

Teaching young learners through Storyline: ‘The more fun it is, the more you learn!’

It is almost break time. 32 Swedish children aged 11 to 13 (the last years of primary education) are working in groups of four, ‘buying’ furniture to furnish a room. Some are cutting pictures from a catalogue, sticking them on to sheets of A4 paper and labelling them; others are checking prices on the company’s UK website and compiling a list of purchases, while others are adding up how much has been spent and how much remains from the £1000 they had to start with. Everyone has a task. Break time comes; no one notices. All want to be ready to present their work.

This is Storyline, a social constructivist, cross-curricular teaching approach in which a fictive world is created in the classroom. The learners are families who have just moved into a street in an English town. Over five weeks, two hours a day, a story will unfold as they work together on a series of Key Questions: questions which structure the story, introduce developments, and provide links with the curriculum. Practical and written work will be displayed on a frieze, or walls of the classroom, depicting what has happened and anticipating new developments.

Originating in primary education in Scotland in the 1960s, today Storyline is used in both first and second language teaching across a range of ages and contexts (<http://www.storyline-scotland.com/storyline-international>). In second language teaching it has affiliation with task-based education, in that learners work on meaningful tasks requiring the use of language and resulting in a concrete outcome. What distinguishes Storyline is that the tasks are situated within a single specific context; outcomes from one task frequently form the basis of another, meaning not only that the learners’ work is treated with respect, but that the core vocabulary of the story is recycled.

I would like to show how Storyline works, linking the various parts to the CEFR at A2, the level at which children in Sweden are expected to be by the end of primary education. I will also refer to the results of a study (Ahlquist, 2013) which I conducted with the age group 11-13, who were being taught in a mixed-age class and used to working with a textbook. The aim was to investigate what the learners responded well to in Storyline and the effects on their learning.

Let us look at the Key Questions which structure Our Sustainable Street, which includes art, social and natural science, home economics and mathematics. The learners had previously worked in Swedish with issues of climate change, pollution, recycling and so on. Now they were going to learn the vocabulary of sustainability in English, develop their communication skills and consolidate existing knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

KQ1 Who are you?

Storyline needs characters. In groups of four the learners create members of a family and introduce themselves to their neighbours. They make models, write a personal description for a newsletter for the street’s residents and a diary of a day in their lives. The advantage of a model is that this can provide support for the less secure when speaking in role.

CEFR A2: Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar topics; can write simple personal information. Learners are also able to understand spoken and written information on familiar subjects at a basic level.

KQ2 What is your house like?

The learners draw pictures of their house and write an estate agent's description based on a skeleton text. They listen to a description of the location of their street, marking places on a map. Storyline developments often come about with the arrival of a letter or visitor. The families receive a letter telling them they have inherited £1000, but the money has to be spent furnishing one room, they must shop at a particular store and get as close to the target sum as possible.

CEFR A2: Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences using simple connectors. Can understand simple directions. Can write very short basic descriptions.

KQ3 How can you live in a more sustainable way?

An invitation arrives – the family's street has been selected to participate in a national project to live in a greener way. At the town hall (the classroom chairs have been moved into rows), the teacher greets them in role as project leader. As a warm up, they start by trying to make connections between words such as greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide and fossil fuels written in a large circle on the whiteboard, then watch part of a short film on climate change in which the words appear. The terms are checked. The project leader then asks the families to look at their diaries and think about ways in which each person's daily life could be greener. If their suggestions appear in the latter half of the film, they will get a prize. The families present their suggestions before the film is shown. Since every family is likely to have at least one suggestion included, they get a prize. From a tourist leaflet they have to choose the attraction which is the greenest. They later email a friend describing their visit.

CEFR A2: Can read short simple texts and find specific information. Can catch the main points in clear messages.

KQ4 What can we do about the problem with the new neighbours?

At the start of the story, the frieze consists of an outline of a road and sheets of green A4 paper representing where the families will live. When all have moved in, there is one For Sale sign remaining. This will be replaced with a Sold sign and then a removal van will appear. The learners are given a list of some items they see coming off the van and speculate on who their neighbours are. They are then given a text about the family's behaviour and think about how this affects their own family. The neighbours mingle as if in the street and chat about this. The teacher takes on the role of mother in the new family and is interviewed.

CEFR A2: Can handle short social exchanges. Can ask and answer questions and exchange ideas.

KQ5 How can we organize a street party?

Storyline ends with a celebration. Some learners are responsible for finding recipes and baking cakes; others take charge of decorating the room and producing a seating plan for the meal. Others create games using the new vocabulary. The neighbours mingle at the party.

CEFR A2: Can understand everyday written material; communicate limited information in everyday social situations.

The data collection tools used in the study were: classroom observations; questionnaires and interviews with the learners and class teachers; learner journals and self-assessment; written texts; audio and video filming. Quotations from the data are italicized.

The most popular features were art, group work and doing different things. The most commonly used word was *fun!* That most of the learners liked to draw was clear from watching the attention

they paid to this work, but they were also aware of how the work contributed to learning: *you have to be able to describe what you have drawn*, being a typical comment. Regarding group work, reasons for liking it were being able to ask for help, providing help and to its being more fun working together. The teachers also noted how the most proficient of the younger learners were *pushed to perform* by the older children and that the less proficient persevered whereas alone *they would have given up*. It is safe to say that this subject was harder than anything the learners had worked with before. In the teachers' view however, this gave the most proficient a challenge. In a mixed ability class *the reality is that you spend your time on the weaker ones*. It is important to add that not all learners enjoyed the group work, either because of the group they were in or because they simply prefer to work alone. It is important that there are opportunities for this too, not least from an assessment perspective.

While an increased ability to understand the spoken language was not so surprising given the intensity of exposure over 4-5 weeks, the explanations are interesting. Although many put their improved listening skills down to having done so much of it, some put it this way: *You had to listen, it was important information*.

When it comes to speaking, many learners took a huge step forward, noticeable not just in increased activity in the group but in speaking in whole class. One of the shyer learners put it this way: *I dare to speak more because no one laughs at me when I get it wrong. They didn't before either, but now I know*. I think this goes to the heart of the solidarity of Storyline.

Learners were aware of learning new words and being surer of spellings. Many wrote longer and more complex texts, the teachers commenting that they had never seen *so much freely produced text*. This was especially so in the case of the girls who had named writing as their favourite part, in connection with drawing and creating an imaginary character. In writing the email for instance, one girl noted that *it felt like writing to a real friend*. As many of the learners were motivated to write they could be seen to be pushing themselves to their boundary with linguistic features emerging which had not been taught, for example the relative clause.

Storyline is particularly suited to the primary classroom in a number of ways: where the teacher teaches a range of subjects, the learning objectives can include subjects other than English and there can be greater intensity of exposure over a period of time. Storyline creates the conditions to make the most of young learner characteristics: their preference for working in different ways (Warrington and Younger, 2006), to use their imaginations and be creative with their limited resources (Halliwell, 1992). This includes a liking for working with role play and together with others. While they have difficulty taking into account the needs of others in collaborative work, this improves with practice (Pinter, 2007).

As learners approach puberty loss of motivation often sets in. One explanation can be that teachers now start to over rely on the textbook, leading to lack of variety. Other explanations are to do with learners' fear of being publicly corrected or laughed at, leading to reluctance to speak and lack of confidence in doing so. Classroom conditions which support learning are identified as being a supportive atmosphere, with meaningful input and opportunities for communication (Moon 2005), where open-ended questions promote deeper thinking (Fisher 2005), where grammar emerges from context (Nunan 2005), with opportunities for recycling vocabulary (Cameron 2001). These conditions can be created using the Storyline approach.

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