

Picture Stories – Facilitating Story Telling and Story Writing

Overview:

Picture stories can be a fantastic way to get your young learner students talking and writing. Clear, obviously sequenced pictures in slots of four to six allow students to focus on a series of ‘here-and-now’ scenes that fit together to create simple little stories. They can try to tell the story step-by-step in their own words, followed by a written composition, or vice versa (or indeed, an initial oral attempt followed by writing corrected with scaffolding from the teacher, concluding with a final oral telling to give students the opportunity to try and use new vocabulary or sentence structures they may have learned during the writing process). However picture stories are used in the classroom to facilitate creativity of expression from students, they always include a key ingredient for your average young learner: a clear and attainable context.

Preparing Picture Stories for Classroom Use:

The English Raven Members download page features a variety of picture story and story-writing tools. There are six full color pre-made basic picture stories featuring four slots, and six ‘advanced’ picture stories consisting of five slots. These can be downloaded, printed in color and laminated for ongoing classroom use. These 12 ready-to-use picture stories are accompanied by story writing sheets, which can be printed and photocopied. For extending the activity even further, there are templates for students to create their own picture stories using anywhere from 4 to 12 story slots.

Using Picture Stories in the Classroom:

Picture Stories can be used in a whole variety of ways, and the following list of stages and activities is meant as a suggestion only. Teachers will inevitably want to skip or refrain from using certain of the activities, and/or (hopefully) try to include activities of their own that best suit their classes’ needs and wants.

STAGE 1 (Basic 4-slot): Teacher Story-Telling

In the simplest application, the teacher introduces a new (basic 4-slot) picture story every couple of days, or once a week or even once a month. The teacher gets the students together (preferably sitting in a group on the floor in front of the teacher). The students are shown the story card and invited to try and tell the story, or at least, to point out familiar words or concepts. Having ‘brainstormed’ the story as a group, the teacher then tells the story, using simple terms and language but adding character and life to the story (for example by naming characters in the picture, asking students to verify certain details as the story progresses, adding interjections, explanations and comments). The next time it is ‘story time’, the teacher produces this story again and asks the students if they can tell it on their own. Following this, the teacher introduces a new picture story, and the cycle repeats - old stories getting a review and students getting opportunities to re-tell them before new ones are introduced. This forms a rich source of language input for the students as well as providing chances for them to participate in the story telling at a level and rate they can handle.

STAGE 2 (Basic 4-slot): Student Story-Telling

The next stage involves bringing all the so-far-covered stories out and letting students choose one to tell on their own. In turns, students (or pairs of students) take the teacher’s place and try to tell the story to the other students. This can be difficult at first, and the other students should be encouraged to remain silent

and respect the story-telling student's right to have the limelight. The teacher will most probably need to help the student extensively, by suggesting words to use or asking simple questions to get the student talking. A great way to motivate the students at this point is for the teacher to act as a story judge, allocating points (generously) to the students who get up and have a go at telling the story.

STAGE 3 (Basic 4-slot): Assisted Student Story Writing

Give each student (or pair of students) a different 4-slot story card that they have already seen/heard and perhaps had a try at telling orally on their own. Distribute 4-slot story writing worksheets to each student and ask them to write a story about the pictures. This may be a truly daunting idea for your average young, low-level learner, and it needs to be emphasized that there are no 'right/wrong' answers and spelling is not a priority (at least at this early stage). The main objective is to get them comfortable and confident in using writing to express themselves. The teacher can make the task less demanding in a couple of important ways: they can write out one, two or three stages for the students beforehand, leaving them one to three slots to do on their own (basically, a 'complete the story' exercise); or they can give the students a word list of vocabulary items that are within the student's reading grasp and appropriate to the story's content. Don't expect spectacular results at this stage, but try to convey to students that you are impressed and happy with their efforts. It is a good idea to hold onto these initial attempts and file them away somewhere. 6 months or a year later, when the students have progressed somewhat, it will be interesting to compare what they could (or couldn't) do to what they now can do.

At this stage, when students have begun attempts to write the 4-slot stories, continue with the old routine of story telling (described in stages 1 and 2 above), except now move on to the 'advanced' picture stories featuring 5 slots.

STAGE 4 (Basic 4-slot): Group/Rotation Stories

This stage introduces the need for more detail and accuracy in conjunction with a group-work approach to alleviate any stress or disappointment students may experience in their attempts to write about story scenes. Photocopy one of the 4-slot picture stories, including vocabulary suggestions if appropriate, and copy a 4-slot writing grid onto the back. Make enough copies to give one to each student in the class. Ask students to write about the first picture in the story. When everyone has finished and written their name next to the box they wrote in, the teacher asks the students to pass their story sheet to the right (or left). The next student continues the story by writing about the second picture in the sequence, and the story is passed on two more times so that all four scenes in the story have been written about, but each one by a different student. The teacher then collects up each story sheet and reads them aloud, awarding a score for each. This score can be awarded based on clarity and quality of writing across the whole story (removing any spotlight from the one or more students who may still be struggling to write something). It can be fun to see how the story changes in the hands of each of the four students who contributed to it, and by handing each back to the student who started the story, the student gets to see how his/her peers approached telling the story.

STAGE 5 (Adv 5-slot): Assisted Student Story Writing/Group Rotation Stories

This basically follows the same steps as in Stages 3 and 4 described above, except now the students are using the 5-slot stories. At about this stage, the teacher should be slowly withdrawing (or at least limiting) the amount of overt assistance they are giving to the students, and slowly increasing the demand for better quality and description.

STAGE 6 (basic 4-slot and adv 5-slot): Story Completion through Gap-Filling

Stages 6 and 7 work on giving students some more controlled models for their writing before they go on to more independent application. In stage 6, the teacher writes the story out for the pictures but omits a number of key words for each slot in the story. In terms of what these 'key words' should be, the teacher could choose to omit all the nouns from one slot, all the verbs from another, all the adjectives from a third and all the articles from a fourth. The teacher could also work on verb tenses by omitting all the verbs from the entire story and requiring students to apply them using consistent tense (for example, present or past tense). Spelling and grammatical accuracy therefore achieve some importance at this stage.

STAGE 7: Story Completion through Error Correction

As an initial application of this stage, write out the story and include several key errors for each slot. Underline the errors so that students know what to look for to correct. The errors could vary in scope, incorrect vocabulary item, incorrect spelling, incorrect verb tense, bad punctuation - it really depends on what it is reasonable for the students to know is right and wrong. As a follow up, write the story out with errors, but do not underline them. The students are then required to actually make decisions about what could be right or wrong written expression before they make any attempts to correct it. Pair and group work are especially recommended for these activities, so that students can discuss and help each other.

STAGE 8: Change or Continue the Story

Time to start getting creative! A great way to inch the students toward confident, independent story writing is to do so in careful stages that progressively require more personal input from the students. The first way is to change the story, beginning with the outcome (final slot of the story) and moving backwards through the slots to the start of the story. This can be done by photocopying a picture story and whiting out the final slot. Students then write the story as before, but for the final slot they draw a different outcome and describe it in writing. They can then go on to change the final two, the final three, the final four and eventually all of the pictures - by which stage they are basically writing their own stories! This process can actually be a lot of fun, as children tend to be very creative and often enjoy 'twisting' a story so that it is more in line with their own interests. Alternatively, the students can be given a blank picture story grid and asked to continue it. Again, this is basically independent expression of ideas and writing, but the children will benefit from the initial 'plot' to give them ideas and a basic format to follow. Oral re-tellings of the stories can accompany this stage - and teachers can expect some surprises and laughs!

STAGE 9: Independent Story Telling

Students at this point move away from a reliance on whole or partial pre-made picture stories and start creating their own from start to finish. This can start with simple drawings and sketches followed up with oral story-telling of what is depicted by the teacher and then each of the students themselves.

STAGE 10: Independent Story Writing

Now the students draw and write their stories completely on their own. Hopefully by this stage the students will not be too self-conscious about their own production and may be more receptive to criticism from the teacher regarding the quality of their written expression and grammar. As students get better at the activity, they may be introduced to longer story sequences requiring 6, 8 or even 12 slots. The activity can be varied by introducing group rotation stories, gap fills and error correction as described above, except now it is the students themselves who compile the information and tasks.