

Andrew Wright. *Storytelling with Children.* Oxford University Press, 1995. (Series: Resource Books for Teachers, edited by Alan Maley). Pp. 222.

Andrew Wright's wide experience as a teacher trainer, author, illustrator and storyteller are evident in the latest addition to the Oxford series *Resource Books for Teachers*. The book presents the topic systematically, encouraging reflection and principled choice.

As is the case with all the other books in the series, the contents page provides a detailed guide to the intended audience level and the time the activity is likely to take.

In addition to the introduction and broad guide (How to use this book) the book is divided into five parts: *How to choose, tell and read stories aloud; A store of 94 activities; Stories and lesson plans; Topics and stories; and Grammar and stories.*

The introduction simply asserts the value of stories. Readers wanting a more nuanced or complex view would have to go to Colwell (1991), Meek (1991) or Sylvester *et al.* (1991). Given the intended audience, however, the emphasis on language learning objectives such as fluency, communication and language awareness is understandable.

The first part (*How to choose, tell and read stories aloud*), is in part concerned to overcome any reluctance to tell stories and deals with key aspects such as choosing stories, fears about limitations in proficiency, ways of starting the storytelling, remembering the story, and different techniques and approaches that can be used in telling the stories. His advice is generally practical, reflecting a real understanding of the difficulties 'new' storytellers face. However, sometimes it assumes rather too much. The description and illustration of the bubble technique (p. 15) is a case in point, as is the advice to try the story out on a friend. In the latter case it would seem important to identify a firm role for the friend: for example to point out any puzzling aspects or flaws in the logic of the story.

The second part (*A store of 94 activities*) provides very explicit explanations of each of the activities involved, divided into *before, during* and *after telling the story* in line with current approaches (see for instance Benton and Fox 1989). This list of activities is an excellent resource for language teachers and can be applied to all aspects of language teaching. South African teachers working in schools with limited resources and with children whose English is limited will find the suggestions offer realistic and practical ways of ensuring that pupils understand the language used and are encouraged to participate fully. Cognitive principles such as the development of automaticity and the need for meaningful learning and intrinsic motivation, affective principles such as the encouragement of risk-taking, building of self-confidence and the need to appeal to the senses implicitly underlie these activities. Many of the 94 are usefully related to the 15 stories used in Part 3.

I have two minor quibbles, however. The first is that the term 'activity' seems too loosely used - many of the 'activities' described are techniques rather than activities. The second is that subtitles such as helping the children to understand the story, introducing new words, and inviting a personal response are used. Apart from the inexplicable linguistic inconsistency in the subtitles, it is not clear why the subdivisions have been made since many of the 'activities' could be seen as serving a variety of purposes, rather than a narrow objective.

The third part (*Stories and lesson plans*) uses 15 stories to present lessons. In every case, the text of the story is given. Wisely, Wright enjoins teachers to add their own warm-up activities since making an appropriate choice would depend on particular contexts or circumstances. In addition, although the lesson plans are detailed, he does not intend teachers to use them as they stand. The stories range from well-known, traditional stories like *Little red riding-hood* to universal favourites like *In a dark, dark town* to ones drawn from particular countries like China (Ma Liang) and Wales (*Elidor*). The approaches used in the lesson plans illustrate the rich variety of possibilities stories offer. It is a pity that in one case, at least, Wright did not choose to explain some of the choices he had made so that teachers would be in a better position to follow his advice:

- Decide what your aim or aims are in deciding to use a story as the focus of your lesson: structural, functional, lexical, phonological, skills? Is it enough for children to listen or to repeat, or do you want them to experiment and try to make use of all the language at their command?
- Decide how you can help the children to focus their minds on the content of the story and on the activities you want them to do.
- Decide which are the key language items they must understand or which they must use productively.
- Consider the whole lesson as an experience for the children. Is there enough variety of ways of learning: music, movement, drawing, and so on? Is there enough variety of pace: slow, quiet activities and brisk noisy ones? Is there a good balance between active and receptive activities? (p. 73)

The fourth part (*Topics and stories*) illustrates some of the ways in which stories can provide a linking thread to cross-curricular studies. (More detailed attention to the linking of cross-curricular topics with stories is available in Ellis and Brewster 1991.) The story used here is *Town mouse and country mouse*. Three topics are used: (mice, home, and town and country) to generate a range of activities both creative and informative. Home, for instance, allows for an information gap activity involving the giving of directions (find your way home), extension of vocabulary, practice of grammar in a natural context (furnishing a home), cultural awareness (types of homes), creativity and sensitivity to others' needs (dream home), extension of knowledge (animal homes), polite disagreement (True/false) and pronunciation (rhymes).

Part 5 (*Grammar and stories*) focuses on the role that stories can play in introducing language in a rich and meaningful context. The activities illustrate innovative ways of

dealing with punctuation, spelling, reading and writing, as well as more specific grammar items such as question forms and simple past tense.

In the final part (*More stories and ideas*), 17 more stories are featured. Among them are challenging stories like *Jogger in New York*, *Gellert* and *The wise shoemaker*, illustrating Wright's firm belief that 'it is what we expect children to do which determines the proficiency level required, not the story itself' (p.5).

At the end of the book, there are 7 pages to copy. Wright uses a simple, but effective method of drawing that even the most untalented can use. There is also a well-selected list of further reading which lists resource books as well as stories.

Storytelling with children is sound and comprehensive and could prove an invaluable aid to teachers who recognise the potential value of storytelling, but are not confident of their ability to use stories in the classroom. Teachers whose own proficiency in language is limited and who have little experience in using stories would find it easy to use most of the stories because of the simple form that has generally been chosen and because of detailed guidance in the procedure(s) to be followed in using the stories.

I wholeheartedly recommend this book to South African teachers teaching children in multilingual classrooms, particularly at pre-primary and primary school level, so they can exploit the opportunities stories offer for natural and enjoyable repetition and use of language. As Maley comments in his foreword,

[Stories] virtually solve the 'problem' of motivation at a stroke. And they offer multiple possibilities for spin-off activities involving visual, tactile, and dramatic elements.

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REFERENCES

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