

ТЕОРИЯ И МЕТОДИКА ПРЕПОДАВАНИЯ

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МЕТОД «STORYLINE» В ОБУЧЕНИИ ИНОСТРАННОМУ ЯЗЫКУ: ИСТОРИЯ И ОСНОВНЫЕ ПОЛОЖЕНИЯ

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Аннотация. Рассматривается использование метода «Storyline» для обучения иностранному языку на языковом факультете классического вуза. Предлагается внедрить метод «Storyline» в образовательный процесс для более эффективного обучения иностранному языку, а также для повышения мотивации студентов.

Ключевые слова: «Storyline»; обучение иностранному языку; коммуникативный подход; проектный метод; мотивация.

It is the author's firm conviction, expressed in earlier published works [1, 2], that English language teaching in Russia is under par and has been for some time.

A new approach to ELT is required; this paper purports to be no more than an exercise in describing the history and main principles of a particular method and evaluating its potential in terms of application to ELT, based on the author's experience with students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, National Research Tomsk State University.

Introduction to *Storyline*

In the context of globalisation the value of knowing a foreign language is undeniable. Internationalisation of society has led to a great many considerable changes in people's lives. Language itself in this context has also become a key aspect because it helps to establish all necessary connections between people in our modern world: people have the opportunity to build businesses across borders, share cultural experiences, etc. Knowing languages gives us enhanced opportunities for the future. In learning foreign languages, our classes and, by implication, our methods ought to take account of culture too, as pointed out by Sysoev [3].

In our country languages are taught and studied at all levels of education – in schools, universities and private schools – which is why it is necessary for us, teachers, to find and use new innovative approaches to teaching, methods which motivate students to work hard and improve their language skills, which lead them to do individual work, raise their motivation, and enable students to better understand the culture of the language they learn. Such

a search led the author of this paper to *Storyline* [4]. This paper describes how *Storyline* was put into practice in the foreign language classroom at National Research Tomsk State University and analyses the consequences in terms of language progress and student motivation.

The background to *Storyline*

The history of the *Storyline* method dates back to the 1960s Scotland, a time when educators were seeking to make sense of a new direction in policy set out in a publication by the Scottish Education Department, titled *The Primary School in Scotland* (Scottish Education Department, 1965). Key areas for development included: learner-centred approaches, activity learning and discovery methods, differentiated group work, integration of subject areas, a skills and concepts approach. This led to the development of *Storyline* by Prof. Steve Bell and Sallie Harkness. Falkenberg notes the influences of Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky on *Storyline*, which is grounded in constructivism, and lists the following major points [5. P. 51]:

- Learning is a subjective process. Only the learner can do it. Others can facilitate it – for instance by teaching.

- Learning is an active process. The learner has to do something, especially something s / he never did before. The teacher must challenge her / his [learners] by letting them experience.

- Learning is about thinking. The [learner] activity is not just activity, but the kind of activity that requires certain thinking.

- Learning is a social phenomenon. It takes place in a social and a meaningful context, and the result is also implemented in a social context. The [learners] must work together and communicate in a learning context.

- Learning is developing new competencies: new skills, new knowledge and new understanding. Learning creates new possibilities for action for the learner. The new competencies can only develop in already existing competencies. Either they are built on top of the old ones, or they integrate with them. The teacher must make sure that each [learner] can start on the level of his / her own present knowledge and skills.

- Reflective learning must come from the learner's own initiative. The learner must want to learn. The teacher must support the [learners'] basic curiosity and desire for exploring and understanding their world.

The *Storyline* method is, however, distinct from topic work or the well-known project method, although it involves elements of project-based learning, experiential learning and problem-based learning. *Storyline* is succinctly described by Harkness [6. P. 20] as follows:

[Learners] are invited to create a setting, invent characters and explore incidents (plot). The logical sequence of ideas, presented in the form of a

descriptive narrative, provides a structure for exploring many diverse themes or topics. One very important and defining feature that marks out *Storyline* from other topic and project work is the central role of the characters – the human element. This allows [learners] to look at feelings as well as facts, enabling the teacher to raise questions regarding moral values, and [learners] to consider the implications of their proposed courses of action.

Creswell [7. P. 10–12] lists the principles of *Storyline* which highlight it as a distinct method:

The Principle of Story – stories are essential to human experience, providing a predictable, linear structure and a meaningful context for learning. *Storyline* uses this principle in order to teach the curriculum in a way that reflects real life.

The Principle of Anticipation – a good story interests the learners, who want to know «what happens next». They are involved in the process, and their anticipation makes them think about it constantly, ensuring that learning goes on both inside and outside the classroom.

The Principle of the Teacher's Rope – there is a critical partnership between teacher and student, which is collaborative due to the balance between teacher control and student control. The rope is held by the teacher, moving the story along, but its flexibility allows for bends and twists, giving the students their control. By following the rope, the students learn the planned curriculum.

The Principle of Ownership – «ownership», states Creswell, «is a powerful motivator»; students feel responsibility, pride, and enthusiasm for projects in which their role is substantive. By beginning with the students' conceptual knowledge, we acknowledge them as being participants in, as opposed to objects of, the learning process.

The Principle of Context – new learning is linked to previous knowledge, going from the known to the unknown. Students research, practise skills and assimilate knowledge in order to progress through the story.

The Principle of Structure before Activity – by asking students to build their conceptual model, we allow them to push their prior knowledge to its edges. Students discover what they do not know by articulating what they do know and seeing the gaps. The Story then gives them a structure that will enable them to find out what they want to know and to present what they discover. The structure provides equal freedom for those students who do not have the skills to accomplish the task on their own, while those who do possess the skills have the freedom to use the structure or diverge from it.

Harkness [6. P. 20] lists the following planning format for *Storyline* as applied in the primary school, but which are applicable in any educational setting:

- Storyline Episode.
- Key Questions.
- Pupil Activities.
- Class Organization.
- Resources.
- Learning Outcomes and Assessment.

The story gives a meaningful context to the learning which is to take place [7] and allows reflective learning. Moreover, the reflective learning must come from the learner's own initiative; the teacher must support the [learners'] basic curiosity and desire for exploring and understanding their world [5. P. 52]. In creating a Storyline various key elements take place within the planning format as summarised below [7. P. 7–8]:

- The Storyline begins with a key question. These key questions identify learners' prior knowledge and, importantly, gaps in their knowledge which ought to be filled.

- Each Storyline employs a number of key episodes. The key episodes provide opportunities to cover what has to be learned in the course of the Storyline.

- A frieze (or display) is created to bring the Storyline to life. This display is created and developed by the learners themselves, and is a source of pride for learners, providing them with a certain ownership of the creative process.

- Each learner creates his / her own character and a biography is written. By creating their own characters learners are able to internalise feelings and emotions, generating a deeper and more meaningful learning experience.

- Incidents occur which involve the characters having to respond and solve problems. Such incidents provide opportunities within the Storyline episodes to use knowledge and develop it.

- The Storyline concludes with a celebration or event. This gives time to reflect on what was learned / accomplished during the Storyline and to assess whether the intended outcomes / pedagogic goals were achieved.

Each *Storyline* topic always has a new challenge for students, and the students are motivated to tackle these challenges due to a sense of personal involvement and motivation. Creswell provides invaluable advice on planning *Storyline* topics [7. P. 13]. There are very many educators from different countries who have made a contribution to the development of *Storyline* as a teaching method. Although *Storyline* is used in many countries the word over (e.g. in the UK, the USA, Germany, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Japan, Brazil, Turkey, Thailand, etc.), at the moment, as far as the author is aware, he and a few colleagues are the only ones currently teaching with *Storyline* in Russia.

***Storyline* in foreign language teaching**

Storyline's application to ELT is thus far a little-researched area; the work that has been done concentrates on secondary education, primarily in a Germanic context. Doris Kocher of the Freiburg Pedagogical University is the leading researcher in this field. Kocher emphasizes *Storyline*'s relevance to the foreign language classroom as result of «major shifts of emphasis in the debate on foreign language learning and teaching» [8. P. 119], quoting from Ellis's [9, 10] findings from second language acquisition research:

- A change from language as form to language as a means of communication.

- A focus on complex tasks and meaningful activities instead of one-dimensional drills and 'non-sense' exercises which serve language in digestible bits.

- A shift from the learner as a recipient participant and passive consumer to an active and creative language user in a communicative context.

- A shift from the learner as an individual to the learner as a member of a social group who negotiates and constructs meaning with his or her classmates by accomplishing various tasks.

- A change in the roles of teachers and learners which is also reflected in a more friendly relationship (mutual respect).

- A focus on the learning process itself as compared with learning products.

- A focus on new forms of assessment, such as self-assessment or portfolio assessment, which not only measures outcomes and results, but also the learners' active cooperation.

At this stage the potential for *Storyline*'s application to ELT may be evident. We can see that there are a great many topics which might be taught effectively using a

Kocher [8. P. 122] lists many benefits of *Storyline* in the foreign language classroom, summarised briefly below for readers' ease:

- *Storyline* is «open in content and results».
- *Storyline* enables a framework for «authentic communication».
- *Storyline* provides a reason for «meaningful and purposeful communication».
- *Storyline* lets pupils become «autonomous learners».
- *Storyline* results in learners becoming «intrinsically motivated».
- *Storyline* requires «cooperative and collaborative learning».
- *Storyline* involves «experiential learning».
- *Storyline* is «topic-oriented and theme-based».
- *Storyline* focuses on «fluency before accuracy».
- *Storyline* develops «language awareness».

- Storyline fosters «learning strategies and presentation skills».
- Storyline helps learners' become «curious and active researchers».
- Storyline is «not only learner-centred but also learning-centred».

Krenicky-Albert examines *Storyline*'s relation to real life, noting that «through authentic problematic situations, the pupils develop and practise basic skills that are relevant to their real lives» [11. P. 28]. In the author's experience it is certainly true that students engage better with the subject when they see a link to real life. Krenicky-Albert approves of *Storyline*'s promotion of authentic communication in terms of its use of role plays and simulated dialogues which «may be considered as promoting authentic communication, if they are integrated into meaningful situations – what they, in fact, should be, namely through the plot of the story – and if they are developed collectively by class and teacher rather than strictly pre-given by the latter» [11. P. 30].

By introducing *Storyline* to the foreign language classroom we can approach our mission as teachers in a much more creative and motivating way. The method enables students to work in groups and individually in a new, more productive way.

A *Storyline* experiment in Russia

Thus began one small step for a teacher, yet simultaneously a giant leap into uncharted territory – *Storyline* in a Russian university setting. The initial purpose was to improve the existing system for teaching military interpreters, as described by Shevchenko and Mitchell [12]. Over the course of two academic years work began with a group of six students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, National Research Tomsk State University. The experiment took place during the students' third and fourth years of studies. Prior to the study – at the end of their second year – the students were assessed as to English language level, using the diagnostic Oxford Placement Test, as were students belonging to a control group in order to enable a comparison of progress. The Oxford Placement Test, giving results in the form of points, allowed group average levels to be calculated based on students' individual performance and, therefore, a relatively accurate comparison to be made between the experimental and control groups. On the basis of results from the Oxford Placement Test it was possible to allocate language competency levels in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR (see Appendix). The English language level of students in both groups was retested at the end of their fourth year of studies to compare their respective progress over the course of the experiment.

The experimental group was taught using a student-centred, communicative approach making use of *Storyline*. The control group, made up of stu-

dents from two smaller language groups, was taught using a more ‘traditional’ method of foreign language teaching as practised at the Faculty.

The average test result for the experimental group prior to the study was 132.8 points or a relatively high B1 (intermediate) on the CEFR scale. The result for the control group was a little lower at 124.8 points – also a modest B1 (intermediate) on the CEFR scale. It was at the retest – two years later – the results showed a great divergence. The experimental group’s average result was 166.8 points in the Oxford Placement Test or C1 (advanced) on the CEFR scale. The control group’s average result amounted to 134.5 points in the test or a very high B1 (intermediate) on the CEFR scale.

In terms of points, therefore, we see progress of 9.7 points for the control group whereas the progress of the experimental group was a healthy 34 points (or 3.5 times greater than the control group over the two-year period). We see that, in language level, the experimental group progressed by two whole levels, while the control group progressed by ‘half-a-level’. Such great progress would seem to vindicate using a *Storyline*-based approach for teaching foreign languages at the university level in Russia.

The experimental group students themselves were very positive about their *Storyline* experiences. One unedited excerpt from a student feedback sheet sums this up rather eloquently in the student’s own words [13]:

Speaking about my progress in English I can tell not only about my vocabulary, which has become much more rich and improving of my grammar skills, but also about my general comprehension of the language. Now, after... studying in this group, I can say that I feel much more confident in English. It is easier for me to express my ideas in English and to discuss a wide variety of topics. And it’s not a question of vocabulary or grammar, but it’s a question of psychology and general ability to use the language.

Limitations

As in any academic research there are some limitations to this study, particularly in regard to generalizability owing to the small group sizes involved. Added to that are the difficulties in controlling all the variables when working with students, plus potential differences in teachers – it must be noted that the students in the experimental group were taught mainly by a native speaker of English. An experimental approach does not always lend well to such research, making comparisons problematic.

It is obvious, however, that the students in the experimental group did make impressive progress over the course of two years. This would back the author’s belief that *Storyline* is a valid method in foreign language teaching at the university level. Further research ought to be conducted on precisely how *Storyline* impacts on foreign language learning and teaching.

Conclusion

In the author's experience *Storyline* has proved itself to be effective in the teaching and learning of foreign languages. No less significantly is *Storyline*'s capacity to raise student motivation. All of which would have the author recommend that *Storyline*'s use in the foreign language classroom is not merely justified but, in our specific context, highly desirable as a means of combating lacklustre results in language learning and a somewhat lack of motivation among students to gain proficiency in a foreign language.

In conclusion, we can say that *Storyline* is not merely a 'fun activity' for occasional classroom use, but an effective method in the teaching and learning languages. *Storyline* internationally has immense prospects. It is time for Russia to be included in the global community of Storyliners, enabling students and teachers to empower themselves to move forward in pedagogy and more effectively master a foreign language.

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13. *Excerpt* from student feedback sheet. 2012.

Appendix: The scale of the Oxford Placement Test and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) divides learners into three broad divisions which can be divided into six levels. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) allocates a level of language ability to students in accordance with the scale provided in points.

OPT	CEFR
C Proficient User	
170 +	C2 Proficiency
150 +	C1 Advanced
	B Independent User
135 +	B2 Upper Intermediate
120 +	B1 Intermediate
A Basic User	
105 +	A2 Elementary
0 +	A1 Beginner

THE STORYLINE METHOD IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: THE HISTORY AND MAIN PRINCIPLES

Mitchell P.J.

Summary. The author examines the use of the *Storyline* method in teaching foreign languages at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of a classical university. It is suggested to incorporate the use of *Storyline* in the educational process to improve the effectiveness of foreign language teaching, and also for raising student motivation.

Key words: *Storyline*; foreign language teaching; communicative approach; project method; motivation.