Eleni Griva

GREECE

A Story-Based Framework for a Primary School Classroom

The teaching context

The learning environment, a formal one where learning takes place in a "decontextualised" way, is a public Greek primary school, where English is taught as a foreign language for three hours per week in the sixth grade. The teaching context is one of *learning* rather than *acquisition.* In most lessons the basic objective is to improve language learning through memorizing as many new words as possible and to learn gradually the structural elements of the English language. The students are dependent on the teacher who uses *caretaker talk*, that is, she keeps the utterances short and simple.

The teaching material

The teaching material used for the sixth grade class is *Funway 3*, which follows the structure and context derived from the teaching and learning objectives of the required curriculum. The underlying principles of the curriculum are to offer students cognitive, perceptual, and social development. The students' book follows a functional, structural, and topic-based approach and includes a variety of activities for practicing the four skills.

However, the texts seem to be dull and uninteresting to students; topics, most of the time, are not of genuine interest to students and do not take into account their age and their social and cultural background. Moreover, there is no variety in the types of texts to familiarize learners with the features of different types of written work and to encourage them to read for different purposes. As Grant (1989, 22) points out: "Using texts of different types develops a variety of reading styles." Extra material, such as stories, songs, games, role-plays, and puzzles, should be included in a course to stimulate students' active assimilation of material and to encourage them to develop self-expression.

A suggested story-based framework

Adaptation and extension of course materials is necessary in order to have an effective teaching-learning process,

for "with adaptations and additions of activities and materials teachers can manage to make them fit the needs of the students they teach" (Dunn 1993, 22).

Taking into consideration the importance of stories in teaching a foreign language to young learners, we decided to design a story-based framework to supplement the course book used in the primary school classroom.

Stories can provide a natural context for language exportation and are a vehicle for analyzing and practicing language items and structures. According to Philips (1993, 18), "stories are a feature of all cultures and have a universal appeal. They fascinate both students and adults and they can be used to great effect in the language classroom." In addition, stories are "motivating and fun and can help develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language and language learning" (Ellis and Brewster 1991, 1).

There are many reasons for using stories in the language classroom. Stories are valuable in gaining and maintaining students' interest in language learning. They make students see learning from another perspective—as entertainment and not as a chore (Ellis and Brewster 1991). Stories exercise learners' imagination and creativity, and they link fantasy and imagination with the child's real world. We must bear in mind that our students are still young, and we can address them as learners who want to play, draw, or create something and not as adults full of responsibilities. That is why we should "stimulate the students' creative imagination so that they want to use the language to share their ideas" (Halliwell 1992, 7). Furthermore, teachers can use stories to introduce grammatical and functional structures and to help students practice speaking and listening.

Listening to stories is a shared social experience and it develops students' listening and concentration skills. Students who are eleven and twelve years old are usually very easily distracted. But if we manage to draw their attention to something that they all like—listening to stories—we will not have a problem with concentration. The frequent repetition of stories allows certain language items to be acquired while others are being reinforced. "Listening to stories allows the teacher to introduce or revise new vocabulary and sen-

tence structures by exposing the students to language in varied, memorable and familiar contexts" (Halliwell 1992, 7). Every single word or structure takes on another dimension in a story and is much more easily accepted as new or reviewed and learnt by the students. Finally, the use of stories provides opportunities for cross-curricular work, which aids teaching. The students already have some general knowledge about the world, and through stories they can find out how their knowledge is relevant to their learning of the English language.

The story-based framework

The framework we used is based on two animal stories. Both stories are popular stories downloaded from the Internet:

- "Pigaroo Behaves Badly," http://www.pigaroo.com
- "Bunny and the Scary Movie," http://unmuseum.mus.pa.us/crr/bsmov.htm

We decided on these stories based on a combination of criteria used for selecting stories, included in Andrews (2000, 30–31) and Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (1992, 162–63). They are authentic stories; that is, they have not been written specifically for the teaching of English as a foreign language, so the language has not been graded or selected. In that sense, they provide examples of real language and bring the real world into the classroom. More specifically, the language level of the stories is appropriate for this class level; but "this does not mean that language always needs to be very simple" according to Parker and Parker (cited in Brumfit, Moon, and Tongue 1994, 186).

We believe that both stories will interest students because they are familiar, memorable, and relevant to the students' personal experience. The stories contain a series of events and repeated language patterns. Visuals that accompany the stories enhance understanding of their content, and some instances of repetition help students recycle language items and develop memory skills. Both stories have potential for language practice and skills development through appropriate activities.

Moreover, we applied to the stories the three criteria—readability, suitability of content, and exploitability—that Nuttall (1982)

set as principles for text selection. In terms of exploitability, the stories "have the potential to facilitate learning and provide opportunities for the design of tasks which develop some aspect or aspects of the learners' reading skill" (Nuttall 1982, 44).

Each of these stories is used in two forty-five minute lessons. We designed a mini syllabus based on these stories that includes vocabulary, language functions and structures, skills to be practiced, and tasks and cross-curricular subjects. The selection and grading of the content of this supplemental syllabus was based both on the present syllabus and the age, interests, conceptual and language level of the students, their previous language learning experience and their general knowledge of the world. As a result, both introducing of new language items and recycling of old ones will take place while the stories are taught.

Suggested lessons

The two lessons using "Bunny and the Scary Movie" aim at helping students to develop their listening skills in an integrated way with the reading, writing, and speaking skills, to extend language forms and functions and to progress into new areas. In addition, two similar lessons used the "Pigaroo Behaves Badly" story. However, only the two lessons with the "Bunny and the Scary Movie" are presented in this article.

The story "Bunny and the Scary Movie" provides the basis for spoken discussion, which recycles information obtained in the listening phase, and it also provides written practice. Supporting a *holistic* view of language as advocated by McKay (1999), the teacher claims that all four skill areas—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—are important and support each other.

Lesson Planning

Materials:
- Story: "Bunny and the Scary Movie"; divide the text of the story in two parts and prepare separate handouts of each part of the story. Each part of the story will be used for a different lesson.
- Photocopies of pictures from the story
- Photocopies of a list of words and their definitions to present new vocabulary

Time: two forty-five minute lessons

Objectives:
1. Developing language skills:
   - *Listening:* listening for general understanding, picking out keywords
   - *Speaking:* revising previous knowledge on the topic, generalizing, negotiating, and reporting
   - *Reading:* reading words and texts
   - *Writing:* taking notes, writing simple sentences, writing an informal letter narrating the story
2. Using functions and structures:
   - Making predictions using *will*
   - Talking about actions that are likely to happen using the conditional
   - Narrating using simple past: regular and irregular verbs
   - Vocabulary

Lesson 1

Aims: Listening for general understanding, speaking, reading, writing
Assumption: Students know most of the vocabulary and the structures used in the story.

A. Presentation stage (15 minutes)

We introduce the listening phase of the story by linking the topic of the text to students' prior knowledge and personal experience to arouse their interest and motivation.

Task 1 (pre-listening): Have students work in pairs to look at the pictures carefully and to help each other with ideas and vocabulary. Finally, have students take turns describing the pictures to the rest of the class.

Task 2 (pre-listening): Have students look at the first page of the story (picture and title) and try in pairs to predict the theme of the story. Students should discuss predictions with their partners, and each pair should decide on an interpretation to share with the class.

Teacher's Notes: As a pre-listening activity, let the students look at the pictures with their partners for a while. Walk around the class while students are discussing the pictures and help them with vocabulary. Ask them to rehearse their descriptions and to write notes if they find it necessary before they report to the rest of the class. Ask for more than one description to be heard and let the rest of the

students add whatever they think is relevant. You can even ask them if they have watched any relevant films on TV to activate their background knowledge on the topic, but do not let them expand into details. In this way you can whet their appetite about what is coming next.

Then, distribute photocopies of the first part of the story and give the students a few minutes to decide what the story is about. Listen to some possible versions and encourage them to be more imaginative.

B. Exposure (10 minutes)

The aim of this stage is: (a) to help students concentrate on the story—the students listen to the story to get an overall idea of what it is about; and (b) to focus on particular language functions, structures, or expressions in the text.

Tell students: Listen to the story carefully and try to understand it without paying attention to unknown words or structures. On a piece of paper, write notes about the animals that appear in the story and the kinds of videotapes they prefer. Later you will compare notes with the rest of the class.

Teacher's Notes: This is a while-listening activity. Ask the students to repeat the instructions; repeat the instructions, if necessary. Stand somewhere in the classroom where every single student can see your face. Change the seating arrangement of the students if this is necessary and convenient. Then start reading the story neither too slowly nor too quickly. Change your voice when necessary to express an animal's feelings. Try to look at the students and not just at your pages. When you finish reading the first part of the story, stop and explain to the students that you will not read the whole story today. Give them a few minutes to move around and compare their notes with each other. Then ask one student to report to the class.

C. Controlled practice (15 minutes)

It would be advisable to have a stage of controlled practice as the students will be hesitant about using the new language items in the free communicative activity later on. The present stage is focused on language and language functions providing opportunities to recycle and practice vocabulary.

Task 1: Have students work in pairs to look carefully at the pictures of the story and try to put them in the correct order using their notes.

Task 2: Provide students with a list of words from the story and have them match the words to the correct definitions.

Task 3: Have the students fill in the blanks with the correct letters to form words that occur in the story. The sample exercise below vertically spells the word *videotape*.

V __ __ __

I __ __

D __ __ __ __ __ __ __

E __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __ __

O __ __ __ __ __ __

T __ __ __ __ __ __

A __ __ __ __

P __ __ __ __ __ __

E __ __ __ __ __ __

[Answers: *vote, ice, dinosaur, embarrassed, outside, tremble, alert, penguin, explain*]

Teacher's Notes: Controlled practice can be used to encourage students to make use of information they gathered during the while-listening stage. Distribute photocopies of the story pictures to the students in a jumbled order and give them a few minutes to work in pairs to find the right order using the notes they made during the previous task. Then give students photocopies of the vocabulary exercise and explain what they have to do. While students are working on the fill-in-the-blanks exercise, walk around the class to assist them.

D. Free production (Homework)

At this post-listening stage, it might be useful and productive if students use the information they have gathered or the answers they have obtained for a further task, such as a piece of writing.

Tell students: Read the first lines of the second part of the story, look at the relevant pictures, and write what you think will happen to the animals in the rest of the story.

Teacher' Notes: This can be considered a post-listening activity as well, which exercises the students' ability to predict and their ability to use the simple future tense. You will give them only the first few lines of the second part of the story—either by distributing a handout or by writing the lines on the board and having students copy them. Explain what students have to do as homework. Tell them that they have to use the simple future tense and that they have to write at least four sentences.

Lesson 2

Aims: Reading, listening for gist, speaking, writing (an informal letter)

A. Presentation stage (10 minutes)

Have students read to the class the predictive sentences that they wrote for homework.

Teacher's Notes: This is a reading activity that can be conceived as a pre-listening task. You should make sure that all the students read their predictions. This is necessary so that some learners will not feel that there was no reason for their doing the task. Students are usually anxious to read what they have done, so you should not disappoint them. Avoid correcting syntax or vocabulary while students are reading, since the purpose of the task is to make the students predict using the simple future tense.

B. Exposure stage (15 minutes)

In this activity, students focus on overall understanding of the rest of the story. Before you begin to read, tell students: Listen to the rest of the story and find out whose version of the story is closest to what you hear.

Teacher's Notes: This is a while-listening activity that aims to familiarize students with listening for the gist of the story and comparing the story with what they and their classmates just heard a few minutes earlier. You should read the story at a normal pace without pausing, as this is more realistic and helps the students concentrate on getting the whole picture. Remember to look at the students, to pay attention to their reactions, and to give more emphasis to sentences that

express the course of the story. After the end of the storytelling, ask the students to tell which of the students' versions was closest to the real story.

C. Free production (20 minutes)

During this stage:

a. Students are given more freedom over language use. Opportunities for student-student interaction are created in a natural environment where students are not afraid of speaking and communicating with fellow students.

b. We help students to reflect upon what they have already heard. We get them involved in free writing.

Task 1: Tell your students to think of any other story, film, or fairy tale in which the main character was an animal. Have students talk about the stories with their classmates and exchange opinions.

Teacher's Notes: Ask students if they know other stories in which an animal is the main character. Accept the use of both L1 and L2 because the students will be mostly familiar with stories and fairy tales in their L1. The purpose of this task is to activate their general knowledge of stories or films relevant to the one they have just heard and worked on and to let them freely express themselves on a topic that is close to their interests. Give them some time to talk and try to avoid correcting, to encourage even the weaker students to take part in the conversation. Accept L1 when the students have difficulty expressing themselves but are anxious to share information.

Task 2: Tell your students to write a brief letter to a friend to tell him/her about the story they listened to in class.

Teacher's Notes: Tell students to pay attention to the rubrics that clarify the "roles" of the participants in the writing, that is, who they are writing to and in what capacity. These things also determine the purpose for the writing and the genre—a letter with all its conventions. Students should keep in mind that they are writing to a friend, and that they are retelling the story that was read in their classroom. This information should help them in their selection of information and type of greeting.

D. Alternative assessment

Using peer-correction technique gives students the chance to correct both themselves and their peers and to get involved in the teaching and learning process, as they get used to the idea that they can learn from each other. This has the advantages of: (a) involving all the students in the correcting process, (b) making the learning more cooperative, and (c) reducing students' dependence on the teacher. In addition, when a learner makes an error and a peer provides the correct answer, everyone in the classroom should be actively involved in listening to what is being said.

In the specific context, the teacher can give students the opportunity to read and correct each other's work before the teacher identifies and indicates the errors. More precisely, after the students have written their letters on the assigned topic, the teacher should ask them to look over the letters in pairs and try to correct their mistakes. The teacher can "facilitate revision by responding to writing as work in progress rather than judging it as a finished product." (Zamel 1985, 79). Taking into consideration that the students are deeply influenced by their first language, the teacher has to guide them and should not criticize them for making mistakes. Instead, the teacher must give them time to recognize and correct their own and their peers' mistakes and even to rewrite the letter, if necessary.

Conclusion

The framework of two story-based lessons provided extra language practice by supplementing course material and engaging students in a variety of activities that involved consolidating vocabulary and structures and also practicing microskills. The lessons seemed to be motivating and interesting and exercised both the students' imagination and their language skills. The stories (a) aroused students' curiosity and made them want to find out more about the text, and (b) provided a starting point for related language activities to develop both receptive and productive skills. The lessons also promoted vocabulary recy-cling, as they allowed the teacher to introduce and revise vocabulary.

The students, being exposed to language in a varied and enjoyable context, practiced specific vocabulary and grammar and used their limited amount of English creatively. Moreover, the students had the opportunity to develop concentration skills via visual clues, listening, and activating prior knowledge. Students were also able to reinforce thinking strategies—comparing, predicting, classifying—and cognitive strategies such as predicting, guessing, inferring opinion, and working out the meaning from context. Finally, these activities proved to be a shared social experience, as students were encouraged to work in pairs, to compare their own answers with those of classmates, and to discuss their answers with each other, with the teacher's guidance.

References

Andrews, J. 2000. *Teaching English to young learners.* Vol. 2. University of Manchester, Distance Programme M.Ed. In ELT. Patras: HOU.

Brewster, J., G. Ellis, and D. Girard. 1992. *The primary English teacher's guide.* London: Penguin Group.

Dunn, O. 1993. *Beginning English with young children.* London: Macmillan publications.

Ellis, G., and J. Brewster. 1991. *The storytelling handbook: A guide for primary teachers of English.* London: Penguin.

Grant, N. 1989. *Making the most of your textbook.* 3rd edition. London: Longman.

Halliwell, S. 1992. *Teaching English in the primary classroom.* London: Longman.

Nuttall, C. 1982. *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language.* Oxford: Heinemann.

Philips, S. 1993. *Young learners.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zamel, V. 1985. Responding to Student Writing. *TESOL Quarterly* 19 (1):79–101.

ELENI GRIVA, a Lecturer in the Department of Primary Education at the University of Western Macedonia, Greece, teaches methodology and English for Academic Purposes. She has Master's degrees in TEFL methodology and Educational Studies, and she earned a PhD from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.