

# Using Story Boxes in Language Learning

**S**tory boxes and story bags are containers for holding realia that are used to enhance reading and provide a variety of activities for encouraging language acquisition and use. Whatever the packaging, these are good ways to develop students' interest in books. After students explore all the items in the box (or bag), they are better prepared to read, write about, or discuss the story relating to these items. The teacher's selection of an appropriate book, and the specific items put into a story box, can be adjusted for any age group, based on the English proficiency of the students.

Using realia, or real-life objects, to teach a foreign language is not a novel concept. It has been recognized for decades as a useful means of teaching vocabulary and providing students with insight into new ideas (Lapp, Fisher, and Flood 1999). Reed and Railsback (2003, 29) state that realia "give students the opportunity to use all of their senses to learn about a given subject, and are appropriate for any grade or skill level." Especially in foreign language learning, realia

help students to connect the known to the unknown. Items in story boxes help create a bridge between something tangible and the newly introduced concepts or words as the students begin to explore a story and its vocabulary. The items also provide a means for making the experiences in the story concrete. The class can discuss Harry Potter's appearance (Rowling 1999), for example, while having a pair of glasses and a magic wand available to pass around the class to be examined by students.

## Where to begin

If a teacher plans to make many story boxes to accompany different books in the classroom or library, it is best to select a type of box that is large enough to hold interesting items but is also easy to store. Shoeboxes are ideal as they can be neatly stacked. They are large enough to hold many surprise items but small enough to fit on a shelf or in a cupboard. The outside of the box can be covered with plain paper or wrapped with paper that has a theme similar to the selected story. Students can also be

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encouraged to decorate the outside of the box to match the story they are reading. For a teacher who wants to begin experimenting with the idea of a story box slowly, and does not want to invest too much time at the beginning, it is also possible to use a large plastic or paper bag. These tend to hold up for at least a year, depending on the students and how often they are used.

Pizza boxes are another possible container for story boxes. Although fairly shallow, they can be used for smaller items and stack easily. The title and author of the book can be written along the front edge of the box to be visible when the boxes are stacked on the shelf. The lids are a nice size for decorating. Some pizza restaurants are willing to donate unused boxes to schools or to sell them at a very reasonable price.

Once the container has been selected, the teacher can begin making the story box. The first step is to choose a book that is appropriate for the class. Two examples are offered to demonstrate that this idea is adaptable for a variety of learners. Harriet Ziefert's (1986) *A New Coat for Anna* is a short book with many illustrations. It can be used with young students at the pre-intermediate English proficiency level. For this book, I created a story box with a ball of red yarn, a thimble, a cloth tape measure, a small sheep puppet, and a button. The second book, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling 1999), is for older students with upper-intermediate or advanced English language skills. For this story box, I included a magic wand, an envelope with a letter, a pair of old glasses (or spectacles), a small finger puppet of an owl, and a train ticket.

### Presenting the box

There are many ways to use a story box. Before reading the book with the class, the teacher can talk with the students about the items in the box. One at a time, the teacher can remove an item from the box and show it to the class (or have students take turns selecting items from the box). The teacher can ask students questions about each item. For example, if a thimble were selected, the teacher might ask the class questions such as:

- What is this?
- What do you do with a thimble?

- Have you ever used a thimble?
- Who would use a thimble in his or her work?

The teacher should spend time with each item to allow the students to think about the item and what it means within the context of their own lives. It is also helpful to list the items on the board so that the students can see how the words are spelled.

After all the items have been examined and discussed, the teacher can decide to do more activities with the items before introducing the book itself. A few ideas for using story boxes at this point are given below.

- The teacher can begin with a writing activity in which students, working individually or in small groups, write a story that mentions the various items in the box. This can be an excellent opportunity to use the language experience approach (Reed and Railsback 2003, 24), depending on the skill level of the students. The names of the various items should be written somewhere that is visible for all students, while the items themselves are displayed where students can examine them. This activity can be developed over several classes as the students work on their own stories, illustrate them, and perhaps bind them to form books. Students can exchange and read each other's self-published books to see the variety of ways that a small set of items can generate a fantastic range of stories. When students have finished their books, the teacher can read to the class the actual book that was the theme for the story box. Afterwards, the class can discuss how their own stories compared to the original one.
- Students can be asked to write a short autobiography of one of the items in the box or to describe "a day in the life" of that item. For example, the teacher could ask: "What might happen on a given day in the life of a magic wand?" or "What might a tape measure's daily life be like?"
- Depending on the language level of the class, the teacher can use the items in the story box to generate a mini-lesson

on adjectives, articles, or pronouns. The items can be used for any number of grammar exercises, depending on the class's curriculum. For example, learners could suggest appropriate adjectives for the items in the box. What words could be used to describe a thimble? How would you describe a magic wand to someone who had never seen one before? Other mini-lessons could focus on specific vocabulary, such as how to use the phrase "a pair of glasses" or *sheep* as a word that is both singular and plural.

The teacher can also choose to read the book immediately after examining the items in the story box with the students. Once all the items have been discussed, they should remain on display, and the teacher can show the students the book. As the teacher reads the story, the students should indicate when something is mentioned or used in the story that was also in the box. After the story is finished, the teacher can choose to have the students complete one of the writing activities mentioned above or write more about an item that appeared in the story. For example, after reading *A New Coat for Anna*, the teacher could ask the students to write about what happened to the teapot that Anna's mother gave to the tailor.

### Follow-up

Story boxes are an excellent addition to any class and can help students develop vocabulary and make connections between the selected book and their own experiences. Story boxes can also be lent out to students, especially young learners, to take home. They give students an opportunity to talk with their parents or other adults about what they are learning at school and can also encourage reading and language use at home. Story boxes with large rubber bands or string to keep lids on are better for student borrowing than bags. (Some schools have actually purchased small, inexpensive backpacks that are ideal for holding the items and the book. This is a convenient way for children to take a story box home to share with their parents or siblings.)

Students can also be encouraged to think about creating their own story box when they

finish reading a book. A story box does not need to be stuffed full of items; one usually has five to eight small things in it. After the students have become familiar with the concept of story boxes, the teacher can ask at the conclusion of reading a chapter or a book: "What might be a good item to put into a box about the story at this point?" Students could also volunteer to make a story box for a book that was read by the class.

### Adapting the idea

The examples above focused on *A New Coat for Anna* (Ziefert 1986) for younger children, and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling 1999) for adolescent or young adult students with higher English skills. Story boxes can be equally intriguing for adults. Imagine some of the items that could be put in a story box for adult learners who are reading a Sherlock Holmes mystery (e.g., Doyle 1986) or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 2005). Students can create their own story boxes as part of a book report or a class presentation. Afterward the class could organize a display of the boxes as part of a book fair.

Another adaptation of story boxes is to use matchboxes. Although matchboxes are quite small, students in one of my classes made wonderful story boxes with these tiny containers. The outside was covered with paper and decorated with the book's title, and the inside contained a few objects that were representative of the story. An imaginative story matchbox for *Toot and Puddle* (Hobbie 1997) contained a very small world map folded up with a few coins from the countries that Toot had visited.

Story boxes and bags are an interactive way to encourage discussions and writing, to build vocabulary, and to provide a multisensory activity for a variety of learners. Story boxes can be easily assembled by teachers or students and reused throughout the term or school year. Most items that would be placed in a story box can be found at home or school and do not require purchases beyond the acquisition of the book. This creative activity is an excellent way to help enhance students' reading experience and make learning tangible.

## References

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