Competency-Based ELT: Learning to Learn through *Our Storytelling Circle*

Julie Waddington
Universitat de Girona

Abstract

General consensus exists that storytelling in the early years promotes early literacy development and can help provide a meaningful context for introducing a foreign language. This paper presents a cyclical project which aims to facilitate transition between educational stages by harnessing the pedagogical potential of authentic storybooks throughout the different stages of compulsory education. While providing learners with a real purpose and stimulus for learning English, the *Storytelling Circle* methodology presented here also develops the transversal competences of the primary curriculum – with a particular focus on the learning to learn competence – as well as the specific dimensions of the foreign language area.

Introduction

Storytelling during the early years

In the context of introducing English at preschool level in Catalan schools, we are reminded that the key to learning second or third languages lies not in *how many* languages we teach, or *when* we teach them, but rather *how* we teach them (Artigal, 2005). As Artigal's narrative methodology emphasises, 'we don't learn a language first and then use it, but rather, we learn it through using it: in other words, we learn to speak by speaking' (Cesire, n.d.). Moreover, we learn to speak by speaking in an interactive process involving other speakers. This principal, shaped by the theoretical findings advanced by Bruner (1983) and other psycholinguists during the 80s and 90s, underpins the focus of this current study. While Artigal's storytelling methodology offers us a meaningful way of introducing English at preschool level, the methodology introduced in this study provides a framework for continuing to work with stories – this time with authentic storybooks – and for harnessing their enormous pedagogical potential, within the context of primary education and, potentially, within the subsequent secondary stage of compulsory education.

Facilitating transition between educational stages

The proposal presented here will thus have particular relevance and resonance for schools that have already incorporated storytelling methodologies into their classrooms, insofar as it offers a way of aiding the transition from one educational stage to the next. Although government guidelines stress the need for teachers and schools to coordinate closely in the transitional period of compulsory education (from primary to secondary education) (Departament d'Ensenyament, 2015), equal attention is also required during the transition from the non-obligatory stage of preschool to the first stage of primary education. The need for close coordination between teachers and schools is thus seen as one of the keys to ensuring holistic approaches to education, which take into account the emotional and social factors involved during transitional phases, as well as the need for methodological coherence and continuity, in order to facilitate transition and promote student engagement throughout this fundamental period of their learning lives. Schools, as the Department of Education document advises, 'must adopt measures to ensure that the transition

between the two stages is successful' (2015). The proposal presented here offers an example of a methodological approach which can be used and adapted through the different stages of childhood education, by continuing to use a resource which students will have come to be fond of and familiar with (storybooks) in a way which corresponds to the different cognitive, social and emotional developmental stages of their primary years.

Competency-based curriculum

Unlike the preschool stage, where the introduction of a foreign language is optional, and during which one of the few stated objectives emphasises the importance of 'bringing the language to life', or 'living the language', and ensuring that language 'work' is contextualised within existing projects and activities (Direcció General de l'Educació Bàsica i el Batxillerat, 2009, pp. 12-13), the task of teaching a foreign language at primary level becomes more complex – or may appear to be more complex – when we consider the general requirements of the new competency-based curriculum and, in particular, when we take into account the specific guidelines for developing and implementing the curriculum in the area of foreign language teaching (Direcció General d'Educació Infantil i Primària, 2015).

The aim of this paper is to show how the Storytelling Circle methodology presented here can help to develop transversal competences – with a particular focus on the learning to learn competence – as well as the specific dimensions to be implemented within the area of foreign language teaching (Direcció General d'Educació Infantil i Primària, 2015). At the same time, the systematic approach to reading and telling stories has particular relevance for the national reading plan known as *Impuls de la lectura,* providing a methodological avenue to be explored and implemented in the foreign language area, in a way which is entirely consistent with the treatment of other languages and other areas.

Educational context: storytelling

Like many Catalan schools, the primary school in which this project was first implemented had a history of using storybooks to promote positive attitudes to English; to ensure that the children's initial encounters with the language were fun and engaging; to provide opportunities for the children to hear the language in a 'natural' and authentic way; and to provide opportunities for them to hear different accents and to become familiar with the sounds of the language. While storybooks were already being used by the English teachers as one of the many resources available to them, the school also opted to start a Volunteer Project, enlisting the collaboration of parents and native speakers of the language to achieve the objectives stated above. Many other schools have already initiated similar projects and would therefore be well-placed to take the next step, which is described below.

Taking storytelling further

As one of the volunteer storytellers, the author of this study saw the huge potential provided by these storytelling sessions. Aware of the school's commitment to the *Impuls de la lectura* plan and the benefits brought about by the peer reading activities already carried out in L1 (*padrins i fillols*), she believed that storytelling in English could be exploited and developed further as a pedagogical tool to assist the language learning process and to help students progress from being

active and enthusiastic *listeners* to being equally enthusiastic *users* of the language. A proposal was drawn up for a *Storytelling Circle* project with the **key objectives** stated below:

- To promote a love of reading and stories
- To introduce and learn English in a meaningful way
- To improve active listening
- To develop oral communication in English
- To foster the learning to learn competence and acquisition of learning strategies in relation to foreign language learning

Main characteristics

The proposal was conceived as a cyclical project in which the students' role would develop, becoming progressively more active in the storytelling process. The interaction between students during small collaborative group work, as well as in the more challenging task of telling stories to younger learners, was seen as a crucial part of the process. The use of storybooks was considered to be an excellent way of stimulating meaningful learning of the language at all stages; from the earliest stages of initial input right up to, and in particular, during the final phase of the project when learners would be given a clear purpose: to understand a story (conceptually and linguistically) in order to tell it to their peers and to younger learners.

Systematic approach

A storytelling routine or format was designed to provide an approach which could be adopted and shared by the adult storytellers (teachers, volunteers), and which would also serve as a model to guide the older children and to provide the basis of the competency-based tasks they would carry out while preparing their storytelling session. The routine followed the format indicated below:

Table 1. Our Storytelling Circle Routine

1) Welcoming/greeting the listeners and creating a relaxed atmosphere

2) Introducing key vocabulary/expressions and/or grammatical structures needed to follow the story

3) Narrating the story encouraging maximum interaction among listeners

4) A game or activity related to the theme of the story

5) Closing the session and saying goodbye

From year 2 onwards, the routine is preceded and followed by oral and written tasks related to the theme of the story, carried out in English class time prior to and after the storytelling session, and collected together in a Storytelling Circle portfolio.

Organisation of storytelling sessions

The organisation of the sessions, and the main activities to be developed in them, was conceived in the following way:
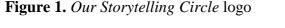
Table 2. Our Storytelling Circle Cycle

Year (of primary)	Main activities	Storytellers	Frequency
One	Listening to and interacting with storytelling sessions.	Volunteers*	At least once a term
Two	Listening to and interacting with storytelling sessions. Completing written tasks and beginning their Storytelling Circle Portfolio.		
Three & Four	Listening to and interacting with storytelling sessions. Completing written tasks and developing their Storytelling Circle Portfolio.	Year 6 students	At least once a term
Five (in small groups or pairs)	Preparing a storytelling session following the model provided and the sessions outlined in the Action Plan. Preparing worksheets to accompany the sessions. Rehearsing the story with year 6 students (peer assessment/feedback)		30/45-minute sessions once a fortnight during English class time** Sessions in the last term
Six (in small groups or pairs)	Preparing storytelling sessions following the model provided and the sessions outlined in the Action Plan. Preparing worksheets to accompany the sessions. Telling the stories to students of year 3 and 4.		30/45-minute sessions once a week during English class time** Once a term
An opportunity exists here for developing a measure to aid the transition between educational stages by involving ex-students in the project as volunteers. This would require close coordination between primary and secondary centres, as alluded to in the Introduction to this paper, but it could have significant benefits for all participants.			
**The frequency and organisation of these sessions will change significantly when the cycle is properly up and running: i.e. students who have been exposed to the project from year one through to year four will be familiar with the format and will probably need less orientation than those without this experience. Nevertheless, adaptations can be made (as they were in this pilot study) to implement the cycle with students with no previous experience of the Storytelling Circle format.*			

As we can see from the organisational table, the emphasis from year one to year four is on the development of active listening skills and the gradual development of story-related written tasks providing opportunities for building vocabulary, generating awareness of grammatical structures, and becoming familiar with the written form. Seeing their older peers as role models, year three and four students will come to realise that they, too, may become storytellers in the not-too-distant future. The design of the logo used throughout the project (used on worksheets, handouts, questionnaires, etc.) sought to highlight this aspirational element, representing it visually through the image of the little owls listening attentively to the wise old storyteller.

Figure 1. *Our Storytelling Circle* logo

Design and structure come together here to provide strategies aimed at creating the basic motivational conditions, generating initial motivation and interest, maintaining and protecting it, and finally encouraging positive self-evaluation in keeping with the process-oriented approach advocated by Dörnyei (2001) and discussed at a previous APAC convention by the author (Waddington & El Bakouri, 2016).

Selecting the storybooks

The recently updated edition of Ellis and Brewster's *Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers* (2014) provides an excellent guide for teachers wishing to use storybooks in the primary classroom, including a full chapter on selecting the right storybooks. This chapter (2) begins by discussing the growing interest shown in 'authentic' or 'real' storybooks, as opposed to graded readers, among EFL practitioners from the 1990s onwards. A case in question would be the use of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, 'quoted as being "an international superstar on the EFL front" (Rixon, 1992: 83), with children in nursery, primary and secondary school' (Ellis & Brewster, 2014, p. 14). The carefully planned use of this popular children's storybook by English teachers at all levels testifies to the pedagogical value of such books, and warns against undermining their motivational potential by placing too much emphasis on allegedly age-appropriate stories. In other words, the criticism that storybooks may be perceived as too childish or simplistic for older children would seem to hold little ground: it is not a question of *which* stories to use at *which* age, but a question of *how* we use them. However, as Ellis and Brewster insist, care does need to be taken 'to select storybooks that are accessible, useful and relevant for children learning English' (Ellis & Brewster, 2014, p. 14). Accessible, useful and relevant: three guiding principles which are then expanded upon throughout the chapter and supported by a systematic chart listing the Criteria

for selecting storybooks (see Ellis & Brewster, 2014, p. 19, Figure 5). After consulting this list, and bearing in mind the storybooks we had already worked with and found to be effective, we focused our selection, in particular, on 1) the accessibility of the language (avoiding excessive textual content); 2) the relevance of the vocabulary/expressions (relevance and interest for children, that is); 3) the possibility for interaction created by the narrative; 4) the presence of humour; 5) the positive messages/values conveyed by the story; 6) and finally, but not least, the visual appearance of the book, including the quality and appeal of its illustrations. A long list of potential storybooks was compiled from recommended titles, and by searching popular children's storybooks on various websites such as the following link http://www.realbooks.co.uk/selection.php.

Given the difficulties involved in accessing and viewing all these books, YouTube was found to be an excellent tool for sampling the copies, providing recorded versions of teachers, parents and even children reading many of the stories aloud. After sampling a large selection of storybooks, a list of 14 books that met our criteria was finally compiled and ordered through an online bookstore. The cost of this initial stock amounted to just under €100 and is expected to offer us plenty of scope for recycling and reusing over the next few years. We consider this to be a relevant point, considering the prohibitive costs of acquiring new material, which can sometimes prevent schools from implementing changes.

Creating a model

One of the storytelling sessions conducted with year 2 students in previous years (as part of the free/unsystematic volunteer project) was selected as a suitable session to be used as the model, given that it already followed the systematic format outlined above. The storybook in question was *Shark in the Park* by Nick Sharratt (2007), a story that employs a narrative device involving withheld images, or part of the image (i.e. showing a cat's ear but not her body, a bird's wing but not the body, etc.), to generate surprise at such a strange incongruity (a shark in a park?!) and create an aura of suspense which enthrals the listeners and draws them into the tale. A session plan was drawn up following the format described, and an audio-visual recording was made of the whole session. Subsequently, the recording was edited to create a version which could be used for teaching purposes: i.e. capturing and conveying all the different phases of the activity in a shorter timeframe. The edited version can be viewed at the following link: http://labranca.blogspot.com.es/.

Preparing a storytelling session

Competency-based activities: foreign language area

The recently published government steering documents on each disciplinary area – *Identificació i desplegament a l'educació primària* – aim to help teachers identify and develop the basic competences of this educational stage. As part of the collection on 'Language' (Direcció General d'Educació Infantil i Primària, 2015), the specific document on 'Foreign Languages' provides teachers with a detailed framework which begins by identifying five key dimensions:

Table 3. Dimensions of the Foreign Language Area

Foreign language basic competences
Dimensions
Oral communication
Reading comprehension
Written expression
Literary
Plurilingual and intercultural

Each of these dimensions is then broken down into specific competences, giving us a total of 12 competences which students are expected to develop and attain within the foreign language area. By way of an example, Competence 1, within the dimension of Oral communication, refers to the ability to 'Obtain basic information and understand simple or graded oral texts related to everyday life, the media or school'. The full list of these 12 competences can be consulted in the steering document (Direcció General d'Educació Infantil i Primària, 2015, p. 9).

When planning how to help year 5 and 6 students devise their own storytelling sessions, it became clear that a wide range of competency-based activities would be needed to prepare the students for this task in a step-by-step manner. With the video model in hand, an Action Plan was drawn up to identify and organise the sequence of competency-based activities required. The original plan included thirteen different sessions of approximately 30-45 minutes. An abridged version of the first three sessions is provided below:

Table 4. Competency-based activities to prepare a storytelling session (Abridged version of first three sessions)

Description of Main Activities	Dimensions	SC	TC
Session 1. Watching model video. Identifying different phases of storytelling session. Practicing creating a relaxed atmosphere and using basic greetings (L2).	Oral communication Literary Plurilingual & intercultural	1 2 3 10 12	Learning to learn Social and civic Autonomy, PI & E
Session 2. Selecting a storybook. Reading for general meaning. Explaining general gist to others (L1 & L2).	Reading comprehension Oral communication Plurilingual and intercultural Literary	2 4 5 6 12 10	Learning to learn Social and civic Autonomy, PI & E
Session 3. Identifying key vocabulary and lexical sets. Translating into own language and creating a glossary (L1 & L2).	Reading comprehension Written expression Literary Plurilingual and intercultural	5 6 7 10 12	Learning to learn Digital Autonomy, PI & E

SC = Specific competences of foreign language area
TC = Transversal competences of primary curriculum

The Action Plan thus helped to organise the activities into a logical sequence, while also helping to identify the explicit aims of each activity (what exactly we wanted to do and why) and to determine how these aims corresponded to the different dimensions and specific competences established by the government steering document. Carrying out this cross-check helped us to see if any dimensions or specific competences were being neglected (which turned out not to be the case) and to identify the particular strengths of the programme. All five dimensions were given ample attention over the course of the different sessions, with the plurilingual and intercultural dimension standing out in particular. Within these dimensions, each of the twelve specific competences were worked on at some point during the programme: the majority of the competences were worked on at least three times; three competences (planning and producing oral texts, interpreting texts and understanding literary texts) were worked on more frequently, during five different sessions; followed by two competences (planning written texts, orally reproducing literary texts) which were worked on 6 times; one (using interactive oral strategies) which was worked on in 7 different sessions; and, finally, the competence involving the use of plurilingual strategies to communicate, which was worked on in almost all of the sessions planned.

Transversal competences

As well as identifying the different dimensions and specific competences to be worked on in the foreign language area, the new competency-based curriculum also places considerable emphasis on the attainment of the transversal competences considered to be vital for lifelong learning: digital; social and civic; learning to learn; autonomy, personal initiative and entrepreneurship. All four transversal competences are developed at length throughout the programme, with a particularly strong emphasis on activities that foster the **learning to learn** competence. This competence is considered vital in all contexts, but particularly in relation to foreign language learning, insofar as it helps to stimulate learners' self-awareness regarding the learning process and to promote more positive and realistic attitudes to language learning. The **digital** competence is also included and considered to be closely related to the learning to learn competence in any twenty-first century context: helping students learn to use digital technologies can help boost their language acquisition if used wisely and strategically, as in the activities requiring students to search online translation tools, for example. However, and as the steering document emphasises in the section on 'Plurilingual and intercultural competence', while translation can be a suitable resource in some specific cases, it should not be used as the central methodological approach to learn a language. Instead, priority should be given to the mechanisms deployed to acquire a first language in a natural context (Direcció General d'Educació Infantil i Primària, 2015, p. 101). The competency-based activities proposed here – set within a real, meaningful context and invested with a clear purpose – thus aim to provide mechanisms akin to those activated in first language acquisition.

As in the preschool storytelling methodology discussed at the outset of this paper (Artigal, 2005), considerable attention is also given to the interactive and dialogical nature of the activities and the final purpose of the programme (to tell a story in a way which engages the interest and interaction of the listeners), corresponding to the **social and civic** competence, which is fundamental in language learning contexts. Finally, providing students with a clear, instructional audio-visual model means that activities can be set up which provide students with clear visual, textual and linguistic guidelines, before inviting them to develop work **autonomously** (in small groups where the teacher monitors and guides), and to cultivate their own **initiative and entrepreneurship** in order to plan their own story-specific activities and storytelling sessions.

Competency-based assessment

Useful guidelines and ideas for assessing the competency-based activities proposed here can be found in the steering document referred to above (Direcció General d'Educació Infantil i Primària, 2015), in *The Storytelling Handbook* (Ellis & Brewster, 2014), and in the various documents available on the government website under the *Impuls de la lectura* programme. Most documents highlight the need to draw up assessment criteria related to the degree to which the specific competences are attained and to pay particular attention to attitudinal aspects, including attitudes to language learning and self-concept.

Our assessment strategy aims to cover these aspects using a combination of self-assessment, peer assessment and teacher assessment strategies in order to monitor and assess the work carried out during the entire programme. In addition to the activity-related assessments, two instruments will be used over a longer period to assess long-term development on the one hand, and to observe specific aspects related to the learning to learn competence:

1) Our Storytelling Circle portfolio used to collect all worksheets and work related to the project
2) My Learning Diary in which year 5 and 6 students record (in L1 or L2) and reflect on their experiences during the sessions dedicated to preparing the storytelling session.

Initial conclusions

The project described in this paper is still in an experimental phase, and it is therefore difficult to draw conclusions at this stage. However, initial responses from the learners indicate that they are highly motivated to carry out all the preparatory work needed to be able to become effective storytellers. This work, as indicated above, involves tasks which develop all the specific competences of the foreign language curriculum. Moreover, an observation made by their English teacher reveals that 'they are learning lots of really useful grammar without even realising it'. This observation provides us with a valuable insight into what is occurring during this process. Teachers sometimes express regret that the joys of learning a foreign language that can be clearly witnessed during preschool and initial years of primary education gradually fade away, as the interactive forms of learning encouraged in early years are replaced by methodologies that often fail to maintain learners' interest. According to Siqués and Vila, one of the secrets behind the success of preschool ELT education is that English is taught in a way which bears more resemblance to the educational practices seen in the home than to those usually seen in formal school contexts (Siqués & Vila, 2014, p. 14): it is taught, in other words, in a way in which learners are unaware that they are learning. To what extent this form of learning can be compatible with, or even complementary to, the promotion of the learning to learn competence – which, by contrast, emphasises the need to develop metacognitive awareness – will be explored in future studies. One of the main aims of the proposal presented here is to foster an approach to ELT which will extend the successes seen in preschool contexts into the primary stage of education. Future reports on the progress made will reveal the extent to which this aim may be achieved.

Acknowledgements

Pardàs (English teacher) for her commitment, patience and insight at each step of the implementation stage.

References

Artigal, J. M. (2005). El text narratiu dialogat. Una manera de construir l'aprenentatge de la llengua estrangera a l'educació infantil. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament d'Educació, Centre de Recursos de Llengües Estrangeres.

Bruner, J. (1983). *Child's talk*: *Learning to use language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cesire. (n.d.). *Orientacions professorat llengües estrangeres.* Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya. Retrieved   from http://srvcnpbs.xtec.cat/cirel/cirel/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&layout=blog&id=122&Itemid=223.

Departament d'Ensenyament. (2015). *Coordinació entre l'educació primària i l'educació secundària obligatòria.* Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya. Retrieved from http://educacio.gencat.cat/documents/IPCNormativa/DOIGC/CUR_Coordinacio.pdf.

Departament d'Ensenyament. *Impuls de la lectura*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya. Retrieved from http://ensenyament.gencat.cat/ca/arees-actuacio/centres-serveis-educatius/projectes-educatius/ambit-curricular/impuls-lectura/.

Direcció General de l'Educació Bàsica i el Batxillerat. (2009). *El desplegament del currículum i la programació al segon cicle de l'educació infantil*. Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya.

Direcció General d'Educació Infantil i Primària. (2015). *Competències bàsiques de l'àmbit lingüístic: Llengües estrangeres.* Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya.

Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ellis, G., & Brewster, J. (2014). *Tell it again! The storytelling handbook for English language teachers.* London: British Council.

Escola 'La Branca'. Blog entry: Our Storytelling Circle. Accessed on 15 March 2017 at: http://labranca.blogspot.com.es/.

Sharrat, N. (2007). *Shark in the Park*. London: Corgi Books.

Siqués, C., & Vila. I. (2014). L'ensenyament de l'anglès a l'educació infantil: Mites i reptes. *Perspectiva Escolar, 374,* 11-16.

Waddington, J., & El Bakouri El Farri, Y. (2016). Fictitious emails and their use as a motivational strategy. *APAC ELT Journal, 82,* 34-44.

Biodata

Dr. Julie Waddington teaches on the degree programmes in Pre-School and Primary Education at the University of Girona. She also enjoys developing practice with in-service teachers in her role as a trainer for the Catalan Ministry of Education and in her own research projects. She previously taught at Manchester Metropolitan University, England, where she also completed her PhD in English and Literary Studies (2007). Her teaching practice and ELT research interests are informed by her own practical experience as a full-time English teacher in language schools in London, Girona and Barcelona (1991-1997) and her previous training as an EFL teacher (Cambridge University, 1991).