

Storyline: The Importance of 'Fun' in the Young Language Learner Classroom

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Introduction

Storyline is a learning-centred educational approach. Originating in Scotland at the end of the 1960s in response to the requirement for interdisciplinary teaching in the primary curriculum, it is essentially social constructivist. Today, the approach is used in many countries and contexts. While the body of research remains small, it is growing, and a dedicated research website is currently being moderated by the University of Minnesota Morris (<https://sites.google.com/a/morris.umn.edu/storyline-research-resources>).

Briefly, in Storyline a fictive world is created in the classroom, with learners taking on and keeping the roles of characters in a story, which unfolds over a period of, typically, four to six weeks. The story develops as the learners, seated in small groups, work on Key Questions - open questions whose function is threefold. Firstly, they structure the story as do chapters in a book; secondly, and related to the first point, they introduce new 'happenings' in the story; and thirdly, they encapsulate the curriculum content. In other words, the learners engage in diverse individual and group tasks in which they speak and write, read and listen in different ways and for different purposes in accordance with the syllabus requirements within the context of the story. The successful completion of group tasks requires cooperation and collaboration within the group (Ahlquist, 2011). In accordance with Vygotsky's theory of mind, interaction between individuals of different capabilities and language proficiencies creates conditions in which learning can occur within the Zone of Proximal Development as the individuals carry out their tasks, providing and receiving support (Vygotsky, 1978).

Besides collaborative group work, other characteristic features of the Storyline approach are that academic and practical subjects are integrated within the narrative framework, and that the work that the learners produce is displayed on a frieze. This free-standing screen, or walls of the classroom, serves both as a record, and reminder, of what has happened so far, and can signal future developments with the changes made by the teacher; not least, displaying the learners' work in a structured and meaningful way accords it respect, which has implications for increased learner motivation.

As a teacher educator, I first came into contact with Storyline in 2000 and since that time have incorporated it into English courses for lower and upper primary student teachers, and observed them working with their own Storyline topics on teaching practice. The word most commonly used by both adults and children alike to describe learning through Storyline is 'fun'. My own experience reflects that of classroom teachers (e.g., in Falkenberg & Håkonsson, 2004), working with Storyline in various subjects and with different ages. For instance, teachers report on the way previously

unseen facets of a learner's personality emerge in the classroom; of increased self-confidence in insecure, and sometimes marginalized, learners when in role plays they assume the role of experts; of the positive effects of working with practical subjects to mediate learning and to boost the confidence of those who are good at these subjects, but who may be weaker academically. These factors depict classrooms which are positive and pleasurable learning environments. While Storyline does not have a prominent place in the empirical literature on young language learning, it shares many of the features identified as promoting language acquisition in this age group (see below). It also provides what Hattie (2009) identifies as a key factor in learner achievement: enjoyment. With the study which is the focus of this chapter, I wanted to investigate what features of this approach particularly appeal to young learners and how this impacts on their learning of English.

The Young Language Learner

The most extensive project to date concerning the benefits of Storyline for second language learning, a Comenius-funded collaboration between teacher trainers from four European countries (see Ehlers, Järvinen, Blandford, & Materniak, 2006), involved the production of materials and training of teachers. The project highlighted the positive effects on vocabulary acquisition and motivation of primary school children. There is a direct link to be made here with conditions, content and methods known to motivate and promote language acquisition in young learners, as discussed in the growing body of empirical literature. For example, young learners learn holistically, with an analytical capability not developing until the age of around 11 (Kirsch, 2008); they learn best where focus on meaning precedes focus on form (Cameron, 2001) in an environment in which they are comfortable (Moon, 2005); where there is a genuine audience for their work (Lo and Highland, 2007); where they can relate to the content, such as interests and experiences which they themselves have (Cameron, 2001); where their imagination and emotions are engaged through the use of stories, which, by definition, contain a large element of the unknown (Bruner, 2002); where they can work in varied ways, involving different senses (Crandall, 1999), together with others (Fisher, 2005). All of these are ingredients in the Storyline approach. Not least, there is a celebratory ending, which Dörnyei (2001) maintains makes a positive contribution to learning by breaking it up into meaningful periods.

Storyline can be said to have much in common with task-based learning (Kocher, 2008), now well-established as an approach to language learning, in the sense that learners work on tasks which bear some resemblance to real life and involve communicative use of language, leading to an outcome or product. As in task-based learning, not all work is carried out in a group, but can be done in pairs and also individually. The difference is that in Storyline *all* tasks occur within the narrative framework, adding to and developing it in a variety of ways. This has important consequences for the learning of vocabulary as the core lexis of the story is recycled in a natural way throughout the story.

The narrative framework, and the sense of experiencing the story together, has implications for sustaining motivation in young language learners. Considered to be an unstable characteristic of young learners (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), motivation is known to decrease from the age of about 10 (Enever, 2011). There are a number of reasons for this. One is that pre-teenage learners become more aware of their self-image, which is formed partly by the opinions of their peers. A poor self-image

as a language learner has a demotivating effect. The classroom atmosphere and the relationship between learners, therefore, have an important role to play. One way to foster good relationships is to have learners work in different constellations, which allow different talents to emerge (Van Lier, 2004), different facets of personality to be seen, and to realize that together learners can achieve more than they can individually. The attitude and behaviour of the teacher also play an important role. While learners are known to fear being laughed at by their peers for their mistakes, they are also afraid of being publicly corrected by the teacher, and thus they become reluctant to speak English in class. Where textbooks are overused, lessons can become predictable and monotonous, often with greater focus on grammar exercises at the expense of meaningful communication, leading to demotivation and a lack of language development. Furthermore, textbook-based teaching rests on the assumption that all learners are at the same level and work in the same way. However, as Gardner (2004, p.13) maintains, this is not the case and there is, therefore, a need for 'multiple entry points' for learners to access content and to demonstrate their learning.

The Study

The questions which I wanted to investigate were: what are the features of Storyline to which learners respond positively and less positively, in what ways do they mediate the requirements of the task for each other, and what changes can be observed in learners' use of English during their work in a Storyline topic? Since classroom processes play an important role in facilitating learning (Gieve & Miller, 2006), a sociocultural theoretical framework was chosen for the study, allowing 'cognition [to] be investigated without isolating it from social context' (Lantolf & Thorne, 2004, p. 19). The focus of the study was process as much as product, and change.

A class consisting of 32 pupils aged 11 to 13 was chosen for the study, for the reasons stated above: these pupils are in the age group which is considered to have been motivated, but for whom motivation may now be in decline. The class, although taught together for most subjects, were normally taught in age-specific groups for mathematics and English. Their lessons were mostly textbook-based. Although the teachers spoke English in the English lessons, the pupils spoke English only in replying to direct questions or in practising specific points of grammar and vocabulary. During the period of the study, the class remained intact, working with two teachers. Both the learners and teachers had previously worked with Storyline in Swedish and in English. This was important in order to eliminate two potential distorting influences on the outcome: the kinds of teething problems that can arise when a new approach is introduced or, alternatively, the novelty value of the new approach. Additionally, some of the older learners had been in the two classes which I had used for a pilot study (The Circus) the previous year (Ahlquist, 2011).

The learners worked with their Storyline topic, *Our Sustainable Street*, outlined below, over a period of five weeks, four days a week and for two hours a day. This was twice as much English as they would normally have, and, for this reason, time was 'borrowed' from other subject lessons by incorporating these subjects, namely natural and social science, into the Storyline topic. It is important to point out that the class had worked with environmental issues immediately prior to the study and that this was not an attempt to teach the concepts. The aim of *Our Sustainable Street* was to consolidate the grammar and vocabulary the learners had worked with since starting English at the age of seven, focus on their oral and written communication skills, and

introduce the vocabulary related to sustainable development. With their teachers' help, the learners individually set for themselves at least one achievable goal based on the syllabus – for instance, to use question words more accurately, improve at spelling, learn more words or become more fluent in speaking English. The attainment of the goal was evaluated half way through the study and at the end.

The story with which the learners worked concerned families moving into a new street in the fictive town of Danbury. While working on the story, they would take part in a project to live in a more sustainable way, deal with the problem of outsiders leaving rubbish on waste land adjoining their street, meet new, anti-social neighbours, and finally organize a street party. The learners worked in eight groups of four, with the groups being carefully formed by the teachers to include a balance of boys and girls, younger and older learners, as well as different proficiencies and talents. The Key Questions (KQ) to be addressed were as follows:

1. Who are you?
2. What is your house like?
3. How can you help the climate?
4. What can we do about the rubbish in the street?
5. What can we do about the problem with the new neighbours?
6. How can we organize a street party?

The tasks were based on the national syllabus for English, which specifies content areas with which learners should work, as well as the receptive and productive/interactive skills which should be developed. Some examples of content areas are everyday situations, opinions, feelings, experiences, and daily life in English-speaking countries. Receptive skills include listening to and reading different types of texts, and being able to understand written and spoken instructions. Learners should be able to give written and spoken descriptions and instructions, introduce themselves and take part in conversations, making appropriate use of politeness phrases. Grammar is not in itself listed as a discrete component of the syllabus.

The language tasks with which the learners worked in each KQ included the following (for more detail, see Ahlquist, 2011):

KQ1: oral and written character descriptions; account of a typical day

KQ 2: writing house advertisements; listening to a description of the location of their street

KQ 3: attending a lecture on climate change; reviewing the account of a typical day; producing a collage in words and pictures about living more sustainably

KQ 4: designing a new park and guiding others around it; writing an email to a friend and a formal letter to the council

KQ 5: valuing living together in society (in which learners show their agreement or disagreement with statements read by the teacher, by moving to designated corners of the classroom); interviewing the mother of the new family; writing a longer letter to a friend about their new life

KQ 6: following recipes, creating games based on the vocabulary of sustainability which the learners encountered during the story

To capture the perspectives of the researcher, teachers and learners, the study was designed as a mixed-method one and comprised the following data collection instruments:

Observation notes – I was present on every occasion

Questionnaires – to find out favourite features and how Storyline contributed to learning

Journals – the learners reflected once a week on questions to do with what they had particularly liked, or not, the reasons for their answers, and what they had learnt

Interviews with the teachers and learners

Learner texts

Video recordings

Self-evaluations – regarding progress in the language skills, biggest step forward and advice to themselves for the future.

The hand-written observation notes were typed into the computer immediately after every session. Half way through the study, coding was performed on the notes in relation to the research questions. For example, Pos and Non-pos were written in the margins to show, respectively, where the learners reacted positively or otherwise to a task; M for *mediation*, where they supported each other using resources or the L1; and LU, *language use*, where they either used English or discussed some aspect of English (such as when writing an advertisement for their house). Extracts from the coded notes were then collected under headings for each research question. Once this process was completed, the notes were re-read interpretively to ensure that nothing was missed, which is a potential risk when preset categories are used for coding.

In the questionnaires, which were in Swedish, the learners were provided with a list of features with which they had worked and asked to choose the five they liked best, without ranking them. These features can be seen in Figure 1 below. They were also asked an open question about what they had liked best, not liked at all, how they thought Storyline had helped them learn English and how working with Storyline was different from usual English lessons. The questionnaire provided information about the learners' favourite features of Storyline, both collectively and in terms of male/female differences (Table 1 below).

The journals, also written in Swedish, were analysed in a similar way to the observation notes – using Pos, Non-pos, M. Remarks made here included attitudes to group work, reasons for liking or disliking particular tasks, what they had learnt from the different tasks and, at the half way stage, an assessment of how well each learner thought they were achieving their personal goal. All instances of the word 'fun' were highlighted in relation to the task to which they referred.

In their self-evaluations, the learners assessed their progress in the four language skills, commented on their biggest step forward and gave themselves advice. These evaluations provided useful complementary data regarding the learners' view of their own learning; especially useful in this regard was what they saw as the greatest development and the advice they gave themselves. For example, the comments *don't be so stressed in English, dare to speak more* gave valuable insight into the learners' attitudes to English at school as a result of their Storyline work compared to their usual lessons.

All interviews were conducted in Swedish. Both teachers were interviewed regarding the level of the learners' success in group cooperation, their development, and regarding the extent the approach suited individual learners. The interview was semi-structured, based on questions given in advance, recorded and analysed in relation to the research questions. A subsample of learners (eight) representing the different ages and sexes were interviewed individually. The purpose of the individual interviews was to follow up the information provided by the questionnaire. For example, where learners had written that *art work* was their favourite, they were asked how that could help them learn English.

I analysed samples of the learners' writing taken from the beginning, middle and end of the five-week Storyline study period. The aim was to identify any development towards more accurate use of structures already known to the learners but still unstable (such as the present tense, present perfect and past simple), and attempts to use new words and even structures which had not yet been introduced in class.

Finally, I video-recorded two groups of learners working on the tasks. This was not carried out during the five-week study itself, but the following week. I had used video recording during the pilot study and found that the learners were very aware of being filmed, on the one hand, and that the sound quality was poor, on the other. The noise level of a Storyline classroom is inevitably higher than when learners are working quietly at their desks. It is also my view that looking through a camera lens at one group of learners, in fact, detracts from the advantage the observer has when they can change position in the classroom to be close to different groups at different times, but still have an overview of the room. This is because much useful interaction takes place not just within the groups, but among the groups. The purpose of the recording was therefore to illustrate the kinds of interaction which can occur, the ways in which the language skills can be developed and the extent to which core lexis can be recycled in carefully designed tasks.

Findings and Discussion

The frequencies of the learners' choices of the different features of Storyline were added up (see Figure 1 below).

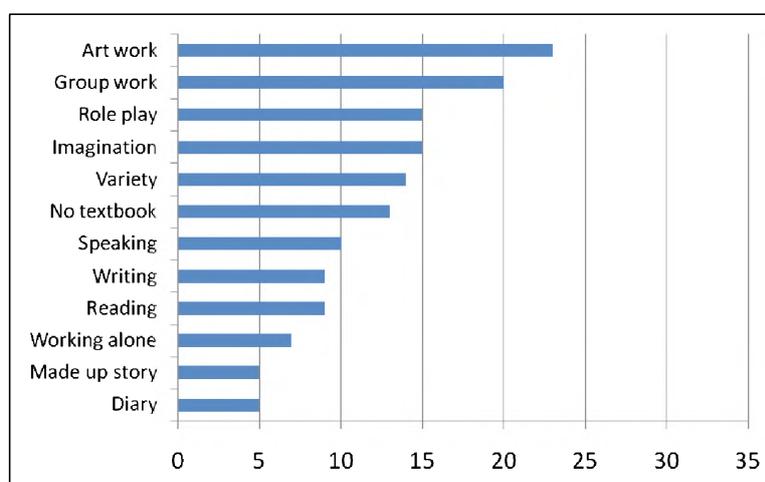


Figure 1 Popularity of the different Storyline features

The most popular features were *art* and *group work*, followed by *role play*, *imagination*, *variety* and *no textbook*. The two features which proved most popular are of interest since, in my experience, they rarely feature in English lessons in Sweden. When the learners were asked in the interview about how working with art helped them to learn English, they were very clear: *you have to be able to talk about what you have done*. Thus, while practical work in itself contributed greatly to the enjoyment of Storyline, the learners understood its role in their language development.

When it comes to group work, the data, particularly from the journals, reveal a mixed picture. There are references to attempts to dominate (girls as well as boys),

time wasted in arguing, individuals not doing as much as they should. Indeed, in the teachers' view, the greatest cause of disharmony and dysfunction in any particular group – and some were more extreme than others – was that identified in the research literature, namely learner personality (e.g., Storch, 2001). However, despite the problems, the learners nevertheless considered that the benefits outweighed the disadvantages. Comments in the questionnaire included *it's more fun, you can ask, you can get help*, the last two of which suggest that sitting in the group had benefits, even where the learners were working individually on a task, and this was particularly true for the boys. In the view of the teachers, there were two groups of learners who especially benefited from group work: the less proficient (who were encouraged and supported and who would otherwise have given up), and the more proficient of the younger children (whose knowledge was stretched through their work with older, more knowledgeable and proficient learners).

The low ranking of *working alone*, for both boys and girls, reflects the positive appeal of group work for most learners, though at the same time the figures also show that some learners preferred to work alone. Reasons given in the interview included *I can decide for myself*. For all teachers working with Storyline, it is important at the planning stage to ensure that there is a balance of work between group, pair and individual engagement in order that this approach can appeal to and elicit the best in everyone. Another reason for preferring individual work is that the classroom is quieter then. Some learners need this, just as they need structure. While Storyline does, of course, have structure, this is perhaps more apparent to the teacher than the learners. It might therefore be helpful for some learners if the teacher prepared them by telling them what is going to happen in Storyline, both as an overview at the outset and in a more detailed way ahead of each session. This would be crucial if the class included learners with diagnoses such as ADHD. It is important, however, that all the learners be told at the outset which parts of the syllabus for English they are going to be working on, and those of any other subjects integrated into the story. They need this information in order to set and evaluate goals.

Another feature worthy of comment is *variety*. In the middle of the study, the learners were asked to write in their journals how they felt about coming to school to work with their Storyline. Comments here (where any special feeling at all was mentioned) were worded in terms of *looking forward to it, even longing for it*, and the reason given was, for example, *there is always something new*.

While in many respects both girls and boys responded positively to the same features of Storyline, there were some differences, as can be seen in Table 1 below. For example, the girls rated highly the opportunity to use their imagination. Comments offered in the questionnaires about their favourite features include *drawing the person because you are that person then; painting and writing about the person; having a family and writing and drawing*. These comments suggest that the use of imagination is closely bound up with the character, which is brought to life in the art work and developed through the written tasks. Other contrasts between the sexes can be seen in the boys' choice of *no textbook*, their preference for speaking, the girls' preference for writing, and the fact that the boys in general liked reading less.

Table 1 The number of boys and girls who included each *Storyline* feature in their top five

Features	Boys (13)	Girls (18)	Total (31)
Art work	11	12	23 (74%)

Group	7	13	20 (65%)
Roleplay	8	7	15 (48%)
Imagination	3	12	15 (48%)
Variety	7	7	14 (45%)
No textbook	9	4	13 (42%)
Speaking	6	4	10 (32%)
Writing	2	7	9 (29%)
Reading	2	7	9 (29%)
Working alone	4	3	7 (23%)
Made up story	2	3	5 (16%)
Diary	1	4	5 (16%)

With regard to mediation, dictionaries and other resources were not well used. Online dictionaries were, however, more popular than paper ones, possibly because young learners are adept at using computers, or because the looking up of a word is easier online, where it is simply typed into the search box. The tool which almost all the learners used regularly was L1: to explain and keep the task on track, to discuss grammar and vocabulary, to manage their relationships and keep everyone involved. While these uses of L1 are consistent with the various functions identified for its use in the research literature, it is true to say that for some learners use of L1 was the first rather than last resort. Though some learners (of all proficiency levels) explained that they would have spoken mostly English if others had not spoken Swedish, it is nevertheless the case that some of the less proficient learners would have struggled with the topic of sustainability if the use of L1 had not been allowed. With a simpler topic, they might have managed more easily and to greater benefit for their language development. What is clear is that L1 has a role to play but that there have to be clear guidelines as to when it may be used.

Concerning oracy, there were gains in listening (as with the other skills, one reason was *we did a lot of it*). The learners' increased understanding could be observed in more effective response to classroom instruction as time went by and in their questions during peer presentations. Significantly, one learner gave this explanation: *had to listen, it was important information*. There was greater willingness to speak, with reluctant speakers gradually taking more initiative to interact, and with longer stretches of discourse produced by the more proficient learners. The classroom atmosphere can be said to have played an important role here with regard to the less confident: one learner explained her increased confidence using the following words: *I dare to speak more now - the others don't laugh at me when I make mistakes. They didn't before either but now I know*.

In writing, there were instances of new vocabulary in use and also of emergent constructions. Some examples are given here to illustrate. In the first three examples (emails) the first two underlined words had been introduced in a text about the new neighbours, the last as part of brainstorming words to describe people. In their emails the learners had to include six of the new words:

- *There is a new family in our street but they are loud and anti-social.*
- *They got a dog is a mongrel.*
- *I want to have a dog. But grandma is allergic so I can forget it.*

In the next set we can see emergence of the relative clause and the past continuous, on neither of which the learners had had formal instruction:

- *One day we read in the now's paper that a lady she name is Doris Rant, that she found mobile phones in her garden.*
- *And we read about a dump whohas been started in the town.*
- *Then we met mrs Brown she talking all the time about the dump and to the end we decided to right a letter to the consul.*

Finally, here are two texts by the same learner: the first produced in a character description task in the first week, and the second in the letter task in the last week. As regards the letter task, support had been provided by the teachers in the form of bullet points reminding the learners about the events in the street. Nevertheless, this learner does show some control of pronouns, prepositions, articles, past tenses and subordination.

- *I'm work to police, I'm go up at 7 a klok and I come home 5 a klok.*
- *We have fond a hous in the advertise. We go to the house, and look it. It was nice. We bought a house because I have got a job in Danbury.*

Conclusion

Storyline has significant benefits for the young learner language classroom. To create variety, it can be used alongside a textbook; topics such as families, free time, animals, countries, or sports appear in textbooks and can be brought to life in Storyline by creating, for instance, a wildlife park, sports centre, or families who have won a trip to different European countries. The vocabulary of the topic and the target grammatical structures of the chapter can be introduced or consolidated through Storyline. Equally important is the way in which the language skills can be practised holistically and meaningfully.

The learners in this study showed change in different ways. For some it was in aspects of increased proficiency, grammatical or lexical knowledge. For others it was the realization that they could achieve more than they thought, or that they had become less anxious and were therefore willing to use the language more. Storyline allows learners to work at their own level; it is learning-centred in a way that textbooks can never be. Therefore, all learners have the pre-requisites for experiencing success, which leads to better self-esteem, increased motivation and more effective and sustainable learning.

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