

Ready, steady, go!

You: What exactly is a REALBOOK?

Me: That's a good question. Aren't all books real? Of course they are. However, when we are talking about using books with children in the English language classroom we could be talking about all sorts of books: a coursebook, a workbook, a special reader written to help children learn how to read. A REALBOOK is none of these.

A REALBOOK provides children with two important impetuses. Firstly, a REALBOOK is a beautiful thing; it has a very different visual appeal from the other classroom books children have around them. REALBOOKS are often written and illustrated by the same person. There is a connection between text and illustration making the story obvious through the illustrations, and consequently supporting the children's efforts to understand the text.

Secondly, a REALBOOK does not focus the children's attention on grammatical structures. Opal Dunn (1997: 1) defines REALBOOKS thus: 'REAL picture BOOKS are written for children's enjoyment and enrichment with no specific language teaching aim. The language that accompanies the pictures is authentic to native speaker children. (...) REALBOOKS leave lifelong impressions; they are what reading is all about. They give enjoyment and often fun too.'

A REALBOOK provides the children with a natural context for the language they have already learned. This means that REALBOOKS are highly motivating for all children, especially when they realize that with a little bit of English they can do so much.

You: Who is this resource book for?

Me: I am writing this resource book for all teachers who work with children and for all children who enjoy having stories read to them: children as young as three and as old as twelve.

You: Goodness, there's a big difference between three- and twelve-year olds.

Me: Yes. Each REALBOOK is accompanied by a number of activities. You know your children and their capabilities; it is therefore up to you to

decide which activity is more suitable. I have tried to define an age group for either a REALBOOK or for an activity. But the final decision is yours.

You: Can I use any REALBOOKS?

Me: This resource book is based on nine picture books published by Scholastic that I have used successfully in the classroom. However, you can choose any books you like. I have divided the books into three age categories: Ready (ages three to six years), Steady (ages seven to nine years) and Go (ages ten to twelve years).

Here are some points to consider when choosing a REALBOOK:

1) What are the illustrations like?

Young children need visual aids when learning a foreign language; they support their learning and help them remember new words and expressions. When choosing a REALBOOK we need to think about the connection between the text and the illustrations. Do the images match the text, providing the children with an extra opportunity to understand the story? Do the illustrations tell the story? Are they child-friendly?

2) Is the text simple enough?

Simplicity of text often has nothing to do with whether children have studied certain grammatical structures or tenses. Narrative uses the past tense, and very few children at the beginning of their English learning experience are taught the past tense. Most of the REALBOOK stories in this collection use the past tense, and they are still suitable. However, we do need to think about what the children know and what would be most appropriate for them to know in language terms, and match this to the language content of the REALBOOK. This often has nothing to do with the children's chronological age. Many books can be used with children from three to ten years of age. How you use the book and the story activities is crucially important.

3) Is there a repetitive element to the story?

Most of the REALBOOKS I have chosen for this resource book have an element of repetition in them. This is very important as children are

exposed to repeated chunks of language, which they pick up surprisingly quickly. If the text is suitable, the children quickly start finishing off bits of sentences with the chunks of repetitive language used in the story. They take enormous pleasure in helping you tell the story. Don't worry if they don't understand everything they are saying. With time and increasing fluency, they will start to analyse the language they are using.

4) What is the subject matter?

Is the story's subject matter appropriate for the children? Is the topic or theme suitable for what they are doing in English? Do they already know some of the words? Does the story have anything in common with what they are doing in school? There may be some cross-curricular connections to be explored. I like to link what the children are doing in the classroom to the REALBOOKS we share. It makes sense to relate their learning experiences when we can.

You: How do I read the REALBOOK to the children?

Me: There is a big difference between reading and telling stories. When we read a story, our eyes are fixed on the page, we concentrate on what we are saying and leave very little time or space for comments from and interaction with children. When we tell a story, the REALBOOK is a visual aid for the children. If the text is simple enough, we can even tell the story from memory, telling and showing simultaneously. This means we can look at the children and use their reaction as feedback to what we are saying. If necessary, we can allow them to interact with the story text, extending it for their benefit. This is not true storytelling, but it is a recognized form of using a REALBOOK in the classroom, which enables children to become part of the REALBOOK experience.

Storytelling implies the teacher knowing the story almost by heart. It also involves thinking about how you are going to say certain words and phrases and which gestures and movements you will use to accompany the words. With each REALBOOK, I have tried to give you some storytelling tips. However, it is a very personal thing. We each tell a story using our personality and character, and more importantly we have to feel comfortable with the story. Try practising a little at home with friends or loved ones. Try working with a mirror and rehearsing your

gestures and facial expressions. It may sound silly, but it really does help. But be careful. Don't get yourself worked up about storytelling; the children will sense you are nervous and that's not what we want.

You: How do children interact with the REALBOOK story?

Me: How children interact during the storytelling procedure varies from country to country. For those teachers who work with children who naturally interact with the story while they are listening, it can sometimes be difficult to answer questions and tell the story at the same time. But this too is an important part of the REALBOOK experience. Try to encourage children to take part in the process and ask them questions; these questions can be in either English or their mother tongue. Listen to their comments, which are often influenced by the illustrations. Children are full of ideas and will be stimulated by the pictures they see. Their reactions are likely to be in their mother tongue; I believe this is a healthy approach to the storytelling experience. Use what they say as a support for their understanding. You can reply and expand in English.

You: How should my classroom be set up?

Me: Classrooms around the world are all different, reflecting different thoughts behind how we educate our children. Sometimes desks are in rows and packed into a small space with little room for moving around. Maybe English teachers work in other teachers' classrooms and moving desks can be a tricky business. However, if you do have space, or can create a space, for the children to sit on the floor in a semicircle around you, do try; creating an intimate moment for storytelling is part of the REALBOOK experience. When children hear the words *Shall we have a story?*, it should trigger off a pleasurable feeling. After a while, children will automatically prepare themselves and settle down quietly, waiting for the story to begin. Older children are less likely to want to sit on the floor, but perhaps they could bring their chairs nearer? It is important that everyone can see and that everyone is comfortable. *Are you ready? Shall we begin?*

A book corner is a luxury not all classrooms can accommodate, but if you are able to devote a section of your classroom to books, with shelves for book storage and display and a rug for

children to sit on, then you can create a very positive feeling amongst your children. This means that REALBOOKS can be left in the classroom for the children to access or browse through out of English hours. You will find that children revisit books far more regularly. You could also include class-made books in this book corner. Children take enormous pleasure leafing through a book they have made together as a class.

You: When should I use a REALBOOK?

Me: That's the easiest question. Whenever you want to. There are no hard and fast rules for when to tell a REALBOOK story. REALBOOKS can be told at the beginning of lessons, or to change pace in the middle, and they are perfect for rounding off a lesson. A REALBOOK story can and should be told several times; it is not something to be experienced just once. It can be told two or three times during a lesson; it can be told every lesson for several lessons; it can be brought into the classroom after not being told for several weeks. A REALBOOK is something we always have, and will regularly be requested by the children. Encourage your children to ask for the stories they like; it's an excellent way of evaluating their enjoyment of REALBOOKS.

You: How do I assess children's progress when using REALBOOKS?

Me: Assessing young children is not always easy. However, children's reactions in class will give us a clear idea of how the REALBOOK is going. Regular requests for the same or a new REALBOOK show us that either individual children or the whole group have enjoyed the experience.

I have included some very simple self-assessment activities at the end of each section in this book to help the teacher and the child understand how the REALBOOK and its activities have gone. For younger children who cannot write yet, the self-evaluation template uses smiley faces relating to activities used from each REALBOOK and asks them to draw their favourite scene or character in the story (see page 28). For older children, the self-evaluation templates require them to tick a choice of answers in English (see page 46) or to write in English or their mother tongue about the REALBOOK (see page 64).

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE BOOK

This resource book is dedicated to nine different REALBOOKS divided into three sections: Ready, Steady and Go! Accompanying each REALBOOK is a set of teacher's notes and two or three photocopiable templates. Most of these templates include a page of visuals, which can be enlarged to make flashcards, or just photocopied for the children to have their own set of mini-flashcards, which they can use in diverse classroom games and activities.

Why flashcards? I take the stand that children need to know a good deal of the REALBOOK story language before you tell them the story. Some theorists believe this should be as much as seventy-five per cent; that's actually quite a lot.

Taking into consideration that children usually acquire a foreign language by picking up single words and simple expressions, I use flashcards to introduce these new words and expressions. Then I often use flashcards again while reading the story and (usually in their mini-version) in follow up activities.

So the notes and templates for each REALBOOK provide activities for three phases:

1. Pre REALBOOK storytelling, including the use of large flashcards

Children are given an opportunity to hear and use words and expressions many times over using flashcards. By providing children with this language and giving them the opportunity to play and have fun with these words, they acquire it very quickly.

2. Telling the REALBOOK story

The REALBOOK provides a context for these new words and expressions. The children can put their new knowledge into practice and understand a story.

3. Post REALBOOK storytelling, including the use of mini-flashcards

This final step is simply personalizing the language, using the story and follow up activities as a vehicle. The children colour and draw, cut and stick, produce visuals and make their own books, which they can share with friends and family members, extending the language beyond the classroom.