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TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH STORIES: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A HANDY PARALLEL SYLLABUS

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Abstract

The paper is based on the conviction that stories, apart from being every young child's bedtime friend, can become every young learner's school time treasure. Moving within the context of English language teaching in Primary schools in Greece through a compulsory course book (*Fun Way* series), the paper identifies a mismatch between what is considered as good primary practice and what is realized in practice through the use of stories inside the course book. A parallel, story based syllabus is developed, which aims to cater for the problems conceived, and the theory behind it is presented in order to justify the selection of both the framework and the materials. Andrews (2000:3) uses the term "framework" to 'refer to a diagrammatic representation of a course outline or plan' and this is also the view of "framework" adopted in this paper. The paper also analytically presents seven teaching sessions within the framework and alternative assessment for one. The framework will be presented and evaluated in relation to the theories about how children think and learn and about acquisition/learning of L1 and L2. Suggestions will be made for improving and further developing the framework.

The teaching situation

Greek State Policy regarding English language teaching

The Greek State's policy regarding foreign language education is reflected in the *Comprehensive 6-year Curriculum for the Teaching of English* (1997:65-66). English as a foreign language to be taught to and learned by Greek students is given "first priority", one main reason being that

'...it is the mother tongue of several largely populated countries ...whose peoples enjoy a high level of technological, economic and cultural development'.

Rixon (1999) presents a wide variety of Young Learner teaching situations and also identifies the situation in Greece as one where 'English enjoys popularity and high prestige' (1999: vii). In practice the situation is as follows: English is not the principal language in the country but it holds a prominent position (it is a strong asset for getting a job, it is a language of communication in tourism and business). The children do not hear it used much around them in everyday situations as subject teaching/learning is conducted in L1. However, the media and technology (computers, computer games, CD's) provide increasingly more chances for children to contact the language.

English Language teaching status

Teaching English in the private language school sector has been an industry for many decades and, for the past decade, English as a foreign language is being

taught within the State school system also. The lessons come in 50-minute periods three times a week. The teacher of English does not teach other subjects and uses an ELT syllabus for which the textbook is the main provider and very often the only resource. The materials used for instruction is the series *Fun Way* (1, 2, 3 for the 4th, 5th, 6th grades respectively) which consist of a Student's book, a Workbook, a Teacher's book and an audio cassette. The books are written by Greek authors. They are provided to the students by the State; the teachers cannot substitute *Fun Way* with a different course book, but are not restricted to the use of extra material, provided they find the resources to generate or reproduce it. Two years ago the innovation of teaching English language to students of the third grade (8 year olds) was introduced and teachers can choose for this class a course book from a list of approved books published by ELT Publishing Houses.

Getting to the framework

Identifying an area in need of adaptation/ development

For a course to have a coherence of purpose, it is impertinent that the aims and objectives of the Syllabus 'are not contradicted at the classroom level' (Nunan 1988:96). Therefore, in order to identify an area in the teaching material that would need further development, a cross reference had to be made between *The Comprehensive 6-year Curriculum for the Teaching of English*, the Syllabus Document, requirements and the way these are realized in the textbooks and Teacher's Book. Three steps were taken to this end:

1. The leading Syllabus aims were isolated. These were identified as follows: a. the Syllabus Document adopts a communicative framework where 'knowledge is a learning experience ... that results from a process which requires the activation of cognitive, social and functional skills' (Syllabus Document: 71-72), b. a learner centered teaching/learning approach is adopted and considerable attention is given to the conceptual and psychological development of the target audience. The latter statement proves the State's concern about the degree of impact that the age and cognitive development of children should exercise upon the curriculum.
2. A story incorporated in the course book was examined, "Bong's story", first as a story in itself and, then, as a story used for instruction. The course book writers, being aware of the importance of stories as a tool in teaching the language in a context familiar to the child, decided to realize the State aims by incorporating this story in *Fun Way 1*.
3. The comparative analysis, between the Syllabus demands and the way these could be developed through a story-based syllabus, provided the rationale for the development of the parallel syllabus that is presented in the paper.

Target group, class profile

The writer of this paper conducted the series of observed lessons with the 4th grade class of the 2nd Public Primary School of Volos. The class consists of twenty native Greek students (twelve girls and eight boys) all of which are monolingual. They are about 10 years old. Sixteen of the students have also been learning English in a private language school for 1 or even 2 years. Two students only study English at school. The main course book used is *Fun Way 1*.

The way these learners are taught the different subjects at school in their mother tongue reflects an attitude towards learning the *language* and not learning *through* language. Unavoidably this attitude becomes deeply rooted and forms their expectations in learning the second language also. Teaching contextualized language and developing cognitive awareness through stories is not considered as an effective language teaching methodology for Greek subjects. Literary texts in general are used as a basis for teaching

structure and developing grammar drills. The story-based approach is not normally adopted in private language schools either.

Teaching children of this age is not easy, but it is certainly challenging. Brewster insists that one of the seven main features of good primary practice is ‘reading literature for enjoyment, responding to it critically and using that reading for learning’ (1991:5). However “comforting” it might be for the teachers to be ‘in charge of the proceedings’ (Skehan 1996:17) with a traditional model of teaching, they should not ignore that stories are made for children and that young learners are also children. An area, therefore, which is less developed, is the possibility of using children’s stories for the production of a wide variety of language and learning activities. These can lay the foundations for the development of more positive attitudes towards the foreign language and language learning.

Why use stories?

Ellis and Brewster (1991) give several reasons why teachers should use storybooks.

- Storybooks can enrich the pupils’ learning experience. Stories are motivating and fun and can help develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language.
- Stories exercise the imagination and are a useful tool in linking fantasy and the imagination with the child’s real world.
- Listening to stories in class is a shared social experience.
- Children enjoy listening to stories over and over again. This repetition allows language items to be acquired and reinforced.
- Listening to stories develops the child’s listening and concentrating skills.
- Stories create opportunities for developing continuity in children’s learning (among others, school subjects across the curriculum)

(Adapted from Ellis and Brewster 1991:1-2)

The question arises, then, of what we mean by “stories”. Children have already formed their schema of what a story is since early childhood. Within the family environment children have had numerous opportunities to listen to stories being read to them, to hold and discover the world of the colorful pictures and, later, to make efforts to “decode” the letters and sounds until they make sense to them as words and sentences. Teachers can choose from a wide range of storybooks of this kind: traditional stories and fairy tales which are common in most European cultures (*Snow White* or *Little Red Riding Hood* for example); picture stories where children can build up their own version of the story; fantasy stories; animal stories. Alternatively, many authentic storybooks written for English speaking children are suitable for use in an EFL classroom. The advantage is that they bring the ‘real’ world in the classroom and they are an excellent opportunity for providing our students with examples of authentic language use. For the story-based syllabus, which will supplement the existing framework, three stories were selected: *Where’s Spot*, *Spot’s Birthday*, by Hill E., and *Meg and Mog* by Nicoll E. and Pienkowski J.,

There are several criteria a teacher could use for selecting a story that would be accessible and relevant for her learners. The successful choice, however, is not enough to ensure the good use of a story in class. The activities designed for each story and the exploitation of the rich material in the story itself are very important also. The table below shows which of the criteria for selecting stories “Bong’s story” fulfills, and which of these criteria are actually exploited by the way this story is to be taught if we follow the writers’ guidelines in the Teacher’s Book.

Criteria for the selection of stories	Bong’s story	
		Fulfills

appropriate language level (vocabulary, structures, notions/ functions)	✓	✗
content (interesting, fun, motivating, memorable, encourages participation)	✓	✗
visuals (attractive, potential to work with, size)	✓	✗
pronunciation (intonation, rhythm, repetition)	✓	✗
motivation (develop imagination, arouse curiosity, draw on personal experience)	✓	✗
Language learning potential (skills development, language practice, recycling, prediction, other strategies)	✓	✗
potential in terms of learning other subjects, target/other culture, metacognition	✓	✗

The table reveals that “Bong’s story” has great potential for use in class but this potential is not exploited, although it could be transformed in a useful teaching tool. To cover up for the lack of using a story productively, the parallel syllabus will prove extremely handy.

The story-based framework in class

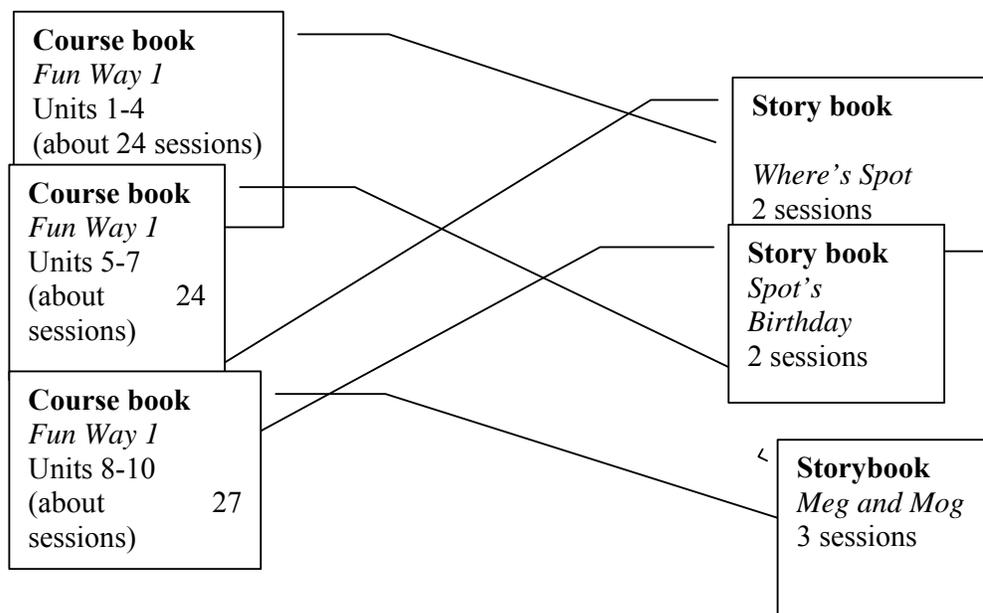
The selection of stories and their position in the parallel syllabus

The three stories selected are authentic ones, in the sense that they were originally written for English speaking children. The language is not selected or graded; however, they contain language traditionally found in most beginner syllabuses. Each story has different aims to accomplish within the parallel syllabus depending on its content, language features and activities. The two syllabuses, main and parallel, need to run in tandem, since the parallel syllabus is used as supplementary to the main. For this reason the stories have a rather fixed position within the main syllabus of the class, the position dictated by the amount of language, skills and strategies developed up to the point each story is introduced. Because the students will be working with a story-based syllabus for the first time, the decision was made that they would not have to work extensively on acquiring new language and structure (the course book does plenty on this!), but it would be more profitable for them to focus on other -more ‘original’- aspects of language learning through stories.

The diagram shows the interweaving of the two syllabuses. First, the number of English sessions per year were calculated; then the two syllabuses were considered in detail in order to find the points where the parallel syllabus could best fit in; after that, the sessions were estimated that should be devoted to each Unit of instruction in *Fun Way 1*; last the whole syllabus was put together as a year-plan for the specific group of learners. This organizing of the teaching material does not imply that it is rigid. The teacher may predict possible problems and provide for them in advance, but one may not predict everything. If such an unpredictable situation should arrive, the solution is simple and dictated by the Syllabus Document itself. What applies to the syllabus of Primary school in general, is that it is not compulsory to cover the whole material in the course books. The Document provides a catalogue of the language, functions, notions, strategies e.t.c., that a learner should acquire within the three years of EFL learning in Primary education and does not restrict the teacher to the use of *extra material*, as long as the syllabus can be covered.

The first story, *Where’s Spot*, is an easy one and appears as soon as students have acquired the basic language to work with it. The other stories appear in relevant positions where more language and structures have been acquired.

The story-based parallel syllabus



Description and rationale for the framework

The story-based framework is designed to show students how the language, they have already learnt, is used in a different context alternative to the course book. It aims to create a productive environment where the students will develop their whole personality. Learners are expected to start developing a more positive attitude to learning the foreign language for the following reasons:

1. The stories are memorable, as the language is repeated, and this encourages students to participate. This recycling of patterns incites students to predict what is coming next in the story and, at the same time, exercises their imagination.
2. The pictures are closely related to the text, sometimes they even structure the text (see *Meg and Mog* going down the stairs, where the text appears going down the stairs also). This can support the learners' understanding. The strategy of inferring meaning of words from the text is also supported by the illustrations. The colors, the simple shapes and figures do not distract the learners but rather guide them to key points of the texts. Another merit of this kind of illustrations is that they are easy to imitate or copy, so it comes natural for many creative activities to fit in the framework.
3. The stories are expected to motivate the learners and arouse their curiosity about the target language and its culture. The fact that Spot's stories are also well known in Greece (they have been translated and published), indicates that some of the children may have read them in their mother tongue. This, far from being discouraging for the selection of the stories, was actually one of the reasons for choosing them for this framework: making such associations with the children of the other culture is welcoming, so that learners discover by themselves that they can have many things in common.

The activities follow the following guidelines in their design. The development of the guidelines are based on the theories of how children think and learn and owe much to the

work of Wood (1998) and the edition of *Teaching English to children* by Brumfit, Moon and Tongue (1995).

DESIGN PRINCIPLES	RESULT
they are enjoyable/motivating	create a desire to continue learning
they exercise imagination	development of useful strategies (predicting, hypothesizing, planning, sequencing, classifying)
they exemplify language features in use	real life use of language
they allow frequent repetition	language items are acquired/reinforced
they build up the child's confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • non-threatening context for learning • familiar genre raises background knowledge
they encourage social interaction/social skills	pair/group work, cooperation/sharing
they present/practice through concrete objects, following the child's conceptual development	illustrations, visuals, touch-and-see things enhance comprehension/long term memory
they exploit the child's enormous amount of physical energy	action games, action songs, creative activities are ways to learn-by doing
they consider the short concentration span of a child at this age	planning feasible lessons, good management of the class

This story-based syllabus places a lot of attention to the development of areas which are rather neglected in the main syllabus for the class. An area that can prove a source of wealth for our learners is that of "learning to learn". Ellis insists that 'in order to develop an awareness of learning and learner responsibility, learning-to-learn should be built into the curriculum in an explicit and systematic way' (Ellis, 1991:191). Learners can be guided to reflect on the process of learning even if they are young. Students of the age of 8-10 are beginning to develop greater self-awareness and can take responsibility of their learning. Small scale Portfolios, simple questionnaires or learners' diaries can be designed to increase the students' metacognitive awareness and could also serve as ways of alternative assessment/evaluation of both the students' achievements and the program's effectiveness. The parallel syllabus makes an effort to link the stories with cross-thematic learning. There are many areas in the curriculum where links can be made. Telling the time, counting, numbers, shapes, relate to Mathematics; the life cycle of animals, outer space, understanding the passing of time relate to Science; food, Nature relate to Environmental Education; action songs and games relate to Physical Education.

The story-based syllabus can raise cultural awareness issues. A carefully selected story can give information about life in the target language. In this syllabus *Spot's birthday* and *Meg and Mog* inform about birthday celebrations and Halloween in the target language culture. Discussions can be held (probably in the mother tongue), projects and surveys among other community members of the target culture can be arranged. In this way learners become aware that learning can be an experience of their everyday life, which is not confined to the school environment only.

The lesson plans illustrate in practice the use made of each story.

<i>Where's Spot</i> by Eric Hill, publication by Puffin Books		
Two teaching sessions		
SYLLABUS		
Main concept : spatial context		
Aims	Let's meet Spot (session 1)	Spot in our class! (session 2)
Structural/ Functional aims	Simple present prepositions	Interrogative forms (yes/no questions) Wh- questions Statements with the verb <i>to be</i>
Skills	Listening to the story, to instructions and statements, questions and answers, games	Listening to the story, to instructions and statements, questions and answers

	Responding to instructions/prompts Reading: words and sentences	Speaking: asking and answering questions, games, role-play Reading: retelling the story with prompts Writing: copying games, gap-filling
Language features	Verbs: imperative. Simple present of the verb <i>to be</i> Yes/No questions (interrogative) negative-affirmative answers prepositions of place (on, in, inside, under, behind, in front of)	Recycling
vocabulary	Animals: revision (dog, puppy, bear, snake, lion, monkey, crocodile); new (hippopotamus, tortoise) Birds: revision (penguin) Furniture: revision (armchair, door, wardrobe, bed, table) Objects: revision (box, basket, telephone); new (clock, piano, stairs, rug, vase)	Recycling vocabulary
Creative activities	Drawing, singing	Drawing, dramatization (role-play)
Learning to learn	Predicting, developing memory	sequencing pictures, developing memory
Curriculum links	Environment: life of a pet	
Activities	Introducing/revising vocabulary: listen and arrange pictures of animals Miming and discovering animals “What’s missing” game with furniture Action game: following instructions with prepositions (e.g. Stand on the chair) Practice/production of key structures * follow up for action game: Ss take positions in class and T guesses * work with story pictures: gradually develop memory (e.g. Is Spot in the wardrobe?) and prediction skills (e.g. Who is behind the wardrobe?) <u>Song</u> (Hockey Cockey) <u>Worksheet</u> (room with furniture/objects) Follow instructions and draw the animals in their place in the room	Group work: Sequencing game/listening/ <u>memory</u> : Ss put pictures of the story in the right order, then T reads and Ss verify/correct their sequence <u>Pair work/information gap activity</u> : <u>Worksheet</u> (pictures of furniture, one S has the complete pictures): Ss ask/answer and draw the animals in the right place according to their peer’s instructions <u>Writing</u> : copying game: Ss choose from lists on the board and complete worksheet <u>Retelling of story</u> : T uses prompts on the board and Ss reconstruct the story by relating the pictures in the story book to the questions/prompts on the board <u>Optional: Role-play</u> : Roles: child, mother and dog. Child can’t find his dog and asks questions to mother.

Spot’s birthday by Eric Hill, publication Puffin Books

Two teaching sessions

SYLLABUS

Main concepts:

Aims	Oops! Spot again (session 1)	What a party! (session 2)
Structural/ Functional aims	Imperative, possessives, articles	imperative
Skills	Listening to story/instructions, questions, answers Speaking: interviewing, questions and answers Reading chart (birthday dates) Writing completing chart	Listening to words in Bingo game Speaking: singing birthday song, party reception Reading invitations
Language features	Simple present, simple past, Interrogative, Yes/No questions Prepositions (in, on, inside, under)	Simple present, simple past Wh-questions Prepositions (behind, in front of)
vocabulary	Animals, house places (recycling from <i>Where’s Spot</i> : rug, curtain, door, plant, cupboard, bath, coat) Numbers (cardinals and ordinals) Months, days	recycling
Creative activities	Make birthday cards/invitations for the party	Put party decorations
Learning to learn	Preparing a party-discussion/decision-making Classifying	Making arrangements, following plans
Cultural elements	Celebrating birthdays in two countries	Celebrating the ‘English’ way
Curriculum links	Maths: numbers and quantity, Music: singing songs	Dramatization of the story: real life party/activities Physical education: moving around, understanding spatial context

Activities	Interview: Ss find out peers' birthdays, list them as for each month and closest birthdays Sing 'Happy Birthday' Prepare birthday party (decide on number of people for the party, make invitations, make preparations for food, drinks)	Bingo game, party games: action games, Simon says..., find the treasure
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<i>Meg and Mog</i> by Nicoll and Pienkowski, publications Puffin Books			
Three teaching sessions			
SYLLABUS			
Main concepts: colors, size and shape, time			
Aims	Let's meet Meg, Mog and the Owl (session 1)	Poor Meg!!! (session 2)	Poor me!!!! (session 3)
Structural/ Functional aims	Asking for and giving information using Yes/No and Wh-questions Describing clothes, people	Giving instructions Asking for and telling the time	Telling the time
Skills	Listening for general understanding using visual clues Speaking: asking and answering questions, describing Reading: word flashcards	Listening to instructions Speaking: imitating spells Reading: dictionary Writing: copying, recipes Listen to the story on the cassette and follow book	Listening to instructions Speaking: giving instructions Reading: food package, recipes Writing: copying
Language features	Adjectives (big, black, long, tall, striped, straight, curly)- word order Verbs (to hook, to make or chant a spell)	Recycling of first session, further practice	Recycling and transferring to another context (food recipe)
vocabulary	Food: revision (eggs, bread, milk, jam); new (kipper, cocoa) Animals: revision (cat, spider, frog, bat, mouse); new (beetle, worm) Clothes: revision (shoes, hat, stocking); new (cloak) Broomstick, cauldron	Recycling of first session, further practice	Recycling and extension
Creative activities	singing	Drawing, puppet making	Making a cake
Learning to learn	Classifying, sequencing	Predicting, hypothesizing, using dictionary	Memory training
Cultural elements	The image of witches in the two cultures	Food in another country (breakfast ingredients)	
Curriculum links	Science: life cycle of animals	Mathematics: telling the time	Environment: food
Activities	<u>Revise vocabulary</u> : clothes: ask and answer about clothes pupils are wearing Animals: describe your pet Food: what's your favorite food <u>Picture dictation</u> : Meg's picture to describe <u>Listening dictation</u> : listen and draw Meg	Use puppets: to retell the story, to make prompts for writing a small version of the story Rebus: give sentences with words at random order, Ss put them in order Listen to the story on the cassette	Visit the school canteen and make the cake!

The activities within a learner centered environment

Brewster rightfully claims that 'inclusion of a variety of teaching styles is a realistic reflection of what actually goes on in primary schools' (Brewster, 1991:5). The story itself and the activities, built within the corpus of the text, are the structuring components of the lesson. The stages of the lesson, where extra activities can be inserted, are clearly defined. In this way, the context assumes great importance; young learners can more readily make associations between the language needed and the language produced, because we provide them with a coherent context, where language and structures are not used for their own

sake but have a target. Children can thus store new knowledge more easily and retrieve it when they find themselves in a similar context.

The different activities for each session act as a guide for the organization of individual/pair/group work. Children's stages of development, according to Piaget, play an important role in how they learn. The target group for the sessions exemplified have just gone beyond the beginnings of the "operational stage" (where the social instinct starts developing) and which occurs 'towards the age of 7 or 8' (Wood 1998: 28, see also Brumfit 1991:2). These learners are now at the stage where in Vygotsky's view, 'speech comes to form the higher mental processes which are culturally formed in social interaction' (Brewster 1991:3). Therefore, in order to follow the children's conceptual development, the teacher must provide for alternative organizational patterns for her class. Not all children develop at the same speed and it is certain that each child has a different style in learning and a unique personality.

The different stages were designed with Halliwell's suggestion in mind that 'children cannot concentrate on one thing for a long period and lessons should, therefore, be divided into series of activities lasting no longer than 5 or 10 minutes' (Halliwell 1992:27). The projects and surveys suggested may last much longer. Students can work alone or in groups outside the school in their free time; this reinforces the idea that learning English is not restricted to the classroom environment but connects to their everyday life.

The pictures have a central role to play in the story-based syllabus and the learning-to-learn process. They can be a stimulus for forming hypothesis, predicting, sequencing and exercising memory. Words are better associated with pictures. In addition, a story is more memorable if it can be related to a sequence of pictures. This quality of theirs makes pictures a useful tool for the design of activities, especially oral or written ones. They can help in practicing speaking and writings skills: the story can be reconstructed orally or on paper (guided tasks) with the help of key-visuals from the storybook. Moreover, they can provide high face and content validity as stimuli for pure writing or speaking tasks in a conventional testing situation (if the teacher chooses this kind of assessment).

Alternative assessment (see appendix)

The way of alternative assessment that can be devised for the teaching sessions is the *Portfolio* style assessment. This develops students' critical learning perspective. It prompts students to reflect on what they have learnt in each story-based session. No mark will be awarded for the students' performance, as this will impede with the relationship we want to develop between the students and literature in general; we do not want students to aim at grades. The *Portfolio* designed to exemplify this kind of assessment for one of the stories, is produced according to the guidelines of the European Council's Education Committee as these are described in *The European language Portfolio: a Guide for Teachers and Teacher Trainers*. It is a procedure of self -assessment where students record their achievements. Apart from the sections which relate to language learning, a second section is inserted where the students may record their reaction to the material itself, -if they liked the story, the illustrations and the activities. The *Portfolio* can be of great use to the teacher and has both wash-back and wash-forward effects. The teacher can:

- trace and record the learners' individual progress
- prepare remedial lessons for common problems detected
- measure the students' reaction to the introduction of innovative methods in teaching
- evaluate the course of the story-based syllabus with the specific teaching groups and trace the areas in need for adaptations

- evaluate the story-based syllabus and the teaching material and make adaptations/developments

It can be of value for the learners:

- they have a concrete image of their areas of achievements/weaknesses
- they can gain self-esteem when they see the number of things they have achieved, even if this is small (“something is better than nothing”)

Parents may also benefit in that they get more involved with their children’s life in school when they are allowed to participate in one way or another (for example, help their children with out-of-school projects). They can also be in a position to evaluate their child’s work in a more objective way.

What about a useful piece of advice to teachers?

Don’t forget the stories as soon as you have worked with them, they have even more to offer. Begin certain sessions (the first of each week for example) with a re-reading of the story as a warm up activity. Children enjoy reading over and over again the same stories. Have a copy of the book handy, so that the students can read and touch it in their free time. This may make their relationship with books stronger.

Conclusion

A story-based framework of teaching and learning can become a very powerful tool in the hands of a teacher. A well-organized story session can intrigue the students and make them want to explore many features of the language. As teachers, we want to make our students autonomous, lifelong learners. We will have made a large step towards this aim if we make them learn consciously and assume responsibility for their learning.

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Course book

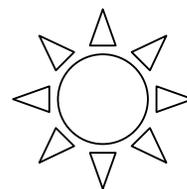
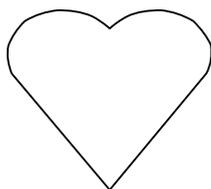
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APPENDIX

Where's Spot?

What I achieved with my friend Spot



Name:

I can

 Say

Names of

animals

Date

Ask and answer

“where”

Date

Furniture

Date

Ask questions
with “Is.....?”

Date

Use
prepositions

Date

Words for
things

Date

Act out my
mum looking
for me!

Date

I can sing

1. **“Hockey, cockey”** Date:

2. The **“cat, rat, dog, frog”** Date:

I can

Write 

Names of animals
Date

**Ask and answer
“where”**
Date

Furniture
Date

**Ask questions
with “Is.....?”**
Date

**Words for
things**
Date

**Use
prepositions**
Date



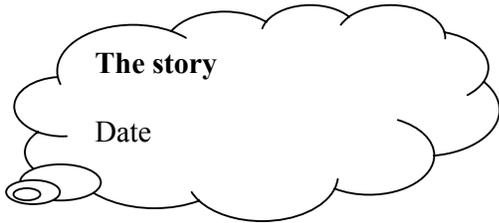
I can

Understand

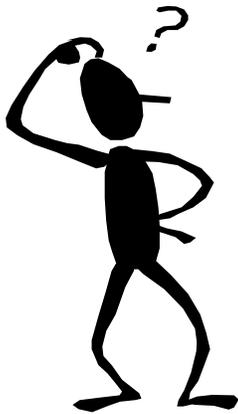
**The life of a pet in the
house**
Date

**How to work with my
partners**
Date

Read 



My "score" :



Date

Not very comfortable yet



Date

Ok



Date

I did it!



Date

I'm a star!!!! Well done me!!!!!!!!!!!!!!