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## *SOPHIE'S LIGHTHOUSE: FROM READING TO STORYTELLING.* THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS AND IMAGINATION

### ABSTRACT

This article presents reading as an essential tool for students to acquire not only the basic knowledge of the language subjects in school, but also in the rest of the curriculum. That is why it is considered a cross-cutting element. Thanks to reading, students improve their comprehension and literacy skills to construct meaning and think by themselves. However, the reading habit is not only acquired and worked at school, it must be worked also at home. Parents therefore play a very important role. When we talk about the teaching-learning process, we cannot forget any member of the educational community: students, teachers and their families. Families can and should be involved in motivating and, consequently, improving children's performance.

There are several ways to transmit the joy of reading, one of which is through narrative or storytelling. Storytelling helps children develop creativity and imagination. At the same time, they are taught to empathize with the characters of the story. This kind of learning allows them to grow as individuals and it can be applied in real life situations.

*Sophie's Lighthouse* is a project born as a result of these needs and aims to provide the reader with the joy of reading and the communicative competence. It includes a series of short stories about daily life situations, which are familiar to children. Therefore, meaningful learning happens.

KEYWORDS: Reading, storytelling, Sophie's Lighthouse, parents, meaningful learning.

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## RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta la lectura como instrumento imprescindible para que todo alumno adquiriera los conocimientos básicos tanto en las áreas de lengua como en el resto de materias curriculares. Esto se debe a que es un elemento transversal. Gracias a la lectura, el alumnado mejora sus destrezas de comprensión y su literacidad, lo que le permite construir significados y pensar por sí mismo. Sin embargo, el hábito lector no se adquiere única y exclusivamente en el aula, sino que también debe ser trabajado en casa. Es por eso que los padres adquieren un papel muy importante. Cuando hablamos del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje, no podemos olvidarnos de ninguno de los miembros de la comunidad educativa: el alumnado, sus familias y los maestros. Las familias pueden y deben involucrarse para motivar y, consecuentemente, mejorar el rendimiento de los niños.

Hay diversas maneras de transmitir el gusto por la lectura, una de ellas es a través de la narración o cuentacuentos. Los cuentacuentos ayudan a los niños a desarrollar la creatividad y la imaginación. Al mismo tiempo, se les enseña a empatizar con los personajes de la historia. Este tipo de aprendizaje les sirve para crecer como personas y puede ser aplicado en la vida real. *Sophie's Lighthouse* es un proyecto que nace a raíz de estas necesidades y que pretende que el lector adquiriera, además del gusto por la lectura, la competencia comunicativa. Incluye una serie de cuentos breves sobre la vida cotidiana que les resultan muy próximos a los niños y que, por consiguiente, producen un aprendizaje significativo.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Lectura, cuentacuentos, *Sophie's Lighthouse*, padres, aprendizaje significativo.

It is universally acknowledged that reading is a key factor to drive children to succeed in school and in life. Good books trigger their motivation and encourage them to learn. As a foreign language teacher, when I started my job, one of my first goals was to have students read. The main problem, however, was that they were not used to read books in the foreign language, in this case, English. This was mainly due to the fact that their parents did not know the language, therefore, they did not facilitate reading English books and, on top of that, students themselves did not have any reading habits. In order to solve this problem, I decided to involve parents in the students' learning process and create situations in which children could discover the joy of reading in another language, English. As Dorothy Rich highlights, «in this complex world, it takes more than a good school to educate children. And it takes more than a good home. It takes these two major educational institutions working together» (2008, p 243). That is why in my classes I aim to implicate in the learning process not only the pupils' parents but also their siblings, grandparents, etc.

Moreover, the other problem I faced in my first year teaching was that I could not find any books which were closely related to the students' linguistic competence. Their

level of English was very low, so it goes without saying that if I had them read stories that they could not understand, they would lose their interest in reading. As a result, I came to the decision of writing my own story books taking into account my students' linguistic competence and their interests.

The objective of this article is to show that by including literature in our schools, children learn and work on specific aspects of the foreign language; including word recognition, new vocabulary, phonics and comprehension. Most importantly, students enter a fantastic and imaginary world that motivates them and awakens their interest to further learn. Reading not only improves their writing skills, but also allows teachers to use storytelling in the classroom. As we will see, storytelling is a fantastic way to help children improve their oral skills (listening and speaking). To put it briefly, as a foreign language teacher, my goal is to improve my students' communicative competence along with their critical thinking skills and imagination.

### 1. *SOPHIE'S LIGHTHOUSE*

*Sophie's Lighthouse* is a didactic and educational project that came to fruition due to the necessities I faced as an English teacher in Spain. It consists of a collection of storybooks that are addressed to kids who are 4 years and older. Its main aim is to make them enjoy reading and feel attracted to the foreign language while they also learn new vocabulary and grammar. These stories are easy to follow with simple and repetitive structures that I write, both as an author and as a teacher, to introduce language skills and topics appropriate for their level.

The main character is a likeable mouse named Sophie who guides them in the learning process. Through her interaction with other characters such as her mum and her friends, children learn values and feel captivated by the English language. My duty as a teacher is not only to teach curricular contents, but also to create future citizens who are able to think critically. Students in my class learn that they are free to use the information and to express their ideas, but always respecting other people's opinions. Furthermore, I encourage my students to solve conflicts in a peaceful way.

This project is divided, initially, into five different stories and each story is related to a specific topic. It is necessary to say that the topics were carefully selected taking into account the students' interests and motivation. Some of the topics include: school, toys, family, etc. In each book children learn a specific syntactical structure and some vocabulary. It is very easy for them to internalise it because the syntactical structure is repeated throughout the story. Additionally, new words are introduced in a very visual way, so that it is easier for the children to remember them. Moreover, students practise

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new vocabulary in the syntactical structure that they are learning. Similar to the Direct Method. As Larsen-Freeman (2008) explains:

Teachers who use the Direct Method believe students need to associate meaning and the target language directly. In order to do this, when the teacher introduces a new target language word or phrase, he demonstrates its meaning through the use of realia, pictures, or pantomime; he never translates it into the students' native language». (p.29)

To this aim, in the stories, the new words that I want my students to learn are drawn inside a balloon or close to the characters. In doing so, it is much easier for them to pay attention to the new words.

Throughout these stories, English is taught inductively. Richards and Schmidt (2010) explain that with inductive learning, «learners are not taught grammatical or other types of rules directly but are left to discover or induce rules from their experience of using the language». (p.158) In addition, I also take into account the Communicative Language Teaching Approach because I want my students to develop their communicative competence. According to Richards (2006):

Communicative competence includes the following aspects of language knowledge:

- Knowing how to use language for a range of different purposes and functions.
- Knowing how to vary our use of language according to the setting and the participants (e.g., knowing when to use formal and informal speech or when to use language appropriately for written as opposed to spoken communication).
- Knowing how to produce and understand different types of texts (e.g., narratives, reports, interviews, conversations).
- Knowing how to maintain communication despite having limitations in one's language knowledge (e.g., through using different kinds of communication strategies). (p.3)

I remember that when I was a child, my English lessons followed mostly the Grammar Translation Method. The teacher introduced a specific grammar rule; then, we had to memorise a list of vocabulary and, finally, we had to translate sentences and short texts. This method has been strongly criticized because it does not take into consideration the spoken language. It is teacher centred and the lessons are taught using students' mother tongue leaving little opportunities or no opportunity at all to use and practice the target language.

In Spain, not too long ago, the grammatical competence was more emphasized in the foreign language class than the communicative competence. That is why it has been

so necessary to adopt new approaches. Upon changing the objectives, we also have to change the way to reach them. Nowadays, in my lessons of English, I want my students to discover and understand the relevance of learning a foreign language. I also want them to be conscious about the fact that it is very useful not only inside the foreign language classroom, but also when they travel to a different country or when they look for information on the Internet.

With *Sophie's Lighthouse*, children are encouraged to read stories about situations that are extremely familiar to them. For instance, they learn how to ask for school supplies, how to ask for permission, how to play with their friends, decision making, etc. This is so that they can see how to use the language in different contexts and how important it is to use it correctly.

## 2. WORKING ON THE LINGUISTIC SKILLS THROUGH READING

Reading is part of our daily life; it takes place not only at school but also at home, in the street, in the park, etc. When we want our students to read, we have to be aware of the fact that reading is not just reading a book, you can also read a poem, a song, a computer game, a leaflet, a recipe and so on. We can affirm that reading is a cross-cutting element which not only works in the language subject, but also in other subjects such as Maths, Science, Arts and Craft. Sometimes, people tend to think that reading is only a skill related to the linguistic area, but that is a mistake because reading comprehension and constructing meaning are fundamental skills that are equally as important in order to achieve school success. As Wright (2003) puts it, «Most stories can be used to develop the children's powers of awareness, analysis, and expression, as well as relating to other aspects of the curriculum, such as cultural and social studies, geography, history, mathematics, and science» (p.5). Students have to use different comprehension strategies so as to make sense of the text. In this respect, some reading strategies are: inferring information from text, making connections between what you already know and the text, reread the texts in order to clarify doubts, try to identify the author's purpose, and build your own interpretation.

According to Smith (2004), «reading is not just a visual activity. Both visual information and nonvisual information are essential for reading, and there can be a trade-off between the two» (p.94). Visual information can be described as the written language that we see thanks to our eyes, while non-visual information should be described as the meaning that exists between the lines. When talking about reading, meaning is extremely important because without good comprehension it is not possible to achieve meaningful learning.

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In this line of argument, it is essential to transmit the joy of reading to our students. Actually, this is a duty that not only corresponds to teachers but also to parents and mentors; we all have to work as team. Teachers can work on language development at school but parents have to do the same at home. How can they do it? The key idea is to read *with* the child, they have to be a model to them. It is also good to have a particular time and special place at home designated to read. Parents should involve their kids in the choice of books, because by doing so, children feel more interested in reading or being read to. Finally, it helps to foster a reading routine and to ask them questions focusing on meaning and interpretation. As Rich (2009) says,

The most essential children's ability that parents have to encourage is the child's continuing readiness to learn. Children are remarkable learners from birth. A parent's biggest job is to help keep a child's appetite for learning alive. This conveys the message that education is very important, that you believe in it and in your child's ability to succeed» (p.23).

Last of all, it is essential to show students how to take care of books. Here again, teachers and parents are models for their students. We must tell them how to treat books carefully so they respect and appreciate them. In order to engage my students and to make them fond of reading, I always use two sessions at the beginning of the school year to show them how to take care of the books. I show them ways to make predictions by what information they can infer from the cover, what they can predict by observing the pictures, etc. In relation to this, I have witnessed that during break time between lessons, some students exchange information about the books they read at home. I remember a particular day when I heard a student recommending a book about witches and ghosts to a classmate. He advised her not to read it with her younger sister because the story could scare her. It was an extremely satisfying experience for me as a teacher!

This demonstrates how reading promotes students' autonomy and how once they discover the joy of reading for pleasure, they will become readers for their entire life. In my school, to encourage this, I create a wall of fame where I stick a picture of the boy or girl who has already read 3 books freely from the classroom library.

### 3. STORYTELLING: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S IMAGINATION

In my lessons, stories play an essential role. Through storytelling, pupils are able to discover and understand the culture of the target language and to know in which context they can use the language. In addition, they develop empathy, which is an important skill in order to establish social relationships. It is essential to be empathic because this allows you to imagine how a person feels or what he or she thinks in a specific situation.

According to Ellis and Brewster (2014), «Stories are motivating, challenging and enjoyable and can help develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language, culture and language learning» (p.6). Moreover, they are also crucial to develop imagination because students identify themselves with the characters. As Cameron comments, «stories offer a whole imaginary world, created by language, that children can enter and enjoy, learning language as they go» (p.159).

In my class, storytelling is organized in three main parts: pre-reading activities, while-reading activities and post-reading activities. Pre-reading activities acquire a lot of importance because we make the most of our students' potential to create mental images as they have to predict and try to anticipate what is going to happen in the story. The second part of the storytelling takes place while the teacher tells the story. It comprises a set of different activities to check whether the students are following the story or not, and to make sure they retain the new vocabulary. Some of the while-reading activities are:

- asking questions to check understanding.
- checking predictions.
- repeating chorally a key word or sentence after the teacher.
- practising pronunciation of new words.
- working on new words trying to infer meaning from the context.

In this way, repetition is important to recycle language that has been previously introduced. Likewise, predicting and participating in the story helps students to build up their confidence (Ellis and Brewster 2014, p 21). On a different note, when I tell a story, I always show the pictures because they help to convey meaning and catch children's attention.

Finally, the post-reading activities, done at the end of the story, help students to understand better the story and to analyse what they have read. Some examples are:

- retelling the story using key vocabulary.
- asking true or false questions.
- creating group discussion about the events in the story.
- reflecting on the values transmitted by the story and establishing connections with the students' lives.
- sharing the emotions that the story makes them feel. This is part of the aesthetic learning which today is so relevant in world of education.

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Once I have explained what I do when I tell a story, it is essential to say that some teachers fall into the trap of forgetting pre-reading activities and while reading activities. They are not aware of the importance of these two types of exercises. They tell the story and then, ask some questions. If the questions are written, the students only have to complete a worksheet without sharing with the rest of their classmates what the story was about or what they learnt from it. These kinds of activities do not trigger students' motivation.

I want to highlight that pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities are equally important because the listeners' brains make connections between their previous knowledge and what they are going to learn in the story. It is then when they enjoy reading and have the will to learn.

Finally, regarding the assessment of reading, it is best if it is done through direct and non-direct observation. For this reason, I use a wide variety of assessment tools in order to take into account all the aspects related to reading and storytelling. As Serafini (2012) suggests,

There is no single assessment that provides access to the complete child. Each assessment window conceals information about a child as much as it reveals. Each window places a «zoom lens» on a different aspect of a child's behaviours, abilities, and dispositions. Only through the use of a variety of assessment windows will a more extensive understanding of a child's literate abilities emerge. (p.22)

We must not forget the importance of student assessment when talking about reading and storytelling. It is important to take notes about the students' attitudes towards reading. Assessment is based, mostly, in direct observation. I assess the types of reading strategies they use, if they can follow the story, if they participate actively in the activities proposed by the teacher and their attitudes towards their classmates when sharing. Teachers must assess reading to gain an understanding of how students perceive the importance of it.

### 3.2. *Sophie's Lighthouse* storytelling

The books in the *Sophie's Lighthouse* series are not only used in the classroom; they should also be used outside of school. As I am aware of the benefits of using it with my pupils, I want as many children as possible to take advantage of it. Since I started writing the stories in 2015, I have told them in different schools, book shops, libraries and culture houses in several towns and villages.

First, I introduce myself to the children and their parents. Then, I try to create a relaxed atmosphere in which they feel free and motivated to participate. I do this by using icebreakers and songs. Here Krashen's Affective Filter hypothesis plays an important role. As he explains, «the Affective Filter hypothesis states how affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process» (1982, p.30). There are several affective factors which have a lot of influence in the second language learning. These variables are: motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. If the learner has high motivation, low anxiety and is self-confident, he or she will acquire the language faster. By contrast, if the learner has low motivation, high anxiety and if he/she is not self-confident, it will be hard for him/her to learn the second language. (Krashen, 1982).

So once I have the right atmosphere, I start with the pre-reading activities. I read them the title of the story and I show them the cover of the book. Later, I ask the kids if they can predict what the story is about. This helps assess how they infer the information from the pictures.

Then, as I start telling the story, I ask them some questions. It is worth mentioning that these books include some questions already written in red colour that can be used by teachers or parents throughout the story. The aim is to facilitate their work when telling these stories to their kids. Thanks to these questions, I promote the children's interaction within the storytelling and I continuously catch their attention. Moreover, whenever a new word of vocabulary appears, I always point to the picture, in order to make them relate the word with the picture.

Finally, when I finish telling the story, I say five statements and children have to answer if they are true or false. This allows me to know whether they understood the story or not. Then, I ask some volunteers to come with me and to do some activities related to the story. For example, I give them some flashcards and they have to display them in the correct order, as they appear in the story. Another activity is related with the cross-cutting elements worked in the story. For instance, in the first book: *Sophie's Lighthouse. My first day of school* (2015), we work on recycling. So I give them some realia like a bottle of glass, a plastic bottle, a milk carton, a newspaper, a magazine... and they have to classify the objects in the corresponding bin.

Whenever I tell a story, the Total Physical Response Method (TPR) acquires a lot of significance. As explained by Richards and Rodgers (1987), «TPR is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action; it attempts to teach language through physical (motor) activity» (p.87). This method was developed by James Asher who wanted to teach the second language to children or adults in the same way as children acquire the first language. Because of TPR, children learn the new

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language in an easy and fun way, and they understand the language better. Additionally, it works perfectly in a mixed ability class group. In my class, I use it when I ask students to mimic the story as I read it a second time. Also I ask them to point out a specific picture as I say its name. Furthermore, when I introduce new vocabulary, I mimic the word for students to understand its meaning without using their first language. For example, if I say saxophone, I move my fingers and I do the movement as if I were playing that instrument. Then, I have my students do it too. Another different example of how I use it is when I ask them a Yes/No question, I show them my thumbs up and my thumbs down, so they relate thumbs up with «yes» and thumbs down with «no». This technique also reinforces the use of the second language in the classroom and deters students from using their native languages.

#### 4. «READING TUTORS» AND «INTERACTIVE GROUPS»: AIMING FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS

In my lessons, I promote «Reading Tutors». As I introduce one book from the collection of *Sophie's Lighthouse* to my students in Primary, we work on intonation and pronunciation and I give them a series of tips in order to prepare them to become reading tutors. To this aim, we sit down in a semicircle and each of them, one by one, go to the front of the class and tell the story. Not all of them do it the same day, however, because children can be bored of listening to the same story over and over again. The important thing is that as they practise they gain confidence in the language they're learning and lose the fear of telling stories in the foreign language to other kids. When I consider that they are ready for this task, we visit the pupils in Infant Education. One Primary student is now the reading tutor of one or two Infant students. In order to group the students, I take into account children's personalities and their reading-comprehension competence. For instance, I try to put a Primary student who is talkative with an Infant child who is shy in the same group or vice versa. Similarly, if there is a primary student who is more advanced, I place him or her with a younger student who has more reading-comprehension difficulties.

They are allowed to go wherever they want to read the book. Some of them like to go to the playground, some prefer to stay in the classroom and some others want to be in the hallway. Because they choose where they want to read, they feel responsible, comfortable and self-confident. As reading tutors, their mission is to read the story and to make it comprehensible for the younger ones. Furthermore, they are prompted to ask Yes/No questions to check comprehension as well as to make use of the TPR method that we have practiced before when they are asking questions. In this case, they put their thumbs up or down to let the younger pupils know that they are expecting a «yes» or «no» response.

As children love listening to stories, everyone enjoys this activity which is extremely motivating and enriching not only for the younger ones but also for the primary students. I would like to emphasize the great importance of the values that students acquire thanks to this activity such as solidarity, respect, friendship, etc. They also improve the communicative competence and their linguistic skills. Primary students love to be tutors and to be in charge of an infant student. They feel as if they were teachers and they do not stop working on the story with them. One day, for instance, one student told me: «I had never imagined before that I could be friend with a kid who is 7 years younger than me. Similarly, last weekend I was playing in the park with my sister and then Pepe, showed up. He asked his mum if he could play with me and I was extremely happy. We had such a good time!» In addition, when the older students are in the playground, they take a lot of care of the younger ones. That is because they built a connection while they were reading tutors.

On a different level, I also implement what is known as «Successful Educational Action» in my lessons. Successful Educational Actions «can improve school success and contribute to social cohesion in every context where they are implemented. These actions share characteristics that have been identified in diverse contexts in different countries across Europe (...) and which have demonstrated to achieve excellent results» (Flecha, 2015, p.3.). These actions were conducted by the INCLUD-ED project. As explained by Flecha (2015):

the aim of the research conducted by the INCLUD-ED project is to achieve both academic success and social cohesion for all children and communities in Europe. Regardless of their socioeconomic status and/or ethnic background. The project analysed the educational actions that lead to social inequality, with a particular focus on the actions that contribute to reducing such inequalities and present evidence of educational success» (p.1).

The one that I carry out is called Interactive Groups. Students are divided into five groups of four, five or six members –boys and girls– with different learning levels. The students who are more advanced help and reinforce the knowledge of the students with more difficulties. It is always done under the supervision of the teacher and the volunteers –parents, grandparents, siblings who are members of our educational community–. Each volunteer is in charge of a different activity. Every 12-15 minutes students rotate to a different volunteer, so they change the activity.

At the end of this session, the volunteers and I, as the teacher, assess the adequacy of the activity for the children's level, the interaction and the help given to each other in the group and the adequacy of the voice tone level. In the Interactive Groups session there is much more interaction and participation than in a class. It is better for the students to be helped by peers or adults because as Vygostky explains within the Zone

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of Proximal Development (ZPD), learning is more meaningful. According to Vygostky (1978) the ZPD is «the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in cooperation with more capable peers» (p.86). Regarding this activity, I want to highlight what one parent told me one day. He was a volunteer in our Interactive Groups session. He was extremely satisfied because among other things, now he knew better his son's classmates. Consequently, he established a good relationship with all of them. Furthermore, he told me that he also learnt new things throughout the work we had done. It was like a review for him. Through these kind of activities, I promote reading habits, values education, attention to diversity. The activities proposed are always carried out as planned. All those people involved (students, teachers, parents and volunteers) are proud of the work done, as all of the activities are very enriching both in a curricular and in a social way.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, I strongly feel that there is no better way to arouse students' joy for reading than through storytelling. Thanks to *Sophie Lighthouse*, I can always connect emotionally with my students. They learn to be empathic and how to express themselves. They also feel relaxed and are not afraid of making mistakes because they are an inevitable part of the language learning process. In this respect, it is really important that teachers prepare them for daily life situations in which they need the foreign language. As a teacher, I feel fulfilled because I help my students to develop their language knowledge through suitable activities that lead them to improve their communicative competence. Let me emphasise once again that it is not only the teacher's duty to accomplish this, but also the families. They must help us to transmit to their kids the joy for reading. By involving parents and other family members in the learning process, students become aware of the partnership between school and home; thus, they are more interested in reading and more motivated and willing to learn.

Finally, apart from reading, the other aim of this project is to show students that speaking a foreign language is both useful and enriching on many different levels. In accordance to the activities explained earlier, I can affirm that my students improve the ability to express themselves; they develop the learning to learn competence and the sense of initiative and entrepreneurship. This is due to the fact that they are the true protagonists of the teaching-learning process.

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