

Creative Strategies with Literature: Developing Literacy in the Classroom

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*Abstract: This presentation describes strategies for using literature to facilitate literacy in the primary school classroom. Critical research information is given on links with reading and the development of children's writing. Teachers can put theory into practice by activities that engage the imagination and stimulate the acquisition of reading and writing skills. While phonological awareness is important in learning how to read, the context of a literary text (particularly of picture books) can assist language understanding (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; (Galda & Cullinan, 2005). The words and picture of literary texts provide a catalyst for generating ideas, which deepen understanding and interest in language learning (Cole & Maddox, 1997). The activities described are based on popular award- winning children's literature (e.g. Li Cunxin's *The Peasant Prince* amongst others) and are suitable for the 5 – 12 year old age range.*

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Introduction

THE ACQUISITION OF literacy, the ability to read, write, view and represent, is an important objective, significant for both educators and students. The literate have more opportunities to fulfil their potential in a world, which increasingly demands the ability to understand written communication. A strong educational beginning for children is an important predictor for future success in school and life (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001). The view of literacy has evolved to encompass 'not only reading, writing, speaking, and listening, but also the multiple ways through which learners gain access to knowledge and skills' (Flood *et al.*, 2007). In the primary school classroom, the teacher takes especial care that language learning is a central focus, stimulating the acquisition of reading and writing skills through imaginative strategies, often through picture books. Teaching strategies related to a text such as Li Cunxin's *The Peasant Prince* (2007), allow the teacher to implement developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009). The words and picture of literary texts provide a catalyst for generating ideas that deepen understanding and interest in language learning (Cole & Maddox, 1997). While *The Peasant Prince* can serve as an excellent exemplar, skills in oral language, phonological awareness and visual literacy can be developed through a vast array of picture books (Winch *et al.*, 2006).

Teaching literature and teaching reading need not be separate entities – both can enrich (Galda & Cullinan, 2009). In Li Cunxin's, *The Peasant Prince* (2007), "one thin thread of a chance" changed his life. As a peasant boy, Li, at eleven years old, was chosen from millions of other children to become a ballet dancer in Chairman Mao's China. His travails at the Beijing Dance Academy and his ambition to become one of the best dancers through dedicated practice, is an inspirational story. The picture book version for children does not mention

Li's defection in the United States (Cunxin, 2003) but dwells on his application of hard work to realise the dream to become a world-class dancer. Older readers can be introduced to Li's autobiographical *Mao's Last Dancer* (in book or audio format), to his personal blog (Cunxin, 2008) and to the film of his life which premiered in 2009.

Teaching Strategies

Oral Language (Narrative/Response Genres and Vocabulary)

Oral language can be developed through discussion that involves the student in initiating conversations about the words and pictures in the book. Interactive reading is the key so that students are encouraged to express their opinions. What clues can they find/predict about the story from the young boy on the cover? Can they see Li has a Chinese jacket, does the snow give a hint of the setting, and are they familiar with the type of bird in the illustration?

Picture books can be used as a springboard for ideas and related to a young student's life experience. In the following passage, discussion can focus on the language expression and relate to authentic experiences of the child, such as games played with family members. Is the choice of the adverb *bitterly* and adjective *cold*, effective – would the student talk like this in conversation? If not, what would he/she say?

On one bitterly cold day, near our home in Qingdao, I tied some 'paper wishes' to my kite and my father helped me fly it up into the sky. The kite soared like a bird and my hopes and wishes went with it.

The simile of the *kite soared like a bird* can be compared to others such as *graceful as a pheasant*, *powerful as a dragon* and other examples of metaphorical language in the text such as *lost in an ocean of loneliness*. Teachers can encourage oral and written language, which becomes more expressive/communicative through the use of metaphor.

A story told by Li's father has a strong influence on him:

Once upon a time, a little frog lived in a deep, dark well. It was his only home. One day, he met a frog from the world above.

'Come down and play with me!' begged the frog in the well.

The frog from the world above laughed. 'My world up here is much bigger!'

The frog in the well was very annoyed, so he told his father what he'd heard.

'My son,' his father said with a sad heart, 'I have heard there is a bigger and better world up there but our life is here, in the well. There is no way we can get out.'

'I want to see what is out there!' cried the little frog. But even though he jumped and hopped, the well was just too deep.

'It is no use, my son,' said his father. 'I have tried all my life to get out.'

Still, the little frog kept on trying to escape from that deep, dark well...

Students can be taught to 'read between the lines' to understand how the fable relates to Li's life and ambition. Ask students who is *the sad little frog in the well*? The fable can be used a model for students to write their own fables, as a class, small group, or individual (depending on their age and ability).

The power of storytelling is that it invites us both to identify with the author and ponder on our own lives at the same time. *The Peasant Prince* invites us ‘walk in the author’s shoes’. Li’s inspirational story of grit and perseverance can motivate students to think about what they would be prepared to work hard for and how they might overcome seemingly unsurmountable obstacles. What conclusions can they draw from Li’s story? Students can write about how their lives might develop as they grow up and what they think they will be in ten years and twenty years.

The narrative genre can be taught through the text as students follow the story. The purpose of the narrative is to interest and entertain, not just to retell past events in a sequence. A scaffold (Derewianka, 1990) containing the following items helps students improve their literacy skills.

Narrative	Features
Orientation	- who, what, where and when is outlined - problem or issue or ‘why’ may be outlined - descriptive and active words can be used - draw the audience in through imagination
Sequence of events (may include complication), rising action, evaluation	- each paragraph may be about a different part of the story or develop one idea further - the complication can be in the middle section too - a lot of description and imagery used to interest - action rises to a climax or highest point in this section
Resolution/ending (may include a coda)	- story concludes, is resolved, ends are unravelled - if a coda is used there is a moral to the story

A scaffold of the response genre can generate discussion on how students respond to the text, including the organisational structure of an opening statement giving the context of the ‘peasant prince’ with background information; a description of the key features or significant event; and a conclusion of a judgement which gives a personal response to the text. Language features can be taught within the context of *The Peasant Prince*, focussing on

Noun groups:

- nouns to represent people (*officials*), animals (*frog*), or things (*candle*)
- pronouns referring to people and other living things e.g. personal pronouns (*I, they*), possessive pronouns (*my, his*).
- classifying adjectives to make statements about categories (*main character*)
- descriptive adjectives of size (*little, vast*), colour (*red*), quantity (*four*)
- modal adjectives (*better, very*)

Verb groups

- verbs that relate action and relating (*is, are, was*) to provide information about the subject
- -use of familiar thinking verbs (*thinking, dream, thought, believe*) to express the author's views about the subject
- -modal verbs to convey the mood of the writing (*can, must, will*)

Adverbial

- -use of adverbs to express feelings or judgements (longingly).

Vocabulary expansion activities can be drawn from the text where students can find information from both the text and illustrations. For example, ask students to compose their own paragraphs about the Li family sitting down to eat in a time of privation, using the verbs: *cook, eat, pray, die* and the nouns: *house, mother, food, sons, starvation*. Here the illustration by Anne Spudvilas assists the student to visualise what the text conveys.

Students enter school with different vocabulary levels, which impact, on their reading comprehension skills. Silverman and Crandell (2010) have found that the vocabulary of kindergarten children can be expanded if teachers focus on target words during read aloud time. In *The Peasant Prince*, the following vocabulary knowledge can be targeted, the words used in context, and assessed for understanding: *kite, frog, well, starvation, officials, measured, enormous, graceful, powerful, courage, ballet*. The words chosen for explication can be those that consolidate the comprehension of the story line and/or those, which add to the students' initial vocabulary knowledge. Understanding the meaning of a word in context is a crucial reading skill.

Phonological Awareness

Oral reading of books with a strong story line assists students in the awareness of language. Phonological awareness skills taught within the context of the picture book can assist students to read whereas the decontextualising of skills is less helpful (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Young students need much practice in understanding that oral and written language is made up of sounds (phonemes) and the manipulation of phonemes to communicate different messages. Students can improve their reading strategies by a) sounding out phonemes e.g. *famous, best, America, told, Nutcracker* b) sounding out syllables in words such as *wonderful, luckier, survived, courage, beautiful*. In the early years of reading, letter-sound (phonic) knowledge can focus on initial sounds frequently used in the text, vowels, consonants, vowel digraphs such as *au* (*My dear mother and father sitting in the audience*) and consonant digraphs such as *sm* (*And I saw their sm iles, so big and proud*). Practice in phonological knowledge will transfer skills to new words and unknown sounds.

Print Awareness

Teachers can build students' knowledge of the conventions of a book's layout by drawing attention to the significance of the title, the author's name (pronounced Lee Schwin Sing), the important role of the illustrator (Anne Spudvilas), end papers (the red colour representing China), the complementarity of text and illustrations (the sadness of Li as he hides amongst the weeping willows), the postscript (about Li's China).

Understanding the morphology of words can be encouraged by a) analysing the meaning, use and spelling of root words, common prefixes and suffixes, e.g. *remembered*, *sadness*, *powerful* b) checking the spelling of words with inflectional endings e.g. *measured*, *thinking*, *crammed*. There will be a number of 'sight words' that students can recall automatically.

Through the picture book they have visual cues to predict the purposes and organisational features of paragraphs, and how ideas can be linked. This is particularly easy to see in the picture book as the paragraphs are brief, usually on one page and complemented by an illustration. A checklist can be composed to check understanding of the grasp of the main idea in a paragraph, the inferential meanings and the recognition of emotional reactions of the main 'character', Li.

Linking the Language Skills

It is important that the activities related to reading, writing, listening and speaking are practised so that the student gains reinforcement of literacy skills. Discussion can hone their predictive skills and writing activities. Traditional reading strategies such as cloze passages, reordering jumbled text, matching illustrations in the text and retelling the story can help students gain a deeper comprehension of the meaning of *The Peasant Prince* (Tierney *et al.*, 2005).

Storyboards

Shaun Tan, an award-winning illustrator of *The Arrival* (2006) inspires an activity where the class can make a photo album (or storyboard) of Li's story and of their own life.

It occurred to me that photo albums are really just another kind of picture book that everybody makes and reads, a series of chronological images illustrating the story of someone's life. They work by inspiring memory and urging us to fill in the silent gaps, animating them with the addition of our own storyline (Tan, 2008).

The storyboard can be used to check students' understanding of story sequence and their ability to interpret sentences.

Text/Illustrations

Anne Spudvilas, the illustrator of *The Peasant Prince* won the NSW Premier's Award (Patricia Wrightson Prize) for her evocation of Li's life in as a peasant boy transformed into a ballet-dancer. Some students experience difficulties trying to express their thoughts fully in words but illustrations can help their comprehension and inspire students to discover their own creativity (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). Accompanying a written text with a series

of drawings, a painting or photograph(s) may assist them to convey their meaning. This may also be done through a timeline or map which encourages students to think about the people mentioned (Mao Zedong), or as they find out the location of Qingdao, the Great Wall of China and places such as Houston, London, Paris and Moscow where Li danced in the world.

Literary Sociogram

The teacher with the class can construct a literary sociogram, a graphic organizer that represents the relationships among characters in a literary text. The central character, Li, is placed in the centre of the page and the other characters are placed around him at distances appropriate with their relationship (sometimes psychological distance). Students can write brief descriptions of the other characters and people mentioned: father, six brothers, mother, four officials, Teacher Song, schoolgirl, the Bandit, Teacher Xiao, Ben (Houston Ballet Co.) and Mao Zedong. The purpose of a literary sociogram is to help students to think more deeply about the literary texts they read or view. Johnson and Louis (1987) describe the construction of sociograms as a most valuable literature teaching technique because of its adaptability. It can be modified for younger students by using illustrations of the characters and word cards and by utilising software such as Inspiration (Snyder, 2002). Listening to students analyse the sociogram will provide insight into students' comprehension skills (Johnson & Louis, 1987).

Assessment

Progress monitoring will inform the teacher about which students need intensive instruction in comprehension and/or alphabetic principles, blending and word building so that they can become independent readers (Vaughn & Linan-Thompson, 2004, p. 129). Finding out how students process reading assists teachers in implementing strategies for those with reading and learning difficulties (Westwood, 2004).

The Peasant Prince can serve as a model for student's own writing, checking the following assessment criteria:

1. Audience: The writer's capacity to orient, engage and persuade the reader
2. Text structure: The organisation of the structural components of the text (introduction, body and conclusion) into an appropriate and effective text structure
3. Ideas: The creation, selection and crafting of ideas
4. Persuasive devices: The use of a range of persuasive devices to enhance the writer's position and persuade the reader
5. Vocabulary: The range and precision of language choices
6. Cohesion: The control of multiple threads and relationships over the whole text, achieved through the use of referring words, substitutions, word associations and text connectives
7. Paragraphing: The segmenting of text into paragraphs that assists the reader to follow the line of argument
8. Sentence structure: The production of grammatically correct, structurally sound and meaningful sentences
9. Punctuation: The use of correct and appropriate punctuation to aid the reading of the text

10. Spelling: The accuracy of spelling and the difficulty of the words used.

To succeed at reading, students must be able to identify the vocabulary and to understand the text. There is a strong relationship between oral language competence, vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension skills and the ability to read. These can be fostered through teaching strategies designed to stimulate the child to learn. Engaging the students in a picture book, or other text that includes new words and new concepts can make language gains.

Conclusion

Language features of text can show how grammatical features are chosen to make writing effective. Narrative texts entertain by inviting the reader into real or imagined worlds, in this case into the true story of a peasant boy transformed into a ballet dancer. Students can use literary texts as models for their own creative writing and/or to practise skills of reading and writing, encouraging them to make more effective choices of usage, vocabulary and grammar. Strategies selected are based on research-based evidence (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997; Derewianka, 1990) and can be adapted for different age groups, depending on their interests and abilities. Picture books such as *The Peasant Prince* with its life-affirming message of resilience and determination can open up new cultures and new worlds, encouraging students to have a 'curious eye'. Literature has the potential to engage their imagination and to inspire students to achieve language skills.

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