

# 4

## Story boxes, story bags and story telling

### This chapter includes:

- Ways of story telling including the use of props
- Re-telling stories
- Comparing stories
- Using talk boxes or tins.

Children can find it very difficult to re-tell stories and even harder to make them up. This is particularly so if they have not had much experience of stories and story telling. There is a variety of ways to involve children with texts, and the use of 'story bags' is one that not only can spark an interest in reading but also involves much talk and discussion, which is why I have included it here.

A story bag is a bag containing a book, plus items associated with the story, which might include characters in the form of soft toys or puppets. There might also be a non-fiction book on a similar theme, which allows children to experience different types of text. These items are used to help bring the story to life. They provide a visual and tactile stimulus that the children can use to take part in the telling or re-telling of the story. Children of all abilities enjoy using them but they can be particularly useful in helping children who are not interested in reading, for whatever reasons, to enjoy books. You can make your own story bag and include whatever you feel is appropriate for the children who will be using it.

I was introduced to the idea of story bags about ten or eleven years ago. A member of the learning support team for our area suggested them as a means of engaging children with special needs, particularly those struggling to access basic literacy skills. She presented me with just one bag that her department had made. It contained a copy of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, a factual book all about bears, hand puppets of Goldilocks and three different sized bears, plus a soft toy polar bear. The interest and enthusiasm this bag created with children, particularly boys, who before only shared books with reluctance, was amazing.

I used the following activity in the literacy hour within a unit of work on traditional stories. The story was 'Little Red Riding Hood'. This is one way of using this resource that I felt worked for me. You may well have read about or know of different methods and approaches.

## Activity 1 – Share a story bag

**Aims** – To promote discussion, speak with clear diction and appropriate intonation, organise what is said, focus on the main points, include relevant detail, make relevant comments, take turns in speaking, use language to explore and convey situations, characters and emotions.

**What to do** – Choose a group of children to work with; the size of the group will depend on what you aim to do with them and what the text is. Seat the children around you, either at a table or on the floor depending on your preference and class organisation. Children love guessing and surprises and you can use this as a way of making the activity really exciting.

Ask the children to guess what might be in the bag. They must listen to their friends in the group and try to give reasons for their guess. They often find this quite hard. Next give them a clue by producing a character. Children are usually very familiar with this story and are likely to guess straight away after they have seen a character. However you can still get them to reflect and talk about it and you need not tell them they were right straight away.

Ask them if they still think the story in the bag is 'Red Riding Hood', and then produce another character and continue in this way. Of course they will soon realise they were right the first time but lots of talk and discussion can be done about books, characterisations, stereotypes (depending on the age of the children) and the genre in general.

There are various ways of proceeding. You could ask a volunteer to tell the story while the others listen and see if anything is omitted. You can read the book to them, or if there is a confident reader in the group they might like to read it to their classmates. Most versions of 'Red Riding Hood' are short; and remember you can find your own version to suit your children.

Get the children to use the characters from the bag to re-tell the story. This is where the size of your group can be important because it is nice for all the children to be involved. Your focus for the session may depend on the overall learning intention of the lesson but here are some ideas all good for developing language and speaking skills:

1. Re-tell the story as it is.
2. Re-tell the story and change the ending.
3. Discuss the characters, who do they like best/least and why?
4. Think of other stories with wolves in and discuss their characters, i.e. good or bad.
5. Re-tell the story making the wolf the good character (this will require some thought, discussion and practice).

6. Discuss and identify the differences between written and oral versions of a text.
7. Discuss the differences between the fiction story and a non-fiction text (a book about wolves could be included in the bag).

**Resources required** – Red Riding Hood story bag containing a copy of the story, puppets or soft toy replicas of the characters in the story. This will depend on your version of the story but in the more traditional versions the characters are usually Red Riding Hood, mother, grandmother, woodcutter and the wolf. In addition your bag could include a factual book about wolves, plus an audiotape of the story.

**Cross-curricular links** – Literacy.

**When to do it** – In literacy as a group activity.

**Use of teaching assistants** – Take a group and work with them in the same way as the teacher, or as directed (some TAs may not feel confident enough to do this).

### **NLS and Foundation Stage objectives**

#### **Foundation Stage – Communication, language and literacy**

##### *Language for communication*

Begin to use more complex sentences.

Listen to favourite nursery rhymes, stories and songs. Join in with repeated refrains, anticipating key events and important phrases.

Listen to stories with increasing attention and recall.

Describe main story settings, events and principle characters.

Use language for an increasing range of purposes.

Sustain attentive listening, responding to what they have heard by relevant comments, questions or actions.

Enjoy listening to and using spoken written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning.

Listen to others in one-to-one/small groups when conversation interests them.

Use a widening range of words to express or elaborate ideas.

Interact with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation.

##### *Language for thinking*

Talk activities through, reflecting on and modifying what they are doing.

Use talk to connect ideas, explain what is happening and anticipate what might happen next.

Use talk to pretend imaginary situations.

Use language to imagine and re-create roles and experiences.

Suggest how the story might end.

Use talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events.

*Reading*

Re-tell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories.

**Reception Year**

*Text level*

**T4** To notice the difference between spoken and written forms through re-telling known stories; to compare told versions with what the book 'says'.

**T5** To understand how book language works and to use some formal elements when re-telling stories, e.g. 'Once there was ...' 'She lived in a little ...', 'he replied ...'

**T7** To use knowledge of familiar texts to re-enact or re-tell to others recounting the main points in correct sequence.

**T10** To re-read and recite stories and rhymes with predictable and repeated patterns and experiment with similar rhyming patterns.

**Year 1 Term 1**

*Text level*

**T3** To notice the difference between spoken and written forms through re-telling known stories; compare oral versions with the written text.

**T5** To describe story settings and incidents and relate them to own experience and that of others.

**T6** To recite stories and rhymes with predictable and repeating patterns, extemporising on patterns orally by substituting words and phrases, extending patterns, inventing patterns and playing with rhyme.

**T7** To re-enact stories in a variety of ways, e.g. through role-play, using dolls or puppets.

**Year 1 Term 2**

*Text level*

**T4** To re-tell stories, giving the main points in sequence and to notice differences between written and spoken forms in re-telling, e.g. by comparing oral versions with the written text; to refer to relevant phrases and sentences.

**T5** To identify and record some key features of story language from a range of stories, and to practise reading and using them, e.g. in oral re-tellings.

**T7** To discuss reasons for, or causes of, incidents in stories.

**T8** To identify and discuss characters, e.g. appearance, behaviour, qualities; to speculate about how they might behave; to discuss how they are described in the text; and to compare characters from different stories or plays.

**T9** To become aware of character and dialogue, e.g. by role-playing parts when reading aloud stories or plays with others.

**Year 1 Term 3**

*Text level*

**T3** To notice the difference between spoken and written forms through re-telling known stories; compare oral versions with the written text.

**T5** To re-tell stories, to give the main points in sequence and to pick out significant incidents.

**T6** To prepare and re-tell stories orally, identifying and using some of the more formal features of story language.

**Year 2 Term 2**

*Text level*

**T3** To discuss and compare story themes.

**T5** To discuss story settings; to compare differences; to locate key words and phrases in text; to consider how different settings influence events and behaviour.

**T6** To identify and describe characters, expressing own views and using words and phrases from texts.

**Year 2 Term 2**

*Sentence level*

**S1** To read text aloud with intonation and expression appropriate to the grammar and punctuation.

*Text level*

**T7** To prepare and re-tell stories individually and through role-play in groups, using dialogue and narrative from text.

**Year 3 Term 1**

*Text level*

**T3** To be aware of the different voices in stories using dramatised readings, showing differences between the narrator and different characters used, e.g. puppets to present stories.

**Year 3 Term 3**

*Text level*

**T5** To discuss (i) characters' feelings; (ii) behaviour, e.g. fair or unreasonable, brave or foolish; (iii) relationships, referring to the text and making judgements.

**PNS objectives – Speaking, listening and learning**

**Year 1 Term 1**

*4. Drama*

To explore familiar themes and characters through improvisation and role-play, e.g. using story boxes and bags of props to create characters.

Link with NLS text objective 7.

### Year 1 Term 2

#### 5. *Speaking*

To re-tell stories, ordering events using story language, e.g. using different techniques to recall and invent well-structured stories.

Link with NLS text objectives 4 and 5.

### Year 2 Term 2

#### 17. *Speaking*

To tell real and imagined stories using the conventions of familiar story language, e.g. including relevant detail, keeping the listeners' interest and sustaining an account.

Link with NLS text objective 7.

**Further comments and suggestions** – There is a lot of work that can be generated through this activity. You may find there is too much for one session and decide to continue with it on another occasion.

You can make up your own bags to suit your purpose or genre although this can be time consuming, particularly if you have to search around for the items to go in it. You can enlist others to help find or make items to go in it. The bag could then become a whole-school resource. There are commercially produced ones available but these tend to be expensive.

## Story telling

In my experience children love to listen to a story, whether it's a reading from a book, an oral re-telling or listening to an anecdote. Family incidents and accidents seem to be popular talking points. These anecdotes, and other story-telling activities, help children to think of ideas, order their words, and begin to gain control over the story-telling process.

Telling a new story or even re-telling a familiar story without a written text to follow is not easy, but it can be really enjoyable and good fun. Whether your story is written down, or made up, it is important to put plenty of expression and action into it. Keep the pace up and use your voice effectively.

Children love humour but I have found they also love scary stories. You will have to use your judgement and knowledge of your class with this. A teacher I know of had a parent accuse her of giving her son nightmares. All she had done was read lots of picture books with monsters in them because that was their topic at the time.

Reading and telling stories to children should be a staple part of any classroom practice and not just classes in Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1.

*Re-telling stories*

Re-telling stories forms part of the text level work of the Literacy Strategy, particularly in Years 1 and 2 and also at Foundation Stage. However, re-telling a story can be more tricky than reading one, for adults and children alike.

Some children can find it hard, either because they cannot remember the story or they do not have the language skills. Even a really well-known story such as 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears' can present problems, especially with narrative order and cohesion. To form an idea of how difficult it is, try re-telling a well-known story to yourself or a friend.

Use of props such as puppets can help to jog the memory and focus on the order of the story. It is a good idea to use a story with a simple narrative structure to begin with, particularly if you are not confident yourself or your children struggle to re-tell stories.

## **Activity 2 – Re-tell a familiar story**

**Aims** – Speak with clear diction and appropriate intonation, choose words with precision, organise what they say, focus on the main points, include relevant detail, take into account the needs of their listeners, sustain concentration, take turns in speaking.

**What to do** – Start with a familiar story such as 'Red Riding Hood'. This story has a simple structure and is not too long. Explain that you are going to re-tell the story and model it using the props. You may want to have practised this beforehand – it will depend on how confident you are. Tell the children that they must be a good audience and listen carefully so that they will then be able to do the same. After you have modelled it, let the children to have a go.

Here are a couple of suggestions how you could organise it.

1. The children work in groups and re-tell the story together. If you are using puppets or other props make sure there are enough for the whole group or arguments are likely to break out. Ensure that each child re-tells part of the story, otherwise you can find one or two dominant individuals take over. This is a good way to work because the children have the support of their peers and less confident children may feel more able to participate.

2. Put children into pairs to support each other as they re-tell the story together. As with the previous suggestion, make sure that both children contribute to the re-telling.

**Resources required** – Puppets (finger or stick puppets). Drawings are provided on pages 58–60 with which to make some props for Little Red Riding Hood. They can be photocopied, laminated, and then cut out.

**Cross-curricular links** – History, literacy.

**When to do it** – During a history lesson to recount events of the past, in the literacy hour.

**Use of teaching assistants** – Support groups and individuals as directed.

## **NLS and Foundation Stage objectives**

### **Foundation Stage – Communication, language and literacy**

#### *Language for communication*

Use intonation, rhythm and phrasing to make their meaning clear to others.

Begin to use more complex sentences.

Describe main story settings, events and principal characters.

Sustain attentive listening, responding to what they have heard by relevant comments, questions or actions.

Enjoy listening to and using spoken written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning.

Speak clearly and audibly with confidence and control and show awareness of the listener (for example, by their use of conventions such as greetings, 'please' and 'thank you').

Interact with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation.

Begin to use talk, instead of action to rehearse, reorder and reflect on past experience, linking significant events from own experience and from stories, paying attention to sequence and how events lead into one another.

Begin to use talk to pretend imaginary situations.

Suggest how the story might end.

Use talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events.

#### *Reading*

Re-tell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories.

### **Reception Year**

#### *Text level*

**T4** To notice the difference between spoken and written forms through re-telling known stories; to compare told versions with what the book 'says'.

**T5** To understand how book language works and to use some formal elements when re-telling stories, e.g. 'Once there was . . .', 'She lived in a little . . .', 'he replied . . .'.

**T7** To use knowledge of familiar texts to re-enact or re-tell to others recounting the main points in correct sequence.

**T10** To re-read and recite stories and rhymes with predictable and repeated patterns and experiment with similar rhyming patterns.

### **Year 1 Term 2**

#### *Text level*

**T4** To re-tell stories, giving the main points in sequence and to notice differences between written and spoken forms in re-telling, e.g. by comparing oral versions with the written text; to refer to relevant phrases and sentences.



**T5** To identify and record some key features of story language from a range of stories, and to practise reading and using them, e.g. in oral re-tellings.

### Year 1 Term 3

*Text level*

**T5** To re-tell stories, to give the main points in sequence and to pick out significant incidents.

**T6** To prepare and re-tell stories orally, identifying and using some of the more formal features of story language.

### Year 2 Term 1

*Text level*

**T3** To be aware of the difference between spoken and written language through comparing oral recounts with text; make use of formal story elements in re-telling.

### Year 2 Term 2

*Text level*

**T7** To prepare and re-tell stories individually and through role-play in groups, using dialogue and narrative from text.

## **PNS objectives – Speaking, listening and learning**

### Year 1 Term 2

*5. Speaking*

To re-tell stories, ordering events using story language, e.g. using different techniques to recall and invent well-structured stories.

Link with NLS text objectives 4 and 5.

### Year 2 Term 2

*17. Speaking*

To tell real and imagined stories using the conventions of familiar story language, e.g. including relevant detail, keeping the listeners' interest and sustaining an account.

Link with NLS text objective 7.

**Further comments and suggestions** – Re-telling stories verbally helps children understand some of the features of narrative such as story structure, settings, and the sequence of events. It provides a situation where they have to think of appropriate words and say them in a clear, structured way. This process can be an introduction to talk for writing.

The next activity is really a development from the last and, like the last, is part of the requirements of the National Literacy Strategy.

### **Activity 3 – Compare the stories: written with oral re-telling**

**Aims** – Choose words with precision, organise what they say, focus on the main points, sustain concentration, make relevant comments, take turns in speaking.

**What to do** – Read a story to the children. This can be any text, but try to make sure that it is not too long. Have a short discussion about what happened, the order of events, etc. Now model re-telling the story orally. The children will be quick to pick up differences in your re-telling! Send the children off in small groups or pairs to have a go at re-telling the story themselves.

After they have had time to practise, bring them together. Ask for volunteers, or choose a pair or group who you think re-told the story quite well. Ask them to re-tell their story again but this time into a tape recorder.

Re-read the story and remind the children about the beginning of the lesson and the things everyone discussed. Now play back the recorded oral re-telling. Ask them to compare similarities and differences. You can stop the recorder as they bring up points and then start it again and you can also re-read the part in the story that relates to the part of the re-telling.

This can be done as a whole-class or group activity. If you are fortunate enough to have a lot of tape recorders you can let each small group record their re-telling or, if not, it could perhaps be done over a period of time.

**Resources required** – At least one tape recorder and audiotape, a short written text for re-telling.

**Cross-curricular links** – Literacy.

**When to do it** – During a literacy lesson, either whole class or as group work (guided or independent).

**Use of teaching assistants** – To support selected groups, general support in the class, offer ideas and prompts during class discussions.

#### **NLS and Foundation Stage**

##### **Foundation Stage – Communication, language and literacy**

###### *Language for communication*

Listen to stories with increasing attention and recall.

Describe main story settings, events and principal characters.

Use language for an increasing range of purposes.

Sustain attentive listening, responding to what they have heard by relevant comments, questions or actions.

Enjoy listening to and using spoken written language, and readily turn to it in their play and learning.

Use a widening range of words to express or elaborate ideas.

Speak clearly and audibly with confidence and control and show awareness of the listener (for example, by their use of conventions such as greetings, 'please' and 'thank you').

Interact with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation.

*Language for thinking*

Talk activities through, reflecting on and modifying what they are doing.

Use talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events.

*Reading*

Re-tell narratives in the correct sequence, drawing on language patterns of stories.

**Reception Year**

*Text level*

**T4** To notice the difference between spoken and written forms through re-telling known stories; to compare told versions with what the book 'says'.

**T7** To use knowledge of familiar texts to re-enact or re-tell to others, recounting the main points in correct sequence.

**Year 1 Term 1 and Term 3**

*Text level*

**T3** To notice the difference between spoken and written forms through re-telling known stories; compare oral versions with the written text.

**Year 2 Term 1**

*Text level*

**T3** To be aware of the difference between spoken and written language through comparing oral recounts with text; make use of formal story elements in re-telling.

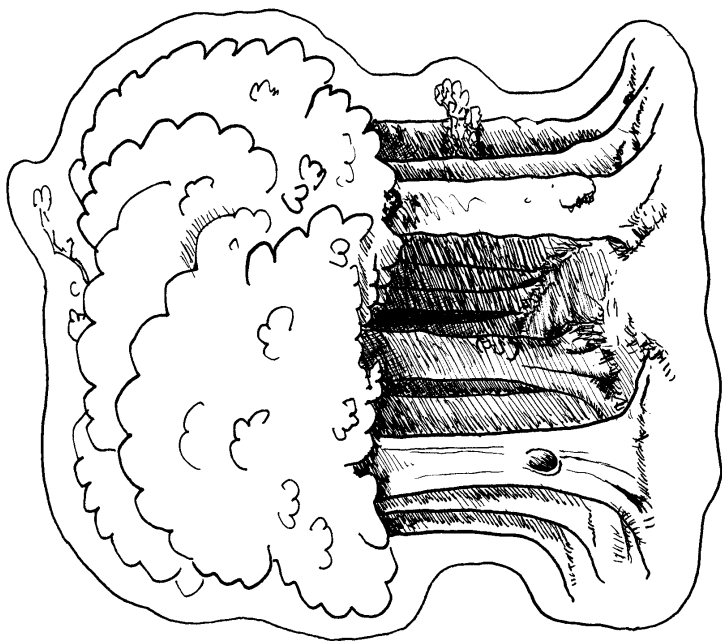
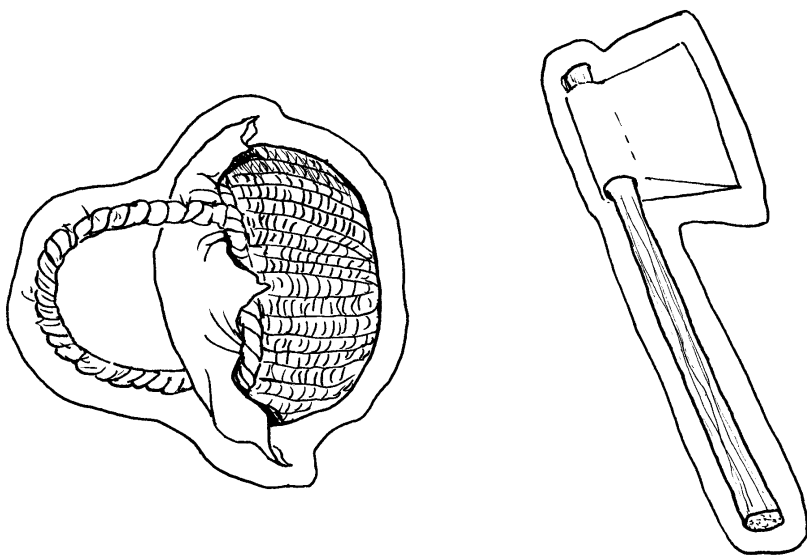
**Year 2 Term 3**

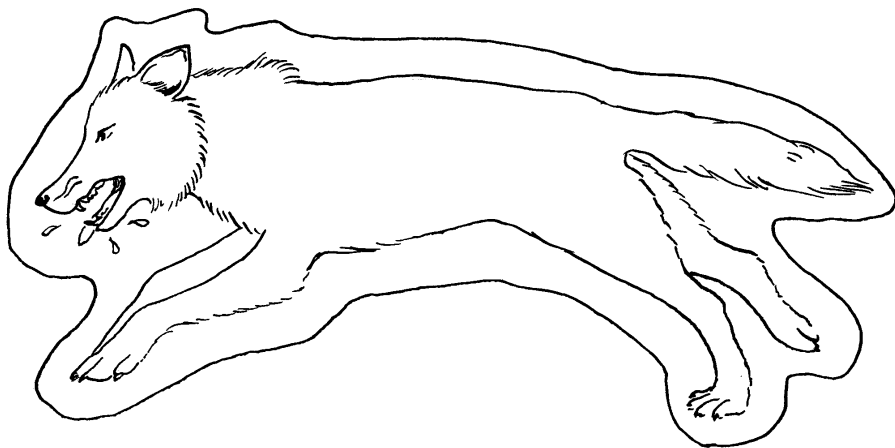
*Text level*

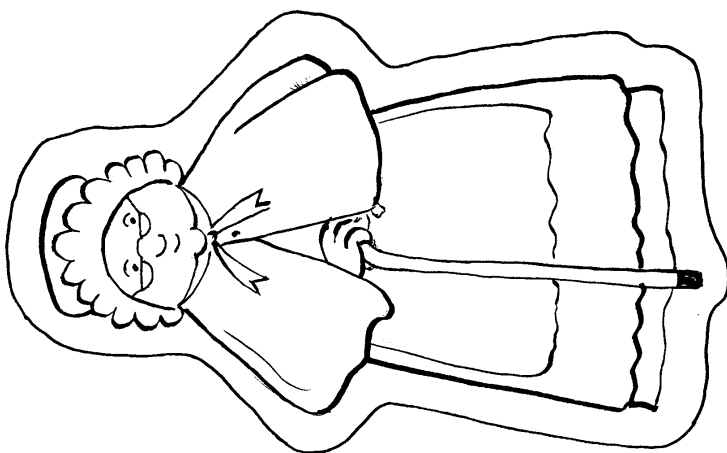
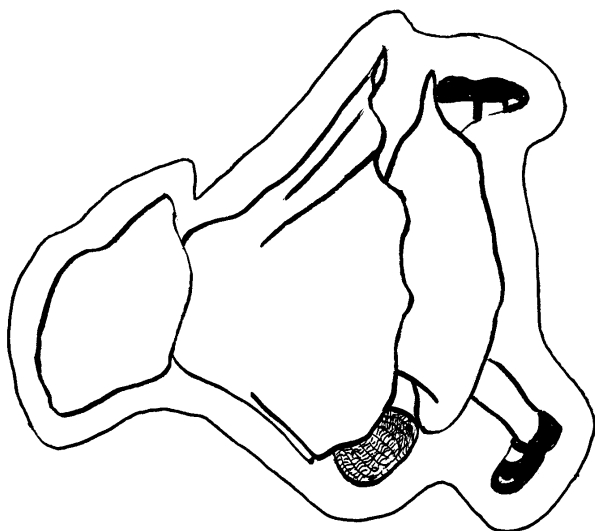
**T3** To notice the difference between spoken and written forms through re-telling known stories; compare oral versions with the written text.

**Further comments and suggestions** – This is a great way for children to hear the differences between a written text and an oral re-telling. It also offers opportunities for assessment, especially if you have managed to record a number of pairs or groups.

Another way of doing this is for you to re-tell the story orally into the recorder, either when you model it, or have one that you made earlier. You can then use this for the discussion at the end.







I like using tape recorders with young children because they have not yet reached the stage of not wanting to hear their own voice. I find that it motivates them and helps them to focus on the task.

### **Story boxes and talk bags and tins**

Story boxes, talk bags and talk tins are all quite similar in that they involve children in exploring items (usually about five or six) that have been placed in them. This in itself is excellent for promoting speaking and listening, especially when open questions are included. However, it can be taken a step further by asking the children to actually make up a story inspired by the items.

I have found that young children in particular can find this very challenging. They will often role-play the items literally by moving them around as in small-world play, rather than making the more abstract connection of using the items as a stimulus to base a story on. When I first tried using story boxes I found that the children in my Year 1 class role-played the characters in their boxes, even although some of the items were inanimate, such as a star and a jar of crystals. They used the items very literally. I was not expecting this because my only experience of using story boxes at that time was from working with adults.

In spite of this I thought it was worth having another go because the children had really enjoyed the activity. They loved exploring the boxes and a lot of discussion and talk was generated. I have included the activity here because although the children found it difficult the outcome was extremely successful and the children exceeded all expectations. With support and encouragement they came up with some cracking ideas and although they did not think of complete stories from their boxes we pooled all the ideas and this led to a whole-class story. There was a lot of talk for writing and eventually a fantasy story was produced that every child had contributed towards. The sense of achievement was tremendous.

#### **Activity 4 – A story-box story**

**Aims** – Speak with clear diction and appropriate intonation, choose words with precision, organise what is said, focus on the main points, take into account the needs of their listeners, sustain concentration, take turns in speaking.

**What to do** – This activity will need to be modelled so the children have a clear understanding of what you are expecting them to do. Place a selection of five to six items that relate to each other in some way in a box for you to share with the children. The items need to have some sort of relationship or theme in order for the activity to work well. The children will be really excited and focused and keen to know what is in the box. Insist that they all sit nicely, and one by one reveal the items.

What you choose to put in the box is up to you. It is a good idea to have worked out your story earlier as it can be quite tricky thinking one up on the spot. This is a good opportunity to work with your TA and show the children how they might collaborate and talk to come up with ideas. Make sure you have met with the TA previously so that they know what to expect.

Tell the children that you are going to use the items to help you make up a story. An example might be as follows: In the box, bag, basket or tin could be a towel (this can be a small hand towel), some sand, a seashell, a ball and a picture of a seahorse, or a plastic toy, a bird's feather, or a plastic toy seagull. Ask the children to suggest what they think the story will be about and they will probably say the sea or the seaside.

An example of what your story could be about follows. It is only a very simple example to give an idea how the items can be used to think up a story.

Two children go to the beach on holiday (towel and sand). While on the beach the children play with the ball, which was special present from someone (ball). Unfortunately the ball is thrown out to sea and goes bobbing off out of reach in the waves. The children are heartbroken because it was a special ball. The seagulls soaring over the sea hear the children wish for their ball back (feather or toy gull). The seagulls tell the children that the seahorses (picture of seahorse or toy) might be able to help but will require a present in return. The children find a beautiful shell, which the seagulls take to the seahorses and sure enough the children's ball is returned (shell).

Explain to the children that they are going to have a go with their own boxes to try to make up a story, like you did, based on the items in their boxes.

You will need to move from group to group in order to support them and encourage them to think of their story.

At the end of the session bring everyone back to discuss how it went.

**Resources required** – A selection of boxes, tins or other containers (how many will depend on how you organise your class; I had five, one for each group), items to go in them. If you really want to include something but can't find an example then use a picture.

**Cross-curricular links** – Literacy.

**When to do it** – As a group activity in the literacy hour.

Use of teaching assistants – to support selected groups, offer ideas and prompts during class discussions.

## **NLS and Foundation Stage objectives**

### **Foundation Stage – Communication, language and literacy**

#### *Language for communication*

Begin to use more complex sentences.

Use language for an increasing range of purposes.

Consistently develop a simple story, explanation or line of questioning.



Listen with enjoyment, and respond to stories, songs and other music, rhymes and poems and make up their own stories, songs, rhymes and poems.

Use a widening range of words to express or elaborate ideas.

Speak clearly and audibly with confidence and control and show awareness of the listener (for example, by their use of conventions such as greetings, 'please' and 'thank you').

Interact with others, negotiating plans and activities and taking turns in conversation.

*Language for thinking*

Talk activities through, reflecting on and modifying what they are doing.

Use talk to connect ideas, explain what is happening and anticipate what might happen next.

Use talk to pretend imaginary situations.

Use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences.

Use talk to organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events.

**Year 1 Term 1**

*Text level*

**T7** To re-enact stories in a variety of ways, e.g. through role-play, using dolls or puppets.

**Year 1 Term 2**

*Text level*

**T7** To discuss reasons for, or causes of, incidents in stories.

**Year 1 Term 3**

*Text level*

**T5** To re-tell stories, to give the main points in sequence and to pick out significant incidents.

**T6** To prepare and re-tell stories orally, identifying and using some of the more formal features of story language.

**Year 2 Term 2**

*Text level*

**T7** To prepare and re-tell stories individually and through role-play in groups, using dialogue and narrative from text.

**PNS objectives – Speaking, listening and learning**

**Year 1 Term 1**

*4. Drama*

To explore familiar themes and characters through improvisation and role-play, e.g. using story boxes and bags of props to create characters.

Link with NLS text objective 7.

#### Year 1 Term 2

##### 5. *Speaking*

To re-tell stories, ordering events using story language, e.g. using different techniques to recall and invent well-structured stories.

Link with NLS text objectives 4 and 5.

##### 7. *Group discussion and interaction*

To take turns to speak, listen to others' suggestions and talk about what they are going to do, e.g. devising simple rules for turn-taking and contributing in groups.

#### Year 2 Term 1

##### 15. *Group discussion and interaction*

To listen to each other's views and preferences, agree the next steps to take and identify contributions by each group member, e.g. learning how to pool views, make decisions and allocate tasks.

#### Year 2 Term 2

##### 17. *Speaking*

To tell real and imagined stories using the conventions of familiar story language, e.g. including relevant detail, keeping the listeners' interest and sustaining an account.

Link with NLS text objective 7.

#### Year 3 Term 2

##### 31. *Group discussion and interaction*

To actively include and respond to all members of the group, e.g. encouraging contributions by use of questions, eye contact and people's names when discussing an issue.

#### Year 3 Term 3

##### 36. *Drama*

To use some drama strategies to explore stories or issues, e.g. working with different techniques to explore key aspects of relationships or situations.

**Further comments and suggestions** – Remember that young children tend to use the items in the boxes literally by role-playing them. They may find it hard to extend their thought process beyond the physical objects to make up an imaginary story based around them. You will need to make sure that they understand they can make up more things, such as other characters, from their imaginations and do not have to stick only with what they find in the box. I found that children with a wide experience of books and stories, and who were articulate and good at expressing themselves, were able to use the items in a more abstract way.

With younger children, I don't think it matters how they use the boxes; it is the development of language and the ability to order, organise and express their thoughts that is important.

It should be mentioned that not all the items have to be used: one or two can be discarded and the actual container can be part of the story if the children so wish. When working with older children you may decide to have boxes containing different items relating to genres such as ghosts, science fiction, fantasy, etc., and expect them to arrive at a story within those genres. This takes the learning process a step further.

When you are deciding what to place in the boxes, think about the story you would make up around the items. If you find it difficult, it is probable that the children are going to find it even more so. The items need to be something the children can relate to and have some experience of, either in their own lives or from their reading or viewing.

On a health and safety note, make sure the items you put in the boxes are not toxic or likely to cause an allergic reaction. Be aware of the hazards of using small items with young children.