

A research study on children's story telling

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Stories have been recognized as a powerful tool in developing children's communicative as well as linguistic competence both in the mother tongue and in learning or acquiring a second or a foreign language. Bruner (1990) even claims that our perception of the world is shaped by the stories to which we have been exposed and which we have internalized. The content of the stories made up by children themselves can reveal a lot about their perception of the world and their preoccupations and attitudes towards the surrounding world. In a recent study Farver and Frosch (1996) reported about aggression in preschoolers' spontaneous narratives after the L.A. riots of 1992. The narratives told by 64 preschool children who were directly exposed to the riots were compared with narratives told by a comparison group of 128 children living in other U.S. cities who had no direct exposure to the riots. Children who were directly exposed to the riots told more narratives with aggressive thematic content, aggressive words and unfriendly figures who engaged in physical aggression than did the comparison group of children. The findings suggest that the children's narratives reflected their exposure to the violence and their expression of that experience.

In our project on intensive early learning of foreign languages in Croatian primary schools, stories were practiced practically from the first day of the course. They were always carefully graded in accordance with the linguistic and cognitive level of the learners, involving in some cases just listening and in the others TPR, role playing, dramatization and even writing children's own stories, thus evoking children's creativity and stirring their imagination.

In the present study it will be reported how children to whom English is either the first, the second or the foreign language tell the story. The purpose of the study was to find out to what extent and in which way language competence influences the communicative competence of children. It was hypothesized that children's telling of a story differs depending on whether they are generally qualified as low or high achievers, on their personality traits and their upbringing. In our project on story telling we tested and compared groups of children who spoke English as their first, second and foreign language. They were all aged 11 to 12 years, they all watched the same story on the video twice and then retold it. The story was «Beauty and the Beast», an Australian version lasting a little more than ten minutes. A well known story was selected to avoid the problems of remembering the plot. The presentations of the story were audio-taped and transcribed in the exact form children offered.

The testing is still under way, but so far we have been able to observe remarkable differences among the children depending not only on whether English is their first, second or foreign language, but as hypothesised, on factors such as their earlier exposure to stories and their general communicative and cognitive abilities.

For the present occasion the stories of 6 children were selected, three of which qualify as very successful and three as rather poor accomplishments produced by two (one good one «bad») children who used English as their first, second and foreign language respectively. As

one of the children is my own grandson – Miran, whose language development I have been observing practically since he was born, I made this presentation a sort of case study, the other five children acting as controls.

Now Miran has been living in New Zealand for two and a half years, and English has become his second language. His school records are excellent and his performance in English, according to his teachers, equals the performance of 16-year-old native speakers. He reads a lot in both English and Croatian, his mother tongue, and he is a good story teller in both languages. At this point, the stories come in. He was exposed to them practically from his birth. The stories he listened to were always adapted and they did not abound with the cruelties which the classical stories often have. So, for example, the big bad wolf was not so cruel after all, and he helped little Red Riding Hood pick up the flowers for her grandma, etc. When he was five, I started to teach him English. He was not very keen on it, especially not on the routine way suggested to the teachers working with this age group. He did not like repeating anything for the sake of practice ("We spoke about it already») and I had to conform to his requirements. But, there was one thing he liked very much, it was when I told him a story in English, prompted by illustrations. He would then translate it into Croatian using very adequate words and structures. This was, of course again, against all the recommendations of modern TEFL. He usually refused to repeat the story; he wanted a new one. He actually did very little systematic work in English, but watched a lot of cartoons on TV and video. He could not say much in English while living in Zagreb, but I had the feeling that it was somewhere in the back of his mind and something had to trigger it off.

When Miran was ten years old, the family moved to New Zealand. I visited them a year later. Miran was using English on a daily basis in all of his school activities whereas at home, the family spoke Croatian. He was already reading English books. After 15 months of his stay in New Zealand when he was passed eleven, his version of «Beauty and the Beast» was recorded both in English and Croatian. At the same time, I recorded his 10 native peers and 10 second language children who had been living in New Zealand for several years. On my return to Croatia, we started to record the children who had been studying English intensively for five years (from age 6 to 11).

Word counts of individual performances showed extremely interesting results e.g. native speakers were not better story tellers than some of the children who used English as their second or foreign language. Honorina – an EFL girl who learned English only at school had the richest vocabulary and although she made occasional grammatical mistakes, her story was most consistent in style. She was closely followed by Miran. According to the teacher, Honorina's parents cared a lot about her achievements at school. She spent some time in Germany and she could speak German as well. She was a top pupil in all subjects and according to the teacher's report, a very reliable and balanced child. Word counts of the good narrators' stories were: Richard L1 – 144; Miran L2 – 197; Honorina LF – 240. Word counts of the poor narrators' stories were: Shonn L1 – 120; Tam L2 – 53; Kruno LF – 88. Because of the space limitation only the texts of three most comprehensive stories will be presented here:

RICHARD – ENGLISH FIRST LANGUAGE

(born in New Zealand, 18.10.1984)

Beauties father was walking through the snow and there was a big blizzard and he.. just as he wasn't going to go any further he came across this big castle and he went inside and it was Summer and then he found this Beast and it said «Bring one of your daughters here and they can come here instead of you, they can take your place» and then he went home and he told

his daughter to go and he kept on saying to her «I'm really very sorry and I forgive you» and all this and then when the daughter went there the Beast...he...the daughter thought the Beast was really ugly and everything and every night when they had tea for two months the Beast asked the daughter if he would marry her and she kept saying no and then a hawk when the daughter was sitting down by a lake or a river thing a hawk came in and tried to get her but the Beast stopped the hawk and got injured and the daughter bandaged up his hand and then she didn't see that the Beast was ugly any more she kind of liked him because how kind he was and everything and then when the Beast was looking through one of his magic mirrors he saw that the father was sick and let the daughter go to see him for a week and then...but the daughter had to return after one week and as soon as the daughter saw him the father got all better and when she went back the Beast was almost dying but what happened is he turned into a prince because a spell was cast over him by an evil witch which when even though he was ugly and all if someone fell in love with him he would turn back into a prince and they got married.

MIRAN – ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE

(born in Croatia, 20.11.1984)

Well, it first began when a man was walking.. when a man was riding a horse in the forest.. was caught by a terrible storm and he was forced to find a shelter. He thought he was going to die but then suddenly he found an old castle.. that looked abandoned. He came in and to his surprise all over the place there were growing all coloured roses. The man could not resist and he picked one and then the owner of the castle appeared. It was a terrible, ugly Beast, that looked like it was ready to kill any moment. He said «That's how you treat my hospitality – by killing one of my roses. There's only one way you could survive. In two days bring one of your daughters,» and the man agreed.. and after three days he had to bring, one of his he brought one of his youngest daughters to the Beast's castle. The girl's name was Beauty and she was pretty beautiful. The Beast, the girl came in and the door was slammed behind her. The Beast waited for her. She.. the Beast gave the girl beautiful room with all of the things a room can have. She had beautiful dresses and other things.. well.. girls like. She and the Beast would see each other only once in a day when they would dine together at evening. But one day the Beast asked Beauty: «Would you be my wife?» The Beauty, but Beauty didn't want to be the Beast's wife and the Beast was heart-broken. One day Beauty's father got sick and Beast saw that in his magic mirror and he was pretty soft-hearted so he let, so he let Beauty go home for a week to treat his father. When his.. when the father saw his daughter he instantly got better. Then the time flew very fast. At the end of the week she suddenly .. she suddenly remembered: «Oh, I have to get back to Beast's castle».. By then the Beast was lying on the floor sick because he couldn't live without... because he couldn't live without the girl. The girl was surprised that she wanted to leave her family and father for that.. for that horrible creature... then she suddenly knew that she liked him not because.. not because his looks because he once saved her from an eagle that was attacking her. When she ran back the Beast was lying on the floor.. and she said; «Please don't die I came here because of you I left my family and father just for you, please don't die. «And then change happened to the Beast. Beast changed from a Beast.. from an ugly creature to a prince that was pretty handsome because once the prince was.. the prince was enchanted by a evil sorcerer.. who turned him into Beast until someone would start to love him and so the spell was broken and the prince and Beauty lived together and they got married happily ever since.»

HONORINA – ENGLISH FOREIGN LANGUAGE

(born in Croatia, 03.06.1984)

One day the Beauty's father went home from some journey back, but it was a horrible storm and he found a place, I think it was a castle. There were roses all over and he was very surprised because outside was horrible weather and inside it was warm. And he liked the roses so he plucked one and wanted to give it to his youngest daughter Beauty. But he could not know that those roses belong to a Beast. It was a horrible Beast, ugly and everybody thought that would eat them. So the Beast said: «I gave you a place to keep you warm and that's the thank for all that I gave you?» But he gave the old man, Beauty's father another chance. He told him to bring one of his daughters to stay with the Beast. So he brought Beauty. All the way along he begged Beauty to forgive him. She forgave him but then she run to take her father's place in the castle by the Beast. She felt and when she woke up she was in a beautiful room, the most beautiful that she ever saw, and she thought she was dreaming and then she went to see the place and was dreaming or not. Then she came to a big room and saw Beast playing on an instrument, musical instrument and she said: «Hello!» and she said her name and everything and then she said: «You are playing beautiful», and then Beast said: «It is beautiful but nothing is better than your voice.» And then he turned around, because he was sitting he turned his back, he was sitting and playing. Then he turned round, the Beauty saw an ugly face. She didn't like it, so she screamed. But the Beast run away and told Beauty to go to her room where she was. Then she cried and cried and she was very unhappy. She didn't like that place. And the days she ate with the Beast dinner, they dine together and as they dined they only one candle was lighting Beauty's face and Beauty's beauty, but Beast ate in dark. He didn't want she to see his face because his face was really ugly and horrible, frightened. One day he told with a gentle voice that Beauty should be his wife. But then Beauty was very sad. She didn't want to marry Beast because she thought that Beast is horrible and evil, the Beast is bad and it would kill her father if she wouldn't marry him. But then one day when Beauty was sitting on a fountain one eagle attacked her. Beast saw that and he hurried to help her. He saved her from an eagle but he was... the eagle hurt him at his arm or his hand, I'm not sure. Then beauty wanted to help him and then the Beast said. «I don't want you to see my arm, it's ugly and frightened.» But Beauty didn't care about that. She just wanted to help Beast because Beast was very kind to her and then she wanted to become to him too. And then she helped him and she saw that Beast isn't horrible and isn't evil and isn't horrible. But one day Beauty's father was ill. The Beast knew if the father would see Beauty or her smile he would be better. And then they wanted to celebrate the Beauty's come-back because she came back. And they dance and sing and drink and ate and everything. But the Beauty gave the Beast a promise that she would be back in one week. And the week was almost over. Beast told Beauty that he would die if she wouldn't come back. And Beauty saw that one week is almost over. Then she run back to the castle and let her father and everybody that was there at Beauty's house back. So she came back to the Beast's castle. But Beast was almost dying, he was on the floor at the garden, I think. And the roses where the garden were, they are not there any more. And it started to rain and when Beauty came with the horse she realise that she loves Beast, and he wasn't beautiful and sweet, but Beauty loved his kindness and her heart just wanted to love him. So when she got back, Beast was lying on the floor and Beast said she loves him. And then something magical happened, the stars were shining and it stopped raining and Beast was really a prince and some evil sorcerer, not a sorcerer, like a... how should I say, a sorcerer, threw a spell over him. He was a prince but he couldn't be prince back till somebody would love him. So a sorceress was a female. she turned him into a Beast and she throw away a spell. And he couldn't be a

prince anymore without somebody loving him as a Beast. So Beauty loved him and the prince find his true love in this Beauty.

What can the tentative conclusions of the research in progress point to?

1. The linguistic standard is only partly responsible for successful story telling.
2. The other factors that influence it have to be looked for in cognitive abilities and earlier exposure to stories.
3. EL 2 children and EFL children when asked to retell the same story in English and their native language show a remarkable similarity in the composition of individual sentences and the complete discourse which is one more reason to assume that the strategies used in narration depend on other than linguistic factors.

Practical implication of these tentative conclusions which will be tested on large samples of students is a rather optimistic one. If exposure to stories can beneficially influence the development of complete verbal behaviour of an individual, we should not hesitate to stress its importance in advising both teachers and parents.

REFERENCES

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