USING CHILDREN’S BOOKS IN THE
ADULT ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING
DEGREE AT THE SCHOOL FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING
BRATTLEBORO, VERMONT

BY

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September 2001
This Project by Patricia Connors Little is accepted in its present form.

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DEDICATION:

My Independent Professional Project is dedicated to my late father, Regis Michael Connors, who told me before I left for my first summer at SIT, “I know you can do it Pat.” And he was right. Thanks Dad.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge Jack Millett, my teacher and advisor who was with me every step of the way in my learning. Special thanks go to my reader, Carolyn Parrott, an extraordinary teacher and storyteller. My husband, Al, who supported me both emotionally and financially through my two SMAT summers.
ABSTRACT

This paper reports my personal story of using children’s books in the adult English as a Second Language classroom. The introduction explains how and why I came to the decision to use the books. Chapters One through Four are an overview of the books I used in my classroom and explain our collective classroom experience using them. Additionally the paper contains my classroom observations and reflections which helped guide me in selecting stories and lesson planning. The document highlights some of the advantages of using children’s books as well as some suggestions for ESL teachers who are interested in exploring their use in their own classrooms.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

HOW I CAME TO USE CHILDREN’S BOOKS IN THE ADULT ESL CLASSROOM

Everybody has a story to tell. Everyone has listened to a story and, more than likely, most people have read stories no matter what culture or part of the world they are from. Stories have a strong tradition in many cultures, some handed down through oral traditions while others were read to us as children. Stories can make us laugh or cry and give us pause to think. Often we can relate to the characters in a story; and sometimes we share common experiences with them.

During my Interim Year Teaching Practicum as a Summer Master of Arts in Teaching student, I began to explore the use of stories in the adult English as a Second Language classroom. My supervisor recommended stories to me because he thought that they matched my teaching style. With classes generally consisting of immigrants and refugees from many different countries, I usually teach from eight to twelve students who are at a Beginner II level. I like to work in circles when working as a group since I have found the circle to be a place of teaching that draws attention to the activity within that can focus on the material presented and the participants rather than the language per se.
Storytelling works very well within the circle and is a natural, focused place to present a story.

First, I began using pictures to tell stories. I carefully collected full-colored pictures and laminated them to preserve their color and quality. Initially, I put the picture into the center of the circle within full view of the entire group, then asked questions to elicit information from the students about the picture. These were questions that gave students a choice in their answers. For example: “Is the man happy or sad?” “Is the man young or old?” I had the students answer in complete sentences and counseled the language as they answered. I didn’t correct the students or focus explicitly on their mistakes; instead, I took the language the students had produced and repeated it back to them correctly. I tried to direct the grammar if necessary, but I also let the students’ ideas flow. I wanted to see what they knew and what they could produce to enhance the story or the ideas. I quickly learned that the students had lots of ideas about any given picture and what I saw in it wasn’t necessarily what they would see. Students responded well to the pictures and came up with many more ideas of who the people were and their circumstances than I could have imagined.

We worked for several months from pictures that I had chosen. Often I would write a text to go with the picture, and sometimes students would write the text individually or in small groups. If students hadn’t yet developed the skills to write a story, they would draw a story and then tell it from their pictures. I soon learned that the stories didn’t have to be filled with melodrama, mystery, or surprise endings. It was enough to have the students tell stories of ordinary people doing ordinary things through the course of their daily lives. I found that this sparked students’ ideas about their own
lives and the stories they wanted to share with their classmates and teacher. The stories could actually be quite basic in language but also very poignant in content.

Students were telling and writing stories that shared their life experiences and added to very real and lively discussions in the classroom. They were talking more and asking for vocabulary words to clarify their own stories and enhance their language learning. They became more self-motivated and interested in one another. This was a great lesson for me as a teacher as I realized that I no longer had to control everything that was happening in the classroom; instead, I could be an observer and gatherer of the language and stories, and then I could use the language and grammar produced in subsequent lessons. I began to understand how to trust my students by listening and letting them help me determine where to go next. They were sharing, telling and writing about things that were relevant to their own lives and experiences. In some cases, one student’s story would inspire another student’s, and although the students had the commonality of being students in one another’s classroom, they also became people who had shared some common and diverse life experiences. This helped me discover the idea of universal themes that could appeal to many students.

We continued in this vein for some time until I got a second job as an ESL tutor in a local elementary school where I taught eight students ages five through eight years old who were in kindergarten through second grade. There were not many materials available to teach from and this led me to the school’s librarian and the reading specialist in whom I found tremendous resources. Not only were books plentiful, but they were also available in multiple copies.
I began to choose books that were colorful and reflected the interests of the children I was working with. Often we would go to the library or resource room together and the students would choose books that appealed to them. Though I know that there are differences with language acquisition between children and adults, I began to think that the children’s stories might have some application in the adult classroom as well. The pictures often told the story without the words and meaning could be made even if the text was too difficult. Some of the language was repetitious, but I began to explore some of the reading and writing skills that could be developed for adults through the use of children’s literature. Many of the books had universal themes with characters that were not only children but also adults in situations that people from many cultural backgrounds may be able to relate to.

I was fascinated. The pictures were so beautiful! Here were hundreds of books waiting to be developed into lessons. Here were books that could elicit vocabulary, grammar, and stories from adults as well as children. Here were multiple copies of texts that the students didn’t have to purchase but could become a part of the language learning process for adults. In addition, here were books that my adult students could also share with their children, as many of the books were available through the local library as well. The authors were from many different cultures and portrayed the characters in respectful and diverse ways.

I began borrowing and pouring over the children’s books. I looked for themes that would engage my adult students. At the time, since I had students from Brazil, Croatia, Korea, Chili, and Thailand, I looked for books that depicted characters from similar cultures; for the most part they were available. I found books that addressed being a
single parent; living in multigenerational families; becoming a new inhabitant of a neighborhood; and celebrating holidays as well as stories that dealt with the environment. The characters paralleled the lives of people in very real and interesting situations and the scenarios were ones that adults could relate to. So I decided to try to work with children’s books with my adult students.

Following you will find the story of one teacher and a group of students who formed a community of learners to explore the use of children’s books for language development. The paper includes an overview of the stories I used as well as my classroom observations and reflections to help the reader understand what my students and I have learned. I hope our story will encourage fellow ESL teachers to consider the use of children’s books in the adult ESL classroom. As you read, I invite you to keep the following questions in mind:

- What language skills can be learned?
- How can the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing be applied through the use of a story?
- How can the stories be used to develop a sense of community in the classroom?
- How can stories be used for the multilevel classroom?
- How can a teacher learn to stand back and listen to the stories generated by her students from the books while learning how to be a facilitator and guide for the students’ own active language learning?
CHAPTER TWO

A CHAIR FOR MY MOTHER

The first story I chose was A Chair for My Mother, the story of a working class Hispanic grandmother, mother and daughter. I chose this story because it concerned family life and had lovely illustrations and bright colors. Prior to introducing it to the group, I had taught my students vocabulary and grammar structures about families and they had shared stories about their own families. They had also made drawings of family trees based on my family tree model, and had written paragraphs based on their own family trees. Prior lessons had also included occupations and what students’ current occupations were in contrast to previous ones in their native countries. In other words, they had the skills to talk about families and jobs.

The main character in A Chair for My Mother is the young daughter, approximately eight years of age, who goes to the local diner where her mother works as a waitress to help her mom with small tasks to earn some money. They are saving the mother’s tips and the daughter’s additional money in a large jar to purchase a new stuffed chair because their furniture had been destroyed in a house fire. Each evening they, along with the grandmother, put their meager earnings into the jar and anxiously await the time when they can trade their coins in at the bank and buy the chair. There is a sense of family love and commitment to the common task they share.
The book then flashes back to describe the fire that destroyed their home and their subsequent devastation and gratitude they have only lost furniture and not lives. Their neighbors pulled together to donate necessities for their new apartment. Eventually, they saved the money they needed and joyfully went to the furniture store where, with great care, chose their “dream chair.” The story ends with the mother and daughter sitting peacefully in the chair, proud of the family’s accomplishment.

Throughout the story we can infer that this is a close family who worked together diligently to overcome the losses from the fire. It is obvious that they are a low-income family and that there’s no father present, but they do have a community of friends who help support them emotionally.

From a cultural perspective, I was curious about several things: single parent homes; multi-generation families living together; the concept of family support; and saving money as a child. Did my students come from cultures where women led the household? Did they have neighborhoods in their home countries? Did the communities they had come from offer support to neighbors in both good and bad times? Had they saved coins to help support their families, or had they saved for anything special as a child? Had anyone gone to work with his or her parents or taken children to work? I put all of these questions on paper and thought that we could use some of them as topics of discussion after we worked through the story.

The first day we took a “picture walk” through the book; that is we went through the book focusing on the pictures and not looking at the text. This process helps the students gain overall meaning the first time they see the book. I had borrowed enough books for each pair of students to share one. As facilitator, I guided the students through
the pictures, page by page, first asking literal questions such as: “How many people are in the picture?” “Who are the people?” “What is the mother’s job?” “Where does she work?” “What room are they in?” The students answered in complete sentences and I counseled the language as needed. I didn’t explicitly correct the language. For example, if a student said, “They in living room.” I would respond, “Yes, they are in the living room.

As we worked through the pictures, some students gave me additional vocabulary which I wrote on the board: words such as a “stuffed chair,” “comfortable chair,” “floral chair.” After completing a few pages, I also asked what they thought would happen next, thus trying to have the students make some predictions based on what they had already seen. We spent about 30 minutes on this, and when we had completed the picture walk, we worked together to recall the details and organize the main points of a story into a visual representation which is a “mind map.” (Bromley, Irwin-DeVitis, Modlo.1995) In this case, I was using the mind map to help the students organize and reflect on their newly acquired information from the picture walk. Again I prompted with questions: “How many people are in the story?” “Who are they?” until we had mapped the entire story as a group.

We then went back to the new vocabulary and made sentences such as: “They want a comfortable chair.” “They want a floral chair.” “They want a stuffed chair.” We also built sentences from the mind map. I let the students offer what they could; since it was a multi-level class, some were able to compose more sophisticated sentences. Students with more language skills could also direct the lower level students to the book’s pictures to explain their sentences using the illustrations to clarify meaning. Even
the most basic student could get the overall meaning through the pictures, and then hear the student-generated language to describe them. I ended the lesson when the energy for it seemed to wane, but I decided we could use it again the next day although, at that point, I hadn’t yet developed a clear plan of where to go next. Before we ended I asked the students if they liked the story and what they liked (or didn’t like) about it. Most said that they liked the colorful pictures and the happy ending. Truth be told, I was as yet unsure of my purpose in using the story and, at the time, I was most interested in where the story would take us from a cultural point of view. I was pleased that, through the course of the lesson, the majority of the students remained engaged, and I suspected that happened because each student could draw meaning from it and contribute in some way.

The next day, I divided the students into groups of three based on their levels, and gave each group a set of pictures that I had copied from the book. The lowest level was only given the pictures to sequence; the next level had to match the pictures with a one-sentence summary I had written and put them in order. The highest level had to sequence the pictures and then write a one-sentence summary of each picture. This exercise worked very well and was a fine example of how to reach multi-level groups while using the same story content.

As students were sequencing, I circulated and observed what they were doing. Once again, they were engaged, and some groups were having discussions about the sequencing using words such as: “first,” “next,” “last.” It was a little confusing for some because the story starts after the fire and then goes back to the time of the fire. When a couple of students looked to me for clarification, I referred them to their group members. Once the groups had completed their tasks, they compared their results, and I gave each
group a copy of the book to check for itself. The group which had written summaries put
its sentences on the board and we worked as a large group to correct grammar and syntax.

We then continued as a large group to discuss some of the cultural aspects of the
book. The first question was, “Do women ever head households in your culture?” The
lower level students were drawn into the discussion by telling us how many family
members lived together in their home country. Additionally, they could tell the class what
members of their family worked in their culture. We moved on to a discussion of multi-
generation families which, in turn, led to a discussion of how property is handed down in
various cultures and who is responsible for aging parents. “Does the eldest son stay at
home?” “Do men and women work outside of the home in your culture?” “Does your
culture have a sense of community?” “Do people help one another in difficult times?”
And, finally, “What did you save for as a child?” For this last question, students worked
in small groups to share their stories and then wrote sentences together. I first modeled a
couple of sentences: “I saved my money in a small bank. I saved my money for a
bicycle.” The students then reported back to the large group and shared the sentences
they had written on newsprint.

Next we talked about the concept of community in America and whether or not it
exists today. I was able to share my own experience of growing up in the 50’s when
neighbors knew and helped one another more readily than today. Some students also
noticed that life in America is very fast paced compared to their own culture, and one of the
lowest level students lamented the fact that both parents have to work here. He was trying
to accept the lifestyle of two working parents sharing housework and childcare, when he
had come from a culture where his father had worked outside of the home while his
mother was responsible for the children and household.

I was amazed at how much language had come from this single children’s book
and how it had led to conversations that I had not anticipated. I actually marveled at what
had happened and saw the process as a way to have students work together while
supporting one another in their learning. It was not that I had underestimated my
students’ abilities to do these tasks prior to working with the story, but rather that I had
lacked the awareness of how to find a way to discuss some of the topics. The pictures in
the story became catalysts for me to find a way to be a facilitator for language and
communication once we were “in” the story.

After our initial discussions, I had every intention of using the text which was rich
with idioms and new past tense verbs as well as vocabulary, but after the second session
of the story I was presented with a very powerful lesson that increased my awareness for
choosing future stories. One of my students was a young Croatian refugee who was prone
to “dark moods.” He seemed fine on the first day of the story, but at the end of the
second day’s lesson he was obviously very upset. I was a little puzzled because he had
contributed to the discussion and shared a lot about his country. He had also worked on
all of the tasks and, from what I could tell, he had been engaged.

He then poured out his story of his father being killed in the war, his house being
bombed and burnt down, and his aging mother being on her own in Croatia. He
repeatedly told us that we didn’t understand. The students rallied around him, especially a
60-year-old Chilean woman, and they told him they would try to understand as he told his
story in broken English. Though it was tense for a while, he gained respect and empathy
from other students who had formerly avoided him. His sharing added a level of understanding for all of us, and a sense of acceptance of our differences. After that experience, he became more of a member of the group and, although we didn’t discuss his story again, what happened that day fostered a breakthrough for all of us.

In the end, the experience was a good though painful one, and the classroom community was stronger for it. Students became more accepting of the young man’s silence and were more encouraging when he took the risk of participating more fully. Students were also more willing to work with him in a small group. I had feared that he would not return to class after that day, but he did; it was as though a part of him that had bubbled under the surface had now been revealed and he could move forward. This experience became a vehicle that helped me choose future stories with a more careful eye to who my students are and where they have been prior to their arrival in America. The difficulty we had with this story also made me tremendously aware of the affective part of learning.

I reflected on what had taken place as a whole lesson. My students had the vocabulary and grammar to easily talk about the story based on previous classroom lessons, and this added to their access to the pictures. The picture walk gave them the opportunity to build on this language and helped them preview the pictures and build schema for the story. When they talked about what they had seen, they practiced active listening, speaking and turn taking. One student’s comments about the pictures activated another’s comments which, in turn, built understanding of the pictures as the students worked together in a cooperative manner. The fact that the students were not competing to give correct answers but sharing information enhanced everyone’s understanding.
adding to a sense of shared community effort. They practiced the reading skill of prediction during the picture walk as they determined what might happen next. This was a skill the students could apply to the upcoming reading of the text.

The mind map, a kind of graphic organizer, helped the students organize the main ideas and details in the story. This provided them with a framework for what they already knew, an exercise in sequencing, and a summary of the pictures they had seen and talked about. Additionally, the students now had a preview of the text and a “hook” on which to add new information about the story.

When we worked with the new vocabulary and built new sentences, the students had the opportunity to incorporate reading and writing skills. Since schema had already been built through the picture walk and the mind map, the new language was more accessible because it had been introduced in the content of the picture story. The picture walk also allowed the students to “see” what they heard and supported them in their learning.

The multilevel groups worked on sequencing activities based on the same content and the same skill. The lowest level group practiced listening and speaking skills while the two higher level groups worked on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This was also a review and reinforcement of what they already knew and could share. When students had questioned the sequence and then looked to me for clarification, I asked them to rely on their own reasoning skills and initiative, and those of their group to determine the answers. The highest level put their sequenced sentences on the board and provided student-generated language and the opportunity to introduce vocabulary. Additionally, this process enabled the entire group to work on the four skills.
All of these activities added to a sense of community building because everyone contributed in some way, and acted together as a group to offer corrections in grammar and syntax. Though I had guided and facilitated the process, the students were responsible for the language, and together they determined its correct use.

The discussions that followed about some of the cultural aspects of the story provided the students with the opportunity to once again use speaking and listening skills. We had moved from some very concrete pictures and ideas drawn from a literal understanding of them to more abstract and thought provoking concepts. The discussions activated the students’ cultural schema and they related their own cultural and personal experiences to those of the characters in the story. The students expanded their understanding of their classmates’ cultures and shared their experiences based on the story’s topics, thus gaining a better understanding of one another.

They also compared their prior experience and culture in their native countries to current American culture. Not only had the students given me a better understanding of their backgrounds and thought processes, but they had opened windows to one another’s experiences as well. I felt that true communication had taken place that created and enhanced a sense of community among the students. Though they were from diverse cultural backgrounds, they had shared their lives through the universal themes of family and community.

Additionally, we had had success with the picture walk, mind map, and follow-up discussions, so I decided to continue with their use in the next story. They had been very useful tools and I had learned a great deal about how to use them.
CHAPTER THREE

THE GREAT KAPOK TREE

The Great Kapok Tree is a story about the destruction of the Brazilian Rain Forest in which the main character is a man who has been sent into the forest to cut down the great tree. When he soon falls asleep beneath the tree, various animals who live in the tree climb down to whisper in his ear, and take turns telling him why he should not cut the tree down.

The story is told with great reverence for the animals and people who live in the forest; beautifully colored illustrations draw you into the story. The fact that the animals whisper as the man sleeps lends a mood of quietness and compassion as they try to get their messages across in a subtle and gentle way.

I had no idea who in the class had an understanding of or interest in environmental issues, but I thought that the book depicted these issues in an understandable way, moreover, three of my students were from Brazil! One was a well educated engineer who loved to talk; another a farmer who loved nature and the outdoors but was rather shy; and the third, a person with an eighth grade education who struggled with language but worked well with everyone in both small or large groups. I hoped that the three of them could act as pivotal points of interaction since the story was about their home country. They all had lived in big cities in Brazil, but they knew about their culture and could probably provide the class with important insights. Class members also
included several Thai women and, from prior experience, I knew that they liked plants and flowers which the book’s illustrations depicted beautifully. My young Croatian man had also been a farmer and I knew that he liked to spend time outdoors, so this book looked extremely worthwhile to me.

I thought it necessary to start with some vocabulary, so I put the words “tropical,” “rain forest,” “understory,” “canopy,” and “emergents” on the board. These terms are listed in the beginning of the book along with illustrations for them, and it was important to the overall understanding as the animals in the book live in these specific layers in the rain forest. Students knew that a rain forest is hot, has many trees and plants and a general idea that it’s near the equator. The various terms for the layers were difficult for them to grasp.

A book was available for every two students, so they were able to focus on the pictures easily. We began with the inside cover with its map of the continents and the rain forests of the world, and we subsequently identified the continents, rain forests and the layers. I have found that my students love maps which act like magnets when my students focus their attention on them. We reviewed map directions and what continent each student was from, and then students looked to see if there were any rain forests in their home continents or countries. The border of this map also had pictures of the rain forest animals, so I had the students identify the animals and whether or not they had them or similar ones in their own country.

This time I let the students take their own picture walk in pairs and had them talk to one another about what they saw in each picture. Their task was to talk about the pictures and then write three to five sentences about what they observed. They were not
to read the text, but to focus only on the illustrations. As I circulated around the classroom during this activity, I listened to students identify things in the pictures and provide one another with vocabulary. When we regrouped I asked them what the pictures told them about the rain forest. They shared the sentences they had written and I put them on the board.

For the most part the sentences described the pictures, but were connected to one another’s ideas. For example: “The rain forest has many plants.” “The rain forest has many animals.” “I don’t like snakes.” “I’m afraid of snakes.” “Butterflies are beautiful.” “We have many butterflies in Brazil.” “We don’t have these birds in my country.” If the grammar of the sentences needed work, we made the corrections as a group. When vocabulary words in the sentences were a problem, we referred to the pictures for understanding.

The vocabulary in this book is difficult, so after the students generated sentences I read the story aloud while they followed along. It is a story that lends itself to being acted out, so I did this at the same time. There are many descriptive adjectives such as “squawking birds” and “howling monkeys,” so I was able to make these sounds. There are also lots of past tense verbs that can be demonstrated, ones that illustrate the actions of the animals: “snakes slithered,” “monkeys scampered,” and “frogs squeaked.” The students got the meanings not only from these actions but also their prior knowledge of the animals’ behaviors. This added some humor and silliness to the story, and some students added to the rain forest noises; but the major points of the story were clear, and the interdependence of the plants and animals seemed to appeal to the students.
Afterwards, we discussed the main points of the story to check comprehension.

“Why are the rain forests important?” “Why do the animals need the rain forest? “ “Why does the man decide not to chop the tree down?” “What will happen if rain forests are destroyed?” The discussion was lively, and the Brazilian students especially had something to add. The engineer had actually worked on a road design project on the border of the rain forest which had to be abandoned because it ran near a sacred site. He told us of the beauty of the forest and how glad he was when the project had to be stopped, although he would have continued had his job required it. Adelma, the woman with the eighth grade education, told us how her grandparents and father were from rain forest in northern Brazil but had left to find work in the city. The farmer expressed how important she thought conservation is.

I’m not sure that these students’ stories would have ever surfaced with out this story, and I was fascinated to learn of their firsthand knowledge of rain forests. Their classmates listened with fascination and asked pertinent questions about their experiences. Another topic that surfaced during this was the color of Adelma’s skin which is much darker than the skin color of southern Brazilians, and it was an observation that she felt comfortable with and proud of.

What had worked in this story and why? The main theme was the environment, but I knew prior to introducing the story that my students had interests that could be related to it. I had wanted to introduce a story with a less personal theme and still allow the students to share their own stories. I also felt comfortable with and interested in the topic and I often work more enthusiastically when this is true for me.
It was essential to pre-teach some vocabulary this time and, although the terms for the rainforest layers were difficult, the maps and clear illustrations helped create meaning for the students. Additionally, the map aided the class in reviewing prior learned vocabulary and language while applying it to the new story. This was the first time I had specifically reviewed prior learned language before the picture walk. The map also provided the students with a setting for the story and an opportunity to talk a little about their home countries before the picture walk. Overall this activity acted as a review, a preview and a way to begin building schema.

The picture walk was also conducted differently in that it allowed the students to generate their own language and write sentences without my guiding or prompting them with questions. The students were able to practice the four skills and share their prior interests and language through the pictures as well as making meaning with the support of the pictures and one another. This exercise allowed all level students to be engaged in the same activity. The lower level students were permitted to produce fewer written sentences if necessary.

I had not read a story aloud before, nor acted one out, but I found doing this sped up and enhanced their understanding. The actions and sounds I produced added humor while helping the students relaxed enough to hear the pronunciation, stress, intonation and rhythm of the language. This was a new approach.

The questions and discussions following the story allowed the students to move to more abstract questions. “What will happen if rain forests are destroyed?” The animals in the book that live in the rain forest had told how their lives would be changed if their habitat were destroyed. The students took this newly acquired knowledge from the book,
and they made predictions and drew inferences about the impact the loss of the rain forest would have on the environment.

The Brazilian students’ personal stories added to everyone’s understanding and interest in the story. The discussion of Adelma’s skin color indicated a growing sense of community among the students. They did not hesitate to ask about her skin color and she was not embarrassed to talk about it. The story had motivated the students to ask questions and provided them with a deeper understanding of different people who live in Brazil and its various regions.

The students could relate to the map and pictures immediately and this piqued their interest in the story. So, I think that though the theme was an environmental one, it connected nicely with the students’ experiences and interests in plants and nature and strengthened their understanding as well. I saw that a variety of stories could be used in the classroom, and it was beneficial for me to think about who my students are and listen carefully to gather information about their interests.
CHAPTER FOUR

DOWN THE ROAD

This story was just plain fun. Almost every picture in the book is suitable for framing and the characters are very nice people—an African American family of three who lives in a rural area. The father runs a car repair business next to their house on a country backroad. One day the mother decides to make pancakes for breakfast and discovers that they are out of eggs, so the little girl asks if she may go to the country store to buy them. She has never gone on an errand by herself before but her parents decide she is old enough, so they give her a wicker basket to carry the eggs in and off she goes.

As with any child of six, she skips, hops, plays and gets distracted on the way to the store. When she finally arrives, she proudly makes her purchase and heads back home. On the way, she spots an apple tree and, as she reaches to pick an apple, her basket tips and she drops and breaks all the eggs. She is so mortified she decides to climb the apple tree.

Shortly afterwards, her father comes in search of her and finds her in the tree. He climbs up in the tree to console her and they begin picking and eating apples. Eventually Mom also arrives and climbs the tree as well; they pick apples together, go home and end up making an apple pie for breakfast. It is a simple but very sweet story about a child’s first mission on her own, that I thought my students might like to play with.
My specific goal in using this story was to review prepositions and have my students eventually write their own stories. They would have a choice of two topics: One was to describe the first errand they went on by themselves and the second, to describe the first time they let their own child do so.

Students were already familiar with vocabulary for family members, occupations and clothes, and also fairly conversant with present continuous tense and some prepositions. I had a small group that day, so we did the picture walk together. This time I had students take turns formulating questions about the pictures; I wrote the questions on the board as they dictated them. They first practiced with “Wh” questions and did a good job with these. “How many people are in the picture?” “Where do they live?” “What is the father’s job?” They moved on to: “What is the mother wearing?” “What is the father wearing?” “What is the girl doing?” Students took turns answering the questions.

They needed help as they went along but they were scanning the pictures thoroughly. Some students were just giving parts of questions or vocabulary words: “Dirt road.” “Tractor in the yard.” “The store has bread.” The students were totally engaged, and it became a little bit of a game to see who could formulate a question, answer one, or throw out a vocabulary word the fastest.

I think that this story may have had the most appeal because of its simplicity; moreover, the students were becoming a little more familiar with the process of using children’s books. Additionally, it was a story that had a theme of childhood experience with no deeper meaning, and it lent itself to playfulness. Perhaps because it also had a level of humor they all could relate to, it brought out the child in all of us. Most of them predicted early on that those eggs weren’t going to make it home intact. Also, as parents
themselves, they had little doubt that someone was going to come to look for the daughter before too much time had passed. The “oohs “ and “aahs” over the dropped eggs were downright comical, and I couldn’t help but hear my Interim Year Teaching Practicum supervisor’s voice saying, “Have fun with the language, play with it,” and playing we were.

After we took the picture walk, I had the students close their books and retell the story. This was the first time I had them go directly to retelling without the support of a mind map or the pictures in front of them. I put my box of Cuisenaire rods on the table with the task of having each student tell a part of the story by using the rods to represent what he or she was saying. With each phrase or sentence the student produced, a rod was put down. The visual clarity of the story’s construction with rods aids concentration and provides reference points for visual images the students form as the story unfolds. The students were to retell the story orally using the rods as the people, objects and details in the story.

What fun! They just jumped in and started. One student took out three different sized rods and said, “This is the father, the mother, and the daughter.” Not only were the rods three different sizes, but also the three different colors that matched the colors of the clothes the characters were wearing. The student then produced sentences: “The mother is wearing a red dress.” “The father is wearing blue overalls.” “The daughter is wearing a white shirt.” A brown rod became the dirt road and a white one became the house. Different color rods became the cars and tractor in the yard. A small rod with six white ones became the basket and the eggs.
I stood quietly in the background as the students took turns retelling the story with amazingly accurate details; I counseled the language when necessary. I probably didn’t counsel as much as I usually would have because I didn’t want to break the flow of their activity. I was looking for accuracy, but they were so clear about the details that I was afraid that if I jumped in too much, they might not continue with such enthusiasm. It was also difficult to stand back, not just because they didn’t need me, but because they were having so much fun I wanted to participate.

The students produced language with prepositions correctly. “She went across the stream,” as a small rod walked across a long blue one. “She went in the store and out the door.” “She went up the tree.” Before my eyes and ears the story unfolded. During the process there was also a genial correcting of one another as some students told the story’s details out of sequence. “No, no, no, this happened first.”

Afterwards I had the students work in pairs and asked them to write three to five sentences using the rods. I circulated around the room during this activity, but the students were happily engaged in the task and pretty much ignored me. When they finished, they put the sentences on newsprint, and we corrected them as a group. Our last task that day was to work as a whole group to tell the whole story from the rods as I transcribed it on the board. Initially I thought I would transcribe it from their sentences and give it to them the next day, but they had done such a good job and were still engaged, so they retold from the rods as I wrote. I find the rods in storytelling to be nearly as enchanting as the pictures, since the rods give the students a focal point in their retelling.
As I wrote, there was much humor about sequencing, details and language. I wrote the story as the students dictated, and I left blanks in the sentences where words were missing. I tried to get them to figure out word order when they made a mistake. They had done an excellent job and we ended the lesson that day on a very upbeat note.

I copied the story from the board, typed it and gave it back to the students the next day as a reading exercise. They took turns reading it and, although some students stumbled over pronunciation, for the most part there was complete understanding for many of the students. I also had made a worksheet with sentences that had the prepositions missing and then had the students work in pairs to fill them in, and then distributed books for them to check their answers.

They had done a great job; I was amazed that they had gathered most of the information with only the pictures and the rods for support, so I decided to give them the books again and I read the story aloud. I felt that they knew the story and I wanted them to hear the pronunciation, stress and intonation. As I read, little choral voices were reading with me which hadn’t been my intention but, because they had been successful so far, they couldn’t help but chime in. They knew the story and they knew they knew it, and I sensed that they felt proud of their accomplishment. Perhaps I should have stopped and had them take turns reading, but I was afraid that slowing down would make the students lose momentum and, because they knew the story, I thought it may be beneficial to hear it from a native speaker. Since we weren’t reading at this point for understanding, I thought their hearing the rhythm of the language made more sense.

We ended the story on a very upbeat note, and I decided to forego the writing exercise. I think that I was still in a tenuous state in terms of how far to go with a story.
We had spent the better part of two classes on it, and I didn’t want to overdo it. Would they become bored if we spent too much time on it? This was the first story that had been an overall success to date. I wondered why.

I realized that *Down the Road* was the second story that dealt with family relationships. The content was familiar to the students and they were engaging in “narrow reading,” becoming more familiar with the language and vocabulary needed to use the four skills with a theme and topic. Narrow reading means reading, for a time, books with the same theme. This technique limits the context and vocabulary but provides students with the opportunity to deepen knowledge in one area at a time and improves comprehension. It also includes word repetition and enhances vocabulary acquisition. (Krashen, 1983)

I loved this story and I loved this lesson, and I pondered if whether or not my love of the story also had an impact on the students’ ability to absorb it. Was I more grounded in my presentation of the story than I had been with the previous stories? I thought that perhaps I had been. I had presented it as just a fun story rather than something with a deeper meaning.

I think that the humor and lightness of the story was a major component to its success. The story had a sense of familiarity, and the students made some of the language acquisition activities into a game that motivated and challenged the entire class. The students built a sense of camaraderie, and they were working as a community. The stories were helping the students’ understanding of one another and their senses of humor were more evident. It was a story that lent itself to literal interpretation with students who were
totally present with it. Furthermore, the students were not worrying or thinking about the next step, thus they could more fully concentrate in the moment.

Additionally, the rods were a very powerful tool in this lesson. They acted as a concrete graphic organizer and aided in the students’ memories. The rods also helped the students to focus on the details without much pressure of whether or not their language production was right or wrong; consequently, they were more relaxed, engaged, and less self-conscious. Students who couldn’t produce all of the words could make a physical representation of them with the rods so everyone could participate in some way: this actually made the process of retelling easier. The rods aided the tactile learners and using rods for the retelling appealed to various learning styles. In addition, the rods were a catalyst for the students to write their own text for the follow-up lesson the next day. This was also a pivotal point in my learning as I had observed how powerful the use of the rods could be.

The students had shown me, through their involvement in the activities and understanding of the story, that they did share their own experiences with the characters. They had all related to the story’s simplicity and theme so, in this case, was it necessary to search for a deeper meaning? Perhaps not. Perhaps this story reminded the students what it was like to be young and curious, thus making them feel young and curious again.
CHAPTER FIVE

CHICKEN SUNDAY

The last story I will highlight is *Chicken Sunday* by Patricia Polacco. I think that by now you have gained the flavor of the variety of stories that can be used and how each story has a different theme, presentation and value to language learning. I used several other stories in my learning, but I think these four may be enough to pique your interest and curiosity to consider using children’s books in your own classroom.

I used this story around Easter time so we could talk about the holiday, traditions and friendship, for it is the story of friendship between a multigenerational family and their dear friends from another culture. It highlights the relationship between Stewart and Winston, two African-American boys; Eula Mae, their grandmother; Patricia, a young girl of Russian descent; and Mr. Kodinski, a Russian Jew.

Miss Eula regularly admires a beautiful hat in Mr. Kodinski’s hat shop. The children desperately want to buy the hat for her but they don’t have enough money, so they decide to ask Mr. Kodinski if he has some work they can do in exchange. When they arrive in the back alley of his shop, a gang of older boys has just pelted his door with eggs and, unfortunately, Steward, Winston, and Patricia are standing near there when he opens the door; so Mr. Kodinski assumes they have thrown the eggs. The children try to explain their innocence, but he shoos them away and then calls Miss Eula to report their mischief.
Miss Eula is crying when they arrive at the house and they tell her what really
happened. She believes them and tells them they must find a way to show Mr. Kodinski
that they are innocent. When Patricia thinks about the eggs, she gets an idea. She knows
how to make the traditional Ukrainian Easter Pysanky eggs as her babushka had taught
her, so Patricia and her mother show the boys how to decorate the eggs. When they are
finished, they take them to Mr. Kodinski as a peace offering.

When he sees the eggs, he softly says, “Spaseeba,” which is Russian for “thank
you.” He hasn’t seen these eggs since he had left his homeland. When the children tell
him they hadn’t thrown the eggs at his door, he believes them, praising the “chutzpah,” or
courage to come to him. He invites them in for tea and poppyseed cake.

When they find out he has no work they can do in exchange for the hat, he
suggests that they sell the beautiful eggs in his store. Since Easter is close at hand, he is
sure that his customers will buy the eggs. Happily, the children sell all of them and make
enough money to buy the hat. When they are about to purchase it, Mr. Kodinski tells
them they should keep their money, and lovingly wraps the hat Miss Eula has been
admiring and gives it to the children.

They, in turn, give the hat to Miss Eula on Easter Sunday and join in a group hug
before going to church. Miss Eula looks beautiful as she sings in church, her voice
sounding like “slow thunder and sweet rain.”

The book ends with a reflection of fond and lasting childhood memories by
Patricia many years later. The children are adults, Miss Eula has died, and a highway now
crosses the spot where Mr. Kodinski’s shop had been.
Chicken Sunday is rich in content and I think many themes can be drawn from it: intergenerational families, multicultural friendships, family holidays and traditions, and religion, to name a few. I used it because I wanted to lead into students’ understanding the American celebration of Easter, and I also wanted them to share their stories and ideas about multicultural friendships eventually sharing their own holiday traditions and customs. Additionally, the writing portrays the characters with a sense of softness and love, and it focuses on childhood memories in an understandable and gentle way.

I adopted some of the activities for this story from Abuela, Babushka, Nana, Papa, and Me, An Intergenerational Multicultural Thematic Unit (Project Synergy Curriculum 1994), a curriculum put together by a group of teachers in Maine. Chicken Sunday had the potential to be my most organized lesson with the most structured activities because I had obtained some ideas from my Project Synergy reading and added them to my previously developed activities. It was beneficial for me to explore what other teachers had done with stories. Although this curriculum was written for junior high level students, the activities were adaptable for adults.

My students had experience as children with family traditions and as adults with their own families. This provided me with an insight: When a child reads or hears a children’s book, he or she will most likely relate to the child’s point of view. When an adult reads one, he or she may have several perspectives: One as childhood memory, one as adult, and one as adult with family. Students can choose how to relate to the characters and themes in a story depending on what may be most prevalent in their own memory or their present life. My insight reinforced my idea that it is important to expand the themes and ideas students have drawn from a story. This is the process that makes the stories
inspired from the children’s books the students’ own stories. Again I was reminded that I had to be aware of not only what I saw in a story but also what my students might see. I had to remain open to the possibilities of letting the story take us where it would.

I began the activities for *Chicken Sunday* with a brainstorming activity, which is when the students are given a word and come up with as many associations with it as they can. I told the students that this story was about a grandmother, her grandchildren and friends from another culture. I put the word “grandparents” on the board in the circle and had the students freely call out any words they could think of. As they gave me words, I wrote them in circles coming out on spokes from the central word “grandparents,” and I categorized the words as the students gave them to me. (In future lessons I would also have the students do the categorizing.) The vocabulary generated included words such as “wise,” “kind,” “old,” “ill,” “caring,” “strict,” etc. I then made sure all of the students knew all words and their meanings because I was building schema for the story and the picture walk.

I then had the students tell us how to say “grandmother” and “grandfather” in their own languages. Each student took a turn pronouncing his or her native words after which the rest of us tried to pronounce them as well. This was fun as it gave each student a turn at being teacher. I also thought that this activity could act as a warm up and further develop schema for the story.

Next I worked on establishing some pre-reading activities. I divided the students into groups of three and I put this question on the board: “Do you think that friendships between people of other cultures can happen? Why or why not?” Each group had a piece of newsprint and they divided the paper into two columns with WHY on one side and
WHY NOT on the other. Students worked in their groups to provide answers, hung the newsprint on the walls, and then walked around the room and read what their classmates had written.

The WHYS included ideas such as: “We can learn about different people.” “We can share customs from our country.” “We can understand different things about the world.” WHY NOTS included: “Speaking in English is difficult.” “I’m afraid.” “Maybe some people won’t like me because I am different.” “I smell like garlic all of the time from my food. People at work don’t like that so I eat in my car.”

We took some time clarifying vocabulary and discussing these ideas. I asked one student what she thought she could teach another student if she wanted to be her friend. She said, “I like to cook. I can teach her how to cook Korean food.” The other student responded, “I like to eat and cook. We can eat and cook together.” I counseled the language as the students talked about their ideas. “What do you like?” “What can you teach someone else?” I used the structure of “I like and I can teach,” although some students could offer more. I was struck by what the students were saying because they usually did relate well to one another. I wondered if, in fact, they were thinking about the difficulty of making American friends rather than friends who shared similar experiences of being in foreign cultures.

I posed the question: “What can make speaking English less difficult?” They responded, “We can help each other learn English.” “We can talk more in class.” “We can be patient.” The students were taking their own ideas, formulating them into sentences and making themselves understood as language learners and people with feelings and ideas. My students were sharing commonalities and differences because I had
established a forum for them to do so, but it was their own ideas and initiative fueling the
discussions. Though the questions I posed were beautifully simple, I pondered why I
hadn’t thought of them prior to using children’s books. I realized that the books had
become a focal point for me. Could I have just thrown these questions into the classroom
without content? And my answer was no. In a student’s language learning there had to be
focal points and there also had to be focal points in language teaching.

We then took a picture walk as a whole group starting with the cover. I asked:
“Who are these people?” “Do you think they are friends or family?” “Why?” We took
the picture walk and I continued with questions, they with answers, as I counseled the
language. I focused more on some pictures than others because they would be important
to follow-up activities.

Several pictures contrasted the homes of the African-American family and the
Russian girl so I directed more questions to these pages. I was trying to focus their
attention on certain details and also let them offer what came to them. “What day do you
think it is?” “Do you think they eat chicken every Sunday? Why?” I was trying to
establish the idea of family traditions and have the students observe the differences in the
homes. “How do they feel?” “What do you see in their home?” I also focused on the
Russian home. “What furniture do you see in Patricia’s home?” “Is it the same or
different from Steward and Winston’s home?” “What is Patricia’s mother wearing?” “Is
she younger or older than Miss Eula?” I varied the questions for several levels so all
students could have the opportunity to answer. I also focused on Mr. Kodinski. “Is he
happy or sad?” “Why does he like the children?” I also had the students look carefully at
the picture of Mr. Kodinski’s shop and the table where he served the children tea and poppyseed cake.

I also asked the students to make predictions of what may happen next and whether or not the children would be able to purchase the hat. Some students predicted that the hat would be exchanged for the eggs. Others thought that Mr. Kodinski would give them the hat because the children had come to visit and had reminded him of home with the Pysanky eggs. They had also shared food together and had become friends. At this point, I thought that the students were relating this part of the book to what they had initially shared about cooking and eating together in the pre-reading activity about friends.

Another picture showed the children’s eggs for sale in the hat shop and the students then realized the children might earn the money for the hat. Since the characters in this illustration are very vivid, they lend themselves to questions such as: “What do the customers think about the eggs?” “Do they like them?” “How do you know?” Mr. Kodinski stands beaming in the background. “How does he feel?” “He likes the eggs.” “He likes the children.” “I think he will give the children the hat.” We continued to the happy conclusion working from the pictures. Through the questioning, students had predicted what might happen next. They hadn’t agreed on how the children would eventually get the hat until one vivid illustration showed the children’s surprise and anticipation as Mr. Kodinski wrapped it for them. Then it became clear that no money or eggs would be exchanged.

When we stopped for the day I asked the students if they had liked the story. Most of them did. One student liked it because different people were friends. Another liked it
because Mr. Kodinski was happier in the end. Another thought it was great that the children got the hat for Miss Eula. I asked what activity was the most helpful and most students though the brainstorming activity was good because they shared words about their own grandparents. They also appreciated having the chance to teach a few words in their own language to the class.

That evening I reflected on what had happened so far. The brainstorming activity had allowed them to share their concepts of grandparents, thus building schema. They all had grandparents and, therefore something to share with the large group, and they had produced language as their abilities allowed. Through my counseling the language, they heard it in its correct form. The students had also taken the role as teacher when they told us how to pronounce and spell “grandmother” and “grandfather” in their own languages, thus sharing a part of themselves and their backgrounds. This exercise seemed to relax them and also added humor as the students and I stumbled over pronunciation. It had also interested the students how “grandmother” and “grandfather” were written in Thai. I had shared the words my grandmother and grandfather (both Slovak) had called one another. “Stada” and “Stada Bubba” which my Croatian students told me meant “old man” and “old woman.”

The students had also been able to talk and think about having friends from other cultures, which freed them to think collectively about how forming new friendships could be accomplished. This was something they all shared and had thought about, and confirmed my initial ideas that a story didn’t necessarily need to have melodrama or mystery to draw people in. Instead it could draw out the stories of real people and their
personal experiences and, in this case, those things had been drawn out by pre-reading activities before the picture walk.

I started the second day of Chicken Sunday by giving the students a list of comprehension questions with the book. Their task was to work in pairs to answer the comprehension questions using the pictures and one another for support followed by writing their answers on the newsprint. This was the first retelling without the support of the entire group and I wanted to see how this approach would work. I asked them to try to answer the questions in the order I had given them thus providing a framework for answering the questions in the sequence of the events in the book. This would also provide a review of what the students already knew about the story. Questions included WH ones such as: “Who are the family members?” “What do they do every Sunday?” and so forth. I circulated around the classroom and gave guidance when necessary, prompting their questions with questions to help them discern answers in their pairs. For the most part the students worked without my help.

We regrouped, hung the newsprint on the board and went over the sentences together, making corrections when necessary. The students, with the help of one another, had recalled most of the details and used the book as support and reference. I was establishing ways to make the students more independent of me and check their understanding of the previous day’s lesson.

As I read the story aloud, I told the students to listen while keeping in mind what they already knew, trying to understand the meaning of the story but not necessarily every word. I wanted them to consciously carry the schema we had built into the
listening. I gave them a couple of minutes to scan the picture on each page before I read to help aid their understanding of the text.

After I read the story, I put the students in pairs again and this time asked them to formulate and write three to five sentences about the story, which could be questions about the pictures, the text, vocabulary words or anything that needed further clarification. They had to decide in pairs what they wanted to know and what their most important questions were. I thought that this exercise would help them entertain their own questions rather than my directing them towards what I thought they should understand from the story, and I didn’t want them to pick apart the text to the point at which it lost meaning.

They wrote their questions on newsprint and posted them, then we worked as a group to correct the question formulation, with me acting as guide for the students to correct verb tenses and word order. I asked for volunteers to answer questions, thus encouraging them to exercise their initiative. I was learning to give them more control in their learning through this controlled process.

Next I put “tradition” on the board and asked the students to define it. I asked what traditions the African-American family in the book had. When I saw that the students had a clear understanding of traditions, I gave them each a chart divided into two columns with “Family Tradition” on one side and “Why I like it” on the other. This was a good time for a quiet, introspective activity to see if they had absorbed the prior information and could now apply it to their own situations. I gave a written example on the board to model the writing for the lower level students, though they were not tied to this structure if they could produce more language. “My family tradition is baking
Christmas cookies. I like it because we talk and spend time together, and it makes me feel happy.” I quietly walked around the room during this activity and helped the lower level students. When they had finished, I had them work in groups of four to share their writing and traditions. We then came back to the large group and I asked what their traditions were and if there were any similarities among their cultures.

I ended the lesson then and asked the students what activity had been most helpful to them. Most students agreed that writing the questions together after the story helped them better understand the story and also gave them an opportunity to formulate questions. They also enjoyed sharing their traditions with one another.

I reflected on what had happened in this lesson. My students were a little more independent of me as they participated in the activities. By formulating their own questions, they were letting me know what they knew and what they still needed to know. The students were guiding me in their learning and I was giving them enough structure to do so. It made me more aware of what they could do and the language necessary to do so.

I began the lesson the following day by giving the students a book and a chart and asked them to work in pairs. Their assignment was to look at the pictures of the two families’ homes and compare and contrast them. “ALIKE” was on one side of the chart and “DIFFERENT” was on the other. The students carefully observed the pictures and made their lists. Both homes are portrayed beautifully and, although there are some similarities, the homes have a very different feel. We went back to the large group when the students had finished, and I asked the students what they had observed. I also asked the question; “What does this tell us about the families?” The students had been quite observant and made some inferences about the pictures. For example: “Miss Eula has a
lot of family pictures.” “She likes her family.” “She has a Bible.” “Miss Eula likes church.” “Patricia’s mother has a big teapot.” “She likes to drink tea.” “There are lots of pictures about religion.” “They go to church.”

We spent a little time talking about the two religions, Miss Eula being a Baptist and Patricia’s family being Russian Orthodox. I asked if students had any family pictures in their homes or ones that indicated their religion. The Thais had little altars for Buddha; the Croats told me they had some religious pictures though the Brazilians didn’t. People were comfortable with this discussion and noted which home was more like their own. Because we had talked about religion, I realized that I would be much more comfortable talking about Easter with them. It was something that I generally felt a little uncomfortable about because I had always wanted to be sensitive to the students’ religious beliefs and practices.

The students had accomplished a tremendous amount of work with this story. They had used the pre-reading skill of prediction and they had retold and summarized the story. Working together, they had formulated questions cooperatively and used their own initiative to find the answers. In addition, they had moved to some higher level skills by comparing and contrasting the two homes and made some inferences based on their observations of them. My goal was to eventually move my students to a higher level in their reading skills where they could begin to formulate their own questions before reading. I was also beginning to understand the importance of pre-reading and post-reading activities.

Sharing their ideas about family, friends, traditions and religion helped make this a lesson the students could relate to well. The activities gave the students the opportunity
to write about their own experiences and then practice listening and speaking as they shared their ideas. The students were able to activate cultural schema. I structured the activities more, but also left time for students’ ideas and thoughts to surface in relation to the activities. Though these classes didn’t have the high energy of the ones when we used Down the Road, I felt that the students had learned a lot. Sometimes I interpret quietness as an unsuccessful lesson while I realize that quiet introspection about topics and content gives the students more time to understand and process the lesson.

The next day was our last class before Easter, so I asked the students to bring in a picture or an object from their own cultures that represented a family tradition or holiday. I brought in hard-boiled eggs dyed with onion skins, as my mother and grandmother had done. I also brought in eggs to dye in the American tradition, as well as chocolate rabbits, small baskets and colored Easter straw. I do this every year for myself, but somehow this seemed to have special significance because students also brought things to share. One Thai woman brought in a picture of a Buddhist temple and showed us her necklace with Buddha on it. One of the Croatian students brought in a picture of the Last Supper painted in the traditional Orthodox style, and we compared it to the picture of the Russian Orthodox home in the story. The Brazilian woman brought in a large, clear plastic Easter egg that she filled with candy for her children. I told them about my Easter eggs and how I had made them with my mother as a child, and I also shared my story of large Easter Sunday dinners at my grandparents’ home surrounded by many cousins and lots of food.

As we sat in a circle around the table making our American Easter baskets for the students to take home, I felt that there was a greater sense of community than there had ever been when I had done this activity in the past. I think this was because of the sharing
that had taken place with the story and the sense of comfort that was present because of that sharing. This story had offered the students the opportunity to share their own stories in a very meaningful way thus providing me the opportunity to share mine in a meaningful way as well. I no longer felt that I might be imposing an American holiday on the students as I had sometimes felt in the past.

The approaches I used this time varied a little from the ones I had used in the previous stories. The brainstorm activity using “grandparents” as the key word acted as a graphic organizer for the students’ prior knowledge. Additionally, the exercise about intercultural friendships prompted the students to think critically about why these relationships may be difficult. Both of these activities were conducted before the picture walk and helped the students build culture specific schema. They weren’t relying on the picture walk to be the introduction of the language.

The retelling was done differently as well because I had developed a list of comprehension questions to help the students review the pictures. They were engaged in a writing exercise in pairs for the retelling, a process I hadn’t tried this before. During the compare-and-contrast activity, the students were engaged in a higher level reading skill, and were able to then draw inferences from this activity. Overall, there were more structured activities with this text, which enhanced the students’ understanding of the story and prepared them for the follow-up activity about Easter. The students had the opportunity to bring in an object from their own cultures that provided them with a more direct connection to the story. All of the tasks had helped the students share their traditions and holidays in a deeper and richer way.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

I spent the better part of a school year learning to work with and teach from children’s books in the adult ESL classroom, an ongoing process that I will continue to develop and refine. New ideas surface frequently as I explore various stories. I learn something new with each story through my observations and reflections. As always, my students have been an essential part of this process and they have helped me understand how best to teach. It has been through their openness and willingness to explore along with me that I have learned the most valuable lessons. Following, you will find some ideas that may be helpful to consider as you and your students work together with children’s books.

First and foremost, it is of utmost importance to choose books carefully. Look for ones that interest you and you think will interest your students. Keep in mind that what you see in the pictures might not necessarily be what your students will see. It is important to begin with themes and topics that you are most comfortable with. If you are comfortable with the book and clear about your purpose in using it, your students will sense your ease with the material and will be willing to experiment with you.

It’s good to look for books that have universal themes. Start with themes that are familiar to your students and work from there. You may first want to engage your students in “narrow reading” by presenting several stories with the same theme. This will
help your students become familiar with the vocabulary; the repetition will enable the students to understand the vocabulary more readily. You may also want to design a thematic unit using the same theme but using numerous authors’ books. In addition, this will help your students understand the system you are developing to use children’s books. Also, think carefully about the language and structure of the book and what kind of lesson it lends itself to.

Choose books written by authors from different cultures or ones written about other cultures. Current children’s literature reflects the traditional and contemporary cultures of the world. You will be pleased and amazed at the high quality and variety of children’s books available. If you do choose to use “narrow reading,” there are many books addressing the same theme, but written from different cultural perspectives and points of view.

Check the pictures carefully. Will they help the students understand the overall meaning from the pictures or is the text carrying most of the meaning? Are the pictures colorful, interesting, and adult-like even if the text is simple? Which kind of book would be most beneficial to your students will be determined largely by who your students are. A good picture, after all, is really worth one thousand words, and your students already have some of those words.

Take a picture walk. Go through the book page by page giving the students time to observe the pictures, comprehend the general meaning and offer valuable language. You may choose different ways to conduct the picture walk again determined by who your students are. You can simply take the language the students give you and work from there. You can ask direct questions soliciting specific answers depending on your
students’ language proficiency. You can also use a specific grammar structure if you are practicing a structure. For example, if you are practicing present continuous tense, you may ask, “What is the man doing?” “What is the woman wearing?” The picture walk will help your students build schema and activate their prior knowledge. It will draw on the students’ observation skills and build a framework or “hook” for your students to add new information. In addition, the picture walk acts as a preview for the text and provides your students with overall meaning before listening to or reading the story.

Use some type of graphic organizer, which can be in the form of a brainstorm activity, a mind map, a Venn diagram, and Cuisenaire rods. The graphic organizer becomes a pictorial view of the language and information that can be used prior to a story to activate students’ prior knowledge and build schema. It can be used to recall details and events in the story at the end of the picture walk or reading of the story as well as helping the students organize and sequence that information. It is also a powerful tool if students will be retelling the story, giving the students a place to focus their attention which, in turn, helps them to engage more in the language. Graphic organizers are also a great asset in the multilevel class. Some students may only be able to draw pictures or manipulate rods to show understanding while the higher level students can provide more language to go with the graphic organizer, pictures or rods.

Design pre-reading activities to build schema and provide students with an entrance point to the story. How you choose to do this will depend largely on who your students are and the best approach for your specific class. The more pertinent information a student takes into the story, the more he or she will be able to take out.
Encourage discussion. If you have chosen a story that is relevant to your students’ lives and interests they will provide you with a broader range of discussion topics than you may have initially thought possible. You can begin with discussions that deal with concrete concepts and then move to more abstract ones. If your students are familiar and comfortable with the concrete concepts, they will move more readily to abstract ones and stretch themselves in their learning. These discussions will give your students the opportunity to share cultural and personal information with fellow class members.

These stories and discussions will help build a solid classroom community. The stories allow the students’ ideas and opinions to surface so they can share this information in a very real and meaningful way. The students’ stories, based on the children’s stories, will promote cultural awareness and deepen their understanding of their commonalities and differences which, in turn, will deepen the level of overall communication. Often the stories help develop the students’ senses of humor which enhances the comfort level of learning together. By means of the children’s books and the students’ personal stories, they share who they are and engage in real communication. They come to know one another better and trust each another more.

The stories also provide for active listening and problem solving. As students collaborate to solve problems together, they will also learn the skill of turn taking, making them better communicators. Try varying your groupings and having the students sometimes work individually, in pairs, small groups or with the entire group. This will give your students the opportunity to share information with different people in different forums thus making the entire group stronger.
Build specific reading skills through the pictures and stories. The skills of previewing, prediction and sequencing can be used with even the most basic students with the aid of pictures, graphic organizers and rods. The pictures can also be used to do “compare-and-contrast” activities as the students find things in pictures that are alike or different. Pictures, rods and graphic organizers can also be used to review or retell a story.

Allow student initiative to grow through your support, understanding and structured activities. Students can formulate their own questions about pictures based on what they know or what they want to know. Have them work in small groups to solve problems or determine outcomes of a story.

Let them offer their personal experiences and, from that, plan future lessons letting the students know you have heard their needs and wants about language learning. I think strong communities of learners exhibit more initiative when they know the structure of the classroom and the part they play in it.

Structure activities that relate to the story, students, holidays, traditions and themes. If the activity is well structured, you will be able to stand back and observe the language learning process and begin to understand more fully when to come in and help. A friend once told me, “Lazy teacher, active student,” but she didn’t mean you don’t have to structure the activities or do the leg work ahead of time.

Vary activities and incorporate the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing as often as possible. Listening and speaking activities fit naturally with the picture walk rods and follow-up discussions. As students engage in activities such as making a graphic organizer, they also are asked to read and write. They may be asked to share their
ideas and opinions through writing about or discussing a topic. When the students formulate questions and put them on the board or on newsprint, they have been engaged in all four skills.

Brainstorming activities can also allow for this. In a brainstorming activity, a student gives a word or phrase in response to a central word or idea. Students listen to their classmates and then offer their own words or phrases, thus speaking as well. The teacher can transcribe on the board what the students tell her, and so this becomes a reading activity. You may choose to have one of the four skills be a focal point for the lesson, but use as many skills as possible in each lesson to strengthen the students’ abilities to work with and understand the story. Stories lend themselves very naturally to the four skills as you can listen to and speak about a story as well as read one and write about it. A story well chosen, with structured activities, enhances all of the four skills. Develop follow-up activities that relate to the topics and language the students have learned and use the four skills in these activities.

Children’s stories are an ideal catalyst for multi-level classroom learning. The pictures are so incredibly vivid and the stories they tell are so intriguing, they allow students of all levels to enter into the lesson. All students can be working on the same story, but the activities can be structured to accommodate all levels. Those who can produce more language can help lower level students’ understanding through the use of the pictures and rods. Pictures and rods can greatly help the tactile learner, while graphic organizers can aid the visual learner: same story, similar task, and different expectations. For example, the lowest level students work together to sequence events in a story by using the rods, a mid-level student draws a graphic organizer to do the same task, and the
highest level students write a paragraph to sequence. I have also found that the higher level students have been tremendously helpful in the process of using the children’s books because they can help provide the vocabulary and structures to aid the lower level students; sometimes the lower level students can provide some vocabulary words and the upper levels can provide the structure to hold the vocabulary. The students I worked with on this set of stories were more times than not very willing and open to learn from one another. When everyone can participate in some way the learning community naturally becomes stronger. I think the students knew that the more language they all had, the more personal stories they would all be able to share and understand.

And finally, consider your role as teacher. Be both a facilitator and guide as the lessons allow you. Share your thoughts, feelings, observations, ideas and opinions. Your stories are of great interest to your students and you can be a powerful model of your culture, the language and how to use and share it. Be observant and aware of who your students are, their interests and fears, and what is taking place in the classroom. Be open to topics and discussions that arise from a story. Your openness will help guide you in the selection of the next story or make you more aware of other topics your students want to learn about.

And last, but not least, have fun with the stories. Help set the tone for classroom learning by using the stories. Put your heart into them, play with them, and remember the joy of shared language and true communication. I hope that my story will inspire you to use children’s books in your own classroom. As I have written this paper, I have become more excited about returning to my classroom in the autumn and continuing our collective classroom stories. The possibilities are endless.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


