

FABLES: A Fun Way to Teach English to Children

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When dealing with the teaching of English to children, difficulties are likely to arise because sometimes we do not include in the program aspects children love, such as tales, short stories, legends, etc. Furthermore, we can see that those examples from literature are overlooked in the texts we use, specially fables, a narrative genre which is very popular among children ages three to twelve. Though popular, it is neglected in textbooks and, in general, in the ESL/EFL curriculum. Hence, I would like to give teachers some suggestions in order to work with literature, and particularly with fables in their classes.

First of all, we must establish the purpose for teaching literature: we must communicate values and also motivate the students in order to get them involved and to react as a means of enriching their roles as readers. In addition, by using them as a source of enjoyment, the teacher should use literature in his classes so that students appreciate and create beauty. This will encourage extensive reading.

Following R. F. Martin, I am going to list three advantages of teaching ESL/EFL

through the story approach¹:

1. The students' attention is quickly captured and easily maintained.
2. Any type of linguistic phenomena can easily be included in the language of the story.
3. It serves as a motivating way for subsequent eliciting of oral as well as written language.

As any listening, writing, speaking or reading exercise must have some pre and post work, I will give a list of suggestions for each stage, and then I will present an example of a lesson plan using a fable.

Pre- Activities

1. Crossword puzzle on the board: The group is divided into two teams. A member of each group writes the name of an animal based on the letters of the word that is already written on the board. The teacher may, for instance, start writing *LION*. The longer the word, the more points the team gets. See the example:

¹ R. F. MARTIN, Model Lesson Plan for Oral Development. The University of Texas, Austin (S.F).

C G
A L I O N
T I G E R
A P E
E F
L F
E E
P A N T H E R
H
A
N
T

2. Song: The students could learn or just listen to a song about animals. This might help them review or learn new vocabulary.

3. With the help of a picture of animals, the teacher could elicit names, and / or show descriptions by using colors, shapes, sounds animals make, etc.

4. Reminding students of fables they may have read or heard. This may be done in English or in Spanish, according to the students' level.

5. The teacher could elicit from students the most important features of the fable.

6. The teacher could give students cue words and their meaning to help them understand the fable better.

Then, after reading or listening to the fable, we proceed to the next step:

Post-Activities

1. Literary analysis: Considering characters and moral.

2. The teacher could read the fable except for its end in order for students to predict it. Then, after reading some possible ends the students have given, everybody compares them with the original. Besides being entertaining, this activity helps students to develop their creative skills.

3. Scanning exercise: The students will look down at the text again for twenty seconds and will look for six words that describe (adjectives) something in the fable. It could be a character, or a place.

4. Narrative writing: Students must write a straightforward account of the fable; they do not have to put in all the details, just the main events. This can be done specially with fourth or fifth graders, since they are able to write more complex sentences. Then you could do in-group reading of narratives. Some volunteers should read their narratives to the group. When they have finished reading, they should pick the one they consider to be the best. Afterwards, each group must read their selection to the whole class in order to choose the most successful.

5. Role play: Using the dialogue of the fable, the teacher could assign roles to any students who volunteer in order to act it out. If it is possible, you could add some other characters, one or two, and create similar situations. If there is no dialogue in the fable, the teacher or the students could write the script, which will add another writing activity to the whole lesson plan.

The ideas given above are just suggestions to exploit the fable. Now, I will show an

example of a lesson plan using a fable as a basis: The Lion and His Three Counselors by Aesop.

Pre-Reading or Pre-Listening

- Description of a picture of animals: The teacher can elicit from the students:

- _ How many animals are there?
- _ What are they?
- _ What color is each one?
- _ What are the characteristics of each animal?
- _ What animals could be pets?
- _ Other questions the teacher wants to ask

- Before reading or playing the recording of the fable, the teacher can guide students in order to have them remember the main features of the fable:

- _ What kinds of characters perform the action?
(animals)
- _ How long is the story?
(Is it rather a short narrative?)
- _ What's the message of a fable called?
(Moral)

- Reading or listening: The teacher plays the recording or reads the fable. If this is not our purpose, students could read it silently. Before this, the teacher asks the students to identify what animals are involved.

THE LION AND HIS THREE COUNSELORS

The King of beasts was in an irritated mood. That morning his mate had told him his breath was most unpleasant. After doing considerable roaring to prove he was king, he summoned his counselors. First he called the sheep.

"Friend sheep," he roared, opening his great mouth, "would you say that my breath smells unpleasant?"

Believing the lion wanted an honest answer, the sheep gave it, and the king of beasts bit off her head for a fool.

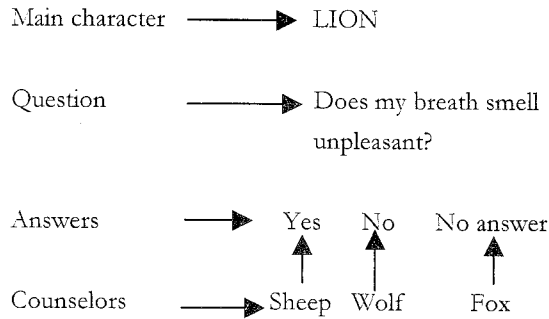
Then he called the wolf and asked him the same question. The wolf, catching sight of the carcass of the sheep, said: "why, your majesty, you have a breath as sweet as blossoms in the spring."

Before he could finish he had been torn to pieces for a flatterer.

At last, the lion called the fox and put the question to him. The fox gave a hollow cough, then cleared his throat. "Your majesty," he whispered, "truly, I have such a cold in the head that I cannot smell at all."

Scanning for Literary Analysis

After identifying the characters, students must read the text again, in order to identify the question the lion asked and the answers given by the three counselors. They will be able to fill the diagram:



Then you could have students discuss by pairs or triads what they consider is the moral. After whole group discussion, they get the answer :

“In dangerous times, wise men say nothing.”

Post-Reading or Post- Listening

- Discussion: Speculation/prediction. In groups, students discuss what could happen to the fox. In this part, there are no right or wrong answers, but the students have the opportunity to speak freely.
- Narrative writing: Students write an account of the fable, considering the main events. Then there is a reading of the narrations until the best one is chosen.

In this way, I hope I have demonstrated how literature is linked to all the language basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Besides, on the basis of my experience with children, I recommend this kind of approach to literature since I can tell it works. Not only can teachers use this approach, that is to say in formal class situations, but also parents and family members can use it in informal situations in order to help their children improve their command of the foreign or second language in a fun way.

References

- Aesop. (1963). *Fables*. New York. Prentice Hall. Mac Millan.
- Martin, R.F. (1996). *Model Lesson Plan for Oral Development*. Austin: The University of Texas Press.