Using storytelling to teach vocabulary in language lessons – does it work?

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It has long been claimed that stories are a powerful tool for language learning. Storytelling is often used as a discrete pedagogical approach in primary modern foreign language lessons in England. There has, however, been little investigation into how storytelling might impact on vocabulary learning in the primary classroom. This article focuses on how a London primary teacher used stories in German lessons in a Year 6 class (ages 10-11), and analyses the words and sentences the case study children remembered over a brief period of time. Data were collected over two terms through observations, interviews and post-tests. The findings illustrate the wide range of teaching strategies that allowed for explicit and incidental learning and encouraged meaningful language use. They also show that children recalled a considerable number of words and sentences.

## Introduction

Stories have been considered a powerful and effective tool in language learning. Morgan and Rinvolucri (1983) and Pesola (1991) explain that stories engage learners, expose them to new language and help them acquire the target language unconsciously and almost effortlessly. Practitioners who have used stories with young learners in their first or second languages have highlighted many benefits, such as the development of the four language skills, improved syntax, a better understanding of story structure, and heightened language and cultural awareness (Dyson 1997; Morrow 1986; Sneddon 2008). Similar claims come from those who have used storytelling in modern foreign language (MFL) classrooms in continental Europe (Ehlers et al. *2*006; Kirsch 1996). Storytelling also features as a valuable pedagogical approach in primary MFL lessons in England. Teachers find ample guidance on how to use stories in the Key Stage 2 framework for ages 7 to 11 (DfES 2005), in some schemes of work and on commercial and governmental websites. However, storytelling appears not to have been widely researched in England. Further, research findings from abroad are not easily transferrable to the English primary classroom because the projects have been carried out in a context where MFL, mostly English, has a high status and where language teaching begins earlier and is timetabled more frequently than in England. In England, primary school children have an entitlement for only one hour of MFL per week from the age of 8. It is therefore of interest to examine the use of stories in English MFL classrooms specifically, and to explore how storytelling may help primary school children improve their language skills.

Although the acquisition of vocabulary is a key factor in successful language learning, very little research has been carried out on this in primary classrooms. The vast majority of research studies on vocabulary focus on the acquisition of new words by adolescent or adult language learners. It is unclear whether these findings are relevant to primary practitioners in England who work with beginner language learners and who tend to familiarise children with new language through narratives such as songs, rhymes or stories. A study of the processes of learning and teaching a foreign language in a primary classroom requires a different methodology from the experimental or quasi- experimental studies carried out with experienced learners.

This article examines how children aged 10-11 in a Year 6 class learned new lexical items in German through a storytelling approach. It investigates the teaching methods and the vocabulary gain. The data were collected over two terms in a London primary school through observations, interviews and post-tests. The findings illustrate, firstly, the range of teaching strategies that allowed for explicit and incidental learning and encouraged meaningful language use and, secondly, the considerable number of words and sentences the children remembered after a period of time. In this study I will use *stories* and *storytelling* interchangeably to denote the telling, retelling and composing of stories.

## Using stories to develop language proficiency

Research findings on storytelling with learners of first and foreign languages indicate that stories have the potential to harness the learners’ creativity and imagination (Huffaker 2005; Sneddon 2008) and to increase their confidence in their use of language (Anderson and Chung 2011; Bell 1998). In addition, they have been found to contribute to the development of oral skills in a first language (Dyson 1997; Paley 1992; Wells 1987), in a heritage language (Anderson and Chung 2011; Conteh 2003; Schouten-van Parreren 1989) and in a foreign language (Bell 1998; Tsou, Wang, and Tzeng 2006; Wilson 1997).Glazer and Burke (1994) and Mallan (1991) explained that stories help children develop an understanding of syntax and story structure which, in turn, enables them to narrate their own stories with greater success. This finding concurs with Blank and Sheldon (1971), Morrow (1986) and Pellegrini and Galda (1982) who have reported that role-play and the retelling of stories contributes to increased syntactic complexity and the inclusion of structural elements in stories.

Although the above studies suggest that children succeeded in acquiring new words, few researchers have explicitly focused on vocabulary learning in connection with storytelling. Nevertheless, there are explanations as to why learners remember stories and key structures so well. Some are related to the stories themselves, some to information processing and some to pedagogy. According to Wajnryb (2003: 4) stories can transport us beyond all boundaries of time, space, language, ethnicity, class and gender because narratives appeal to our emotions and imagination. The rhythm of stories and the language (e.g. repetitive structures) can captivate the learners. Research has shown that children join in easily and repeat, chant, and participate in the telling of the story (Kent 2004; Sneddon 2008). Stories engage children and help them learn language incidentally, through unconscious processes (Elley 1991; Morgan and Rinvolucri 1983). The combination of the engaging nature of stories and the participation of the learners arguably facilitates memorization and contribute to academic achievement (Ellis 1988).

Information-processing theories provide additional insights. Duff and Maley, authors of a well-known resource book for English language teachers, suggest that we process stories and facts in different parts of the brain and, therefore, retain stories more easily (1990: 5). Further, Paivio (1986) holds that the simultaneous use of language and visuals leads to dual coding that can facilitate retention and recall. This may provide some explanation of how the use of picture books may enhance language learning. As for pedagogy, it is noticeable that several EFL (English as a foreign language) and MFL research projects on story-telling that reported vocabulary gain, were underpinned by social constructivist learning theories. Practitioners who used a task-based approach (Ellis 2003, Willis 1996) such as Ehlers et al. (2006),Gretsch (1994) and Kirsch (1997) offered children opportunities to listen to and to create stories in a well-supported learning environment. The analysis of the work of these practitioners shows that they encouraged learner autonomy, interaction with text and language, collaboration, and communication for a given purpose in a meaningful context.

Although stories arguably have the potential to promote language development, meaning-making can be a daunting task for beginner language learners who lack the vocabulary to engage with the text. Experts have found correlations between vocabulary gain and listening comprehension as well as vocabulary gain and reading (Gersten and Geva 2003; Stæhr 2008). Nation (2001 2006) reported that it is necessary to know 6,000-7,000 word families to understand spoken discourse and 8,000-9,000 to understand written discourse (98% of the words). Guessing the meaning of unknown words is difficult and unreliable below this threshold. In order to ensure that learners with a considerably lower vocabulary benefit from storytelling, teachers need to choose appropriate stories and provide support during and after the narration. Heathfield (2011) suggested the following strategies to make the language input comprehensible: using actions, mime and gesture; having empathy for the characters in the story and displaying their expressions; repeating key phrases; modulating one’s tone of voice; making good use of props, and interacting with the audience. Morrow (1985 1986 2001) focussed on effective practices with young children after the initial narration. She found that the retelling of stories promoted comprehension, encouraged language use, increased the syntactic complexity of the children’s language and improved their semantic recall.

The review of these pedagogical studies, firstly, confirms that storytelling can lead to language development in young learners and, second, helps identify some effective teaching strategies. However, these descriptive studies do not focus specifically on vocabulary learning. It is therefore important to complement them with psycholinguistic studies on vocabulary teaching and learning that offer insights into language acquisition. However, such studies tend to be based on quantitative methods and to be carried out with experienced learners in experimental or quasi-experimental settings. In addition, they tend to focus on the acquisition of words and on particular teaching methods (e.g. key word method).

## Insights from research into vocabulary learning and teaching

In order to ascertain if and how beginner language learners acquire sentences through storytelling in the classroom, I reviewed studies of three relevant research areas: uptake from listening, the acquisition of words and phrases, and vocabulary learning in non-experimental studies. The very few studies on the acquisition of multiword expressions (Schmitt 2008) may help shed light on how inexperienced learners acquire simple sentences. Anecdotal experience from primary language teachers suggests that young children often learn simple sentences as ‘chunks’ without understanding them as grammatical structures. The few non-experimental studies are of particular relevance to this study on account of their research questions and methodology. I will look at these three areas in turn.

Studies on the incidental acquisition of vocabulary through listening report a low uptake. Schmitt (2008) mentions Al-Homoud’s (2007) doctoral research study that showed that learners acquired only two of 40 words after listening 12 minutes a day for 7 days to news reports. Toya (1992), quoted in Vidal (2003), similarly reported small vocabulary gains. She found that the 109 Japanese university students of English who listened several times to two short passages, acquired new words but lost between 66% and 75% of the words initially gained. Vidal (2003) examined the vocabulary gain of 116 Spanish learners of English. The students listened to 3 short academic lectures that included 36 target language items. Vidal reported that the students learned some new words but had forgotten about 50% of them after a month. The vocabulary gain and retention depended on the level of comprehension of the lecture and on the proficiency of the learner. Schmitt (2008) concluded that uptake was low but that it increased with the engagement of the learner. Uptake from reading is similarly low (Milton 2008). Laufer (2005) and Schmitt (2008) suggest that readers need to encounter an item 8 to 10 times before they stand a reasonable chance of acquiring a receptive knowledge of it. While reading is not ideal for acquiring new words it offers learners opportunities to consolidate and enhance knowledge of words previously learned.

For language learning to progress effectively, there is some consensus that incidental learning (e.g. learning through listening to target language input) needs to be complemented with explicit learning (DeKeyser 2002; Hulstijn 2005; Sanz and Leow 2011). Experts agree that vocabulary instruction should include both an explicit component that focuses the learners’ attention on the lexical items, and an implicit component that enhances exposure and encourages meaning-focused use (Laufer 2005; Sanchez and Manchón 2007; Schmitt 2008; Stæhr 2008). Direct teaching and explicit learning include teacher explanation, translation, dictionary work and the use of computer-assisted learning devices. This two-pronged method is based on the understanding that knowing a word means knowing its meaning, form and basic usage receptively and productively (Brown and Payne 1994; Nation 2001; Gu 2003).

The acquisition of a word is a complex matter because the acquisition of one component (e.g. meaning) does not automatically lead to the acquisition of another (e.g. form) (Nation 2001). To complicate matters further, there is some disagreement about the most effective way to acquire each component. Given that my research focuses primarily on the acquisition of the meaning of sentences, I will illustrate this point. Schmitt (2008) holds that the meaning of a lexical item is best acquired through explicit teaching. While agreeing with Schmitt, Nation (2001) maintains that contextual guessing and negotiation can also enable learners to acquire the meaning of new lexical items if these are presented in meaningful, interesting and relevant contexts such as stories, communicative activities or graded readers. When it comes to the acquisition of phrasal vocabulary, Zyzik (2011) reports that explicit teaching helped university students acquire the meaning of multiword expressions. Boers et al. (2006) found that students who had been taught phrasal words through a method that encouraged them to notice these items in the input used more phrases than students who had been taught through grammar translation.

Research in the field of Second Language Acquisition confirms that learners need to notice forms in the input in order to convert the input into intake. Further, researchers have shown that activities that encourage negotiation and active language use, that focus the learners’ attention on form, and that provide the learners with feedback can lead to language acquisition (Ellis 2003; Pica 2007; Swain 1985; Swain and Lapkin 1995). These conditions are met in Task-based language teaching (TBLT), especially when it includes a focus on form. There is also evidence that TBLT can lead to language acquisition (de la Fuente 2006; Ellis, Tanaka, and Yamakazi 1994).

For the purpose of this study it is also worth looking at two of the very few studies on vocabulary acquisition actually carried out in the classroom. Dobinson (2001) recorded four language lessons in a pre-tertiary institution in order to examine the number of words the learners recalled. She found that the number of words varied from student to student, that most of the words recalled had been the explicit focus of the lessons, and that there was no direct relationship between the oral participation of the students in the lessons and the number of words they recalled. Tang and Nesi (2003) remind us that it is difficult to predict what and how much students learn. The researchers found that secondary students in Hong Kong and China acquired many words incidentally through exposure and that they learned more unplanned words than words the teacher had focused on.

This brief overview cannot capture the complexities involved in learning words and phrases, let alone sentences. However, it has shown that learners can acquire new words or phrases through incidental and intentional learning and implicit and explicit teaching. Uptake from listening alone is likely to be poor. It has also revealed that learners need opportunities to notice words, to focus on form and to use the language. Although it is clear that the studies on storytelling and vocabulary acquisition differ in their research questions and methodology, one could nevertheless synthesise some of the findings and hypothesise that storytelling can yield vocabulary gain if teachers choose engaging stories, deploy strategies that make the language comprehensible, focus the learner’s attention on the new lexical items, encourage practice, and promote language use. To what extent are these assumptions in line with the classroom reality?

The research: investigating language learning through stories

This paper firstly investigates the teaching strategies and the children’s language use during two storytelling events in a Year 6 class. Second, it examines the sentences recalled immediately after the event and after several weeks. Like Dobinson (2001), I decided to look at recall and retention rather than at the acquisition of new lexical items. It is difficult to ascertain if and when children have acquired a word or a sentence. Being able to remember an item, is, however, a step in that direction.

## Setting and participants

The study was carried out in a school located in a deprived area in South-East London. In 2009, approximately 80% of the pupils were from ethnic minorities and a high percentage were new arrivals with little or no English. The percentage of children with learning difficulties or disabilities and the percentage of those on free school meals were higher than the national average. Academic achievement had improved over the previous years owing to excellent leadership and good teaching, and results in the national tests at the end of Year 6 were above the national average.

The school was pleased to have a native German teacher who taught German in Years 3-6 (ages 7-11) for two half-hour sessions a week. In September 2009, Ms Schmitt (pseudonym) participated with a Year 6 class (ages 10-11) in this study. She selected six 11-year-olds to become the case-study children: two high, two middle and two low achievers in mathematics and English. The two children classified in September 2009 as low achievers were new arrivals; the girl had arrived in September 2009 and the boy in September 2008. The ethnic backgrounds of the focal children reflected the mix in the Year 6 class. One child was born in England, three in North Africa, one in Spain and one in Turkey. Three of the children spoke English at home and three predominantly a language other than English. This study did not examine the differences between monolingual and bilingual children although bilingualism is likely to affect the strategies Emin, Sophia and Jumoke used when learning German. Table 1 provides an overview of the six children.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name  | Gender | Language most spoken at home | Achievements in English and Mathematics |
| Emin | Boy  | Turkish | High achiever |
| Lucy | Girl  | English | High achiever |
| Mike | Boy  | English  | Middle achiever |
| Chantelle | Girl  | English | Middle achiever |
| Jumoke  | Boy | Arabic  | Low achiever |
| Sophia | Girl  | Spanish | Low achiever |

Table 1: Background information on the six children

Ms Schmitt had planned two storytelling events; a one-off lesson featuring Eric Carle’s book *Der kleine Käfer Immerfrech* (*The Very Grouchy Ladybug*) in February 2010 and a five-week project on the tale *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten* (*The Town Musicians of Bremen*) starting in June. The first lesson of this project was a story, the following four half-hour sessions were used to practise language and work on a presentation, and the final one consisted of the presentation.

## Research methods

In order to study learning in context and to develop in-depth understanding of learning and teaching, I used an ethnographic approach which was interpretive and, in this case, based on qualitative data. My work with these beginner language learners within the classroom called for methods that were in line with Ms Schmitt’s pedagogy and, therefore, familiar to the children and more likely to be acceptable and successful. This was particularly important when it came to assessing vocabulary gain. Think-aloud procedures with individual learners such as those used by Gu (2003) and Nassaji (2003) were not appropriate in this study as my aim was to follow the six children while they learned vocabulary items in whole class lessons. Vocabulary tests similar to the ones used by Fan (2003), Stæhr (2008), Vidal (2003) and Zyzik (2011) did not seem appropriate either because the beginner learners were unfamiliar with these methods and had limited reading skills in German. Albeit frequent in psycholinguistic studies, the use of think-aloud protocols and of vocabulary tests (e.g. Vocabulary Levels tests) was inappropriate in the context of this descriptive study.

The research methods used here were in line with non-experimental studies such as those of Dobinson (2001) and Tang and Nesi (2003). The methods for data collection consisted of non-participant observation, interview, simple assessment tests and documents. I observed and recorded the storytelling lessons and the follow-up tasks. I focused on the teaching methods and on the children’s engagement and language use. In addition, I carried out three semi-structured interviews with Ms Schmitt, discussing the rationale for and experience of using stories, the aims of the lessons, and the children’s learning progress. The teacher also assessed the children’s knowledge of key items prior to the storytelling lesson. The interviews with the children took place at different ages of the learning process. Before each storytelling event, I ascertained if the children were familiar with the story. In the case of the story *The Very Grouchy Ladybug,* I also asked them to list the names of the main characters which had been taught in previous lessons. After each storytelling event, I encouraged the children to retell the story and to mention any new words or sentences they remembered. My aim was to evaluate their story comprehension and their understanding of new vocabulary items. These semi-structured interviews lasted between 10 and 15 minutes and were carried out in a quiet room. The children were interviewed in pairs in order to help them feel secure.

In addition, I used a delayed post-test to evaluate the number of words and sentences children retained. The first test took place six weeks after the lesson on *The Very Grouchy Ladybug* and the second two weeks after the end of the project on the *Town Musicians* (at the end of the academic year). Following the advice of Bachman and Palmer (1997), I tried to create a testing situation that replicated the classroom practices. I asked the six children to work in pairs and to record any new sentences or words they remembered. They were not allowed to repeat items previously mentioned. They had props (pictures of the characters) in the first, but not the second, post-test. This form of vocabulary testing proved motivating, challenging and enjoyable and provided a good record of the children’s vocabulary and pronunciation skills.

Finally, I collected documents such as the teacher’s scheme of work, songs, scripts of the stories, a poem and the storybooks produced by some children in order to gain additional insights into the teaching and learning processes.

All interviews, tests and lessons were recorded and transcribed. The analysis of the lesson observations comprised the search for common themes relating to teaching strategies and the children’s oral participation. The text analysis of the stories, poem and songs enabled me to identify repetitive key sentences. The analysis of the children’s language use during the storytelling event, in the follow-up tasks, during the interviews and in the post-tests enabled me to identify the type and number of key sentences being used. I made a list of the new lexical items used by each child on each of these occasions and compared the items. I paid attention to accuracy and calculated the percentage of correct words per sentence.

Teaching and learning through stories

Ms Schmitt considered stories to be an effective means of teaching words and sentence structures because they provide children with authentic language and engage the learners over several weeks. She worked with at least two stories a term in each class. Depending on the learning objectives, she introduced the stories at the beginning or at the end of a unit of work, narrated or read them and drew on those with either simple repetitive text or complex language. The interviews with the six children indicated that they greatly enjoyed these narratives. They echoed Ms Schmitt’s perception that stories captivated their interest and attention and helped them learn vocabulary. Do these positive views still hold after a more rigorous analysis of the children’s learning?

In the following sections, I outline Ms Schmitt’s teaching strategies and describe the children’s engagement during each of the storytelling events. I then examine the children’s language use during the lessons, the interviews and the post-test, and finally, I identify the lexical items they remembered.

##  ‘The Very Grouchy Ladybug’

### The storytelling event

In February 2010, Ms Schmitt finished a four-week unit on animals by telling Carle’s story *Der kleine Käfer Immerfrech*. Her aim was to consolidate the vocabulary on animals, and to provide the class with additional opportunities for language use. In addition, she hoped that children would commit to memory some of the key sentences of the story displayed in Table 2.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Key sentence  | English translation |
| S1 | Um [x] Uhr traf er [Tier] | At [x] o’clock he met [animal] |
| S2 | He, du! Willst du mit mir kämpfen?  | Hey, you! Would you like to fight? |
| S3 | Wenn du darauf bestehst. | If you insist. |
| S4 | Du bist mir nicht groß genug.  | You are not big enough.  |
| S5 | Und er flog davon.  | And he flew away. |

Table 2: Key sentence structures in *‘The Very Grouchy Ladybug’*

The assessment of the case study children’s prior knowledge indicated that they knew the meaning of *freundlich* (friendly) and *schlecht gelaunt* (ill-tempered) and understood and were able to produce the names of the 14 insects, animals and mammals that featured in the book. None of the children knew any of the above key sentences but Lucy was familiar with the English version of the book.

As in all lessons Ms Schmitt spoke only German. She articulated clearly, varied tone, volume and rhythm of her speech, and made good use of mime and gesture. In this particular lesson, she also used paper figurines and a small stage. In order to follow the original repetitive text closely, she relied on a script. She narrated the story from memory while occasionally glancing at the script lying on the floor. The children in the class were keen to join in with the actions and the repetitive sentences but Ms Schmitt made them listen first and gradually increased their oral participation. For example, she encouraged the class to repeat sentences S2 and S3 after she herself had used the sentences five and six times respectively. At the end of the 13-minute event, the class confidently chanted sentences S2, S3, S4 and S5.

### Evidence of vocabulary learning

Three types of data provide insights into children’s language learning process: the observations of the children during the follow-up task, the interviews after the lesson, and the post-test.

During the 12-minute long follow-up task the class acted out the story with props. The children worked in pairs and responded creatively to this task. The low ability children sequenced the pictures and practised naming the animals in a mini dialogue that often included a simple phrase and imaginary language as illustrated below. The new vocabulary is underlined.

Sophia (*moves the ladybird to the sparrow*): Spatz (*sparrow*). He du! Dugedugedugedu.

Jumoke (*moves the ladybird to the lobster*): Hummer (*lobster*)*.* He du!

The middle and higher ability children tried to perform the dialogues. The transcripts show that most children in the class remembered at least one key sentence. As illustrated in the excerpt below, Mike and Chantelle used the ‘animal’ vocabulary as well as the sentence S2 flexibly and creatively.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Mike | He comes to the hyena. He du, sagt der Marienkäfer. Willst du mit mir kämpfen? |
| Chantelle | Willst du mit mir kämpfen? |
| Mike | Kämpfen, kämpfen, kämpfen. He, du! Willst du mit mir kämpfen? |
| Mike | Guten Morgen der Hyäne*.* (*Good morning the hyena*.) |
| Mike (*moves the ladybird to the wasp*.) |
| Mike/ Chantelle  | Guten Morgen die Wespe. |

Emin confidently uttered sentences S2 and S4 which he also pronounced with some accuracy. His partner, Lucy, took several pages of Ms Schmitt’s script and read out sentences S3 and S5. She hesitated as she had little experience of reading German.

The interviews after the lesson revealed that all six case study children had understood the gist of the story. As for the development of their active vocabulary, Sophia and Jumoke only recalled *He du*, hence two out of seven words of sentence S2 (30%). Mike, Chantelle, Emin and Lucy remembered all the words in S2 and S4. In addition, Emin and Lucy produced sentences S1, S3 and S5, although they struggled with the pronunciation of the verb form *bestehst*.

The findings of the post-test six weeks later showed that retention was very good. Jumoke, Sophia, Mike and Chantelle had retained all the new words and sentences. Emin and Lucy were still able to perform a dialogue of 12 turns lasting approximately one and a half minutes. Emin and Lucy produced the sentences S2 and S5 correctly (100%). As Emin sometimes left out the verb in S4, it is correct to say that he remembered five out of six words (83%). Lucy remembered six out of seven words in S1 (86%) and three out of four words in S3 (75%). She tended to forget either the article as in S1 or the verb as in S3. As both children confidently reacted to each other’s sentences, I take it for granted that they understood all five sentences. The six children also remembered at least 10 animals including their articles, and the words *freundlich* und *schlecht gelaunt*. These words had been taught before the storytelling lesson but the children had an opportunity to revise them during this lesson. One could therefore hypothesise that this lesson had contributed to the children’s excellent memory performance.

Graph 1 illustrates the percentages of the five key sentences recalled as a group in the post-test.

Graph 1: Retention of five key structures in each group in the first storytelling lesson

In sum, these findings suggest, firstly, that this one-off story and the follow-up task helped children consolidate the acquired animal vocabulary. Second, it offered opportunities for incidental learning that allowed the children to learn new sentences. Memory performance seemed to be related to ability. While the lower achieving pupils remembered at least part of a new sentence, the high achievers remembered five.

##  ‘Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten’

### The storytelling event

Ms Schmitt began a project on the tale *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten* (The Town Musician of Bremen) in June 2010. Her aims were to expose the class to new vocabulary and sentence structures through a story, songs and a poem and to encourage the children to produce a piece of drama, a finger puppet show or a storybook based on the vocabulary learned. Ms Schmitt began the first lesson with a poem about the protagonists. She then narrated the story, revisited the poem and finished the lesson with a song about the four animals (hereafter song 1). In the following four half-hour sessions, she introduced two further songs (hereafter songs 2 and 3). Each of these lessons began with a five-minute practice of the poem and the songs. In the main part, children worked independently on a chosen task. In the sixth session they presented their work.

Based on the story, the songs and the poem, I identified the following 11 key sentences or sentence structures presented in Table 3:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| no | Key structures and number of repetitions  | Translation | Used in |
| S1 | Geh weg!  | Go away! | story  |
| S2 | Komm mit!  | Come with me! | story |
| S3 | Wir gehen nach Bremen. I gehe nach Bremen.  | We go to Bremen.I go to Bremen. | storysong 1 |
| S4 | [Pronomen] spielen [Instrument].  | [Pronoun] play [instrument]e.g. I play the lute.  | story |
| S5 | Wir machen Musik.  | We play music.  | story |
| S6 | [Tier] steigt auf [Tier]  | [Animal] climbs onto the [animal]e.g. The cat climbs onto the dog. | story |
| S7 | Ich bin [Tier].  | I am the [animal]. | song 1 |
| S8 | [Tier] ist müd und alt.  | [Animal] is tired and old. | song 1 |
| S9 | Ich bin hungrig.  | I am hungry. | song 2 |
| S10 | Guten Appetit. | Enjoy your meal. | song 2 |
| S11 | Ich bin durstig.  | I am thirsty.  | song 2 |

Table 3: Key sentence structures used in the project about the *Die Bremer Stadtmusikanten*.

Songs 2 and 3 had few if any repetitions. The texts included lexical items related to animals, robbers and food and drinks. The initial interviews with the teacher and children revealed that the six children were unfamiliar with the tale.

In the first lesson, Ms Schmitt introduced some key vocabulary prior to the storytelling. She used the poem to familiarise the class with the names of the four animals, showed Bremen on a map, drew on analogy to explain the word *Stadt* (town) and asked for one translation. During the narration of the tale, she used the same techniques as in the *Grouchy Ladybug* story to make the language comprehensible (e.g. voice modulation, use of gestures and mime). In addition, she used five pictures and focussed the children’s attention on difficult words by repeating or paraphrasing them. She facilitated guessing as shown below:

Da sagte der Bauer: ‘Geh, geh weg! Weggehen!’ (*making the gesture of chasing*.)

(*Then the farmer said: ‘Go, go away! Go away!’*)

Und sie sahen in dem Haus **Räuber** (*word emphasised*) sitzen. Räuber*.* Dunkle Gestalten. (*pulling a face and pointing to the picture*).

(*And they saw robbers in the house. Robbers. Dark figures*.)

The children’s behaviour during the seven-minute storytelling event testified to their engagement and understanding. Most sat cross-legged on the carpet and moved very little. They listened well, paid attention and imitated Ms Schmitt’s gestures. They reacted with laughter, excitement and gestures of surprise to unexpected events in the story. As in the *Grouchy Ladybug* story they applauded spontaneously at the end of the tale. Next, Ms Schmitt revisited the poem. There was clear evidence of learning: many children recited the poem louder and quicker than at the beginning of the lesson and carried out some actions before Ms Schmitt did so. Ms Schmitt finished the lesson with song 1 which revisited the names of the animals and introduced key structures S3, S7 and S8.

### The follow-up task

In the following four lessons (equating to 60 minutes on task), the children in Year 6 worked in groups and either produced a show or wrote a story based on the tale. By chance each group was of mixed ability. Ms Schmitt oversaw the drama group which included Lucy, Chantelle and Sophia. She advised on organisational aspects and provided occasional language support. When composing the dialogues, the children in this group drew heavily on the tale, the poem, the printout of the three songs and a script they found on the internet. The finger puppet group, which included Emin and Jumoke, made slow progress on account of difficulties in collaborating. They were able to include some dialogue as a result of listening to a rehearsal by the drama group. Nevertheless, Ms Schmitt had to take on the role of the narrator in their show during the performance. The story-writing group, which included Mike, worked independently. Mike and his two friends tried to write the story from scratch and relied heavily on the dictionary. As they had yet to develop dictionary skills, they made several errors that rendered parts of their text incomprehensible. Ms Schmitt regretted that they made little use of the sentence structures provided in the songs and poems that she had asked the class to practise in each lesson. These rehearsals made up for a total of 20 minutes.

### Evidence of vocabulary learning

Evidence of the children’s learning stems from the lesson observations, the interviews and the post-test. The interviews with the case study children after the first lesson revealed their good text comprehension. Each pair retold the talein considerable detail mentioning, for example, the instruments the animals played or the places where they slept. These details were not illustrated on the pictures the teacher had used. They rendered the gist of a song line (S8) in English while being unable to recall it in German. The length of the text (676 words), the large number of unknown words, and the few repetitive structures help explain, firstly, why the children did not repeat any words after the teacher during the narration and second, why they did not recall any sentences in the interview. In addition, the sentence structures were more complex than the phrases in the story *The Very Grouchy Ladybug*. Although repetitive, structures S3, S4 and S6 change with the subject.

The analysis of the language use during the presentation of the drama, the finger puppet show and the picture book, suggested that the type and number of sentences remembered depended on the child and the task. While Lucy and Sophia used six and seven key sentences respectively in the drama, Chantelle spoke very little (one phrase and one word). Emin and Jumoke used two key sentences. They confidently acted out the story narrated by Ms Schmitt and thereby demonstrated receptive understanding of four other sentences. Mike produced only one key sentence. He struggled while reading his picture book which is understandable given that their text contained 11 completely new words. The results are displayed in Table 4. A tick indicates that a child (identified by the initial) produced a particular sentence. There are two columns per child. The first refers to the presentation of the work and the second to the post-test.

The analysis of the post-test two weeks later revealed, firstly, that each case study child was able to recall more or less the same number of key sentences as in the presentation. All sentences were correct although several words were slightly mispronounced. This suggests that retention was very good. Second, the analysis shows a difference in the performance of the boys and the girls. Jumoke, Mike and Emin recalled one sentence, Chantelle two and Lucy and Sophia six sentences. This could be explained by the fact that the girls had chosen to be part of the drama group where children seemed to have slightly more support than the children who had chosen a different follow-up task. We should, therefore, not be surprised that Lucy and Sophia, who played a key role in the drama mentioned, most items.

Third, as illustrated in Table 4, the six children tended to volunteer sentences in the post-test that differed from those they had produced in the presentations. This is not an indication that they had forgotten the sentences used two weeks earlier. The girls might simply have omitted to say them. As for the boys, they might not have been as quick in volunteering answers as the girl who formed part of their team in the post-test. The results might well have been different had children done the post-test individually.

The analysis of the post-test further reveals that each child recalled new words as well as sentences; on average the boys recalled four and the girls three words. The boys and Chantelle, who had volunteered fewer sentences, listed most words. It is worth adding that Emin, Jumoke and Chantelle mentioned mainly words and sentences they had overheard rather than those they had uttered during the presentation. Their part in the show was small but they had nevertheless managed to remember some lexical items. Listening to classmates, participating in the composition process and listening to and performing songs and poems, seemed to have helped all children learn new vocabulary. This explains why they were able to produce different sentences in the post-test and the presentation.

Given that the children collaborated in the post-test it seems appropriate to mention the total number of words listed per group: Jumoke/ Sophia recalled 24, Emin/Lucy 18 and Mike/Chantelle 10. Unlike the children’s memory performances in the story *The Very Grouchy Ladybug*, the groups did not differ according to the children’s ability. It is also worth noting that the bilingual learners recalled most words. Emin was the most confident learner in the first story and Sophia, the bilingual child labelled lower ability 10 months earlier, outperformed everybody the second time.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sentence | Performance of the six childrenduring the presentation (left) and the post-test (right) |
| J | J | S | S | M | M | C | C | E | E | L |  |
| L |
| S1 |   | √ |   |   | √ | √ |   |   |   | √ |   |   |
| S2 |   |   | √ |   |   |   |   | √ |   |   | √ | √  |
| S3 |   |   | √ |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | √ |   |
| S4 |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| S5 |   |   | √ |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | √ |   |
| S6 |   |   | √ | √ |   |   |   |   |   |   | √ | √ |
| S7 | √ |   | √ | √ |   |   |   |   | √ |   | √ | √ |
| S8 | √ |   |   | √ |   |   |   | √ | √ |   |   | √ |
| S9 |   |   |   | √ |   |   |   |   |   |   | √ | √ |
| S10 |   |   | √ | √ |   |   | √ |   |   |   |   | √ |
| S11 |   |   | √ | √ |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Nb of S/ presentation | 2 |    | 7 |   | 1 |   | 1 |   | 2 |   | 6 |   |
| Nb of S/ post-test  |   | 1 |   | 6 |   | 1 |   | 2 |   | 1 |   | 6 |

Table 4: Use of the key sentences during the presentation and the post-test.

In sum, the analysis of both projects has shown that the use of stories can lead to significant vocabulary gain although the number of sentences recalled varied from child to child. The high-achieving children remembered several sentences of a repetitive text introduced in a single lesson over several weeks. The project that exposed them to a story, songs and a poem was also effective. Each child remembered some sentences and some new words but the number of items recalled was related to the type of follow-up task and to the children’s engagement. It was impossible to assess the impact of the tale independently of other texts but it is true to say that the tale and the follow-up task successfully catalysed language learning.

## Discussion of findings

While some storytelling experts have claimed that children can learn new lexical items through stories (Elley 1991; Morgan and Rinvolucri 1983), the pedagogical studies on the use of stories have rarely focussed on vocabulary acquisition and when they have, they have not quantified the gain (Bell 1998; Morrow 1986; Pellegrini and Galda 1982). By contrast, researchers in the field of vocabulary learning have shown that uptake from listening is low (Toya 1992; Vidal 2003). Findings from this study reveal that children recalled and retained a significant number of words and sentences. A single narration of *Der kleine Käfer Immerfrech* proved an effective means both of consolidating vocabulary and of facilitating the acquisition of phrases. In this one-off 30-minute lesson, the middle and high-achieving learners learned several sentences. All six children retained almost all the new lexical items over a period of six weeks. This contrasts sharply with the poorer performances of the experienced learners in the studies of Toya (1992) and Vidal (2003). One wonders if the children retained the lexical items because they were presented in the meaningful context of a story and because the children had the opportunity to engage in meaningful follow-up tasks.

Similar to Dobinson (2001) I found that the number of sentences remembered varied from child to child. The amount of items recalled can be explained both by the children’s proficiency (as in the study of Vidal 2003) and their engagement (as suggested by Schmitt 2008). My findings have shown that the children had multiple opportunities to engage with the language: listening to the teacher and classmates, observing, composing new texts in collaboration, and presenting these texts. I argue that the children noticed, and to some extent, learned the key sentences because they encountered them frequently in the same text (i.e. *The Very Grouchy Ladybug*) or over a period of several weeks (i.e. *The Town Musicians*). In Carle’s story, the key sentences were repeated 12 times, the word *Marienkäfer* was used 20 times, and the names of the other animals were repeated twice. The key vocabulary of *The Town Musicians* featured in the story, the poem and the songs. The children’s achievements can therefore be explained by their engagement as well as by the frequency of exposure to the lexical items. A relationship between learner engagement, repetition and learning, has previously been reported by Ellis (1988), Milton (2008), Schmitt (2008) and Schouten-van Parreren (1989).

Further insights into the children’s learning process comes from the analysis of the teaching strategies which reveals that Ms Schmitt provided opportunities for both incidental and intentional learning. Her way of teaching vocabulary is therefore in line with the call to adopt explicit and implicit teaching methods (Laufer 2005; Nation 2001; Schmitt 2008). During the narration of the stories Ms Schmitt encouraged the class to learn key sentences in an incidental way through meaning-focussed input (Nation 2001). She made the language comprehensible through mime, actions and props and facilitated guessing from context. The efficiency of these strategies has been emphasised by Heathfield (2011). Nation (2001) further explained that contextual guessing can lead to learning if the lexical items are presented in a meaningful context and in an interesting way. This was guaranteed through the choice of the stories.

The length and linguistic complexity of *The Town Musicians* required Ms Schmitt in addition to draw the children’s attention explicitly to form. Boers et al. (2006) and Zyzik (2011) have previously shown that an explicit focus on form enabled students to acquire phrases. As the children in this study had a limited vocabulary which might have prevented them from inferring the meaning of unknown words (Hu and Nation 2000; Laufer 1989) they had to rely on the teacher to make the text accessible to them. Prior to the lesson Ms Schmitt used direct teaching in the form of explanation and translation and during the narration she repeated key phrases and used analogy and paraphrase. The combination of explicit and implicit strategies proved effective; the children understood the stories, remembered details and developed their receptive and productive vocabulary.

Apart from making the texts comprehensible, Ms Schmitt provided children with many opportunities to use and to revisit the lexical items in different contexts. She encouraged language use during but particularly after the storytelling event. She carefully managed the children’s oral participation during the narration of *Der kleine Käfer Immerfrech* andasked the class to join in with the key sentences at particular points. Similarly to Kent’s (2004) study, the children in this study were keen to recite phrases whenever possible. The follow-up tasks that consisted of playing the story of the ladybug and of producing different versions of the tale *The Town Musicians* provided the children with further opportunities to use the new phrases and, I would argue, to remember them.

This finding supports Morrow’s (1985) claim that the retelling and acting out of the stories facilitates memorisation. The fact that Ms Schmitt drew particularly on task-based language learning in some of her lessons might also have contributed to children’s good memory performance. The efficiency of TBLT has been known for a number of years (de la Fuente 2006; Ellis et al. 1994; Ellis 2003). Ms Schmitt offered tasks that encouraged creative language use, fostered collaboration and encouraged learner autonomy. Dam (1995) and Holec (1981) have shown that having control over their learning helps children maintain high levels of motivation, which, in turn, is essential for learning. Ms Schmitt’s teaching strategies ensured that the children collaborated, had some control over their learning, and engaged in meaningful and creative tasks over several weeks. Her teaching was based on the same social constructivist theories that underpinned the philosophy of the successful projects of Bell (1998), Ehlers et al. (2006) and Gretsch (1994). It is not the stories per se but the ways in which they were used that led to the children’s learning.

## Conclusion

The present study set out to examine whether children learned vocabulary through storytelling, and how. The findings have shown that the children eagerly engaged in storytelling activities, recalled some lexical items after the events and retained them over a period of time. A number of explanations were given: a repetitive text; the presence of the key structures in several texts; the frequency of encounters; the teaching strategies that allowed for both explicit and incidental learning; the motivating and creative tasks; the children’s sustained engagement and participation, and a pedagogy based on social constructivist theories. Stories can work well but teachers need to plan how to use them. They need to make the language accessible through a range of strategies such as mime, gesture, voice modulation, visuals or paraphrase and offer multiple and meaningful opportunities for language use such as role-play and the retelling of a story. They need to allow for explicit and incidental learning and focus on the meaning, form and usage of the new lexical items.

The teacher in the present study was both experienced and a native German speaker. This explains her regular use of the target language and her choice of stories with complex language. One wonders to what extent the children’s ability to make sense of these stories was related to their habit of trying to understand their teacher. Although this ability might have helped them make sense of the complicated story *The Town Musicians*, one could imagine less experienced learners engaging in simple stories such as the *Grouchy Ladybug*. It is, however, worth replicating this study, firstly, with non-native language teachers who are equally passionate about storytelling and, second, with a range of learners. Although this study did not focus on the difference between monolinguals and bilinguals, it became clear that the bilinguals achieved as much and possibly more than the monolinguals. A more focused study is necessary in order to investigate to what extent the bilingual children were able to draw on enhanced language learning skills resulting from their ability to use and think in two languages.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, time constraints did not allow for the measurement of the vocabulary gain of individual children. Withdrawing children from lessons would have disrupted their studies in the final year of primary school. Second, I could not directly evaluate the efficiency of the narration of *The Town Musicians* because Ms Schmitt used a very effective multi-method approach comprising songs, a poem and the story. In addition, it was difficult to compare the learners because they engaged in different tasks. This is, however, the reality of a classroom and classroom-based research reflects this complexity. This research study has provided some insights into storytelling, practice and language learning in an actual classroom. As such, it contributes and adds to the few research studies on vocabulary learning and teaching that have been carried out in primary schools.

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