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Featured Articles: Gabriela Mistral's Poetic Retellings of Four Classic Fairy Tales • Thinking and Caring Boys Go Vegan: Two European Books that Introduce Vegan Identity to Children • Big Nose, New Emile, and Mina's Revolutionary Children's Literature • Tooran Mirhadi and Jella Zeman: Two Women, Two Continents, One Aspiration • Manuela Bacelar and Her Groundbreaking Work in the Field of Portuguese Picturebooks

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Let's Tell a Tale: Storytelling Events in English L2

by ELISA BERTOLDI

In Italy, cultural organizations and associations promote children's literature and the pleasure of reading through storytelling initiatives. These initiatives support reading from very early childhood to adolescence, starting from parental storytelling and gradually proceeding to autonomous engagements with books. The initiatives are organized and take place in libraries, theaters, cultural centers, and schools where volunteer narrators and librarians run open-access storytelling events based on books for children or adolescents (*Nati per Leggere*, *Crescere Leggendo*, *Youngster*). To cater to the many different languages used in Italy and to promote inclusion through activities and initiatives that are relevant at the intercultural level for children, local libraries in Italy also organize storytelling events in languages other than Italian.

For many years, the collaboration between the University of Udine and the Municipal Library "Vincenzo Joppi" in Udine (Northeast Italy) has given rise to initiatives that promote plurilingualism through children's literature. A few years ago, a lecturer of the University of Udine, Maria Bortoluzzi, and the librarians of the main municipal library decided to offer some storytelling events in English as a second language (from now on *English L2*) in the main library of the town. For the children and the narrators, English is a foreign language. The main aim was to promote the acquisition of English L2 through narrative and informal modalities in libraries as significant and familiar contexts for children. Thanks to the local librarians, teachers, and educators, a series of storytelling meetings called "Let's Tell a Tale" was organized. The events in English L2 have been taking place in the town libraries and focus on children from four to eight years old. The volunteer narrators have been offering to little boys and girls the opportunity to listen to stories in English inspired by books for children. The initiative promotes English acquisition not only as a second language but also as a multicultural means to offer a wider perspective on children's literature in languages different from the native languages. The events have been taking place in recent years at the children's section

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of the Municipal Library of Udine, and they are based mainly on picture-books of stories in English.

In June 2018, regional funding resulted in the initiative “Let’s Tell a Tale” being transformed into a research project of the Udine University entitled “Storytelling in English L2 for Young Learners and Adolescents in Informal Contexts of Acquisition: Innovative and Inclusive Approaches for Local Library Networks.” The project (directed by Maria Bortoluzzi, Udine University) is organized in collaboration with the librarians of the Children’s Section of the Municipal Library of Udine, led by Tiziana Danna. I (Elisa Bertoldi) am involved in the project as a research assistant.

My role is to identify best practices and effective actions to support students from nursery, primary, and middle school in their approach to English L2 through narration used informally in extra-school contexts such as libraries.

The initiative “Let’s Tell a Tale” has been extended to four district libraries of the Udine area. The project is also used to conduct qualitative research about the use of children’s literature in informal contexts to approach English L2 in an effective, emotionally positive, and motivating way. This gave me the opportunity to organize and supervise sixteen storytelling events from October 2018 to May 2019. The local libraries that have been chosen to host “Let’s Tell a Tale” 2018-2019 share some common characteristics: even though they are quite small in terms of space, they have a large catchment area, and they are not yet equipped with a multi-lingual section for children.

The decision to host these events in the district libraries was also aimed to reach a wider number of parents and caregivers in order to disseminate the importance of giving children the opportunity of an early approach to a second language through literature. Recent scientific research in the field of second language acquisition has demonstrated the extraordinary advantages of acquiring and learning languages different from

the native tongue especially, but not exclusively, at a young age. Being able to use a second language offers remarkable advantages at neurological, cognitive, and sociolinguistic levels through adaption to communicative contexts, acquisition of additional metalinguistic competences, and flexibility in adopting intercultural attitudes and practices. From very early childhood, we start developing the ability to listen to stories and understand them in our native language or in a second language. Listening to a story fosters the development of verbal and communicative competencies and social and intercultural skills. Storytelling represents a fundamental strategy in second language teaching as it stimulates creativity, facilitates comprehension, and raises awareness of the complexity and variety of communicative contexts.



The Narrators of "Let's Tell a Tale" 2018-2019 Edition

For the storytelling events of "Let's Tell a Tale," the volunteer narrators are the students of the teacher education section of the University of Udine. These students help little girls and boys discover English through narration, picturebooks, and silent books. Each event lasts one hour and the storytelling session is followed by workshops in which children can create crafts and do activities connected to the topics and characters of the storytelling event. The main objective of "Let's Tell a Tale" is creating contexts for communication and stimulating creativity, imagination, and motivation to use English as a second language. Narrators use children's picturebooks as frames for promoting inclusive communicative modalities and cognitive flexibility in language acquisition.

The aspects connected to narration deserve great attention: the appropriate choice of children's books, techniques and strategies for storytelling, good practices for interaction, and group dynamics management during storytelling events are fundamental. To plan their events and be effective, volunteer narrators have the opportunity to participate in training workshops on children's literature and storytelling workshops at the university. By taking part in the workshops, students can expand their knowledge in the field of children's literature and improve their competences as storytellers.



Selected Books for Storytelling Sessions

The first step in the organization of "Let's Tell a Tale" 2018-2019 edition was selecting books for each storytelling event. In order to give continuity to the whole initiative, the best solution was to choose a theme to select books linked by a common topic. This year's edition focuses on the theme of nature and animals, allowing children to approach a complex, current, and extremely relevant issue such as the relation between humans and the environment.

In order to choose stories suitable to the very young age of the audience (from four to eight years old), all the sixteen books selected are picturebooks; some of them are wordless books, which allows children to make meaning from illustrations even if they are pre-readers in English L2. By listening to stories like *Tree*, *Seasons Come*, *Seasons Go*, children can learn to more attentively observe the changes in the environment around them. Narrators show children how inspiring it could be to look at a clear sky through the pages of *How to Catch a Star* and *Little Cloud* and how amazing it could be to live an adventure in natural environments with *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* or *Flashlight*. Not less important is that children can feel how deep and touching the relationship with animals and nature can be through the illustrations of wordless books such as *Wave* and *Flora and the Penguin*. The initiative "Let's Tell a Tale" offers children a sheltered environment in which they can explore complex aspects of life. English as a second language offers boys and girls the opportunity to face these themes from a new point of view and understand their global relevance.



Children's Feedback

The storytelling events of “Let’s Tell a Tale” are planned in uncertainties: narrators do not know how many children will participate each time, how old they will be, or whether they have special educational needs, so flexibility is a fundamental requirement in planning both the storytelling session and the follow-up workshops. The initiative, up till now, involved approximately nine or ten children for each session, which is a suitable number considering the size of the libraries. To understand if the event has been effective, I ask children for feedback at the end of each session. On a magnetic whiteboard, they place happy-face magnets or sad-face magnets over three drawings that represent the narrator, the book, and the workshop. Children’s feedback has so far been mostly positive. A most interesting aspect of the events concerns the unexpected participants. It happens frequently that children come to the libraries with their families and their little brothers or sisters. Two-year-old children and even a nine-month-old baby took part in the events, and surprisingly, they listened to the stories very attentively, observing the images of the books and paying attention to the narrators. The official information of the library gives four to eight as the age range of participants.

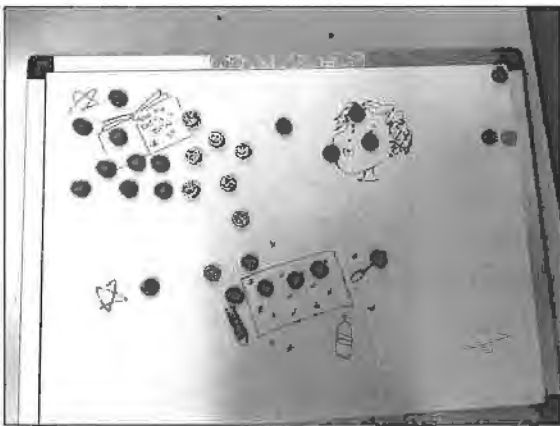


Open-Access Online Resources

Volunteer narrators, but also teachers, librarians, and educators, will be able to use guidelines and resources produced and developed during the storytelling events in the libraries through the storytelling thematic group in the open-access professional community for teaching and learning

English, Yell & Tell. The community is part of the platform LearnWeb, developed by the L3S Research Center of the Leibniz University in Hannover; it is a virtual environment for research and collaboration that allows sharing and discussing resources and practices for language teaching and learning. The online community offers resources, bibliographical references, tips, ideas, downloadable materials, and examples of the use of children’s literature for storytelling events in informal L2 contexts for nonexpert narrators. It also allows access to collect and share digital materials and resources based on children’s literature (videos, audio

files, worksheets, pictures, posters, flashcards) created for and during the events in the libraries. All the materials and activities developed during the initiative “Let’s Tell a Tale” are available on the platform in the storytelling thematic group and can be used as open-access materials. To access the Yell & Tell community and explore the resources, we invite storytellers, teachers, librarians, educators, and parents to follow the instructions available in the Yell Blog (yell.uniud.it) and join the *Storytelling Group*.



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Further Online Resources

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- Bilingualism Matters. "About Us." www.bilingualism-matters.ppls.ed.ac.uk.
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- YELL blog. yell.uniud.it
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