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Book Review: *Stories and Storyline* by Sharon Ahlquist and Réka Lugossy

Reviewed by Nena Nikolic-Hosonaka, Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

Stories and Storyline, written by Sharon Ahlquist and Réka Lugossy is an e-book published by Candlin & Mynard ePublishing. It stands out as a book which, devoid of unnecessary generalities, leads the readers in developing their own judgment based on their own teaching practices. The authors have done their research in Sweden and Hungary respectively, under different educational circumstances. In this book, they present their rich experiences, accompanied by sound theories as well as the experiences of fellow teacher-researchers. In a word, this book is an excellent example of dynamic autonomy meaningful to both teachers and students alike in teaching/learning as well as the research.

In the setting of foreign language learning and teaching to young learners (6-16 years of age), the authors of *Stories and Storyline* investigate the positive changes caused by this innovative approach. Although used in the mother tongue context in many educational fields, it also, they believe, shows a strong potential in the foreign language education.

The book is divided into two sections. The topic of the first section is the theory and practice of using stories and children's literature in the classroom and of the second, the storyline approach in theory and practice. The first section is further divided into seven chapters.

In chapter one, the authors familiarize us with the characteristics of the young learners, indicating that stories as instructional materials are most congruent with the principles of how children learn i.e. that their intrinsic motivation increases in the contexts where they can apply their cognition, emotions and creativity. They focus on developing both content area (knowledge) and the language skills in the story context, with a deep regard for the feelings and attitudes of the learners.

In chapter two, in order to raise the teachers' awareness of their pedagogical beliefs, authors introduce a number of theories that validate their classroom practices and thus empower them. Although the stories have been met with resistance from

analytical lines of thought, the authors see the benefit of narrative pattern in organizing teaching material across the curriculum, its positive effect on relationship within social groups, literacy development, and providing a meaningful context for language acquisition.

In chapter three, the authors share common concerns in the classroom setting: the usage of authentic stories, boys' and girls' interests, understanding every word, ability of following the story line, teaching grammar, relationship between mother tongue and a foreign language in meaning making, dealing with older students, among the others.

In chapter four, the authors share a plethora of practical ideas easily applied to any classroom, with the students of different ages and different proficiency levels. Structurally, they attend to pre-reading, reading, reading again, follow-up tasks, discussion, open-ended questions and retelling from a different perspective. They all focus on a meaningful experience that stimulates the imagination and involves the whole person.

In chapter five the authors suggest ways of identifying issues for classroom research. They present four small-scale studies dealing with specific issues in specific settings. The researchers include the teachers themselves, children and external observers who all cooperate in order to notice the small changes and enhance language learning for the benefit of the class.

In chapter six, Réka Lugossy introduces the concept of a Storyline approach in which she focuses on different topics for different age groups. Young learners, by becoming the characters in a story actually create it by focusing on different key questions starting with "Who are you?" The questions and the tasks, situated within the framework of the story, move the story forward. They are linked to the curriculum, and, in order to participate in a conversation, learners share knowledge, and, in the end, review and evaluate the learning outcomes.

An example of a detailed planning of a storyline through a number of key questions is introduced in chapter seven. The syllabus includes the topics, the sub-skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, grammar and vocabulary. Young learners are seen as active participants in classroom explorations as they fill out the questionnaires, respond to interview questions or write in learner journals, the process that makes them feel as experts on their own learning

Chapter eight looks at topics for different age groups and claims that learners benefit from bringing the outside world into the language classroom. The tasks deal with real-life situations as seen in the key questions and the accompanying supplements. Learners help each other and the occasional use of their mother tongue is believed to keep everyone involved and on the track.

Chapter nine reviews the existing limited research on Storyline and introduces a study done with a class of Swedish 11-13 year olds over a period of five weeks. It is worth noting that the learners' reflective journals showed that the Storyline approach was not only real for them and therefore worth the effort, but that it was also fun.

In the final chapter, the authors summarize the previous chapters making once again the case for the long-term benefits of regular exposure to stories and their role in creating ultimate environment for successful language and literacy development.

One can say that the authors address not only the needs and wants of the growing children, but also the needs and wants of the modern society. In the process of growing, learners try to make sense of themselves, of the culture they are in, and of the society in general. Sense-making refers to the ability of the child to react to changes within his or her environment and feel comfortable about this reaction, leading to self-presentation. Through the approach presented in this book, a child learns about him/herself through the actions and the thoughts of the story characters and peers. By having an organizing aspect, stories also help the learners develop knowledge in the content area. The modern society we live in also puts a strong emphasis on autonomy of individuals who take responsibility for their own actions, and who show mutual respect and solidarity.

The greatest strength of this book is that the authors are tuned into the needs of modern times as well as the needs and nature of the young learners, thus making a significant contribution to the field of foreign language learning and teaching. By being both teachers and researchers, the authors posed very pertinent and realistic questions with which teachers anywhere in the world can feel familiar with. For example, "Are authentic stories better than those designed for language teaching?", "How do I teach grammar with stories?", "Do learners have to understand each and every word?" among the many others. Moreover, the sections on research are not overloaded with unnecessary academic language and reflect ordinary classroom

situations, common problems, providing us with solutions any teacher can feel comfortable with. Last but not least, throughout the book, the authors keep emphasizing the autonomy of the teachers themselves, giving them freedom and respect for managing their own classrooms and for making their own choices. One cannot but emphasize once again the importance of having one's own teaching philosophy. The same goes for the autonomy of young learners and the choices they make, at the same time developing the group solidarity and cooperation.

There is one thing that needs clarification. The authors insist that the young learners build on their background knowledge, that they understand the story from the clues given either verbally or visually, or through the teacher's gestures or intonation. If they rely on their natural curiosity to follow the story line, I wonder why the authors suggest the young learners start with the stories they already know in their L1. How long should that stage, if theoretically acceptable, last?

One more concern relates to the materials (supplements). While it is my belief that they can successfully prepare young learners for the challenges of the world we live in (through topics like neighborhood, or a hotel, for example), and while it is clearly stated that the ideas reflect the authors' respective environments, I have a feeling that many things need to be changed in order to adjust to the environments other than European. In countries like Japan, it might take time and effort to change the educational scene from teacher-centered to learner-centered, and the things it pertains. For this kind of cultural milieu, it might have been necessary to explain into more detail, for the sake of beginners, how to actually define one's own teaching philosophy and how to make the first steps.

In the view of the authors' remark that the readers of this book have the autonomy to adjust the contents according to their own teaching scene, I take the liberty to suggest that, for the sake of cultural learning and teaching a foreign language at the same time, it might help to include the characterization process in describing the characters. According to Culpeper (2001), that is done by paying attention to the textual clues like the way the character presents him or herself, by inferring character information from his or her linguistic behavior, or by character information coming directly from the author. This way, learners would be able to guess from the context and later on to create their own characters through the similar process, and possibly notice the cultural differences.

All in all, *Stories and Storyline* is not only a welcome addition to the area of foreign language teaching and learning, it is a must in any school serious enough to prepare young learners for the world we live in.

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Reference

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