



**ENGLISH THROUGH STORIES:
BRINGING ONLINE SOURCES OF FICTION INTO ELT CLASSROOMS**

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Abstract

Perhaps the single most powerful force that drives our world is Internet. internet has drastically changed our world-the way we make sense of the world, the way we understand time, the way we understand space, the way we do our everyday transactions, the way we buy things, the way we sell things on and on. Each and every aspect of human life has been subjected to drastic change. Educational field is no exception. With new web-based educational practices like online teaching, online courses, online tests, video-audio conferences etc... on rise, internet has also transformed our understanding of classroom and classroom activities. A wide array of information, books, stories and other materials being available in different electronic formats, just a few clicks away, internet has also revolutionized our understanding of academic resources and materials. In this context, could not an ELT practitioner think of bringing the wide array of fictional stories available online, into our ELT classrooms? Studies have pointed out that stories play a significant role in the evolution of mental, cognitive and linguistic capabilities of the children. Easy availability of fictional works online, coupled with the already much documented studies about the effectiveness of the story reading in the linguistic development of the learner should encourage an ELT practitioner to incorporate online resources of fiction into teaching practices. In this paper, an attempt has been made to trace the possibilities and challenges of the proposed method.

Key Words: ELT, Online Resources, Fiction, Electronic Formats.

INTRODUCTION: Children involved in storytelling programs exhibit improved listening skills, better sequencing, abilities increased language apprehension and more thoughtful organization in their own writing. The benefits of becoming familiar with the concept of an oral tradition are numerous. (Speaker, 184)





The effectiveness of any ELT classroom practice depends on the ability of the method to keep the students fully engaged in it. In keeping the students engaged, nothing would be more effective than a method that picks on the curiosity and frailties of the human minds and young minds in particular. The fact that the young minds exhibit a special infatuation for stories is undeniably true. Story telling is a uniquely human phenomenon, no other animal is capable of. The species-specific ability to tell stories partly derives from what linguists identify as a unique feature of human languages-“displacement”. This salient feature of human languages essentially means that human languages are neither time-bound, nor space-bound but they can transcend the both, allowing human beings to talk of things past, things unfolding and things to come. In a more practical sense, the ability of human faculty for speech to transcend time allows human beings of twenty first century to talk of the people who inhabited ancient civilizations. Likewise, its ability to transcend space allows a teacher in a tiny classroom in some obscure corner of India to talk of the unfolding political developments in the United States. It is exactly this salient feature of human languages that allows human beings to tell stories and make sense of the story as being told to.

Best of English being produced in fictional works and most of them being available online, should not ELT practitioners be tapping into this new facility? If employed properly, children’s stories could positively transform ELT classrooms, ensuring increased engagement with students and active student participation in classroom activities. Tales and stories play a vital role in the evolution of children’s consciousness as they come with rich source of language and imaginative input. Coupled with this, the universal appeal of the stories make stories an ideal tool to introduce to our English classrooms.

Apart from the sheer pleasure students might derive from reading stories, there are many more reasons for why stories should be used as an effective ELT tool. Maria Ellison in her study “Make Them Think! Using Literature in The Primary English Language Classroom to Develop Critical Thinking Skills” identifies five categories of advantages of derived by incorporating stories into ELT practices. They are: attitudinal, linguistic, cultural and intercultural, social and moral and finally cognitive and creative.

A development of desirable attitude towards language learning, varieties of cultures and one’s own self and others’ can be developed by effectively incorporating stories into our classroom practices. The special interest human beings have for stories essentially implies that employing stories could pick on the curiosity of the learners and thereby develop the necessary positive attitude towards teaching/learning activities. The development of a





positive attitude might go a long way in mentally and psychologically preparing the students. Each and every story we read are steeped in a specific culture. In this sense, stories have encapsulated into themselves and carry within themselves, the culture from which they are born. Reading stories indirectly introduce a student into these cultures that result in gaining deeper understanding of other cultures. This allows the students to pick up the specific linguistic constructs in their specific cultural contexts. Learning English in its cultural context ensures a relatively better exposure to authentic English that would lead to a far better understanding of the language. Apart from the linguistic benefits stories, they could also help social and moral development of the learners as stories, especially fables and moral stories convey a positive social message. More than anything else, reading fictional works offers the necessary creative input that would, in a long run, improve the creative and more advanced use of English by the learners. A brief look at the manifold advantages of employing a story-based ELT activity as identified by Maria Ellison suggests that story-based ELT practices have advantages that go well beyond mere linguistic concerns.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

Easier said than done. As we proceed to put the proposed story-based ELT method into practice, many questions and challenges loom large before us. Most important of them being about the choice of the stories, the exact practices and activities and many more. A wide varieties of stories are available online for free. They come in text formats, podcasts and MP3 formats and many other electronic formats. Of the available stories what kind of stories must be chosen is a question of paramount importance. No matter how far a sophisticated method the teacher employs, if the choice of stories is wrong, we could not expect much of a result. The stories must be so chosen that they are in line with the curricular objectives and the psychological, cognitive and linguistic capabilities of the learners. The more creative, the more imaginative, the more captivating the story is, the more participation and result could we expect. Meantime, a teacher should be wise enough to recognize the fact that both curricular objectives and psychological, cognitive and linguistic capabilities of the learners vary with their age and standard. While lower and upper primary students, given their psychological, cognitive and linguistic capabilities might prefer shorter stories with less complex plot construction, students of higher level might prefer longer stories with more complex plot construction. Short tales like Aesop Tales with their shorter length and easy-to-follow plot construction may make a quick appeal to the younger minds. Aesop Tales and similar fables like Panchatantra have one or other dichotomies at the centre-like good versus bad, justice versus injustice, strong versus weak- that best recreate children's simplified and often naïve understanding of the





world and hence best appeals to their mind. The websites like Candlelight Stories that can be accessed using the web address www.candlelightstories.com and Bedtime Stories that can be accessed by using the web address www.bedtime.com can be quite useful in this context. Older students, meantime prefer stories that are longer and involve heroic adventure with relatively more complex stories like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Doctor Doolittle*, *Anne of Green Gable* and classic series like Arabian Nights. The website, byGosh.com that can be accessed using the address www.bygosh.com is a good source in this regard.

Since internet offers stories in numerous formats one does not have to fully depend only on the usual PDF, Kindle, EPUB, HTML or any other text formats. Numerous websites, both paid and free, provide stories in many other formats, most important among them being MP3 and other audio formats. MP3 readings of the stories can be an effective tool in teaching students English in its native accent, tone and pronunciation. Besides, listening to a story being read with needed tonal and accent variations can be a lot more interesting and less demanding than reading a text. Websites like Storynory and Open Culture are widely used web resources that offer a wide array of stories in audio formats.

After the selection of the stories, next question with wide range of implications is the one about the actual practices and activities to be incorporated. Students may be asked to read the text on their own and mark the confusing/new words and structures. Before giving direct help to the students, students may be encouraged to sort out the problems on their own through group discussions. Other than finishing the stories in a long stretch, teacher must allow time to pause and reflect. During the pause, students may be asked to comment on the story so far and to predict what may happen next. Giving pause in the critical and dramatic moments that could create a cliffhanger effect may be especially effective in this regard. Instead of just reading the story, teacher has to make sure that enough post-reading activities are planned and organized in the classroom. After the completion of the story, students may be encouraged to conduct discussions or even debates about the actions and motifs of the characters. Similarly, the stories may be partly or entirely dramatized in the classroom. Apart from improving the creative outputs of the students, it may also provide a platform for students to practice and improve their spoken skill. Through practices like loud reading of the story, writing review, preparing character sketch or critical commentary etc...are sure to improve the listening, reading and writing skills of the learners.

Stories in audio format can be put to a special use, with the help of language labs, that would, not only increase the learners' interest in reading and English proficiency, they may also be helpful in improving the ability of the learners to understand the subtle differences





in meaning made possible by tonal variations and sound modulations. Students may be asked to listen to the story and try to understand the meaning. Repetition of the same procedure a couple of times might be helpful in understanding the meaning and reinforcing the right manner of reading with proper pause, stress, pronunciation, tonal variations and voice modulation. After repeating the same story a couple of times, students may be provided with the exact text of the story and allow them to read along with the recording. This procedure may be followed by attempts by students to record themselves reading the story, trying to follow the exact same pause, tone, pronunciation and voice modulation as in the original recording. This may be helpful in improving, along with other things, the reading skill of the learners. Whatever methods a teacher adopt, he/she should be wise enough to recognize that he/she might want to change and adopt new strategies as the classroom situation demands.

ONLINE SOURCES OF CHILDREN'S STORIES

Just a few clicks away lies a vast ocean of online resources that offer stories in multiple electronic formats waiting to be exploited by ELT trainers and learners. It includes websites that allow free access to its resources and also those that require payment. One does not have to be put off by the fact that some of them are paid sites as there are still many more websites that allow free access and some of them even have resources that cannot be fully exploited by a one in his/her life time. These websites offer a wide range of stories ranging from short narratives like Aesop Tales and Panchtantra Tales to longer and more complex folktales from different parts of the world, classic series like Arabian nights, adventure and fantasy novels like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and even further complex novels like *Pride and Preudice etc...* Apart from the wide range of stories they offer, these websites also offer stories in multiple electronic formats allowing the users to choose one's most suitable format from choices like DOC, DOCX, PDF, HTML, EPUB, Kindle, MP3, WAVE etc... A teacher's choice of the format must depend on the availability of technology in the school or classroom. The choice of the format can be crucial as each of them have their own relative merits and demerits. For example, formats like PDF, Kindle, and audio formats can be downloaded and used without even internet connection. Once downloaded, they are easy to use and share with students. But they also have their own demerits, like for example, Kindle and PDF formats are impossible to be read without their respective reading devices and applications softwares in hand, that alone could support them. In short, the choice of format is as crucial as the choice of stories themselves. In the following part of the paper, we would like to give a brief tour through the online resources of stories and tales.





LibriVox, a group of worldwide volunteers who read and record public domain texts is a massive online source that offers free access to audio books. Founded in 2005, as of 2015, it had 8664 books in its collection. LibriVox offers children's stories in ten categories: Children's Fiction-Action and Adventure, Children's Fiction-Animals and Nature, Children's Fiction-Myths, Legends and Fairy Tales, Children's Fiction-Family, Children's Fiction-General, Children's Fiction-Historical, Children's Fiction-Religion and Children's Fiction-School. The website can be accessed using the web address www.librivox.org. A special advantage of LibriVox is that all LibriVox recordings are in public domain and hence anybody can download and use it without any prior consent.

Internet Archive is similar online library with the stated objective of universal access to all knowledge. It is a San Francisco-based nonprofit digital library launched in 1966. It provides free access to digitalized materials including public domain text books, novels, short stories etc... The website can be accessed via archive.org. Apart from its own web resources, the website also provides direct access to other popular public domain archives like LibriVox. FreeClassicAudioBooks.com is similar website that offers free public access to a wide range of books in audio format. With its homepage boasting of its being the "digital narration for the 21st century", the website provides free access to stories and books as varied as American Indian folklore and fairy tales, classic short stories by various authors, and numerous classic novels like *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and many more. Apart from the free access to its archive, the website also sells its DVD collections for \$9.95 to support itself. The website can be accessed via www.freeclassicaudiobooks.com

Loyal Books, like the previously discussed websites, offers free public access to its collection of audio books categorized under multiple genres such as adventure stories, comedies, epistolary fiction, fairy tales, historical fiction, myths, legends and many more. The huge collection provided by Loyal Books include classic novels such as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Treasure Island*, *Emma*, *Peter Pan* and many more, all of which are in public domain.

Kids Audio Books is a similar website that offers free access to audio books in public domain. What distinguishes this one particular website from other similar websites is the fact that the recordings available on this website are made more amusing by adding appropriate background music to the reading. Stories are narrated in such a way that they make a quick impression on the young minds. This UK-based website can be accessed via www.kidsaudiobooks.co.uk

Storynory is another website that offers audio stories with free access. Apart from the classic fiction, it also provides audio records of contemporary children's stories in public domain. High quality MP3 files downloadable from the website are in public domain hence





it requires no prior consent to use and share it among the students or any other community.

Candlelight Stories is one of the major sites to offer classic children's stories for free in HTML format. The website offers free access to a whole range of classic children's fiction including Arabian Nights. It includes, "Aladdin and his Magic Lamp", Ali Baba and his Numerous Larcenous Acquaintances", "Voyages of Sinbad, the Sailor" and many more exciting stories for kids of all ages.

Bedtime Story, as the name indicates is a collection of classic children's stories, both old and modern ones. The collection includes a wide variety of works, whimsical, magical, humorous, fantasy and many more, all of which presented in HTML format. Every story is preceded by a brief note titled "What's the Story About" that gives a synopsis of the story-recommended age-suitability, reading time estimates etc...

Book Box, another website, is intended for children below 10 years' age. It provides books in various formats like multimedia, text, audio etc... Unlike most of the above introduced websites, this one is not completely free. Animated and other version of multimedia productions of the stories are put for sale while some stories in PDF, HTML and other text formats are free to access.

The previously mentioned ByGosh has a free juvenile session that features many classic pieces of fiction like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Treasure Island*, *Doctor Doolittle*, *Anne of Green Gable*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and many more.

Room 108 Kids Stories offers a huge collection of animated multimedia production of children's stories for free. The website mainly offers stories suitable for children upto eight years old. Animations are so produced that they best meet the linguistic and cognitive capabilities of young kids.

Apart from the so far introduced websites, there are still many more websites that offer both paid and free access to its collection. Some of them include, Guttenberg Project, 365 Tomorrows, East of the Web, Classic Reader, Classic Shorts, Story, Flash Fiction Online, Fictionnaut, Baldwin Online Children's Project and many more. An ELT teacher has to make wise choice among these websites depending on the cognitive, linguistic and literary capabilities of his/her students and come up with the most suitable teaching methods, class and post-teaching activities so as to ensure effective transaction of the curriculum.

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