Stories play a major role in early childhood education and are a key element in any good English programme for young children. Read on for some practical tips for choosing, delivering and using stories for memorable and meaningful language learning.

**Why use stories?**

As more young learner teachers adopt classroom practices that focus on teaching the whole child, stories have become a key resource for providing a natural, engaging context for learning language. But when we read to children we are doing so much more than just teaching them English. We are encouraging their imagination, exploring other cultures and teaching them about the world. Listening to and participating in stories also develops a range of linguistic, psychological, cognitive, social and cultural skills. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to make storytelling with your English language learners a regular part of your routine.

**Your book collection**

A library of picture books is one of the best resources a young learner teacher can have. If you don’t have a budget for books – which has been the case for me for most of my career – opt for second-hand ones. Whenever possible, I buy the large, hardcover version. They last longer and are easier to hold when reading aloud.

Another idea is to create a book bank with colleagues. Get together with some other young learner teachers, agree to buy a few books each and rotate them between you. This is another good way to get access to a big collection of wonderful stories without having to spend a lot of money.

Nowadays, there are so many wonderful children’s stories to choose from; however, not all of them are appropriate to use with language learners. Before you buy anything, here are some specific characteristics you should look for when selecting a book to use with your young learners:

* Repetitive words and phrases.
* Rhyme and/or onomatopoeia.
* An easy-to-follow sequence.
* A predictable or familiar storyline.
* Illustrations that support the understanding of the text.
* Interesting characters that the listeners can identify with.
* Humour and lots of action.
* An exciting ending with an appropriate conclusion.
* A clear message or moral.
* An appropriate length for the age group / level.
* Topics or content that can link into the curriculum.

**The delivery**

When your audience doesn’t speak English as a first language, the delivery is everything! There is an art to reading aloud to an audience of youngsters, so once you’ve fallen in love with a great book, the next step is to work on your performance.

According to *Tell It Again* by Shirley Raines and Rebecca Isbell, ‘Storytelling involves three essential elements: the story, the teller, and the listener. A well selected story told by an effective storyteller captivates young listeners’ attention and the three elements work in harmony.’

With that in mind, here are some tips for making story-time with your young learners a big success.

**General guidelines**

You should always read the story to yourself (or in front of a mirror) before going public. This will help you decide how you will read it, what voices and actions you will use and how you will get students to participate.

You need to get a feel for the rhythm and speed of the book; make sure you vary both. Depending on the book and your audience, you may need to adapt the language and/or length. This should all be done before you attempt to read it with your students.

**The use of space**

Whenever possible, designate a special area in the classroom for storytelling, even if this means moving the furniture around. You should also establish a routine and some rules to follow during story-time. For example, you may like to get the children to ask questions at the end to avoid constant interruptions. Don’t forget to make sure everyone can see both you and the book clearly. If a child can’t see then they will miss out on the essential language support from the gestures you use and the pictures that help them to understand the meaning. This can lead to them losing interest and getting distracted. Finally, remember you should only begin reading when everyone is settled and focused.

**Generating interest**

If you aren’t excited about the book your students won’t be either, so always show enthusiasm. You can present the book in different ways to engage them in the topic, e.g. you could slowly reveal the cover, or hide the book and have students look for it, or bring the book out of a special bag or box.

**Providing language support**

Show the cover of the book and elicit words and ideas the students know based on the title and/or images. Some teachers like to use flashcards or real objects to pre-teach key vocabulary and, if applicable, you could even teach them a rhyme or a game that ties in with the topic or language used in the story. Having students predict what the story is about by showing them images or reading aloud key sentences from the story is another great way to prepare them. Finally, if you have read the book with your students before, encourage them to recall as much as they can about the characters or storyline.

**Follow-up activities**

**Story sequencing**

In this activity students are encouraged to collaborate to recall a familiar story, illustrating the key stages and retelling it to their classmates.

Instructions:

1. In groups, students decide on the key stages of the story they are going to illustrate. Stronger groups of students should be encouraged to think of more stages (this provides differentiation).
2. Hand a piece of blank paper to each group and ask them to draw lines to divide the paper into equal-sized boxes. They will need one box for each key stage of the story, so if a group has more stages it might be better to give them several pieces of paper so they have enough space for their drawings. (Alternatively, you could pre-make these before the class and hand them out to groups.)
3. In each box, students draw a picture to represent the key stages of the story. Depending on the level of the class/group, they could write a sentence (or more) underneath each picture to describe what is happening.
4. Students take turns retelling the whole story with the others in their group, using the pictures and words to help them.
5. Students then cut up the page and divide the pictures equally between the members of the group.
6. The group works together to retell the story for their classmates, with each member reading out their part and showing their pictures in the correct order.
7. The pictures can be kept in an envelope and used again in future lessons. (You might want to write a number on the back of each picture for later reference.)

**‘Lift the flap’ book**

In this activity children learn the meaning and form of words in context by creating illustrated flaps to cover key words in a book.

Instructions:

1. In groups, the children each select a word from a page of the book and copy it on to a piece of paper. (Monitor to make sure the chosen words can be easily illustrated and that the whole group understands the meaning of each word; you may wish to give groups specific pages from the book to look through, so they don’t all choose the same pages/words.)
2. Divide the words between the members of the group, so that students have a different word to the one they initially chose. Ask them not to show the others what they got! Give each student one Post-it note.
3. Each students should cut up their Post-it note to create a flap to stick over their word in the book (but don’t stick them on the book yet!). They should then each draw a picture on the Post-it to illustrate the meaning of their word.
4. Students show their drawings to the others in their group and see if they can guess the word.
5. Stick the Post-it notes over the words in the book.
6. Choose someone to be the ‘teacher’ and read the story to the class.
7. When the storyteller reaches a flap, he or she should stop and show the drawing. The other students should call out the word, and the storyteller can then lift the flap to see if they are right.

**Storyboarding**

In this activity children retell a familiar story, and then the teacher takes photos to create a storyboard.

Instructions:

1. After reading a short story out loud, put the children in groups.
2. Students should choose between 5–10 key moments in the story, and then recreate those scenes using their bodies and/or other props. (Note: Depending on your class size and the time you have available, you could either ask each group to choose and recreate their own key scenes, or choose the key scenes as a class and assign one or two to each group.)
3. Take photos of each scene, upload them to the computer and print them out. (You may want to print each image on to white paper with some space below it, if you want students to try step 5.)
4. Within their groups, students can then put the images in order and take turns to retell the story to each other.
5. With guidance, students can write sentences below each image and staple it together like a book.
6. A shortened version of this activity is to photocopy images from the story (laminate if possible to make them more durable), mix them up, then hand them out (in sets) to groups. The groups then have to put them back into the correct order and retell the story. It can be made into a race, with points awarded to the group who finishes correctly first.

Storytelling is one of my favourite things to do with very young learners and I know I’m not alone. If you’ve tried storytelling before but without the desired results, I think it’s really worth giving it another go.