

**BIG BOOKS: GREAT IDEAS, MARVELLOUS CLASSES! "SPOTS, FEATHERS AND CURLY TAILS"**

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Big books have become very popular in kindergarten classes; however, they can be useful and enjoyable in classes at all levels and for all ages. They are attractive for children and they make the reading process a very memorable one. Fortunately, reading is not the only thing we can do with them. Books allow for extremely creative sessions, which can be exploited to limitless ends that are savoured by teacher and students throughout the years.

The idea behind this class was to provide a model for teachers of various levels and ages, which could give them pointers on how to use these books. The objective was for them to later on adapt and adopt these strategies to their own teaching scenarios. I focused these strategies on a class of twelve 4-year-olds, but this was only for the purpose of narrowing down the scope of the class; it in no way limits the potential reach of the book I used. This book is about farm animals and their features.

I began the class with animal sounds because, as hearing is a more primary sense than sight, this helps to set the mood, tone, and context for the class more effectively than the sole visual input given by the materials. Once the kids had come into the world of the class, I asked them to solve some two-piece jigsaw puzzles, an activity that requires them to interact among them as well as face a challenge and solve a problem.

Using these puzzles, I presented the basic vocabulary for the lesson: farm animals. Because animals are already a part of the children's schemata, the presentation of the vocabulary simply aims at naming the animals in English, rather than creating a concept of the animals themselves. The importance of the previous statement is crucial because it is not recommendable to get ahead of the children's cognitive development. Once again, due to the fact that the children are not alien to the sounds animals make, matching each animal to its characteristic sound is not much of a challenge, and is more of a means to reach my true objectives than an end in itself. These objectives are to provide opportunities for the kids to use the words they've learnt and to expose students to their written form. It is here where I begin the process of developing reading and writing skills in this class.

Bear in mind that the purpose of this type of class is not only to develop reading and writing skills, but also to create good and enthusiastic readers. Because of this, pre-teaching the key vocabulary in the story is crucial. If the words in any given book are too difficult, or are not made comprehensible before the actual reading, then the meaning of the story, or book, will be lost, the children will fail to enjoy the experience, and the teacher will feel frustrated and discouraged. There is a very simple test to determine if any given book is adequate for any given reader. It is called the "five-finger test": Select a random page of the book; read it through, raising one finger for every incomprehensible word on that page; if more than 5 fingers are needed for one page, the language in the book is too difficult, and an easier book should be chosen.

Why use a big book? First of all, because teachers will be amazed at the delight and insight these books create in students. Also, because if you do so, your students' attention span and vocabulary will grow and grow, thereby fostering the development of reading and writing skills. When we use big books in class, we are teaching reading behaviour—holding up a book, following print with a finger, recognising letters, turning pages. In addition, books are a wonderful way to settle restless children or start off an

activity, a class, a unit, or even an entire teaching programme. As a matter of fact, this is precisely what I did.

When you have the opportunity of presenting the book or story through a recorded tape or CD, you bring an invaluable element into your class. The reading by a voice other than the teacher's, together with the background noises commonly included in such recordings, sets the children's imaginations free to fully enjoy the world of the book. Moreover, in being an external and immutable source, the story acquires a wholeness to it that might not be achievable otherwise. Having said this, do not ignore a story just because there is no recording of it. Students often relish listening to a story told by their teacher, or even by a classmate. Remember that variety should always be one of the targets in our teaching.

Most probably, after listening to the story, your students will ask to listen again. At this point, you may choose to do it or not. However, you should certainly do it sometime, either later in the class, or in the following ones, and the book should be made available for students to look at. Some big books now come with smaller versions of themselves for students to have. Every time a child re-visits a story, new words are learnt, more language is internalised, and a further understanding of the story is accomplished.

Story telling is one of the greatest things you can do for your students, and it is never too early nor too late to start. Infants may not convey that they are listening; however, they are learning. How? They are associating pictures with words, especially when books have pictures of identifiable objects. They are being exposed to language that adds to their ever-growing vocabulary, and, if the book tells a story, they are learning that stories have a beginning, middle, and an end. This is true for children of all ages—and even adults. Remember, reading aloud increases speaking abilities, listening skills and comprehension, and, ultimately, creates a love for books and lifelong readers.

Throughout the course of this class, I have catered for different learning styles—visual, with the animals, the farm, the big book, etc.; auditory, with the sounds, the story, etc.; and tactile-kinaesthetic, with the puzzles, the movement around the classroom, etc. Since your students will not all fall into a single style, it is very important that you vary the types of activities in every single class. Again, variety in the learning environment enriches the learning experience.

When working with children, being aware and in control of their level of concentration, attention span, energy build-up and release, etc. becomes essential. During any class, students need to move around the classroom and be seated; their concentration needs to be focused and released; they have to be led from an excited state to a calmer one... and back again, over and over.

Working with children during the literacy process creates certain needs in terms of materials and activities. Written language is ever-present and seen, at any other stage in life as a means to other ends. However, when teaching this age, written language becomes an objective in itself, whether in a receptive fashion (reading) or a productive one (writing). Building words from their phonemes is the foundation of the reading and writing process. Allowing the children to manipulate the letters that produce these phonemes gives them a unique opportunity to get actively involved in the construction of language. I am sure you can see why the use of phonemes, rather than isolated letters, is crucial in a language like English, that does not follow phonetic spelling.

Once the reading and writing process has gone through several stages, beginning with visualizing the written words, reading them, and building them, the groundwork has been set to now move on to a further level of development: complete sentences. (The ultimate goal is to take the students all the way to discourse level, but this can only be achieved by going through word, sentence, and paragraph levels one step at a time.) For this purpose, I brought together everything the students had done in the class, and

consolidated it into one worksheet. Since all the language necessary for completing the task had been covered, this focused mainly on the students' ability to write. Let me just clarify this, the students' ability to write will depend, of course, on their age and stage within the writing process in general, but not on their level of performance in English. To illustrate this, I prepared several different options of worksheets that could be used as a writing task. The one I chose to do in this class was aimed at children who have begun writing words by copying them, but are not yet ready to freely produce them in written form. However, if your students are not yet at this level, your writing task can be a matching exercise. For students with a further development of writing skills, you could increase the challenge of the activity either by asking them to fill in blanks, complete sentences, write sentences using words from a box, or even freely produce them in answer to comprehension questions.

And there is even more to this task. With this exercise, you have the invaluable opportunity to assess the effectiveness of your class. If your class was successful and your students responsive, they should be able to fulfil this task without more obstacles than perhaps the actual mechanical process of writing the words. On the other hand, if your class was not successful or your students not responsive, this is an excellent time to make a mental note that some remedial work should be done in the following class, and be prepared for it. What is very important to remember is to not attempt to carry out this remedial work on the spot. There are two main reasons for this: 1) your students are tired and will not internalise the language at this point in the class and 2) you are not prepared. Whichever the result is, however, now is the time for a game. Whether the game will be a reward for a successful class, or more practice of the language with the focus of reinforcing for further practice in the following class is beside the point.

We all know how important it is to have games in a class. I am sure that during these Jornades, there were a number of speakers discussing this topic, so I will not get into it very much. It suffices to mention that games are a fundamental part of learning, not only a language, but everything, from behaviour to cognitive abilities. It must, therefore, be a recurring part of our classes.

One of the most important aspects of language, often neglected by language teachers, is paralinguistic features. They are important because language is more than just words and structures. Language is more than simple vocabulary accuracy and grammatical correctness. Language is, above all, a means of communication, and therefore, facial expression, body language, tone of voice, etc. are at least as important as the verbal language itself. Do not be afraid to exaggerate or overemphasise paralinguistic features in a class. Do not be embarrassed by them. On the contrary, exploit them as much as you can. This will not only contribute to your students' ability to convey meaning, but it will contribute to a more relaxed atmosphere in your classes and improve your rapport.

Another very important part of any class is songs. Music is part of our lives. We listen to it at home or in the car; we hear it on the street, in restaurants, bars, clubs. It is ever-present, and it is not only an expression of thoughts and feelings, but it is also a natural, authentic use of language. If you find appropriate songs for your classes, or adapt existing ones to them, you are giving the children the opportunity to recycle the vocabulary and structures you have been working on in class. It is the best way to internalise structures and words, and, if the kids like the song, they will sing it over and over, every time owning a little more of the language in it.

It would be worthwhile to say that although students, especially, but not only, young children, will often not have the ability to enunciate the songs word by word, this does not matter. On the contrary, as long as the kids are singing along, following the tune and the sounds they hear, acquisition of language is taking place. Little by little, they

will refine their production. They will do this in much the same way as they are acquiring their native language. This is a mental process of cognitive development where we can have little influence, and we should allow them to go through it.

Nowadays, as you know, something that is required from us is to keep a portfolio of students' work, a collection of evidence of the children's progress. By adding to the portfolio on a regular basis, you make it an accurate and realistic measurement and proof of development. Perhaps not in every class, but certainly often, design activities and tasks for your lessons that can be stored for this purpose. You can set time aside every week, or every month for the kids to organise it, so that at the end of the course you can deliver it to them and their parents. Making the children proud of what they have accomplished throughout the year is extremely important. Therefore, always insist on their writing their names on their work, and when putting the portfolio together, highlight their names somehow, for example, with a cover. Remember, your students are the authors of their portfolios, and making their names known is as important as mentioning the authors of the books we use in class (as I did when we listened to the story).

In this context, it is absolutely impossible for me to present, even shallowly, the full range of activities, tasks, objectives, etc. that is feasible to implement around this one book, let alone do it in any depth or for more books. However, my objective in this lecture was to show you how varied and adaptable to your context these can be. This class could have been done as one, or added to and restructured, and become an entire unit. It could be your starting point for an entire term, or school year, based on the topic of the farm, where you could cover the animals and their characteristic features, as I did; the parts of the farm, like the barn, pond, fence, etc.; the people on a farm; the work they do there; the food produced on it; types of farms;... The list is endless, as is the number of activities, tasks, songs, rhymes, chants, stories,... you can use. Your imagination and creativity are the limit to how much you can get out of it for your students.

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