Make them think! Using literature in the primary English language classroom to develop critical thinking skills.

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INTRODUCTION

We all know the pleasure that stories can bring to children's lives and their potential as tools in the teaching and learning process. In the foreign language classroom, stories are recognized as a means of motivating children to an appreciation of the target language and culture. As awareness of the utility of foreign languages for other learning increases, it is important to reflect on and adapt practice to ensure that we provide an education that meets the demands of the world we are living in. This world is one of easy access, quick-thinking, fast-talking, risk-taking, on-the-spot decision-making. It is a *critical world*, one in which almost everything, including people, is judged quickly at the click of mouse. Does the much-loved, cherished classroom story still have a place? In this essay I argue that it does, and that our use of stories in the foreign language classroom can go beyond language learning and into the realms of critical thinking, a skill which is vital in today's world. I will outline the importance of helping children to think and provide a framework to guide teachers' use of questions about stories using Bloom's Taxonomy of thinking processes to encourage and develop thinking beyond simple recall of events. This will show that even in primary English language lessons, children can become critical thinkers.

THE ROLE OF STORIES IN PRIMARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT)

Stories play an important natural role in children's lives in most cultures. They have a universal appeal and provide a rich source of language and imaginative input which make them ideal teaching tools in primary classrooms. Aside from the obvious pleasure derived from a good story, there are many pedagogic reasons why they should be used in the foreign language classroom. These can be grouped in the following categories:

- Attitudinal: developing positive attitudes to language learning, different cultures, self and others;
- Linguistic: natural exposure to the foreign language in context, lexis, grammar, discourse and pronunciation through patterns and repetitions in the narrative;
- Cultural and Intercultural: access to, and awareness and understanding of other cultures;
- Social and Moral: emotional development/consciousness, empathy, shared experiences;
- Cognitive and Creative: use of the imagination and thought processes, academic skills development to support other learning.

The types of story used in ELT fall into two broad categories: graded and authentic. Graded stories are those in which the language has been carefully chosen or 'diluted' so as to make reading and understanding of the text easier. There is notably an omission of the past tense in graded stories. Authentic stories or 'realbooks' as they are often called, are those intended for native-speaker readers. They contain authentic language used in the natural context of the story (see Mourão, 2003). It can be argued that realbooks, with their inclusion of structures such as the past tense, provide better exposure to the language and have potential for more natural acquisition.

Stories are used variously in the English language classroom from supplementing coursebook coverage of themes and lexical areas to whole syllabuses (see Ellis and Brewster, 2002). In the main, stories are used to introduce or consolidate language and those selected tend to be ones where there is repetition of key words and expressions which invite children to participate in the 'story experience'. Good books are ones which have pictures which accurately accompany the storyline and thus provide support for language development.

A typical procedure for using a story in the classroom would be for key lexis to be pre-taught so that when it is 'met' in the story, children can recognise it in context. When reading the story to the class, the teacher will normally ask questions about the pictures and main characters and events in the story. Such questions tend to be closed ones and focus on recall of facts and events. Sometimes children are asked to make predictions of what comes next in the story. Other activities which help to develop basic communication skills and consolidate key items of vocabulary may follow.

There is now a wide-range of ELT materials which reflect the many things that can be done with stories in the primary English language classroom. However, it is the use of stories to promote critical thinking in young children that is perhaps least exploited.

THE ROLE OF STORIES IN LIFE-LONG LEARNING

We are living in an age where the content taught in schools and the skills needed in a rapidly evolving world is a constant balancing act. If educators are to fulfill their role in society, they must reflect on *what* and *how* they teach so that they help to equip children with the knowledge, skills and understanding they need to be able to live and function in society. This does not mean that we have to reinvent the wheel, it simply means that we have to make what we teach 'valued added'. That is, make it more relevant, get more out of it. Such is the case with the use of stories in the classroom.

> In preparing children to be full participants in a literate, democratic and multicultural society we need to focus on the ways of thinking that are involved in many uses of literacy in school and in the community. These uses require abilities of reflection, of critical thinking, investigation and problem solving. [ ] The technical side of learning, what the Greeks called *techne*, can be promoted through systematic instruction to give children rich domains of knowledge and skills. But we also need teaching that enables students to develop higher order thinking, the practical wisdom that the Greeks called *phronesis*, that will help tackle the problems of learning and of life.
>
> Fisher (1999)

Reflecting on our practice is not easy as it implies re-evaluation which may lead us to challenge well-established theories and our own deeply-held beliefs. But it is a necessary part of change. For example, we may say that asking an eight year old to think critically about a story is difficult, especially in a foreign language, that the child has not reached an appropriate intellectual level to perform this function. A re-evaluation of our own practice and a change in the way we ask questions and provide support, for example, would lead us to believe that this is possible. An act of courage would afford us the opportunity.

TOWARDS A THINKING-CENTRED CURRICULUM

Much of what happens in primary classrooms and other levels of schooling involves the transmission of knowledge from teacher to children. Such teaching can be considered 'teacher-centred' with the teacher being in focal position as information and knowledge provider. Many would argue that this is important particularly at the primary level. However, as already pointed out, this technical side of education is not enough. Children have to learn how to apply, to analyse and eventually to evaluate what they learn at school. It is through these processes which require more complex thought and cognitive engagement that effective learning will take place.

According to Fisher (1999), there are strong pedagogical reasons for developing thinking skills in children through the use of literature. Referring to studies which compare more able, literate children with less able ones, Fisher states that.successful learners have:

- Knowledge of literary forms, purposes and genre, including meta-linguistic knowledge;
- Skills and strategies for processing literary knowledge, including the ability to question, interrogate and discuss narrative texts;
- Ability to apply and transfer their learning and knowledge to other contexts.

For children to be encouraged to think, teachers also have to think!

A great amount of teacher talk in the classroom involves teachers asking questions. Many questions are asked to check facts, test memory or check understanding of key words. They are limited, closed questions to which the teacher expects a specific answer. Few questions are of the open, referential type which encourage higher order thinking.

A return to Bloom's Taxonomy: The Cognitive Process Dimension (1956) would do much to help teachers 're-think' their practice in order to help develop vitally important thinking skills in the children they teach.

The taxonomy, often represented as a pyramid, consists of a hierarchy of six levels of thinking starting with lower-order thinking at the bottom and ending with higher-order thinking at the top (Figure 1 below)

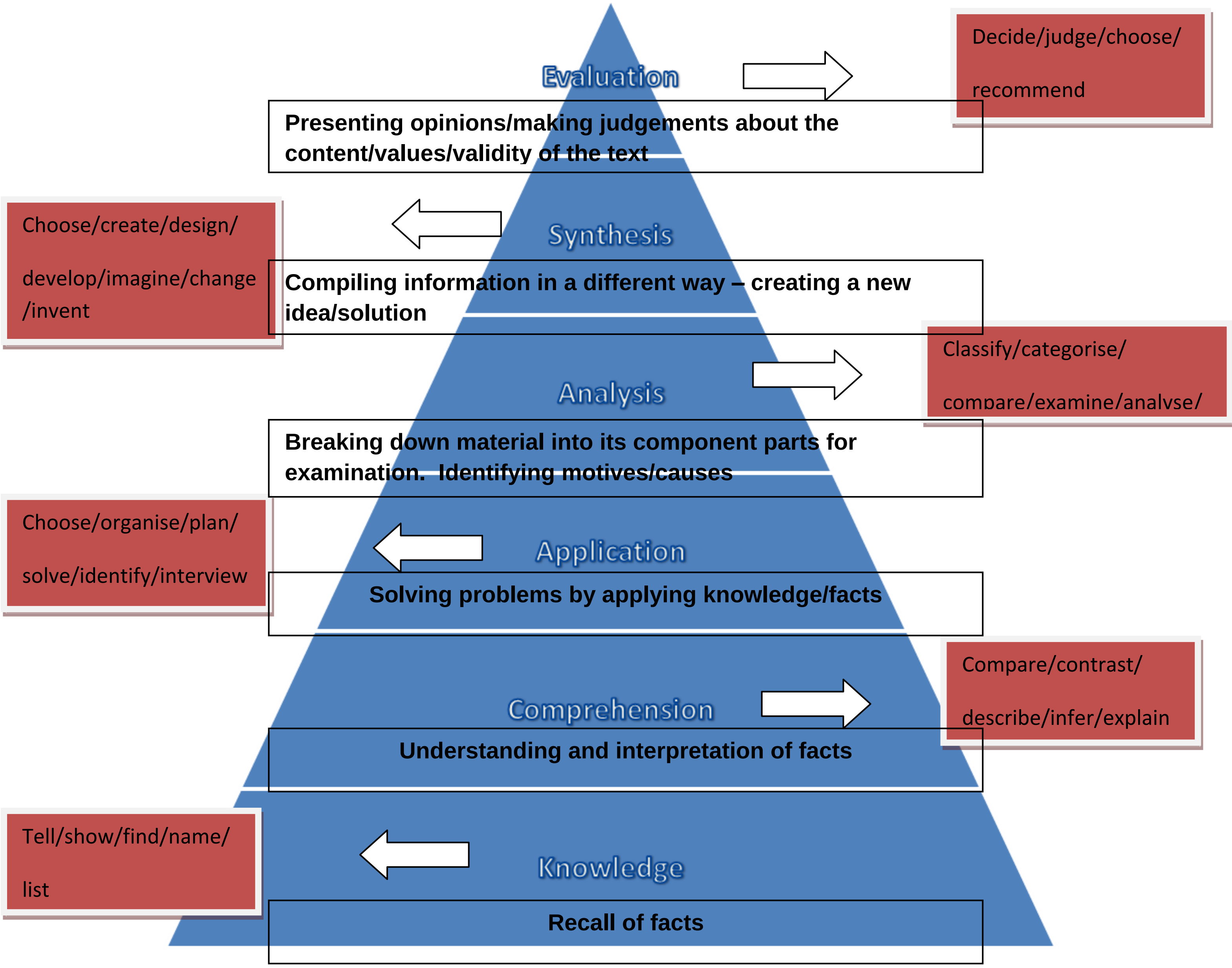


Figure 1. Bloom's Taxonomy: The Cognitive Process Dimension

It is argued that foreign language students, even young children should be asked questions that lead them to progress up the hierarchy and thus develop the full range of thinking skills (See Haynes). Hill and Bjork (2008) link question formation in Bloom's Taxonomy to the five predictable stages of second language acquisition (SLA):

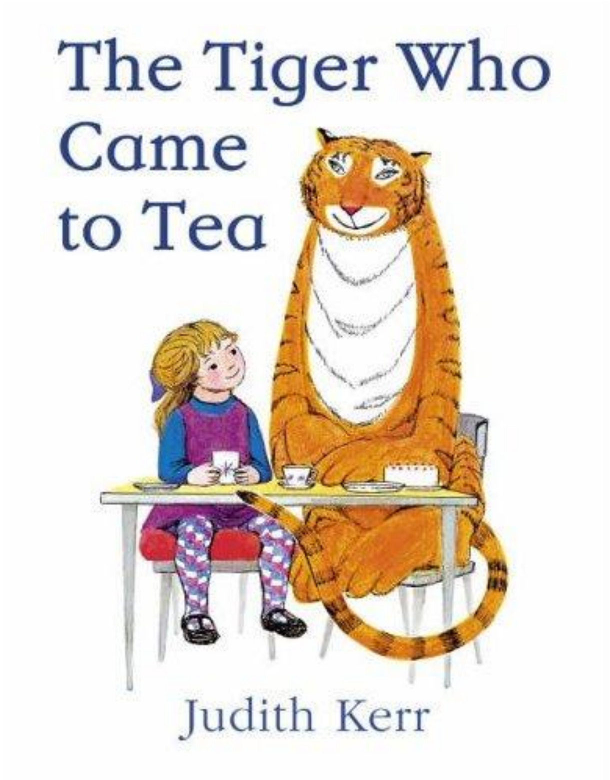
- Pre-production: minimal comprehension, no verbalization, uses gestures e.g. pointing;
- Early production: limited comprehension, one/two word responses, key words/familiar phrases, present tenses;
- Speech emergence: good comprehension, can produce simple sentences, makes grammar and pronunciation errors;
- Intermediate fluency: excellent comprehension, few grammar errors;
- Advanced fluency: near-native level of speech

Teachers can ask questions for each level of Bloom's Taxonomy which are appropriate to each of the above stages of SLA. The amount of output from a teacher's questions will depend on which stage a child is at. These authors argue that limited output should not be mistaken for an inability to think in more complex ways. Young learners should not be kept at the 'knowledge stage' by simply asking recall questions, but that they too should have their thinking challenged.

But how can this be done effectively? The answer lies in the extent to which the teacher provides linguistic and non-linguistic support or 'scaffolding'. Social constructivist theories of education put strong emphasis on learning with and from others. With the help of the teacher and other children, the child should be able achieve success which alone he/she would otherwise not be able to do (Zone of Proximal Development, Vygotsky). The teacher needs to think carefully about the nature of this support. This could be through using the pictures in the book or additional ones, through gestures, the teacher's own voice with appropriately stressed words, intonation, lengthening of sounds, extended pauses. The teacher needs to predict the type of language (verbal or non-verbal) the child needs to answer her questions. This language can be provided in previous lessons or during the lesson itself. Given children's natural desire to communicate they may use their mother-tongue if they do not have the words and structures to do so in English. This perfectly acceptable and is an opportunity for the teacher to see where there are gaps in the language the children need for the learning process.

A FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHERS' QUESTIONS USING BLOOM'S TAXONOMY

An example of how teachers' questions can be used alongside Bloom's Taxonomy is provided below using the classic children's book, *The Tiger Who Came to Tea* by Judith Kerr. This book is a realbook intended for native-speakers.



It was first published in 1973 and tells the story of a little girl, Sophie, and her mother who one tea-time have an unexpected visitor, a tiger. The family, rather graciously, welcome the tiger into their home. The tiger then proceeds to eat everything offered him for afternoon tea and all other food and drink in the family home before politely saying, '*Thank you for my nice tea. I think I'd better go now '* and leaves, never to return. The story is beautifully illustrated, the pictures accurately accompanying the text.

This story could be used with children in the third or fourth year of primary school, who may have had at least one year of English language lessons (three forty-five minute lessons per week). What follows are examples of teacher questions for each level of Bloom's taxonomy. The story, like many that children enjoy, may be revisited and re-read in different lessons. The teacher would not be expected to ask questions from each level within a single lesson. Revisiting the story will allow for its 'polysemic' qualities to be examined and different levels of meaning and significance to be analysed (Fisher,1999).

The idea for teacher questions for each stage of the taxonomy is based on the work of Haynes.

Example questions for each stage.

Knowledge (recall of facts)

Who came to tea?

What did the tiger eat?

What did the tiger do in the kitchen?

What did he do in the bathroom?

Where did Sophie and her parents have supper?

What happened first, and next…? Put the pictures in order.

Scaffolding/children's responses

use the illustrations in the text to frame questions

children can point to illustrations

one/two word answers

flow charts

Comprehension (understanding and interpretation of facts)

How do we know that it wasn't Sophie's daddy at the door?

How did Sophie feel? Draw her face.

Why did the tiger eat all the food and drink all the drink?

What was the kitchen like before the tiger came? And after? Draw it.

How did Sophie's mummy feel when the tiger went? Show me.

Why did the family go to a restaurant for supper?

Scaffolding/children's responses

use the illustrations from the book

teacher gestures

before and after pictures

help answer '*why'* questions using '*because*…'

Application (solving problems by applying knowledge/facts)

How would you feel if a tiger came to your house/to our classroom? Show me/tell me.

What would you say to the tiger?

What would you do? Let's make a list.

Make a comic strip of your story.

Which animals would you like to come to tea? Which ones wouldn't you like?

Scaffolding/children's responses

picture cues of feelings

pictures of other animals/things

speech bubbles

Analysis (breaking down material into its component parts for examination. Identifying motives/causes)

Why did the tiger go to Sophie's house?

Why did Sophie's mummy let him in?

Why did the tiger leave?

Where did he go? Which places did he visit next: church, school, restaurant, the butcher's?

Why did Sophie and her mummy buy Tiger Food at the supermarket?

How do we know he was a nice tiger?

What's the theme of this story?

Scaffolding/children's responses

optional answers through picture cues/word cues/oral cues

graphic organizers to group/classify

Synthesis (compiling information in a different way – creating a new idea/solution)

Think of another animal/thing that came to tea. Tell us.

What would you say/do? Draw a picture.

Tell us your story. Draw the story.

How can you make Sophie's story different?

Which wild animal would you like to be your friend? Why?

Scaffolding/children's responses

Answering '*how'* questions with '*I would* ..'

Evaluation (presenting opinions/making judgements about the content/values/validity of the text)

What kind of story is it? Tell me. Show me.

What did/didn't you like about the story?

What part did you like best?

Did Sophie do the right thing when she let the tiger come in her house?

What/who would you let in your house?

What do you think will happen next?

Do tigers go to tea? Why not?

Scaffolding/children's responses

using picture cues

gestures/facial expressions

CONCLUSION

Helping children to become better thinkers does not mean a huge change in what we teach. It means a change in the way we think about it. Using stories with children to develop critical thinking can be 'natural, familiar and sometimes fun' (Erkaya, 2005). If children love stories then they will love talking about them. Asking the right questions and providing the necessary support for them to answer will allow children to develop their thought processes. Good teaching is more than transferring knowledge from teacher to student. It is about making people think and that means teachers as well as children. By making education more thinking-centred, we will be better preparing ourselves and the children we teach for the challenges life holds.

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