

DEVELOPING YOUNG LEARNERS' ORAL SKILLS THROUGH STORYTELLING WITH LEGO®

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DEVELOPING YOUNG LEARNERS' ORAL SKILLS THROUGH STORYTELLING WITH LEGO®

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Abstract

The current study shows how LEGO® was used as a learning tool in the foreign language classroom with young learners (7-10 years old) during an English Foreign Language (EFL) course in order to enhance fluency and develop students' oral skills. The findings of this small-scale study support the idea that storytelling engages young learners in the process of foreign language learning and that LEGO® bricks could create contexts very favorable to language learning. Likewise, it indicates that students' engagement in the storytelling task is determined by several factors, such as their interest in LEGO®, their level of assertiveness, their creativity and language level. As to the type of tasks, collaborative or individual, the current paper puts forward the idea that in the case of storytelling tasks, young learners perform better individually than in pairs or in small groups. This article approaches the language benefits of storytelling activities with young learners and displays a few pedagogical suggestions for the use of LEGO® as a language learning tool.

Keywords: collaboration, EFL, engagement, LEGO, oral skills, storytelling.

Rezumat

Studiul prezintă modul în care a fost folosit LEGO ca material didactic în cadrul unui curs de limbă engleză cu elevi cu vârste cuprinse între 7 și 10 ani, pentru a le dezvolta fluența în limba engleză și abilitățile de comunicare orală. Rezultatele acestui studiu susțin ideea că învățarea prin poveste îi captivează pe cei mici

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facilitând procesul de învățare a unei limbi străine, LEGO oferind un context extrem de favorabil învățării. De asemenea, studiul indică faptul că interesul elevilor în activitățile care implică povestea este determinat de mai mulți factori, precum interesul lor pentru LEGO în general, nivelul lor de asertivitate, nivelul de creativitate individuală precum și de nivelul de limbă. În ceea ce privește tipul de sarcini de lucru, acestea au fost atât colaborative, cât și individuale, elevii cei mici descurcându-se mai bine în sarcinile individuale de lucru decât în perechi sau grup. Pe parcursul procesului a fost folosit setul special LEGO pentru povești. Articolul pune accentul pe modul de folosire a setului LEGO pentru a spune povești într-o limbă străină prin angrenarea elevilor în diferite activități de construit și prezentat povești și relevă diverse avantaje pentru folosirea pieselor LEGO ca materiale didactice în activitățile de învățare.

Cuvinte cheie: *abilități orale, colaborare, EFL, implicare, LEGO, povestit.*

1. Introduction

Storytelling is considered to be a useful and effective learning activity for young EFL learners improving multiple language skills, including oral skills (Tahriri, Tous & Movahedfar, 2015), listening comprehension skills (Yoon, 2013), sentence building ability (Kim, 2014; Tsou, Wang & Tzeng, 2006) and writing (Figg & McCartney, 2010; Yang & Wu, 2012; Yoon, 2013). Although we know the benefits of storytelling in general, storytelling with LEGO bricks has not been discussed extensively in the EFL literature.

The LEGO Story Starter Set (used in the current context along with LEGO classic) has been used in UK schools in order to develop narratives. For this purpose, LEGO has provided resources to be included in the UK National Curriculum and to be used by teachers in class. However, these resources were mainly designed for native speakers, not for EFL purposes. Based on the fact that LEGO has always captured children's interest and also based on my personal experience with LEGO in other international EFL contexts, I decided to try it out with Romanian EFL learners as well.

Since the current study investigates students' engagement in the storytelling task, engagement is defined as active participation in the learning process which contributes to learning in a positive way. According to Kearsley & Schneiderman (1998), when students are engaged in tasks they enjoy, they

learn more effectively. Likewise, engagement is a construct defined by various dimensions such as interest, curiosity, challenge, attention, feedback (O'Brien & Toms, 2008; Trevino & Webster, 1992). The term “engagement” is related to the concept of “flow”, a state which is very familiar to children who get involved in an activity for its own sake. Therefore, children usually enter a state of flow while listening to and telling stories, which has a positive impact on learning in general.

In order to fill a gap in the research literature related to the use of storytelling with LEGO materials in EFL, I attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. How did young learners engage in the story building and storytelling activities?
2. What factors determined students' engagement and flow in the tasks?
3. How did students approach collaborative and individual tasks?

2. Context

The study was conducted in Romania, during a six-week summer course in 2018. The course was designed for young learners (7-10 years old), learning English as a foreign language in mainstream schools. There were 7 groups of 6 students each and their language level ranged from PreA1 to A2. I used the LEGO Story Starter Set (including the resources prepared by LEGO for the UK National Curriculum), LEGO classic, as well as different existing short stories for kids. I used existing short stories, which students had to listen to and then build the story accordingly using LEGO classic.

The story building and storytelling tasks were chosen according to the group's language level and interests. Thus, the resulting syllabus was quite flexible since it depended mostly on the language level of the students joining the course and their interests (e.g., stories related to “space” for a group of boys).

Each session lasted for two hours with a short break in between, for five days a week. Students would build approximately 10 stories per week. At the beginning of each session, students were given the prompts to take into

account throughout the story building and storytelling phases. Also, during the story building phase, students themselves asked for very specific vocabulary as well as language structures to be used. Therefore, the students used both the vocabulary I had suggested but most often they used language structures which they considered appropriate for their individual stories. The following types of activities were used during each session:

2.1. Storyboards

Students watched or listened to a given story and then they had to create storyboard images in order to represent the story. Thus, students felt more confident to build a familiar story or to be involved in a task which did not require them to build a narrative on their own. This type of task enabled students to be more focused on the language they heard and on the teacher's questions related to the story. Once the students finished building, they would have to answer questions about the story, characters, setting. This task was more appropriate for lower level students since they needed considerable scaffolding. Both the LEGO Story Starter Set and LEGO classic were used for this task.

2.2. Beginning/Middle/End

For this activity I used the LEGO Story Starter Set which includes ideas to build stories on a variety of topics. The Story Starter Set also enabled students to build narratives using fantasy characters and props. Students had to build a narrative based on given prompts, making sure that their story has all the three parts of a story: beginning, middle, end. This task was more creative as it enabled students to use their imagination in order to build a narrative followed by storytelling. This task was more appropriate for A2 level students.

2.3. Can you build it?

In order to enable students to better describe their characters, animals or

buildings, they were shown different models to follow. The focus of this activity was on the use of descriptive language while focusing only on the building of one item at a time. This task enabled students to pay more attention to individual item building as well as to the use of various language structures for descriptions. This type of task was mainly used as a warm-up activity.

2.4. Creative story telling

Students could also build a story entirely on their own. This type of task was usually given at the end of a one-week course as students became more familiar with both the building and the storytelling phases.

2.5. Everyday storytelling

This activity was used as a warm-up, students had to quickly build an everyday activity allowing them to share personal experiences through play and talk about them. It also enhanced inter-student communication and was suitable for both A1 and A2 learners.

3. Theoretical Framework

The current study was informed by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Littlewood, 1981) which takes into account the communicative potential of language, having as a final goal the notion of communicative competence. I chose this framework as CLT focuses on the functions of language. According to Halliday (2003, apud Richards & Rodgers, 2003, p.160), there are seven functions below which children develop when learning their native language:

1. The instrumental function: using language to get things.
2. The regulatory function: using language to control the behavior of others.
3. The interactional function: using languages to create interaction with others.
4. The personal function: using language to express personal feelings and meanings.

5. The heuristic function: using language to learn and discover.
6. The imaginative function: using language to create a world of imagination.
7. The representational function: using language to communicate information.

I consider that all of the above functions can be traceable in the context of a storytelling task which takes place in a formal learning context enabling students to develop their communicative competence in a natural way.

Accordingly, the course was designed on the basis of the above communicative functions, focusing on language in use, making “communication competence the goal of language teaching” (Richards & Rodgers, 2003, p.155). Within the CLT framework, the role of teachers and learners changed, instruction being more learner-centered, the teacher being the monitor and facilitator of the learning process. As to the role of learners, within this approach, learners are expected to interact with one another being engaged in cooperative tasks and also involved in the process of learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2003).

4. Methodology

Action research was the methodology approach used in the current study. Action research is a cyclical or spiraling process that integrates theory with practice through reflection and action planning. The process of action research includes four steps: posing research questions, collecting data, analyzing data and reflecting/reporting results (Altrichter, Feldman, Posch & Somekh, 2007). Therefore, the current study is framed as an action research study integrating teacher’s action, the teacher conducted the course and collected the data in order to find out the answer to specific research questions. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively and finally some reflections based on the data were discussed. This approach to research was considered the most appropriate since it allowed the teacher to be part of the research process. (Burns, 1999).

4.1. Data collection procedure and analysis

The two techniques used for data collection were classroom observation and video documenting of the stories created by students. The stories were transcribed by the teacher using a standard transcription scheme whereas teacher's observation sheets were also used. A number of 15 stories were video documented in six weeks, however for the purposes of the current study, only 5 stories were analyzed. The stories are analyzed based on language productivity (the vocabulary and language structures used), story representation (the documented photo of the stories) as well as overall performance and engagement in the task.

Story1: The haunted house, Philip (A2, 10 years old), individual story

This is the haunted house in the town and there are many...there are many people that want get close to it. .but when (pause) Jenny (pause) lost her cat and seen the cat running there, she went there. She went to the house to take her kitty back. She went...she went and tried to enter but when she seemed that was a trap....a....another trap pushed her on the trap slide but the witch and the cat are nearby and she took the cat but getting in the witch's trap. But when the witch came and opened the chamber, the cat jumped on her and Jenny escaped and then she took the cat and she get back home and after she seen the witch a..getting..leaving on her broomstick.



Figure no. 1: *The haunted house*

In the story above, Philip had to build a narrative based on a given beginning. Philip had to continue the story and find a solution for Jenny and her cat. As to Philip's language productivity, he used the vocabulary related to the topic of the story and did not ask for any vocabulary support throughout the storytelling phase. As he was telling the story, Philip also played with the characters in the story in a very natural way. In terms of grammar, Philip used several past tenses correctly without any support from the teacher. He also used 127 words in his story and the sentences range from simple to more complex, the outline of his story is easy to follow. The recording showed that the pace of storytelling was normal, without interruptions, which indicates that Philip was in a state of flow while telling the story. As far as the story representation, Philip used fantasy characters and objects (e.g., the witch, the flying broomstick) but he did not build unnecessary scenery on his board and he used and mentioned all the elements in the story during storytelling. The tone and the pace during storytelling suggest that Philip was very engaged in the task. Overall, his performance was very good.

*Story 2: Larry's escape, David, (A2, 8 years old),
Rob (Pre A1, 8 years old), pair work*

D: David escaped from the jail and gived a magic potion to the police and then it slept. Then he took one of its clothes and put its clothes on him. Then when they woke up, the police arrested the other one because he thought he was Larry.

R: The Larry.... (pause)

D: Then Larry went to Mrs Lopez and stoled her...dinner service (pause, the word "dinner service", given by the teacher).

R: The Lopez telephone the police...the police...the car...The police come...arrest

T: Who is in the car?

R: The policeman, the Larry

T: Where was Larry when the police arrested him, David?

D: He was hiding behind a rock then another police car and saw Larry behind the rock. Then he gone and catch him and arrest him.



Figure no. 2. Larry's escape

In the story above, David and Rob had to build the story on three separate plates, indicating the beginning, the middle and the end of the story. As to language productivity, David used vocabulary related to the story, however, Rob was not able to produce too much vocabulary, needing the support of the teacher. David also used past tense simple and continuous and a total of 106 words in the story, David's sentences were quite complex, whereas Rob did not produce too much language during the storytelling phase. Rob was very engaged during the building phase and he picked up vocabulary related to the story props and characters. As to the story representation, they both used the right props to build the story and overall, they engaged in the production of the story. The pace of the story was slower, given the fact that Rob had difficulties in telling the story. Also, another aspect to take into account is the relationship between student's proficiency level and student assertiveness. In the case of David, his level was A2, however, he also needed to be prompted in class although he had the necessary language to tell the stories he built. Rob, on the other hand, was more assertive than David, and throughout the two-week course he made considerable effort to retain and use vocabulary related to the stories he built. However, his production was limited to word level only.

Story 3: Our holiday (Alexandra, 9 years old, A2)

The family got a lucky envelope. The dad go to take it and in the envelope ..it was written (structure provided by the teacher) “They won a holiday” ...and they are arguing where to go. Mum say “I want to go at the big city and father say I want to go camping..and brother say I want to go to the seaside”. And the phone ring and Daria go to pick up the phone and people asked “Where do you want to go?” And Daria say “We don’t know yet.” And she close the phone and say to her family. Mum say “I have an idea”: We can go to Mamaia because Daria can swim, I can go shopping, Ahmet can eat very much food, and the dad can stay at the beach and Daria go to the phone and she call the people and say “We want to go to Mamaia” and they put things in the car and they go to Mamaia. And then Daria going to swim, and Ahmet pick money with mum to go shopping and dad stayed on the beach.



Figure no. 3. Our holiday

Alexandra worked individually to build the story “Our holiday”, starting from the prompt “You won a holiday.” She used the given prompt, but chose freely the time and setting, the characters and the props. She used the necessary vocabulary to complete the task and she also direct speech in the storytelling phase, which is very similar to children’s everyday play contexts.

Alexandra is not able to use the tenses very accurately, however during the storytelling phase she showed great confidence while telling the story. In terms of story representation, the picture shows the setting of the story and the characters she built. The recording indicated that the pace of the story was quite fast, which suggested engagement in the task but also the fact that she entered a state of flow while telling the story. This student was also very assertive and active in class but she preferred to build stories individually.

Story 4: *Pick me, Pick me (Mary, 9 years old, A1-A2)*

The black knight and the white knight go to the princess and say: “Pick me, pick me” and the princess didn’t know and go to our house and a fairy transformed into a granny and go to the black knight and say: “Can I stay one night because I’m tired?” “No, go away”, he said, and the granny go to the white knight and say “Can I stay one night because I’m very tired? Yes. Thank you.” And the granny transformed into a fairy and say to the princess. And the princess go to the white knight and married him.



Figure no. 4. *Pick me, pick me!*

The story above was based on a given beginning, the student had to continue the story using her own imagination. The story has 100 words and it uses mostly direct speech, the student also played with the characters on the story board while telling the story. She also tried to use tenses accurately. The outline of the story is easy to follow, the pace of the story was normal and the student's attitude indicated engagement in the task. Overall her performance in the task was successful, she also preferred to build and work individually.

Story 5: Creative storytelling (Andrew, 8 years old, A2)

A time in the castle it's a wizard, he looking everywhere. He's got a super big magic wand and it's a policeman in that castle with a flower. The flower is given to the girl. The girl is not a normal girl, it's a princess. An bad man is escaping and takes an sword, that's the knight's sword. He attacks that man very angry and he's got an friend, but the friend is dead; is coming a bat, the bat is killing the bad man. She takes the sword, it's going back the sword. The king is very sad. There, a fool man is in the castle. It's angry, the man is attacking the fool man and the princess is happy. The princess is going to take the baby wizard and an guard is going here. And the guards very angry. The baby wizard and his hands he puts this...handcuffs, and the wizard going away, the bat is taking the handcuffs.



Figure no. 5. Creative storytelling

The story above was told by Andrew, a student who enjoyed fantasy stories and telling stories in general. As to language productivity, his story is 161

words long and the vocabulary he used was appropriate for the chosen topic of the story. Unlike the other stories, he also used descriptive language (e.g. “super big magic wand”, “a fool man”) and made an effort to give more details related to the setting, characters and actions in the story. As to grammar, the student used a wide range of language structures, such as *the passive voice*, *present simple and continuous* and *going to future*. The recording shows that his storytelling pace was quite fast, showing a lot of engagement during the storytelling phase and the desire to go on with the story for longer, as children normally do in play situations.

5. Discussion

5.1. Students’ engagement in the tasks

The data collected from both teacher observation and from the documented stories indicated that students were engaged in the storytelling task and tried to perform to the best of their abilities. Students liked LEGO in particular and they enjoyed the building phase of each session which had an impact on their performance in the storytelling phase. However, there are other factors that account for students’ performance in the tasks, such as students’ English level, their degree of assertiveness and also their general interest in telling stories.

Likewise, based on the data and my observation, students’ engagement was also connected to the environment, the context where the learning activity took place. In the case of the current study, the context was entirely connected to the children’s world of play, which is very meaningful for young learners. Children learn new words in the context in which they encounter them and they have more chances to retain those words and language structure if they encounter them again in the same context (Cojocnean, 2017). Therefore, the more they learn in a context which is familiar to students, the more engaged they are in the task and the more likely it is that their performance is more satisfactory. Also, given the fact that young learners felt at ease during the sessions, displaying confidence and enjoyment, indicates that learning activities were perceived in a very positive way.

5.2. Overcoming language challenges

One of the challenges I observed was students' struggle to build narratives similar to the ones they would produce in their native language. Young learners tend to be very creative in their play and in the case of the current study, they tried very often to build more than they could talk about. Therefore, lower level students had difficulties during the storytelling phase. However, these difficulties could be overcome with prompting and scaffolding. In the case of lower level students, their progress was recorded at word level only. By the end of a two-week course, they were not able to tell a story, but they were able to name the characters, the setting and the props used on their building plate and also to answer questions about their stories. This outcome was possible since the teacher had to monitor only one small group per session, which enabled her to provide the necessary support individually.

Also, while working with monolingual groups, the main challenge was to prevent them using their L1 as much as possible. This challenge was manageable since the tasks were all given in English, teacher-student communication was most of the time in English and students had individual storytelling tasks.

Another significant challenge was monitoring students' performance in collaborative tasks or pair work. Based on my observation and students' performance, the participants performed better individually than when working in pairs or small groups, being able to focus more on their individual story. Moreover, the most assertive students tend to dominate the group/pair, making it thus even more challenging for lower level students to contribute in the task.

5.3. Language learning benefits

Given the fact that the activities during the course were part of a summer course, with the focus on developing oral skills, fluency and confidence during speaking activities, there was no particular focus on teaching certain vocabulary or certain language structures, the students learnt new words as

they needed in their stories, most often students would ask for the vocabulary they needed. This proved to be very efficient since students gained special interest in particular words, which increased their retention chances. Moreover, by learning words and structures in the context of play, learners became more motivated to retain those words.

Another positive outcome is the fact that young learners practiced their oral skills but also used their imagination to create stories in a foreign language. At their age, stories and play are much closer to their universe, which facilitates learning in context. Therefore, developing oral fluency and building confidence during speaking activities are benefits to take into account when using LEGO during storytelling activities.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, the current paper showed how English teachers could make use of LEGO when focusing on developing young learners' oral skills and fluency during storytelling activities. The paper also indicated that students' engagement in the storytelling tasks was related to their language proficiency, level of assertiveness but also to their particular interest in LEGO and stories. The use of LEGO sets created a learning context which had positive feedback on students' engagement and motivation in the tasks, bridging the gap between informal and formal learning contexts. The current paper indicated how the use of LEGO in EFL tasks could help learners strengthen their speaking, listening, role-playing and storytelling skills as well as build on their confidence and imagination.

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