

# USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ELT A STORY-BASED APPROACH

**CRISTINA FERREIRA PINTO**

Escola Superior de Educação do Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Portugal  
cristinapinto@ese.ipp.pt

**HELENA SOARES**

Colégio Júlio Dinis

## Abstract

There has been a growing interest in the role of children's literature in language teaching since the 80s, when the communicative approach made it possible to bring stories into the classroom (Garvie, 1990). It is undeniable that storytelling has many benefits. Not only are children naturally drawn to stories, but they are also an effective and enjoyable way to teach and learn. This article presents the findings of a MA project on using stories with children. It shows the importance of stories on language acquisition and concludes with some practical suggestions based on my teaching experience with young learners.

**Keywords:** young learners, English Language Teaching, stories, story-based approach, storytelling

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Stories play an important role in everyday conversation as we all communicate by telling stories about different aspects of life. Everybody loves a good story, especially children. They are already familiar with stories in the mother tongue, and the use of stories in the English classroom offers an effective way of introducing new language in a meaningful and memorable context. Stories increase children's exposure to English and help them build their own vocabulary, involving them directly in their learning process. Stories are unquestionably a significant tool in the learning process. They are a rich resource in language learning and teaching but they also offer a wider window on the world, and through them children learn much more than words.

As Mourão (2011b) says:

"A learner is given a multitude of opportunities to use the language of the picturebook, a language that is made up of pictures and the words,

for their aesthetic and cultural development, cognitive and emotional development, and language and literacy development.” (p.1)

This article discusses the importance and the possibilities of using stories in language learning, gives advice on creating a unit around stories, showing that they can be used as an alternative to course books.

## 2. WHY USING STORIES WITH YOUNG LEARNERS

Reading at an early age is essential and, in the ELT classroom, stories “can provide an ideal introduction to the foreign language as they present language in a familiar and memorable context” (Ellis & Brewster, 2002:1). Stories have been described as a successful vehicle to teach English as they offer numerous possibilities of different activities and are highly motivating. (Ellis & Brewster: 2002; Garvie: 1990; Wright: 1995). Stories can also bring English into other subjects as they provide the starting-point for different activities across the curriculum.

Eads (2006:12) summarizes the advantages of storytelling by saying “Telling stories can reduce the stress in classroom, promote literacy, speaking and listening skills, help children to develop thinking strategies and promoting their social and emotional development – and all while they engage in a rewarding and enjoyable activity.”

Slattery & Willis (2001) also mention the important role of stories in language acquisition as they say,

“Young learners acquire language unconsciously. The activities you do in class should help this kind of acquisition. Stories are the most valuable resource you have. They offer children a world of supported meaning that they can relate to. Later on you can use stories to help children practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing.” (p.96)

Cameron (2001:159) states that stories use a holistic approach to language teaching and learning as “stories offer a whole imaginary world, created by language that children can enter and enjoy, learning language as they go.”

Here are some other reasons to use stories:

- Children enjoy and are always eager to listen to stories; they also know how stories work;
- Stories are a rich and versatile resource and children are intrinsically motivated to them;
- They are fun, motivating and can be used in a number of different ways to develop different skills and topics, this way stories also contribute to developing positive attitudes towards language learning;
- They involve children in their learning process;
- They provide endless resources of language in context;
- They are a great way of introducing, practising, revising vocabulary and structures and improving pronunciation and listening skills.

- They introduce new illustrated vocabulary and are a springboard to different activities and even to other curriculum areas, involving different learning styles;
- They improve pronunciation and listening skills. Children become aware of the rhythm, intonation and pronunciation of language;
- They provide repetition of key words and phrases, stimulating children's participation;
- They provide opportunities for integrating the four basic language skills;
- They add variety and creativity to lessons;
- They foster positive interpersonal attitudes and develop intercultural awareness as they are also a source for cultural content;
- Children feel a sense of achievement after reading a book in English;
- Stories can be used to create whole units of work that constitute mini-syllabuses and be an alternative to course books.

### 3. HOW TO CHOOSE A STORY

There are an infinite number of stories to tell. Authentic or “real” storybooks are clearly preferable to adapted stories as they offer a rich source of authentic input. They are also highly motivating and challenging. Children do not need to understand every single word, because pictures, gestures and intonation will help them to understand the main gist, providing a strong sense of achievement.

Children's literature is rich and teachers can choose stories that are already familiar to children in their mother tongue, such as traditional stories and fairy tales (Ellis & Brewster, 2002). Some other genres and types of storybooks are picture books, folktales and fables, myths and legends, poetry, nursery rhymes, alphabet books, counting books, rhyming books, animal stories, picture stories with no text, humorous stories, and many others.

Picture books are children and teachers' favourites because of the colourful and clear illustrations that tell the story and provide extra information to explore. Mourão (2010) defines picture books by saying,

“What makes a picture book different is the way the illustrations and the words combine in a book format. A true picture book tells the story both with words and pictures. The two narratives are important and the total format reflects the meaning of the story. An illustrated book usually includes illustrations as extensions of the words, where the pictures are not necessary for its interpretation. A decorated book includes small pictures or designs, often at the beginning or end of a chapter. These decorations do not usually enrich or extend the story, merely decorate the pages.” (p.1)

This means that in a picturebook, pictures and text work together: pictures show and words tell. We can have a simple picture/word dynamics or a complex picture/word dynamics. In a simple picture/word dynamics, pictures confirm the

words and tell similar information. In a complex picture/word dynamics, there are gaps between pictures and words and pictures add different information.

When choosing a story, we need to select carefully “authentic storybooks that are accessible, useful and relevant for children learning English” (Ellis & Brewster, 2002:8).

Here are some criteria for selecting the right story for your pupils (Ellis & Brewster, 2002; Mourão: 2009).

The theme - the story should deal with a topic children are learning about in English class. There is a picture book for practically every possible theme.

Appropriate language level – the language should be accessible, but rich, authentic and expressive as well. Children should be familiar with about 75% of the language (Mourão: 2009).

- A clear storyline – children understand the story.
- Plenty of repetition – if children are exposed to repeated chunks of language, they will immediately pick them. (Mourão: 2003)
- Content - it should be interesting, fun, motivating, memorable and should encourage participation while developing imagination and arousing curiosity.
- Helpful illustrations –it should have high quality illustrations, which synchronize with the text; a good visual aid provides a supportive context for language learning and helps children understand the story.
- Opportunities to learn new things in addition to language across the curriculum (Maths, History, Geography, Arts and Crafts, etc)

We also need to know our students as Harmer (2006:308) points out:, “we need to consider a number of crucial factors such as the language level of our students, their educational and cultural background, their likely levels of motivation, and their different learning styles.”

Also very important is to choose a story we like. As Davies (2007) refers,

“The best advice for any storyteller is to enjoy the tale. If you have fun with it, so will your audience. No amount of fancy presentation skill can cover up the fact that you don’t actually like the tale, and if you don’t like it, you can’t expect anyone else to.” (p.10)

#### **4. HOW TO PLAN A UNIT OF WORK AROUND A STORY**

A story can be the starting-point for different language and learning activities and it is a valid alternative to coursebooks. Stories contain everyday language that we can find in the traditional syllabuses for young learners, so they meet our teaching needs besides being extremely appealing to children. Language is presented, used and recycled and all the four skills work together. Children acquire new language structures and vocabulary in a natural and authentic way. Stories also link to other subjects in the curriculum and “one of the best ways to make language real is to use it for other learning.” (Halliwell, 1994:126)

Creating our own story-based syllabus involves a lot of work as we need to plan activities and prepare materials around the linguistic and thematic content of the story, but it is truly rewarding. There is a story for almost every topic. Five or six stories can be used throughout the year.

It is well known that children learn effectively through scaffolding by adults (Bruner, 1983). The teacher's role is to guide and help children to become autonomous learners. Using a story-based approach will help children improve their learning strategies, while English becomes more familiar and significant to them.

A story based approach is structured around pre-, while- and post-storytelling activities. First, teachers need to carefully select stories according to their teaching objectives and their pupils' needs. Then they should brainstorm ideas for possible activities and start drawing a lesson plan.

Here are some sample activities based on several researchers (Wright, 1995; Lambert & Choy, 2000; Ellis & Brewster, 2002, Mourão, 2003):

- Pre-reading activities
  - Show the cover and the title and talk about them
  - Predict what is going to happen through the title or a picture
  - Pre-teach vocabulary
  - Ask questions
  - Play games
- While-reading activities
  - Predict what is going to happen next / Guess the ending
  - Repeat and mime vocabulary
  - Hold up cards
  - Sequence parts of the story
  - Yes/no questions
- Post-reading activities
  - Order pictures / sequence events
  - Choose another title
  - Make a mini-book, a collage, a poster
  - Play games
  - Read or act out the story
  - Sing a song
  - Make puppets/masks and retell the story
  - Project work

When planning a story-based approach, teachers should think carefully about the aims they want to achieve, brainstorm possible activities, think about time, links across the curriculum and classroom language, prepare the materials and turn their ideas into individual lesson plans. While they are planning their

lessons, they should not forget that learning English means fun, creativity and enjoyment.

## 5. EXAMPLES

Next, there are some brainstorming ideas for activities to use with three different stories – *Winnie the witch*, *Love, Splat* and *The Gruffalo*. They are popular picturebooks written by and to native speakers. They contain rich and authentic examples of English as well as repetition, rhyme, humour and suspense. They have high quality illustrations that support children's understanding of the story and they provide cross-curricular links.

### Winnie the witch

*Winnie the Witch* is a best-selling series of picture books, written by Valerie Thomas and illustrated by Korky Paul. According to Oxford University Press more than two million books have been sold of this series. Winnie is a much-loved character and children love this story.

This is the magical story of a witch living in a big black house with her black cat, Wilbur. "... The house was black on the outside and black on the inside ...". Everything was black and Wilbur closed his green eyes, Winnie could not see him and she tripped over him.

This book offers a fun and engaging way to explore many subjects across the curriculum. It can be used in October to revise colours, teach rooms of the house and celebrate Halloween. Here are some activities to use with this story.

### Pre-reading activity

#### Flashcard race

Teacher divides the class into two teams. There are two piles of flashcards face down on the floor, one for each team. One member per team plays at a time. When they listen to the teacher saying a colour, they should run and find the correct card. The first to find the colour wins a point for the team.

After-reading activities

True or False

After listening to the story, T says some sentences about it and children should stand up if they are true, or sit down if they are false.

E.g. *Winnie lives in a big and black house in the forest.*

*Winnie's cat is called Fluffy.*

*Wilbur is an orange cat.*

### Let's go to Winnie's house

T asks: *Is Winnie's house big or small? Winnie's house has got a bedroom, a bathroom, a living room, a kitchen, a garage and a garden.*

T shows the flashcards and sticks them on different walls around the classroom.

T asks 5 children to stand in a line behind her/him and says: Let's go to

Winnie's house. *Where's the kitchen?* Children point and repeat the word. T repeats with different groups of pupils.

### **Echo game**

Teacher says one room of the house (e.g. bedroom) and children should repeat the word three times. This procedure is repeated with all the words.

### **Fly swatter game**

Two students get a fly swatter each. Teacher shows them a picture of a room (or garden). The players need to hit the correct word card (on the board) using their fly swatter. The first student to do so is the winner. Teacher changes students whenever appropriate.

### **Listen and sing the Winnie the witch song**

A big tall hat  
Ten long toes  
A black magic wand  
A long red nose.  
She's Winnie  
Winnie the witch.  
A long black tail  
Big green eyes  
He goes with Winnie  
When she flies.  
He's Wilbur  
Wilbur the cat.

### **Draw Winnie's house**

Children draw Winnie's house and their pieces of work are displayed on the wall.

### **Shape hunt**

Teacher hands out pictures of different houses and children should find squares, circles, rectangles, and other shapes in the houses. Then using coloured paper, children cut different shapes and make a house collage.

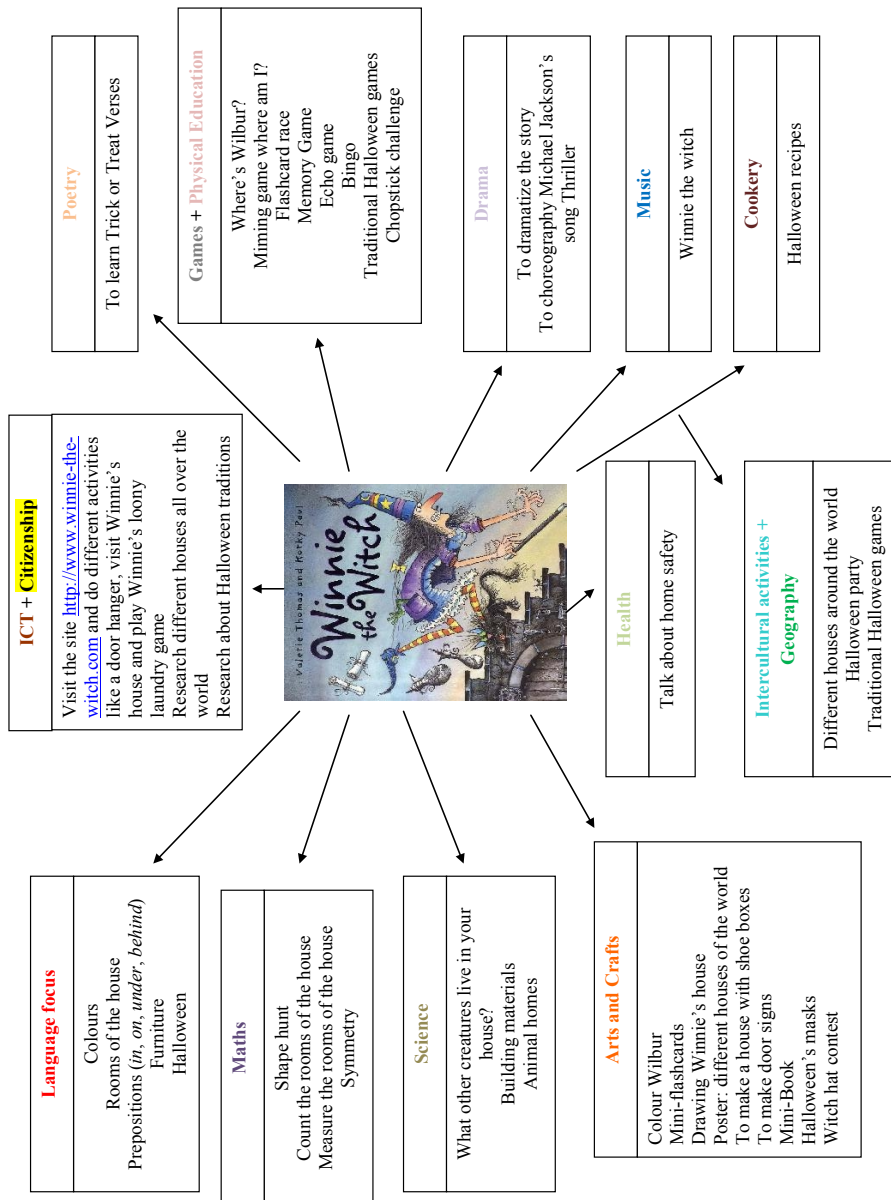
### **Talking about home safety**

Children identify dangers in the house and suggest safety measures to prevent accidents.

E.g. *not opening door to strangers or talking to strangers unless a parent is around*

## Halloween party

To celebrate Halloween children decorate school facilities, make party invitations, prepare typical recipes, play traditional games, perform choreography, participate in a witch hat contest, etc.





## **The Gruffalo**

"A gruffalo? What's a gruffalo? A gruffalo! Why, didn't you know? He has terrible tusks, and terrible claws, and terrible teeth in his terrible jaws."

*The Gruffalo* is a children's book by writer and playwright Julia Donaldson, illustrated by Axel Scheffler that tells the story of a clever mouse, three large animals that want to eat him and an imaginary monster, a Gruffalo, who turns out to be very real. The book has sold over 10.5 million copies, has won several prizes for children's literature, and has been developed into plays on both the West End and Broadway. The book has also been adapted into a 30-minute animated film.

The book is truly captivating and the illustrations are full of colour, detail and appealing characters. It has strong rhythm, short rhymes and a repetitive structure that is perfect to be read aloud and to children join in by saying some words of the story.

We can also teach across the curriculum with this book. It can be used to introduce the parts of the body and revise some wild animals. Here are some activities to use with this story.

### **Pre-reading activity**

#### **Gruffalo puzzle**

T divides the class into small groups. Each group should solve a puzzle to find out what the topic of the lesson is (The Gruffalo).

### **After-reading activities**

#### **My Gruffalo display**

Children draw a wanted poster of the Gruffalo and T displays their drawings on the wall. Children take photos of their drawings. Later they will use them to make a video to publish in *YouTube*.

#### **Gruffalo can I walk in the wood**

Children play *Gruffalo can I walk in the wood?*- playground or gym game

T chooses one child to be the Gruffalo. Others should ask in chorus *Can I walk in the wood, Gruffalo?* The Gruffalo says *Yes!* and name a colour, e.g. *blue!* If the children are wearing blue, they can walk in the wood safely. If not, Gruffalo is going to try to catch them. If they are caught, they become *Gruffalos* too and the game continues in the same way.

#### **Frozen statues**

T asks children to change themselves into frozen statues of the Gruffalo. On the count of 3 T asks them to come alive and walk or roar like the Gruffalo.

### **The Gruffalo song**

Children learn the lyrics and act out the song.

*He has terrible tusks, and terrible claws,  
And terrible teeth in his terrible jaws.  
He's the Gruffalo! Gruffalo! Gruffalo!  
He's the Gruffalo!*  
*He has knobbly knees and turned-out toes,  
And a poisonous wart at the end of his nose.  
He's the Gruffalo! Gruffalo! Gruffalo!  
He's the Gruffalo!*  
*His eye are orange , his tongue is black,  
He has purple prickles all over his back.  
He's the Gruffalo! Gruffalo! Gruffalo!  
He's the Gruffalo!*  
*He's the GRRRRRRRRR.....Gruffalo!*  
*He's the Gruffalo!*  
*Repeat*

### **Draw your favourite character from the story**

Children draw their favourite character from the story.

### **Draw a menu for Gruffalo**

Children use the mouse's suggestion (*roasted fox, owl ice cream, scrambled snake*) and draw a menu.

### **Fishing parts of the body**

Children practise the vocabulary in small groups. They should "fish" and name parts of the body. For this, you will need cardboard "fish", paperclips, mini flashcards and small fishing rods with magnets at the end of the lines.

### **Balloon bouncing**

T divides the class in groups of four. Each group has a balloon and it has to form a circle while holding hands. Then they bounce the balloon in the air while still holding hands and name parts of the body. They can use any part of the body to keep the balloon in the air, but they must not let go of each other's hands.

### **Please game**

T asks children to follow her/his instructions. Children should touch parts of their body, but only when T says the word "please".

This is best done by repeated demonstrations. If T does not say, "please", but children carry out the instruction then they must sit down for one round.

T also uses the parts of the body used for describing the Gruffalo (tusks, claws, jaw, back, etc) e.g. *Now, you are Gruffalos. Touch your tusks, please.*

### **Repeat if it is true**

T shows a flashcard and says a name. If the name matches the pictures, children should repeat it, and if it is not true they should remain silent.

### **A very long sentence**

T says *I saw a monster ...* and asks children to suggest ways of finishing the sentence. e.g.: *with three heads*.

Then each child says the sentence and adds one more item. Other children can help if someone cannot remember all the items.

### **Picture dictation**

T gives out white paper and tells the class that she/he is going to describe a monster for them to draw. T describes a monster, sentence by sentence, giving children time to draw. E.g.: *It has a big head with three eyes (pause); the eyes are red (pause). It has a long, purple nose (pause)* and so on.

At the end of the dictation, T asks the children to mingle and show each other their monster pictures.

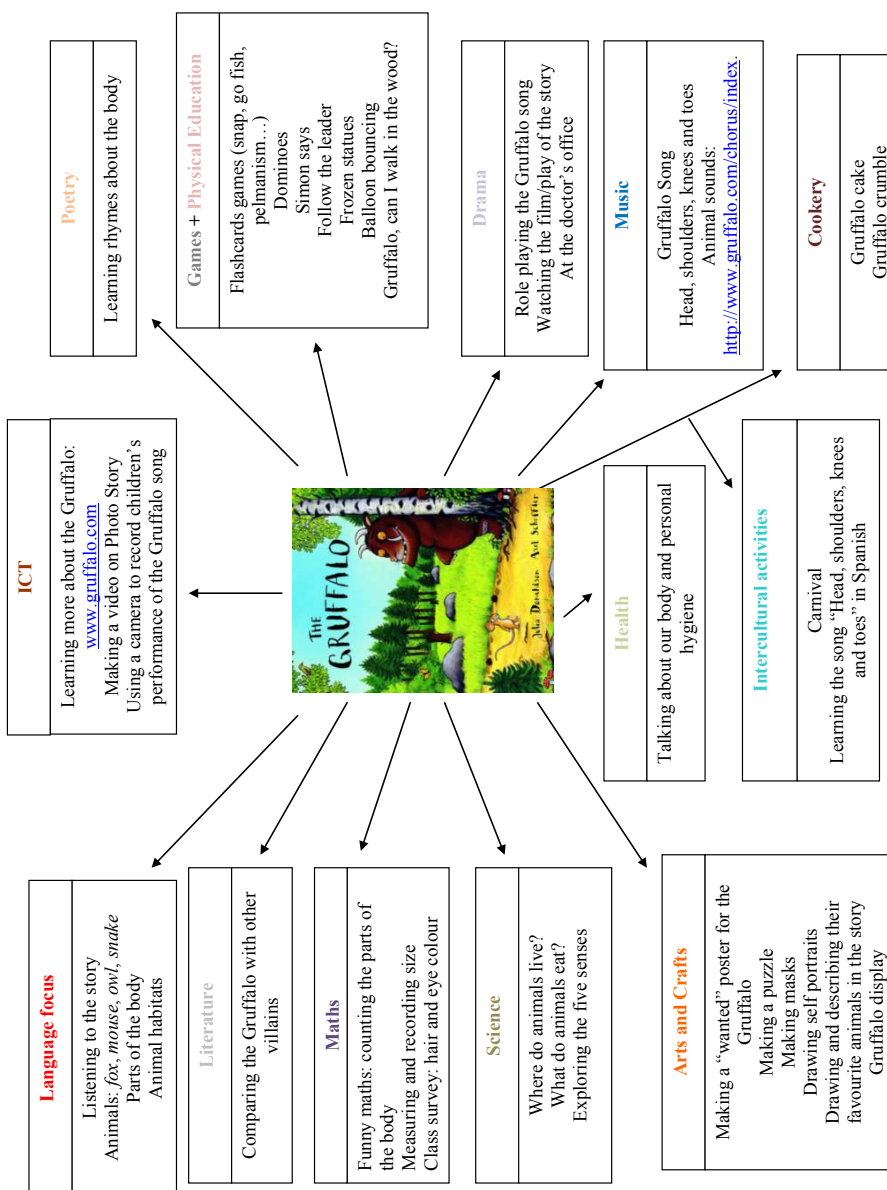
Then T puts children's pictures on the board and they choose the best ones.

### **Creating a word puzzle**

Children make their own word puzzles using the body parts that they have learnt. They choose between eight and ten words and write them on the worksheet. Words can go across, down or diagonally. Then they fill in any remaining blank squares with random letters. They then give their wordsearch together with a list of words for another child to solve.

### **Drawing self-portraits**

Children draw a picture of themselves and describe it to the class (they can use a mirror).



### Love Splat

Splat likes Kitten, a beautiful white cat with pea green eyes, “more than fish sticks and ice cream.” However, every time he sees her, his tongue turns to jelly, his legs wobble like rubber, and his tummy rumbles loudly. At Cat School, Splat clutches a little red envelope and he tries to tell Kitten just how he really feels. There is just one tiny problem. Another cat named Spike likes Kitten, too and his valentine is ten times bigger! Who will Kitten choose – Spike or Splat?

*Love, Splat* is one of several titles in Splat series about a lovely black cat written by Rob Scotton. This picturebook is about Valentine’s Day. The illustrations are brilliant and colourful and children love them. The story is told in the narrative past and includes direct speech. There is repetition and the pictures help decoding the meaning of the text. It is a simple and fun story about love during childhood and it is perfect to introduce Valentine’s Day. Children also learn vocabulary about feelings. Here are some activities to use with this story.

### Pre-reading activities

To introduce and revise vocabulary about parts of face and feelings

Acting out feelings around the classroom

Children stand up and act out feelings around the classroom while T says the words (referring to those feelings). When T says STOP everybody should return to their places and sit down.

### Mirror game (Pair work activity)

In pairs one child should act out different feelings while the other is a mirror and should imitate his/her partner’s actions. Children should mime their partners’ facial expressions and body movements. After a while they switch positions.

### Dance the way you feel

T plays a CD with a mix of tunes with various tempos that can reflect various emotions. Children dance the way the music makes them feel and they make a corresponding face as well, e.g. a silly face while dancing a jumpy and goofy music. (If necessary, T guides children through the activity.)

### Before the story

#### Story bag

T uses a story *bag* to generate interest before telling the story. Inside, T puts clues, such as pictures of the characters, significant objects and realia. Children pass the bag around, taking turns to pull out a clue and trying to guess what the story will be about.

## **While-reading activities**

### **Listening to the story**

T shows the cover of the book, reads the title and elicits what is on it (a black cat, a mouse, a big red heart). When telling the story, T makes sure that everyone can see the pictures and asks children to describe them (colours, objects, and numbers). T says: *Look it's Valentine's day and Splat has a special card for someone in his class.*

Teacher starts telling the story and asks children:

*What's in the picture?* Children should be able to say a black cat (Splat), a mirror, a mouse (Seymour).

T points to the objects to facilitate children's understanding.

*How many toothbrushes can you see? (4) What colour are they? (orange, red and blue – light and dark) Can you see some toothpaste? Where is it? Can you see a rubber duck? (Yes) What colour is it? (yellow) Seymour is holding a comb. What colour is it? (green) Where is Splat? (In the bathroom.)*

T turns the page and repeats the procedure, focussing the children's attention on the pictures to help them understand the story.

T asks children if they liked the story, who their favourite character was, what part of the story they liked the most and if they liked the illustrations.

## **After-reading activities**

### **Draw Splat and Kitty**

Children draw a picture of the main characters of the book: Splat and Kitty. Then T sticks children's work on the English corner.

### **Playing with red dough**

Children make a variety of items with red play dough and with heart shaped cookie cutters they make hearts.

### **Love is ... collage**

T provides children with magazines. Children cut out pictures about love. T draws out the shape of the largest possible heart with a marker on a piece of construction paper.

Then both T and children arrange the pictures and glue them. Children can embellish the collage by adding some drawings.

Later their work is displayed on the English corner.

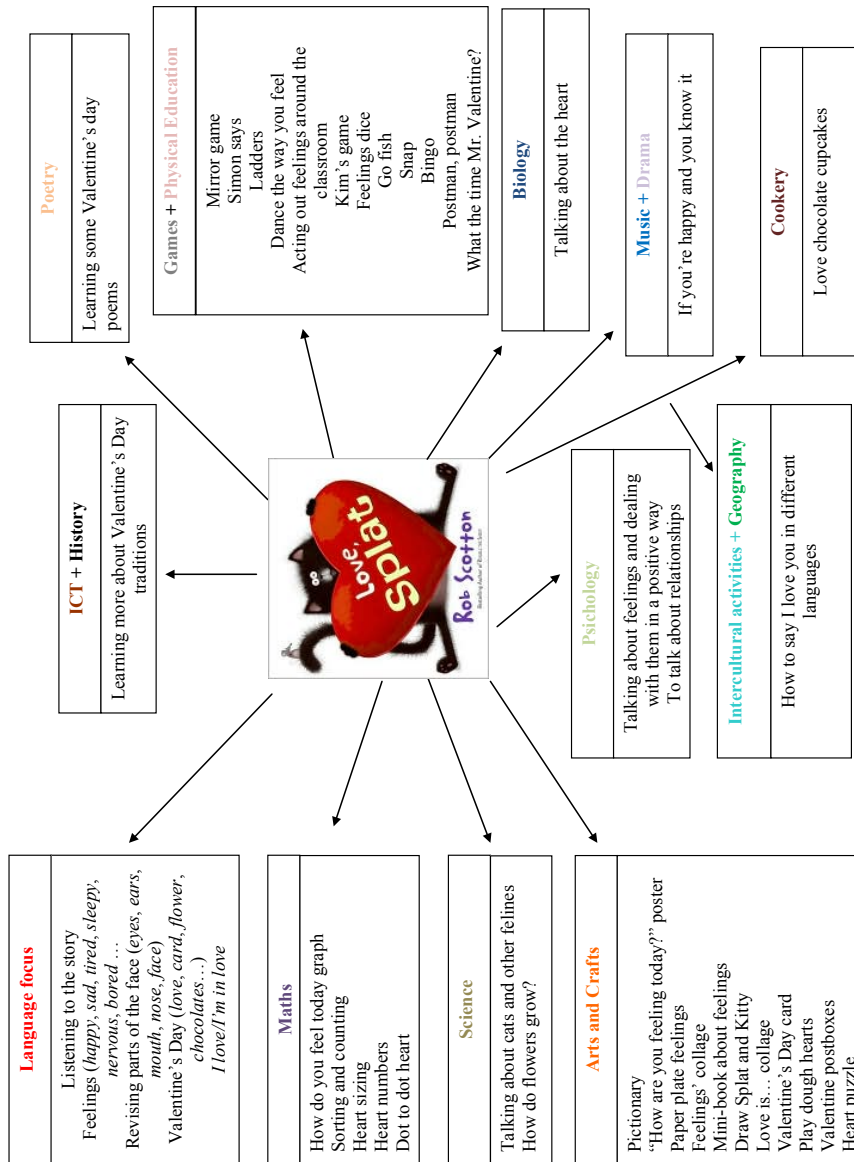
### **How to say I love you in different languages**

Children learn how to say I love you in French (*Je t'aime*), Italian (*Ti amo*), Spanish (*Te quiero*), Greek (*S'agapo*), German (*Ich liebe dich*) and in Portuguese sign language.

Children listen and repeat the sentences using different tones of voice.

## “Valentines”

Children draw and colour a card. If children can already write, they can copy one of the poems to the card. Then they exchange cards with other children.



## CONCLUSION

Stories are fundamental when teaching young learners. Telling a story is an appealing way to transmit information as it opens the window to imagination. Stories create a motivating and challenging atmosphere in the classroom and help children to develop and enhance a positive attitude towards English.

Stories are also a powerful tool for children's holistic development. Not only do they foster language learning, but they also support emotional, social and intellectual development.

Planning is the key to success. "Storybooks need to be analysed carefully so they can be used to their full potential." (Ellis & Brewster, 2002:8) A teacher needs to invest some time in preparing lessons and materials, but he also becomes more engaged in his work and this will clearly engage his students as well. It is much more than teaching a language.

Storybooks in the classroom also improve reading habits, so "what a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do herself tomorrow". (Vygotsky, 1978:87)

Stories are a priceless supply when teaching young learners for many reasons. They can be explored in a number of different ways to develop different skills and language areas. They are fun, versatile and highly motivating for both children and their teachers.

## REFERENCES

- Brewster, J., Ellis, G., & Girard, D. (2004). *The primary English teacher's guide*. London: Penguin.
- Bruner, J. (1983). *Child's talk: learning to use language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, A. (2007). *Storytelling in the Classroom: Enhancing Traditional Oral Skills for Teachers and Pupils*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Donaldson, J. (2000) *The Gruffalo*. Macmillan Children's books.
- Eads, J. (2006). *Classroom Tales*. London: Jessica Kingsly Publishers
- Ellis, G. & Brewster, J. (2002) *Tell it again! The new storytelling handbook for primary teachers*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Garvie, E. (1990). *Story as a vehicle: Teaching English to young children*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Haliwell, S. (1994). *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom*. Harlow: Longman.
- Harmer, J. (2006). *The practice of English language teaching*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Lambert, V. & Choy, M. (2000) *Enjoy Teaching English with Puffin Picture Books. A resource for primary teachers*. London: Penguin Books.
- Mourão, S. (2003). *JET: Realbooks! In the Primary Classroom*. Southam: Mary Glasgow Scholastic.
- Mourão, S. (2009). *Using stories in the primary classroom*. BritLit: Using literature in EFL classrooms, London.
- Mourão, S. 2010. "What's in a picture book?" in Mourão, S. (Ed) *APPInep: Celebrating ten years of teaching children in Portugal*. APPI: Lisboa.
- Mourão, S. 2011a. *Picturebooks for all: a Think Article* retrieved on October 2, 2012 from <<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/picture-books-all>>.
- Mourão, S. 2011b. *The way and the why of picturebooks* on the 45th International IATEFL Conference and Exhibition, Brighton, UK retrieved on October 2012 from



- <[http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2011/sites/iatefl/files/session/documents/picturebooks\\_in\\_elt\\_introduction.pdf](http://iatefl.britishcouncil.org/2011/sites/iatefl/files/session/documents/picturebooks_in_elt_introduction.pdf)>.
- Slattery, M., & Willis, J. (2001). *English for primary teachers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scotton, R. (2008) *Love, Splat*. London, Harper Collins.
- Thomas, V. & Paul, K. (2006) *Winnie the Witch*. Oxford University Press.
- Wright, A. (1995) *Storytelling with children*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.