulties encountered in the previous lesson. b) 'Rehearsal': the classroom was divided in groups and learners were preparing the story, trying to remember their lines and cooperate with their "co-actors". Emphasis was given both on the linguistic and non-linguistic features of the story. The teacher was constantly moving among the groups, assuming a supportive role. c) Dramatization of the story: because of the large number of students, some groups presented the story while the rest of the groups formed the audience. The role of the audience was vital and active, as they had to watch carefully, encourage and help the actors. d) Voting the best story: at the end of the dramatization, the learners chose the 'performance' they liked best. After a short discussion, the audience, using rackets with the words 'excellent', 'very good', 'good' voted and provided a reason for their choice.

3. Evaluation of the study

In order to estimate the effectiveness of the intervention in relation to the development of children's oral skills, an evaluation study was conducted. The data collection instruments in question were the following:

A) Pre-test and post-test measurements: a pre-test was administered after the completion of the first phase (October-December 2009) to determine children's oral skills before the intervention, while a post-test was administered after the completion of the project. The same tool was employed in both the initial and the final measurement, and it consisted of three parts (word recognition and production, understanding of simple events and tracking at the poster, production of words for sentence completion).

B) Journal: a journal was designed and kept by the teacher researcher with the purpose to gain an in-depth understanding and reflection on the monitoring of the project. Twenty (20) journal entries, based on a list of reflection questions, were kept by the teacher-researcher.

C) Interviews: structured interviews were conducted by the teacher with young learners at the end of the intervention in order to record children's attitudes to the specific foreign language intervention.

D) Observation: ten non-participant, non-structured observations were conducted by two external observers to gain an in-depth understanding of the project. Observation was chosen as a tool in order to countercheck the validity of the data collected through the teacher's journal entries.

4. Results

The analysis of the data collected revealed the story-based project to be successful on the whole. The children showed interest in the stories and dramatization, which captured their attention and increased their motivation and participation in the learning process. During the intervention, a friendly and relaxing environment was created, allowing the learners to develop their social and language skills, while the playful character of the activities designed and implemented led to the development of children's creativity and imagination.

More specifically, the results of the pre and post-test were encouraging, as they indicated the positive effect of the experiment on children's receptive and productive oral skills. At the first part of the test (word recognition and production) the mean score of the words recalled and produced correctly by the participants were ($m=15.21$), while in the post-test a significant rise was observed ($m=23.80$). As far as the second part of the test is concerned (understanding of simple events and tracking at the poster), the effect of the intervention was noteworthy. The responses provided were rated as follows (couldn't track the sentence or incorrect response=1, traced with help=2, traced without help=2). The mean score of the responses at the pre-test were ($m=0.91$), while the means score rated after the completion of the project was higher ($m=1.56$). Finally, the third part of the test (production of words for sentence completion) aimed at assessing students' ability to produce words within a sentential context in order to complete phrases provided by the teacher. In the total amount of the sentences provided the mean score of students' responses was ($m=0.21$) whereas the post-test indicated a means score of ($m=0.90$). All in all, students expressed their ability to recall and produce correctly an important amount of the vocabulary learnt, being able not only to understand individual words but to receive and decode messages, and complete sentences.

From the qualitative analysis of the extracts, four basic typologies emerged, so as to classify similar categories and sub-categories: (a) teaching procedure (b) teacher's behavior (c) student's behavior (d) problems encountered. The classification scheme used in this research depended upon what the researchers thought it was meaningful in the setting (Bailey 1994). The results indicated that the children had the opportunity to familiarize themselves and work with a variety of materials, and the teacher to employ various techniques (storytelling, questions and answers, etc). Furthermore, the teacher assumed a flexible and encouraging role, acting as a coordinator and using linguistic and non-linguistic features to facilitate understanding. Regarding students' behavior, the humorous style of the stories and the opportunities they had to participate in the dramatization of the stories stimulated their interest, they highly enjoyed the lessons and communicated successfully. It is worth mentioning that they were able to understand unknown words and linguistic patterns from the context of the stories. Finally, the children encountered some problems in recalling certain words or understanding new words.

As far as the findings from the students' interviews are concerned, their positive stances and attitudes towards the project were revealed. More particularly, the students seemed to enjoy the lessons and highlighted the playful and different nature of the lessons, the opportunities they had to participate in the learning process, the stories and the dramatization as the main reasons of their preference. Moreover, all children expressed their desire to participate in the project the following school year.

Finally, from the analysis of the field notes three basic typologies emerged: (a) teacher's behavior, (b) student's behavior, (c) problems encountered. The findings confirmed the teacher's personal views, which were recorded in

the journal entries. As it was observed and recorded, the supportive role of the teacher enhanced the communicative aspect of the project, raising cooperation among students and increasing their autonomy. Students succeeded in actively participating and this eager for participation led to the development of their social and language skills. Furthermore, despite the fact that the project laid emphasis on the development of oral language skills, children were familiarized with the reading process and understood the interrelation between written and spoken language in EFL.

5. Discussion

The purpose of the present paper was to present an illustrated story –based framework of teaching English as a foreign language, which was designed to meet the needs of a specific group of seven year old Greek students. The project was implemented through two basic stages: a) reading of the stories by the teacher, which provided the children the opportunity to use the linguistic elements learnt at the first phase within a meaningful and motivational context b) dramatization of the story, through which the children managed to communicate with their classmate in different ways and use the language creatively to express themselves.

The evaluation study, that conducted to estimate the effectiveness of the story –based project, indicated the positive effect of the project on the development of children’s receptive and productive oral skills. Furthermore, both the field notes and the journal entries denoted that the humorous and playful nature of the sessions played an important role in the development of children’s oral and social skills. Follow up discussions and dramatization of the stories provided crucial opportunities for interaction among children and between the teacher and the children, while helping them make connections to their own experiences. Thus, the children communicated and interacted successfully with their classmates, used their imagination and creativity, while being involved in all the activities.

This experimental design of the story based project revealed that the incorporation of stories and drama into teaching very young learners was workable. For this purpose, it is suggested that such a project should be implemented to a number of primary school classrooms. Moreover, an extension of the programme with the same children in the second grade would guarantee continuity and lead to gaining a more complete picture of the effectiveness of the project.

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