

# NARRATIVE THINKING AND STORYTELLING FOR PRIMARY AND EARLY FL/SL EDUCATION

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, mankind has given shape to its own existence, built its own knowledge, and established social contacts through storytelling. The cave paintings of Altamira could well represent the first examples of narrative used to disseminate knowledge. These artists of ancient times most likely produced those illustrations on stone to tell of their lives and transmit the art of hunting. The act of narrating and listening to stories involves, in fact, numerous dimensions: above all emotional, but also cognitive, social and cultural. What do we remember from our childhood if not what we were told through the words and stories of our family, looking through photos of our happiest memories? How do we grow and develop new knowledge if not by embracing the world around us, observing, imitating and, especially, communicating with our fellow human beings? In telling our experiences and listening to the stories of others, we construct meaning, formulating our own personal interpretation of those human experiences which characterize human culture.

Bakhtin's dialogic approach (1979), Bateson's concept of «ecology of mind» (1976), but above all Bruner's concept of «narrative thinking» (1986), lead us to think that storytelling represents much more than an enjoyable and motivating activity to be planned for the classroom, rather a critical resource for generating learning in every field. This is particularly true in the field of foreign or second language (FL/L2)<sup>1</sup> acquisition. In an interview to «The Guardian» (Crace, 2007), Bruner asks:

Why are we so intellectually dismissive towards narrative? Why are we inclined to treat it as rather a trashy, if entertaining, way of thinking about and talking about what we do with our minds? Storytelling performs the dual cultural functions of making the strange familiar and ourselves private and distinctive. If pupils are encouraged to think about the different outcomes that could have resulted from a set of circumstances, they are demonstrating usability of knowledge about a subject. Rather than just retaining knowledge and facts, they go beyond them to use their imaginations to think about other outcomes, as they don't need the completion of a logical argument to understand a story. This helps them to think about facing the future, and it stimulates the teacher too.

Alongside logical thinking, which guides us in the adaptation process of knowledge through mental schemes, that is to say organisational units of memory (Rumelhart, Norman, 1978), Bruner

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between FL (foreign language): the language learned in an institutional environment in one's own country and L2 (second language): the language learned in the country in which it is the mother tongue of the community, will not be considered in this article dealing with learning at an early age, but in the school environment.

hypothesises the existence of narrative thought conceived as a «cognitive mode». In this sense, narrative thought structures and interprets experience, transforming it into narrative, to be told and then shared. In this manner, collective forms of meaning are created (Byatt, 2000), and represent the foundations of the culture of a group: «La realtà non è semplicemente ciò che ogni persona può oggettivamente percepire, ma essa è soprattutto la rappresentazione simbolica di una determinata cultura, senza la quale perderebbe gran parte del suo significato».<sup>2</sup>

Bruner argues that in the life of each individual narrative reorganizes experience through a categorising process. Through this strategy, people are able to organise their own life experiences and embed them in their minds. This organisation creates a more logical and stable vision of reality, allowing individuals to understand and imagine the behaviour of others and to control their own behaviour properly. Our behaviour is therefore guided by the meaning we attribute to reality, and we constantly negotiate with the other members of our culture through language. According to Bruner (1986, p. 12), therefore, there are two modes of thought humans use to construct reality: «One mode, the paradigmatic or logic-scientific one, attempts to fulfil the ideal of a formal, mathematical system of description and explanation. It employs categorisation or conceptualisation and the operations by which categories are established, instantiated, idealised, and related to one another to form a system». The other mode, called «narrative mode», concerns the meaning ascribed to experiences through stories: «It deals in human or humanlike intention and action and the vicissitudes and consequences that mark their course» (p. 13).

The transfer of all of this to the field of learning a new language is of fundamental importance, because storytelling in FL/L2 provides the new pragmatic context: «creando un mondo fantastico per la seconda lingua nella quale il bambino ‘entra’ attraverso un rituale [...] e ne esce con un altro rituale, gli diamo la possibilità di organizzare uno schema di conoscenza per la L2» (Taeschner, 2002, p. 214).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in order to ensure that a story is significant for learning, according to Schank (2001a), it must have two components: it must be told at the right time, exactly when necessary, and told actively, transmitting the passion that characterises it.

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<sup>2</sup> J. BRUNER, R. W. BROWN (1956), *A Study of Thinking*, Wiley, New York, trad. it., *Il pensiero: strategie e categorie*, Roma, Armando, 1969. «Reality isn't just what each person can objectively perceive, but is above all the symbolic representation of a determined culture, without which it would lose much of its meaning.» (translation mine).

<sup>3</sup> «By creating a fantasy world for the second language which the child ‘enters’ through a ritual [...] and comes out of with another ritual, we give him the possibility to organise a scheme of knowledge for L2» (translation mine).

These are the primary characteristics of storytelling which make it an effective strategy for teaching FL/L2 at an early age. Beginning with the concept of «format» by Bruner, this paper will analyse the potential of storytelling as an instrument to gain knowledge of the ‘Other’ (in keeping with the hermeneutic approach for the study of languages) and of reality, perceived and formalised through the language (the theory of embodied language). The technique of storytelling will then be framed within the field of language teaching methodology through CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), illustrating the teaching model of the narrative format as a form of storytelling to teach FL/L2 at an early age.

## II. BRUNER’S FORMAT

The term «format» was used by Bruner (1975a) to identify the micro-situations, habitual and highly predictable, which are constantly repeated in the relationship between child and adult (Sisti, 2013a). According to his first language acquisition theory, such an interaction with others would represent a support mechanism (LASS: Language Acquisition Support System) for the development of the child’s language. To Linguistic Universals (Nature), in which Bruner identifies semantic data that organise reality – revisiting Fillmore’s «Case Grammar» (1968) – one would add, therefore, the influence of external environment (Nurture). The theory affirms that every child has in itself the basis of language from birth. Indeed each speaker can express *who* (Agent) *does* (Verb) *what* (Object) *to whom* (Benefactor) *how* (Instrument) and *where* (Location). Contact with the adult world, during the critical period, therefore, would favour the development of these basic skills into mature language proficiency. There is a cooperation between Nature and Nurture. According to this social interactionist theory of language development, every human being has a birth right of concepts defined as protosemantic universals – the equivalent, as it were, of Chomsky’s Universal Grammar – to which the influence of social interaction in the form of routine formats is added (shared experiences between adult and child in which the same actions are repeated, in the same situations, with verbal exchanges that are very similar in content and linguistic intonation: changing diapers, feeding, falling asleep, etc.). These micro-situations are therefore the terrain from which one creates the intention to communicate: the child experiences discomfort and tries to inform the adult who responds with behaviour that will become, for the child, systematic and predictable. This ritual (defined by Bruner as the «need mode») will be repeated each time the same need presents itself and will solicit the same response. Later, as the child grows, the action of recalling the adult’s attention will be followed by a pause and after the response a new call for attention will follow, developing into something that resembles a conversational exchange («exchange

mode»). With the appearance of the first verbal language, the child will be able to establish a true relationship of mutual communication with the adult organised around a specific task («reciprocal mode»).

For example, the ability to «make demands», designed by Bruner (1983), follows a process that begins from the initial act of indicating an object, the child turning his/her gaze up to the adult, to the explicit request for an object outside of the child's own field of vision. It is a succession that starts with a simple action (extending arm) and develops through the production of a single word or pair of terms, ending with simple sentences, compound sentences and, finally, regarding complete complex sentences where clauses are joined by co-ordinating conjunctions (Taeschner, 1993, p. 26). At three years old, the child already has full command of adult verbal language with all the functions described by Halliday (1975) well-developed.

This development of linguistic competence in the mother tongue can also be retraced in a foreign language, especially if the student is still at an early age, thanks to the methodology of the narrative format, which focuses on the micro-situations that have proven to be fertile ground for the birth of communicative intentions. The idea developed by Taeschner's group was precisely that of rebuilding the same favourable conditions for the development of language in an environment different from that of the home and in a relationship other than the one that exists between mother and child. Therefore, brief interactive situations in the FL class are recreated between the adult (the teacher) and the child (the student) that offer an experience similar to that of the natural acquisition of the L1. These brief situations will be routine formats, such as those studied by Bruner (foreign language used in moments of routine: the greeting, the calling of the roll, etc.) or narrative formats (set of actions linked in a short story according to a predictable sequence that stimulates predictions regarding possible developments), and represent the basis of a methodological approach centred on storytelling, now widely tested in nursery and primary teaching of FL/L2.

### III. THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH

As seen, the acquisition of the mother tongue occurs by focusing on the transmission of content (originally a special need of the child) more than form. Storytelling likewise – even if carried out in LS/L2 – constitutes a teaching practice that exercises the direct use of language not so much in simulated circumstances but in a reality represented by the actual act of the storytelling itself. Students will not have to imagine themselves in a particular situation and will no longer pretend to perform speech acts typical of artificial communication events recreated in the classroom to

practice language forms to be learned. Rather they will express their ideas, their reactions and feelings.

This also responds to the philosophy of the hermeneutic approach proposed by Professor Hans Hunfeld of the Katholische Universität Eichstätt (Germany). Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, represents the theoretical basis of an approach that moves from the assumption that to live in our own society each of us must interpret and be interpreted. Moreover, as suggested by Magnani (2005, p.152), any language learning is by definition hermeneutic «/.../ in quanto finalizzato alla comprensione di un idioma straniero». <sup>4</sup> The novelty is represented by the idea that a different language is not an insurmountable obstacle, considering that even one's fellow countrymen sometimes speak using a language that may be misunderstood or not fully understood. This means accepting the fact that we are all strangers to each other, and we will never be completely understood because the process of interpretation is always heavily influenced by subjective aspects that make it relative and personal. Certainly, using two different languages means applying re-elaborated versions characterised by different cultural models to the same message, thus, further complicating the process yet maintaining similar substance.

These are the first two theoretical 'pillars' of the hermeneutic approach: the normality of the stranger and skeptical hermeneutics. The first pillar sanctions that in our multicultural society, the presence of the stranger is now normal and should be considered an asset allowing the implementation of the expression of intercultural empathy extensively studied by anthropologists. The second leads us to accept the limits of mutual understanding and guards us from easy stereotypes or prejudices. We can see that communication is largely characterised by an only partial understanding that leads us to be more cautious and to consider dissimilarity something to be discovered and not to be judged.

Storytelling can become a key-tool to making this discovery. Indeed, Hunfeld (1990) argues that language is not just a communication tool, but also represents a sort of question in itself. In particular, literary language exercises this function in the most coherent way. The first linguistic experience of foreignness that individuals create in their own culture and in their native language is in fact represented by the encounter with literature. When we listen to a fairy tale or read a story, we enter situations foreign to our lives, living diverse experiences, thinking through the mind of protagonists as we perform their actions:

La lingua della letteratura [...] rappresenta una sorta di appello indirizzato al lettore. Il testo letterario comunica al lettore delle informazioni da rielaborare ma al tempo stesso gli porge anche delle domande

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<sup>4</sup> «...as it aims to understand a foreign language» (translation mine).

[...] In altre parole la lingua della letteratura assume il ruolo di una vera e propria lingua a sé stante che si contrappone in forma interrogativa al lettore e gli permette, per mezzo delle domande che lui stesso formula, di esprimere autonomamente ciò che del testo recepisce e comprende in base alle sue conoscenze pregresse ed alle sue esperienze. (Magnani 2005b, p153)<sup>5</sup>

The third pillar of the hermeneutic approach is therefore represented by the language of literature conceived as a question: beginning with the dialogue, between author, protagonist, and reader. The educational consequences of this vision of language and foreign literature (in all its forms, including those for children) are varied and extraordinarily innovative (Sisti, 2013b). The teacher assumes the role of facilitator, storyteller, and provider of linguistic ‘impulses’ for his/her students. With the hermeneutic approach, literature in general and, in our case, the stories for very young readers in particular take on the main function of a dialogue between the text and the reader and the narrator and the listener. In the format approach, storytelling represents a means which leads us to connect personal experiences to the narrated content, an opportunity to engage with others who, in our case, speak a foreign language.

In this way, teaching loses artificiality because the FL/L2 is used authentically to express content related to a narrative reality that assumes the characteristics of experience and incorporates behavioural patterns, objects, and actions familiar to young learners. Storytelling therefore becomes a tool for sharing experiences and emotions between the users and the protagonists of a story as well as an opportunity to socialise and exchange impressions with peers.

#### IV. THE THEORY OF EMBODIED LANGUAGE

According to Jonassen and Hernandez-Serrano (2002), stories would be «the most natural and powerful system to accumulate and describe experiential knowledge», perhaps because the narrative modifies the structure of the brain in a similar way to that of personal experiences. This seems to be what the theory of embodied language has demonstrated.

Until the ‘60s, in most psycholinguistic studies, language was considered a strictly individual phenomenon, independent of perception, cognition or memory, and only since the early ‘70s have scholars begun to investigate the ‘context’ in which it develops. The context is understood as the physical, linguistic, psychological and social environment in which

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<sup>5</sup> «The language of literature [...] represents a sort of appeal to the reader. The literary text informs the reader of the content to be reworked, yet also poses questions [...] In other words, the language of literature takes the role of a language in its own right that allows the reader, through questions that he/she formulates, to express text content according to his/her prior knowledge and experiences» (translation mine).

communication takes place. Studies by Ochs (1979) and Halliday *et al.* (1965), among others, consider language to be a social behaviour and highlight the enormous influence that context exerts on the syntactic, semantic, and phonological dimensions of language. They promote the idea that the speaker is at the centre of a language learning process which is influenced by his/her own experience. Indeed, the speaker provides the experiential context and becomes a protagonist of the process itself. Going back to the roots of this thinking, represented by the fundamental contribution of John Dewey (1938), and through studies by Piaget (1970) and Lewis (1996) (the *Learning Cycle*), until the more recent theory of *Experiential Learning* by Kolb (1984), many scholars have confirmed the crucial role that direct experience has on learning in general and on the development of language in particular.

Even in language teaching, numerous studies affirm that in the FL/L2, as well as in the mother tongue, a speaker first develops sensory-motor experiences which then assume linguistic signs in the words or phrases that express them. This view of language development was recently confirmed by neuroscience. Through the technique of neuroimaging, it was discovered that «gli esseri umani utilizzano le stesse strutture neuronali con cui esperiscono la realtà (sia dal punto di vista motorio che dal punto di vista sensoriale) anche per comprendere il materiale linguistico, verbi, nomi o frasi che descrivono quelle stesse esperienze» (Buccino, Mezzadri, 2013, p. 5).<sup>6</sup> Hence the theory of embodied language, related to the discovery of mirror neurons (Pulvermüller, Härle, Hummel, 2001), enshrines the direct involvement of the sensorimotor system in linguistic analysis, not only limited to categories such as nouns or verbs of motion. In the field of language teaching, this validates the use of storytelling for the development of linguistic competence in a FL/L2. The foreign language, especially at an early age, can be learned if dropped into specific communicative contexts in which action becomes fundamental to support the new linguistic elements. It is an approach centred on the needs and cognitive development of the learner who can reflect and conceptualise new meanings only from his/her own experiences. Storytelling accompanied by mini-acting, in which learners reproduce the actions narrated using gestures, facial expressions and body movements, then takes on the added value of an experiential model which proves to be indispensable for effective language learning.

## V. CLIL

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<sup>6</sup> «human beings use the same neural structures with which they experience reality (both from the motor point of view and the sensory point of view) to also understand linguistic material, verbs, nouns or phrases that describe the same experiences» (translation mine).

A storytelling approach based on narrative formats may also be related to CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) methodology. Indeed, focusing on the storylines of narrative formats, young learners experience a CLIL environment where the content is represented by the narrative formats themselves, while FL/L2 skills are acquired in a natural way as a by-product of storytelling. In such an environment, in fact, language no longer represents the object of teaching/learning but becomes the story read, heard and dramatized to attract the child's attention. The goal of the lesson is not learning new words, songs or short phrases in a foreign language but to experiment with situations and events that belong to an imaginary world where the class group identifies itself, reliving known experiences and discovering relationships with their pre-knowledge and their own experience. Thanks to its sensorimotor matrix, the game of acting develops language – no matter what language – while the child forgets that he/she is using a different language code from that of the native language. Forgetting to use a foreign language to communicate, and therefore learning to use it in a natural way is one of the main pillars of Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory (1982). In CLIL, there is precise emphasis on natural and spontaneous use of FL/L2 when studying non-linguistic content. This content is often linked to different school disciplines. In our case, it is represented by the stories themselves which, at an early age, take the form of short routines or narrative formats, but can also turn into tales or novels that become short dramas or plays with older students.

Theatre on the other hand has the wonderful peculiarity of turning fiction into reality, making the imaginary tangible and dropping the language into a specific situation. Cangià (1998, p. 202) maintains that while doing theatre in FL/L2:

i locutori parlano veramente la lingua straniera se sono investiti di un ruolo e rivestiti di un costume e del trucco; il tema è racchiuso nella fiaba o nel racconto, ottima occasione di teatralizzazione, adatta ai bambini, interessante e coinvolgente [...]; l'ambientazione o situazione è tradotta egregiamente dalla scenografia e dagli oggetti e traduce a sua volta nelle coordinate spazio-tempo il tema, collocandovi i personaggi-locutori.<sup>7</sup>

When teaching and learning through dramatisation, language is thought of as a means to express meaning, a means to «do things with words» as suggested by Austin (1962). In the case of simple storytelling (oral or written), children are projected into an imaginary world that helps them categorise their own reality. Cangià (2011, p. 281):

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<sup>7</sup> «The speakers truly speak the foreign language if they are invested in a role and dressed up in a costume and makeup; the topic is contained in the fairy tale or story, excellent opportunity for dramatisation, suitable for the children, interesting and engaging [...]; the setting or situation is translated very well by the scenery and the objects and in turn translates the theme into the space-time, by situating the characters/speakers » (translation mine).

Nel caso del teatro la situazione è differente: ciò che figura nel luogo scenico è un 'reale', fatto di oggetti e persone la cui esistenza concreta non è mai messa in dubbio».<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, when we pass from storytelling to acting-out formats we transfer from the 'dream' image to the image that we have made:

La strategia specifica della rappresentazione rimodella a ogni istante la situazione di parola e i rapporti tra i protagonisti. Il teatro mostra, con l'aiuto del linguaggio quotidiano, la dinamica propria dei rapporti umani, quale viene messa in evidenza dalla strategia degli atti di parola. Il teatro affascina soprattutto perché lavora con e per le emozioni. (p. 282)<sup>9</sup>

We are, therefore, talking about a subcategory of CLIL that selects the story narrated as content, a form of CLIL transformed into TLIL: Theatre and Language Integrated Learning (Sisti, 2011).

#### V. PUCK'S STORIES

Storytelling is therefore a functional exercise of language, an instrument of self-knowledge and an empathetic means of stepping into another's shoes. It is an opportunity to 'live the words' by triggering off the same mental structures activated by experience and is ultimately a cathartic activity that allows us to release emotions and relive situations even if narrated in a foreign language, as long as it is used in a natural and spontaneous way. From these theoretical premises, we tested an approach to storytelling called the «format approach» (Taeschner, 1993). Adopted for more than 10 years, in both local pre-primary schools and within a network of pre-primary and primary schools of the Marche region in Italy (LIReMar)<sup>10</sup>, the didactic model is based on a multisensory approach to narrative formats.

As previously mentioned the term 'format' has been borrowed from studies of natural language acquisition. According to Bruner (1975b) a format is a sequence of events in which the previous event allows one to make inferences and presuppositions about the following event. The social interaction which takes place during these routine situations produces language. A major theme in the theoretical framework of Bruner is that learning is an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current/past knowledge/format. The learner selects and transforms information, constructs hypotheses, and makes decisions relying on a cognitive

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<sup>8</sup> «In the case of theatre, the situation is different: that which appears in the scenic place is "real", made up of objects and people whose concrete existence is never questioned» (translation mine).

<sup>9</sup> «The specific strategy of representation remodels, at any moment, the situation of speech and the relationships between the protagonists. The theatre shows, with the help of everyday language, its dynamics of human relationships, which is highlighted by the strategy of utterances. The theatre is especially fascinating because it works with and for the emotions» (translation mine).

<sup>10</sup> The LIReMar (Lingua Inglese in Rete nella regione Marche) group, founded in 1999, was an online network of about 60 kindergartens and primary schools, located in the Marche region in Italy, aiming to promote the teaching/learning of English as a FL among young learners aged 3-7.

structure to do so. Cognitive structures (i.e., schema, mental models) provide meaning and organisation to experiences and allow the individual to 'go beyond the information given'. The format, defined as «a routine of shared experiences between the adult and the child» (Taeschner, 1991, p. 8), was transferred to FL learning by Taeschner. Taeschner began to experiment with this new approach based on both multisensory experience of input and neurological bimodality, the latter emphasising that both the right and the left hemisphere are activated in cognitive processes (Sisti, 2002, pp. 20-23).

According to the communicative theory, we speak because we have the foremost intention to convey a meaning, to send a message to someone, then we fill this meaning with content and we choose a form to express it. Therefore, we transform the initial intention into words and organise them into a certain sentence (we choose some lexical and morphosyntactic categories) in order to express the intention and make it understandable for our listener. But where does the motivation to speak in English come from? Why should a little child speak a foreign language with his/her teacher?

During the acquisition of the mother tongue, the intention to speak and communicate with the caregiver arises from the child's primary needs. He/she may be hungry, thirsty or he/she might need to be cuddled or cleaned, etc. Therefore, to attract the adult's attention, he/she starts with the first forms of proto-language, which are crying or laughing, then little by little he/she starts to produce the first syllables and then the first words which will develop into gradually more and more complex sentences. Transferring Bruner's routine formats – related to the natural process of mother tongue acquisition – to FL learning, Taeschner invented a new approach based on narrative format recounting, in order to trigger, in these young learners, the same learning processes which were activated during the acquisition of the L1. What do the format approach to FL learning and the mother tongue acquisition process have in common?

From a cognitive point of view, the intention to speak is generated, as in the mother tongue, through previously shared experiences (that is routine) since the same narrative format is repeated 15 times (in different ways as we will see) with the same class. The story is told and re-enacted several times and, with the help of illustrations, key sentences and vocabulary are practiced. As young learners become competent with the language, more and more is added and they start to make inferences, predict the events and produce the related sentences. They gradually become comfortable speaking the FL thanks to the reassuring affective learning environment created by the teacher. The class is kept lively, children express themselves freely and enjoy themselves. The activities are perceived as a game. Pupils are eager to continue their communication in English with the teacher and their classmates, and in doing so, they learn new language items and expressions.

Therefore, from a psychological point of view, this didactic model attempts to re-create the same affective relationship which exists between a child and his/her caregiver. For this reason, the teacher should constantly exchange glances with each pupil and try to establish a one-on-one conversational turn-taking. First the teacher speaks and then all the children.

Furthermore, from a linguistic point of view – as in mother tongue acquisition – in the format approach teachers begin to elicit the repetition of single words and continue to short clauses and simple sentences. Consequently, students develop a so-called *interlanguage*: which is «an emerging linguistic system progressively acquired by a learner of a foreign language (or L2) who has not yet become fully proficient, but who is approximating the target language» (Selinker, 1972). The L2 interlanguage has many features in common with the mother tongue emerging linguistic code. Therefore, within this pedagogical framework the various phases of a lesson are:

1. Storytelling and mini acting-out;
2. Dramatic reading of the illustrated booklet;
3. Mini-musical;
4. Added activities.

The teacher acts out the narrative format in English, playing the voices of the various characters. Thanks to miming, children learn about key aspects, and in a circle they repeat what they hear while miming actions and saying words together with their teacher. This favours correct pronunciation and the understanding of the story. Afterwards, the teacher reads aloud the same story from an illustrated booklet and shows the pictures to the class, which then takes an active part in the storytelling and provides linguistic chunks that the teacher pretends to have temporarily forgotten. Following this, the process involves a musical in which the teacher and pupils sing and act out the main events of the narration again. After many repetitions of this sequence of activities, when the children are completely familiar with the characters and the story line, the teacher suggests various tasks, asking questions about the illustrations, making links between the different scenes of the story and children's everyday experiences and organising playful activities.

Consequently, the material related to each single narrative format in *Puck's stories* (Sisti, 2010) consists of the script of the dramatised story – including stage directions in combination with mimicry, gestures and facial expressions – a storybook with the pictures and the text of the story, and both the sound track and the lyrics of the musical based on the format. This material is given to would-be kindergarten and primary school teachers who attend our Master degree teacher training course «ICLILBA: Inglese e didattica CLIL per bambini».

The course is an online course tailored to a specific group of learners, including kindergarten and primary school teachers who use Puck formats to teach English as a FL to young learners or those who are willing to use that approach. From a linguistic point of view, the would-be teachers are absolute beginners or learners at the Breakthrough (A1) level of the Common European Framework. The course was designed by a team of university teachers and experts (a musician, a graphic designer and some experienced kindergarten teachers) both Italian and English mother-tongue, from the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Urbino. In addition, the material used in the course had been previously used by students and teachers from about 60 kindergartens and primary schools, located in the Marche region in Italy, over the last 10 years.<sup>11</sup>

When planning our ICLILBA course, we tried to combine the positive features of both online and face-to-face FL courses. In order to meet our teachers' needs, the course was implemented within a blended learning framework with only 20 classroom hours and the rest constituted by online lessons, activities and individual study. The programme consists of three main modules. Two of them deal with EFL methodology and the third one – containing six units – devoted to promoting the acquisition of the basics of the English language.

The face-to-face classroom instruction provides students with theoretical and practical knowledge of the e-learning platform (Moodle) used to deliver the distance-learning Master programme, including the opportunity for learners to socialise and get to know each other. Moreover, students are trained to create learning objects through the use of smart boards and to improve their teaching techniques, applying the pedagogical framework learnt in the online course: namely the format model within a CLIL environment.

In summary, the course has three main objectives: 1) to provide a solid theoretical and practical knowledge of the FL teaching methodology for young learners; 2) to improve students' proficiency in English and 3) to present English teaching material suitable for pre-primary age groups. Such material (constituted by six short Puck's stories) has also been used as a basis for the third linguistic module which consists of six units focusing on the adventures of a child, Puck, and his family. As the main character, Puck is put in the shoes of a garden gnome, a ghost, a pirate, a cowboy and a pilot, and the pupils, imagining to be Puck, live out the different adventures with him as recounted in the stories.

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<sup>11</sup> The online course can be accessed at the following website:  
[http://www.uniurb.it/it/portale/?mist\\_id=20&lang=IT&tipo=IST&page=178&aa=&id=1605222](http://www.uniurb.it/it/portale/?mist_id=20&lang=IT&tipo=IST&page=178&aa=&id=1605222).

Since the course aims to provide kindergarten and primary school teachers with basic grammar rules, lexical sets and pragmatic skills of the English language, in each learning unit the student is requested to carry out the following activities:

1. *a pre-reading exercise* (to elicit predictions about the story to be told and present key vocabulary items);
2. *a reading comprehension exercise* (based on the story script);
3. *the study of a language bank* (with lexical and grammar summaries based on the items dealt with in the unit) followed by some different types of *self-evaluation tests* such as open dialogues, gap filling, multiple choice, matching, etc.;
4. *listening comprehension exercises* based on the musical and on a simulated dialogue dealing with the topics of the story. In particular, the trainee teachers are invited to listen to a conversational exchange between a pupil and a teacher and then are required to provide the missing parts of a similar dialogue on the same topic, playing the role of the would-be teacher. They may record their oral answers, listen to them and send them in written form to the tutor for correction;
5. *creative writing exercises* (open-answer exercises to be sent to the tutor for correction).

Moreover, under the name of *Linguistic laboratory*, a series of more complex linguistic tasks are presented in each unit:

- *Librivox*: listening comprehension of a brief story and writing activity to be chosen from a range of different options: 1. write a summary of the story; 2. tell the same story from a different point of view; 3. invent a new ending; 4. analyse the story according to the roles indicated by Propp (2000) (good/bad; hero-antagonist, etc.); 5. summarise its moral; 6. rewrite the story changing the epoch/setting of the story;
- *Culture and civilisation*: reading comprehension exercises based on a text dealing with a cultural topic (to be sent to the tutor for correction);
- *Web Quest*: guided search on the Internet with a specific task leading to the production of a text;
- *Invent a story*: activity carried out in groups (using synchronous text-based chats) leading to the creation of an original story exploiting the pictures given as input;
- *Open dialogues*: listening and completion (oral and written) of an open dialogue with personal information, following a given model, to be sent to the tutor for correction.

Within an e-learning course enriched by collaborative activities, the use of up-to-date technological tools such as forums, wikis and synchronous audio and video chat sections is required. In fact, learners should be provided with the opportunity to train socio-pragmatic oral

skills as well in order to compensate the lack of face-to-face interaction. In forums, students may ask questions about the topics dealt with in the current module and discuss the threads suggested by the teacher. They may compare their ideas and experiences and help each other with their study. Sometimes they meet in a more informal virtual environment to chat freely without the supervision of their instructor, to share doubts, satisfactions or fears related to the course or their private lives. This is also the virtual learning environment where students meet for synchronous collaborative content creation tasks such as written exercises aimed at inventing a story (an activity done generally in groups of 4/5 learners). However, the most structured collaborative meeting is the chat lesson, a virtual synchronous lesson during which the teacher can discuss a topic with the entire class.

In virtual classrooms, however, trainee teachers must do all of their work only through the channel of writing and they lack oral conversational exchange sessions. Hence *Skype*, introduced during the second edition of the course, has become a particularly effective tool for oral language instruction. Students have been enthusiastic about the possibility of actually speaking with our mother-tongue instructors. They immediately perceived the great opportunity presented to practice the spoken language informally and in authentic discussions about experiences common to all of them (lesson topics, exercises, language teaching experiences, etc.). As well, this instrument allowed them to discuss broader cultural and social topics such as films, novels, current affairs, TV shows, etc. The input provided in the course rose from the need to provide content that could be reused by future teachers in their own professional contexts as well as to provide texts that would motivate mature learners interested in broadening their studies and enriching their socio-cultural knowledge.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Within this theoretical framework, future teachers can be provided with linguistic and methodological training targeted to help them use storytelling effectively. The storytelling technique should consist of a longer phase of acting out formats with very young learners since they need movement and gestures to understand and acquire new language. However, with older learners, the short narrative formats may become longer stories, first listened to and then dramatised in role-playing activities or transformed into proper theatrical performances to be presented in front of a public. The story will preserve its magic and through it any kind of knowledge can be taught. Moreover when the story is told in a foreign language, students will have the double advantage of improving their language proficiency and enjoying the content (within a CLIL environment). Entire curricula were built based on learning through simulation supported by just-in-time story telling. In

an article in *eLearn Magazine*, Schank (2007) describes a Story Centered Curriculum (SCC) as «a carefully designed apprenticeship-style learning experience in which the student encounters a planned sequence of real-world situations constructed to motivate the development and application of knowledge and skills in an integrated fashion». A ‘fashion’ which aims to create a form of instruction that not only allows us to make a living but which teaches us how to live.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> President John Adams stated: «There are two types of education [...] one should teach us how to make a living, and the other how to live».

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