Storytelling and drama share a number of features which make it natural to integrate them during lessons. Both build on children’s innate capacity for fantasy and imaginative play, and even very young children can differentiate between the conventions of a story or drama and real life. Through stories and drama, children develop understanding of themselves and the world around them. The distance afforded by characters and events which are not real also helps children to explore significant issues which are relevant to their daily lives, in a way that is safe and enjoyable.

In storytelling and drama, the usual norms of time, place and identity are temporarily suspended as, for example, in a story which spans a hundred years yet takes three minutes to tell, or a drama activity which transforms the classroom into a ‘jungle’ and all the children in it to ‘hungry lions’. Storytelling and drama are above all shared, communal classroom events which engage children’s interest, attention and imagination and develop their language skills in a holistic way. They also appeal to children with different intelligences and learning styles and provide a framework for fostering social skills and attitudes, such as active listening, collaborating, turn taking and respect for others, in a positive way.

Learning through stories

Most children start school familiar with stories and narrative conventions in their own language and quickly transfer this familiarity into a willingness to listen to and participate in stories in English. Stories provide a natural, relevant and enjoyable context for exposure to language and an opportunity to familiarize children with the sounds, rhythm and intonation of English. The discovery and construction of meaning is supported through things such as visuals, mime, gesture, voice and characterization, and children also develop learning strategies and thinking skills, such as predicting, hypothesizing, guessing and inferring meaning. Stories help young children to develop concentration skills and also aspects of emotional intelligence, such as empathy and relating to other people. Stories also provide a springboard for a wide range of activities which develop language, thinking skills, positive attitudes and citizenship, as well as appreciation of other cultures, or understanding of content from other areas of the curriculum. As children increasingly develop their ability to understand, retell, act out and/or create their own stories in English, this also has a positive effect on their motivation, confidence and self-esteem.

There are various possible approaches to using stories in class. These range from occasional use of stories to supplement a topic or structure-based course book, to using a story-based course book, and possibly supplementing this with additional stories as well, to basing the whole language programme and syllabus on a selection of stories which the children study over a period of time, e.g. two or three stories per term.

Choosing stories

Stories can be selected from a range of sources, including graded readers, story websites on the internet or picture books originally written for children whose first language is English. Whatever the source, the most important thing is that the story you choose is suitable for the children it is intended for. You need to check that the content is relevant, interesting, appealing and memorable and, if the story is illustrated, that the visuals are clear and attractive and will support children’s understanding. The language level of the story also needs to be appropriate and to fit in at least partially with your syllabus. Other features, such as whether the discourse pattern of the story is repetitive, cumulative or includes a rhythmic refrain (and therefore promotes participation, aids memory and practices a particular language pattern) will also influence your choice. Over time, it is important to vary the kinds of stories you use, including, for example, traditional stories or, with older children, spoof or modern versions of these, fables or stories with a moral, myths, legends, funny stories, rhyming stories, stories with flaps or pop-ups, biographical stories, stories which help children understand their own feelings, stories from other cultures and stories which are linked to content from other areas of the curriculum.

Telling stories
Before telling a story to children for the first time, it is usually advisable to practice how you are going to do this, including for example, mime or actions you plan to use to convey meaning, the way you are going to use your voice, e.g. for different characters or to create surprise or suspense, and the places you are going to pause or ask questions to encourage the children to show their understanding or predict what’s going to happen next. When you tell the story, you need to make sure that everyone can see and hear you and, if you are using a picture book, hold this up and show each illustration slowly round the group. With younger children it is usually best if they can sit on the floor in a semi-circle near you and you may also like to introduce the story with a rhyme to settle the children before you begin. As you tell the story, it is a good idea to maintain frequent eye-contact with the children, in order to help them stay focused and attentive. You also need to give them time to think, look, comment, ask or respond to questions and, if appropriate, encourage them to join in with you as you tell the story. At the end, it is important to invite a personal response, e.g. by asking children if they like the story, or have had similar experiences or feelings to the characters in the story, and be ready to recast or extend their contributions in English as necessary. Above all, it is important to show and share your own enjoyment of the story – it’s catching!

Planning story-based lessons

As with other listening and reading activities, it can be helpful to plan story-based lessons following the three stages of before, while and after. If you decide to use a story in an extended way over several lessons, then this is likely to be a cyclical process which starts by creating interest, motivation and attention in the story and predicting what it is about, followed by an initial telling of the story, related activities and follow-up. The cycle can then be extended through a combination of retelling(s) of the story in a variety of ways, interspersed with a series of appropriately selected activities that lead children from an initial, global understanding of the story to using more and more of the language it contains. In some cases, the storytelling cycle may lead to children producing their own versions of the story or dramatizing some aspect of it in a role play.

With older children, as part of their understanding of storytelling, it is also important to develop their awareness of how stories are constructed and to give them opportunities to create stories themselves.

As part of activities in the storytelling cycle, and in order to enrich and enhance children’s learning, it is often appropriate to integrate storytelling with drama.

Learning through drama

Drama provides opportunities for multi-sensory, kinaesthetic responses to stories and engages children in ‘learning by doing’ at a number of different levels. At a basic level, through listening and responding to storytelling and doing short, introductory drama activities, children use mime, sounds, gestures and imitation to show their understanding and to make connections between language and corporal expression. This helps young children associate actions, words and meanings and memorize key language in a natural and enjoyable way. As children become familiar with the story, more extended drama activities provide opportunities for recycling the language it contains through retelling or acting out, either by the children themselves or by the children using puppets. In these activities, the use of drama provides a focus and support for children to use (some) language from the story in an independent way and also contributes to building up their confidence and self-esteem. At a more sophisticated level, the use of drama techniques such as hot seating, role play or thought tunnel provides opportunities for children to go beyond the story and explore the issues, problems or moral dilemmas that it contains. This not only provides opportunities for children to use language they know beyond the story script within a clearly defined framework but also encourages them to develop critical and creative thinking skills and to work with others in a collaborative way.

In addition to classroom drama, it may sometimes be suitable to use a story the children have specially enjoyed as the basis of a class play. The preparation of a class production for an audience of parents and others is different from other classroom drama activities in this section, which put the emphasis on using drama as part
of a process of personalized learning. However, preparing and performing a class play can also have enormous benefits for children’s language development, confidence and self-esteem and prove extremely worthwhile and rewarding.

Managing drama activities

Drama activities with children can be ‘risky’ in terms of classroom management and need to be handled carefully and sensitively. It is usually advisable to introduce drama gradually, in activities which are short and where you use techniques such as ‘freeze’ or shaking maracas to control the action. In addition to general points about classroom management, it is vital to show yourself willing to participate in classroom drama and to model the kinds of responses you expect from the children. Although it is important to give children encouraging feedback after doing a drama activity, it is best not to look at them (too) directly during the activity, as this may unwittingly convey an impression that you are judging them. This can be off-putting to some children, who will be drawn in naturally as long as they do not feel under pressure. If you regularly use story-related drama activities with your classes, over time you may be surprised at the increasingly confident and mature way in which children respond.

Reflection time

As you use the storytelling and drama activities in this section with your classes, you may like to think about the following questions and use your responses to evaluate how things went and plan possible improvements for next time:

1. Interest: Did the story engage the children’s curiosity, interest and attention? Why? / Why not? If so, how was this sustained?
2. Participation: Did the children participate actively? What factors encouraged – or discouraged – this?
3. Creative thinking: How did the children respond to activities which invited a creative or imaginative response? Did this affect the way they used language? If so, how?
4. Kinaesthetic learning: How did the children respond to activities involving mime and movement? In what ways did such activities seem to help or detract from the children’s learning? What were the reasons for this, do you think?
5. Collaboration: Did the children collaborate and work well together? What factors influenced this?
6. Enjoyment: Did the children enjoy the story and related activities? Why? / Why not? What effect did this have on their motivation, confidence and self-esteem?