It is common practice for teachers of first and second language learners to read stories to children. By engaging in this practice, teachers not only model literacy skills, but they cultivate listening skills and promote vocabulary acquisition. One particular type of story, the "story-song" is frequently used by educators of young children. The story-song is basically a poem with a story-line woven through it. Furthermore, because it has been set to music it can be sung rather than spoken.

Yet, are story-songs simply novelty items or does the melodic element make an important instructional contribution? An empirical investigation of a group of 48 third grade second language learners measured the amount of vocabulary acquisition which was produced when stories were sung, spoken, illustrated and not illustrated. The statistical analysis revealed that the illustrated spoken and sung stories were equally effective means of supporting language acquisition. However, close examination of the descriptive data revealed a definite bias in favor of the illustrated story-song. That is, second language learners who listened to the illustrated sung stories acquired an average of 1.5 words by the end of the treatment, while those who heard the illustrated spoken rendition of the story acquired an average of 1.0 words.

During the following two weeks, the story was not heard by the learners, yet the gap between both groups widened. The average vocabulary acquired by the illustrated story-song group was 1.75 as opposed to the illustrated spoken story group's 1.08. As expected, the effects of music were greatest with the subjects who knew the least amount of vocabulary. After two weeks, they acquired an average of 3.33 vocabulary while the spoken story group averaged 1.5 vocabulary words. Although this research was conducted on a relatively small number of subjects, it points to the positive effects which music may have upon language acquisition. More specifically, it suggests that illustrated story-songs may produce greater vocabulary acquisition than illustrated traditional spoken stories (Medina, 1993).

Research Into Practice

Teachers of second language learners can similarly increase the vocabularies of their learners by following some simple guidelines.

Step 1- Select a Story-Song

Before you begin, make certain that you have selected a story-song which will produce maximum results. First, follow the same principles you would use when selecting a story for your learners. Find a story-song with a story-line which will be of interest to your learners. In Elley’s (1989) investigation, not all stories resulted in the same amount of language acquisition. It is not clear at this time what characterizes such a story, although interest level certainly might be a critical attribute. Also, select a song which contains an appropriate number of unfamiliar words. According to Krashen (1985), language acquisition occurs when the learner is exposed to a few new words, what Krashen refers to as "i + 1." Acquisition will not take place if learners are inundated by an inordinate number of unfamiliar words (i.e., i + 9). Furthermore, the story-song should expose students more than once to each new vocabulary word. It is particularly helpful when the target vocabulary words are critical to the plot of the story. The contextual environment in which a new vocabulary word is found should be rich. That is, learners should be able to easily infer the meaning of key vocabulary words on the basis of the context (Elley, 1989).
Stories should also be rich in a necessary requirement for language acquisition is what Krashen refers to as "extralinguistic support." As the term implies, extralinguistic support refers to non-verbal means of communicating a word's meaning (e.g., pictures, photos, actions). Meaning can also be conveyed verbally as is the case when a teacher provides a synonym or varies her intonation. This is referred by Krashen as "linguistic support." (See Diagram 1)

Diagram 1

Relationship of Extralinguistic Support and Linguistic Support to Second Language Acquisition

In short, when selecting the appropriate story-song, both forms of support need to be tended to. Therefore, story-song books should abound with illustrations which clearly communicate the significance of new vocabulary. It is particularly helpful when illustrations of new vocabulary words appear numerous times in the story (Elley, 1989).

The music heard on the story-song tape cassettes should also be appealing to the students. This will increase the likelihood that learners will want to hear and sing the song after it has been learned in class. The melody line should be simple and uncomplicated. Complex melodies unnecessarily tax memory, forcing the students to focus attention on learning the melody rather than the lyrics. The tempo should also be moderate. If the song's cadence is too brisk, your learners will be unable to capture new vocabulary words (Medina, 1993). Instead, learners will hear nothing more than musical "noise."

Step 2- Preparing for the Story-Song

A few preparatory measures should be taken prior to playing the story-song for your learners. Familiarizing learners with the story content prior to hearing the story-song will increase the comprehensibility of the story and ultimately the amount of vocabulary acquired. Begin by stating the topic of the story-song. Have students share their experiences on the topic in order to tap their prior knowledge. Next, briefly explain what the song is about without summarizing the entire story-line. Finally, read the story while pointing to pictures. Further support your reading with other types of comprehensible input. Elley (1989) found that using three types of "comprehensible input" produced the greatest amount of vocabulary acquisition: (1) the contextual clues, (2) illustrations, (3) other types of comprehensible inputs such as pointing, synonyms, explanations (in the first or second language) while the story was being read. In order to maximize vocabulary acquisition in your learners you would be wise to similarly provide multiple forms of linguistic and extralinguistic support while reading the story.

Step 3- Introduce the Music

It is often helpful to play the instrumental version of the story-song at this point if it is available. If your tape recording does not contain a separate instrumental version, then play the sung version several days before introducing the story-song. Students can listen to this music while engaging in other activities (e.g., working on an art project or while engaging in a physical education activity). In either case, students will have an opportunity to become familiar with the music prior to hearing the story-song. It is a particularly important step if the genre of music is totally unfamiliar to the learners. Danlan (1975) found that learners responded differently depending upon whether the music they were exposed to was familiar or unfamiliar. Introducing the melody first makes pedagogical sense for still another reason. When humans are simultaneously exposed to several new stimuli, they experience what is referred to as "secondary task overloading." This cognitive overstimulation can prevent students from learning the skills which they are attempting to acquire. Therefore, in order to avoid this effect, it is advisable to first expose students to the melody of the story-song prior to introducing the story-song itself.

Step 4- Present the Story-Song

Play the recording of the story-song while pointing to the story's illustrations. Repeat this process two to three times each day for several days. Students may wish to take turns pointing to pictures in the story-book as it is heard. Play the story-song intermittently over the next month or two. Students will most likely ask you to play the story-song again and again.

Step 5- Continue to Support Language Acquisition

To add variety and further support the language acquisition process, provide different forms of
comprehensible input each time the story-song is heard. One way to do this is to have students create artistic works that will be used later on during subsequent readings of the story. For example, students can create illustrations of key vocabulary or scenes in the story. Later on, when students hear the story-song played, you can point to the students’ illustrations rather than those in the storybook. Similarly, students can create puppets, costumes or masks which can be used to playact the story-story as it is being heard.

The effects of music upon human learning are not entirely understood. Yet, there is reason to believe music can be used by educators to promote second language acquisition. While additional research is needed on this topic, there is reason to believe that story-songs may result in greater vocabulary acquisition than more traditional spoken stories. Teachers can begin immediately to witness the effects of music on their second language learners. By following a few simple guidelines they can use story-songs to boost the acquisition of vocabulary in their learners.

References


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