

## Adapting Stories for Teaching English to Young Learners: A Brain-Friendly Learning Perspective

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### Abstract

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*This study aims to elaborate the way of adapting stories for teaching English to young learners with specific reference to brain-friendly learning. Having analysed both peculiarities of stories for children and the philosophy of brain-friendly learning theory the researcher adapted four original stories. In order to statistically prove their effectiveness a control and an experimental group were formed. The students from the control group were taught through usual reading passages whereas the students from the experimental group were given the stories adapted by the researcher. Pre-tests and post-tests were applied in both groups. The tests were processed with IMB SPSS 21.1 and a t-test analysis was conducted. The findings indicated that the students from the experimental group had improved their knowledge of English more than the students from the control group. Consequently, the use of stories adapted with regard to brain-friendly learning has a positive impact on learners' proficiency.*

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**Keywords:** storytelling, adaptation, young learners, brain-friendly learning

### Introduction

Teaching English to children has become very important in recent years due to the introduction of primary English Language Teaching (ELT) worldwide. The crucial questions here are: How to teach English to young learners more effectively? What techniques should be used for teaching a foreign language to children? Do these techniques differ from those for adults?

It is well known that children acquire languages much more quickly and, as a rule, with much less effort than adults do. Children tend to acquire a foreign language, not just to learn it. They are not busy with learning vocabulary and grammar structures in order to use them later like adults do. Thus, children are a particular type of learners demanding a specific approach to teaching them. For instance, studying usual reading passages is not fully suitable to children. Reading stories, to the contrary, is a much more effective way of teaching English to young learners. As a matter of fact, many instructors start to include reading authentic or adapted stories in their classes. However, authentic stories do not always provide for comprehensible input since young learners may not fully understand original texts. As for adapted stories, their teaching effectiveness depends on the way they have been adapted. Here comes brain-friendly learning (BFL) theory. BFL theory is about knowing how the brain works in order to create a suitable environment for successful learning. The beliefs of BFL theory especially suit children and meet their needs. Furthermore, the principles of BFL can make a significant contribution to adapting stories for young learners.

Much research was carried out on using storytelling in English classes, criteria for stories being used in the L2 classroom and benefits of brain-friendly learning. However, practically no researchers focused their attention on the ways of adapting stories according to the criteria suggested. The need for research in this field resulted in the present study. Thus, the present study aims to elaborate the way of adapting stories for young learners with regard to the philosophy of BFL and to examine the effectiveness of stories adapted in that way.

### 1. Literature Review

Young learners are children aged from seven to twelve years old (Slatterly & Willis, 2003). Young learners possess certain characteristics that distinguish them from adults.

According to Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002), young learners are different from older learners because children have a lot of physical energy and need to be physically active. They are emotionally excitable and have a wide range of emotional needs. Young learners get bored easily. Children learn more slowly and forget things more quickly than adults do. Another important peculiarity of young learners is that they are excellent mimics. (Adapted from Brewster, Ellis and Girard 2002, p. 27). Teachers should take into consideration these peculiarities since it is necessary to adapt teaching strategies and styles according to age characteristics. Activities designed for young learners should correspond to their particular features.

When we speak about teaching a foreign language to young learners, it is also necessary to consider the peculiarities of their second-language acquisition. The most relevant point in children's second-language acquisition is the necessity of comprehensible input. In other words, it is necessary to use the target language in such a way that message is always understood by students, even if separate words may not be familiar to them (Met & Lorenz, 1989). According to many researchers (Krashen, 2002; Zdorenko & Paradis, 2007; Muñoz, 2010), more effective language acquisition occurs when the input is meaningful, interesting and comprehensible. Using stories is one of the ways of providing children with both comprehensible and interesting input. Stories allow the teacher to use an acquisition-based methodology by language input that is slightly above the level they are expected to produce (Ellis & Brewster, 2014).

In fact, storytelling is considered one of the most efficient and motivating ways for teaching a foreign language to young learners (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Cameron, 2005; Loukia, 2006; Steinbeck, 2004). Ellis and Brewster (2014) claim that stories enrich students' learning experience and help to develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language. Stories enhance learners' imagination and relate fantasy with children's real world. Stories allow children to play with ideas and feelings and to think about issues that are important and relevant for them. Since children enjoy reading stories over and over again, stories provide a good opportunity for recycling and reinforcing language items already learnt. (Adapted from Ellis and Brewster 2014, p. 6 – 7)

However, not any story is suitable for young learners. If teachers want their learners to benefit from reading a story, this story should possess certain qualities. Loukia (2006) mentions the following characteristics of stories for young learners:

1. Appropriate language level (appropriate vocabulary, grammar structures)
2. Content (interesting, fun, motivating, memorable, encouraging participation)
3. Visuals (attractive, potential to work with, appropriate size)
4. Motivation (developing imagination, arousing curiosity, drawing on personal experience)
5. Language learning potential (skills development, language practice, recycling, prediction)
6. Potential in terms of learning other subjects, target/other culture.

(Adapted from Loukia 2006, p. 28)

When adapting stories for young learners, it can be helpful to use some principles of BFL. BFL is about such a learning process when peculiarities of brain work have been taken into consideration to provide more natural conditions for learning (Fletcher, 2004; Sousa, 2009; Prince, 2005; Cave, Ludwar, & Williams, 2005). Among the most important aspects of BFL that can be beneficial for adaptation of stories are emotions, motivation, memory and thematic instruction.

According to Caine et al. (2005), good learning engages feelings, therefore, emotions are a form of learning. Emotions drive attention, meaning and memory. Stories are a useful tool for creating positive emotions, since young learners usually associate stories with enjoyment and interest. Stories adapted for young learners should be characterized by a high degree of enjoyment and general emotional tone (Cameron, 2005).

As young learners have a constant need for stories, they are highly motivated to read them. Again, a story should be adapted so that children would be eager to find meaning in the story since the search for the meaning is innate. If children find meaning they are rewarded through their ability to understand the foreign language. If they do not understand they are motivated to try to improve their ability to understand (Nagy, 2002).

Emotions directly influence memory. Hence, young learners remember things better if these things provoke some emotions (Fletcher & Westcombe, 2010). The teacher should keep learners emotionally involved in every activity. New information should also appeal to learners' background information to make steady interconnections in the brain.

When selecting a story for adaptation, it is logical to choose a story with a familiar plot and characters or at least with familiar situations (Shin, 2006). Then, children will be able to link new information with their prior knowledge. Moreover, the input will be more comprehensible.

The prior knowledge is also a basis for thematic instruction. Patterning or chunking information for thematic instruction helps learners to sort new information in a way that has meaning (Cave et al., 2005). This provides for greater internalization of this information (Wagmeister & Shifrin, 2000). Storytelling can be a good base for thematic instruction when the story itself and the pre- and the post-reading activities are organized around some key themes.

Thus, adapting a story for teaching English to young learners is a complicated process involving various aspects. The main purpose of the study is to elaborate the way of an effective adaptation with regard to BFL. There are several research questions based on the purpose of the study:

1. What are the peculiarities of effective adaptations designed for young learners?
2. What principles of brain-friendly learning should be taken into consideration when adapting stories for children?
3. Are the stories adapted with regard to BFL philosophy really effective in teaching English to young learners?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1 Design**

The experimental study aims to examine the effectiveness of using stories, adapted with regard to BFL, on young learners' knowledge of English. In order to statistically prove the proposed hypothesis experimental and control groups were formed among young learners of private English language school "Clever" (Saratov, Russia). The students from the control group were given usual reading passages in their English classes, whereas the students from the experimental group were taught through the adaptations made with regard to BFL theory. The instruction period lasted four weeks. The students were given a pre-test and a post-test to evaluate their progress.

### **2.2 Participants**

Experimental and control groups were formed among young learners aged between 7 – 12 attending English classes at private English language school "Clever" (Saratov, Russia).

The control group was formed of the learners from two groups. Control group "A" consisted of 10 learners with pre-A1 level. Control group "B" consisted of 11 students with A1 level. The experimental group was formed of the students from other two groups. Experimental group "A" consisted of 9 students with pre-A1 level. Experimental group "B" consisted of 11 students with A1 level. Thus, there were 21 students in the control group and 20 students in the experimental group.

### **2.3 Instruments**

Pre-tests and post-test were designed for the control and the experimental groups. One pre-test and one post-test were prepared for pre-A1 level students. One pre-test and one post-test were prepared for A1 level students. The pre-tests and the post-test were designed according to the requirements for Young Learners Cambridge Exams.

### **2.4 Procedure**

Before the instruction period four classical stories were selected for adaptation: "The Jungle Book", "Jack and the Beanstalk", "Aladdin", and "Pinocchio".

"The Jungle Book" and "Jack and the Beanstalk" were adapted for pre-A1 level (Starters). Both the grammar structures and the vocabulary used in the stories correspond to young learners' knowledge of the language at this level of proficiency. "Aladdin" and "Pinocchio" were adapted for A1 level (Movers). The grammar structures and the vocabulary used in these stories correspond to young learners' knowledge of the language at A1 level of proficiency.

At the beginning of the instruction period the pre-tests were carried out in both the experimental and the control groups. The results of the tests were processed with IBM SPSS 21.0. In order to determine whether two sets of data – the results of the experimental and the results of the control group – were significantly different from each other, a t-test was conducted.

The instruction period lasted four weeks. During the instruction period the learners from the experimental group were given usual reading passages in their English classes, whereas the learners from the experimental group were taught through the stories adapted with regard to BFL theory.

After a four-week instruction the post-tests were applied in the control and the experimental groups. A t-test was conducted in order to define whether there was a significant difference or not between the results of the control and the experimental groups.

### **3. Data Analysis**

The tests were analysed quantitatively using such programmes as Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS 21.0. For the analysis of the pre- and post-tests, students' scores were entered into the Microsoft Excel by the researcher to calculate the mean scores of each student. Then the data obtained were entered into IBM SPSS programme. First, the reliability and validity of the data were proved by the analysis on IBM SPSS. Then, the t-test was conducted both for the pre-tests and the post-test in the control and the experimental groups. The t-test was carried out in order to evaluate students' progress and to find out whether there was difference between the scores of the experimental and the control groups.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

The study has three research questions. First two questions are intended to reveal important characteristics of adaptations designed for young learners since the researcher considered these peculiarities while adapting the original stories in an effective way. The third question is directly connected to the experimental part of the study aimed at proving the effectiveness of the adaptations made. Thus, the results and the interpretation will be given under two headings.

#### **1. What are the peculiarities of effective adaptations designed for young learners? What principles of brain-friendly learning should be taken into consideration when adapting stories for children?**

It was relevant for the researcher to define some crucial characteristics of adaptations designed for young learners in order to adapt four original stories more effectively.

At the first stage, it was necessary to choose original stories for adaptation. First of all, the researcher chose quite famous stories in order to provide children with familiar plots and characters. The learners had the opportunities to make connections between their background information about the stories they had read or listened to in the mother tongue and new information they had got in the L2 classroom. This caters for peculiarities of memory functioning and provides young learners with comprehensible input as well. Some criteria suggested by Steinbeck (2004) were also taken into consideration, for instance, the stories chosen had the potential to be action-oriented and personal after adaptation. The final adaptations are full of action and make use of familiar characters and situations.

While adapting the stories the researcher was bearing in mind various suggestions made by other researchers. The content of the final versions of the stories is interesting, motivating and arousing curiosity. The adaptations have potential in terms of learning, namely, potential for prediction and guessing activities, personalization technique, vocabulary recycling, etc. (Loukia, 2006) The plots of the adaptations are not too detailed and have a clear structure (Steinbeck, 2004). There is the balance between the narrative and the dialogues (Cameron, 2005) that gives an opportunity for acting out some scenes from the story and learning language patterns.

The researchers considered students' levels of proficiency as well. Both the grammar structures and the vocabulary used in the stories correspond to young learners' knowledge of the language at their levels of proficiency (Loukia, 2006; Cameron, 2005). Grammar presented in the stories had already been learnt or was being learnt at the moment of instruction. The vocabulary of the stories comprises both words and phrases learnt before and new language. Besides, the percentage of new vocabulary is lower than that of old one (Steinbeck, 2004). The unknown words, which may cause difficulties when reading the story, are explained with the help of small pictures, given at the bottom of the page.

These measures facilitate the learning of new vocabulary and give the opportunity to recycle vocabulary learnt and raise learners' motivation to read the story. The high proportion of unknown words and structures may make young learners feel frustrated and lead them to lose interest in reading.

The rich illustrations accompanying the stories also stimulate better understanding of the input. Furthermore, the pictures satisfy young learners' need for visualizing (Fletcher, 2004).

Memorizing of new vocabulary goes more smoothly since learners make steady associations between words and pictures and new vocabulary is stored in the long-term memory. The vocabulary of the stories is grouped around certain topics, thus, thematic instruction is provided as well. The stories can be used as an extra aid when teaching particular vocabulary, such as family, animals, the body, etc. The vocabulary used in context is easily perceived, memorized and retained because learners deal with language in use, not separate words (Wagmeister & Shifrin, 2000).

The post-reading activities are aimed at checking comprehension, recycling old vocabulary and learning new vocabulary presented in the stories and giving context for speaking. The activities were designed according to international requirements in order to prepare students for possible exams in English for young learners. The activities are richly illustrated which excludes the need for the L1 use. Learners are supposed to use different techniques when fulfilling the tasks. Learners match the pictures and the words, colour the pictures according to the code, draw small pictures, etc. The activities designed cater for different learner types and involve different representational systems (Harmer, 2008; Fletcher & Westcombe, 2010; Gilakjani, 2012). What is more, learners enjoy such activities and are highly motivated.

Hence, the researcher adapted four stories for using them in teaching English to young learners. The researcher took into consideration the most relevant characteristics of stories for children and benefitted from BFL theory beliefs in order to get adaptations being effective in terms of teaching and learning.

## **2. Are the stories adapted with regard to BFL philosophy really effective in teaching English to young learners?**

The tests were designed, applied and analysed in order to answer this question. First, the pre-test scores were processed with IBM SPSS 21.0. The following results were obtained: the average score of the experimental group before the instruction is 81,2; whereas the average score of the control group is 81,52 (Table 1). The t-test (Table 2) has indicated that the difference between two sets of data is insignificant, since  $p > 0,05^*$  ( $p = 0,932$ ). What is more, the results are practically the same as the mean of  $p$  is nearly 1. It is possible to conclude that before the instruction both experimental and control groups showed similar results. In other words, it can be assumed that the learners' knowledge of English in both groups was almost the same before the instruction period.

After the instruction period the post-tests were analysed as well. According to the results, the average score of the experimental group after the instruction is 87,2; whereas the average score of the control group is 82,00 (Table 3). The t-test (Table 4) indicated that the difference between two sets of data is not significant either, since  $p > 0,05^*$  ( $p = 0,133$ ). Despite the fact that there is no much difference between two groups according to the t-test, the mean of  $p$  is much higher in the first t-test. The higher the mean of  $p$  is, the less significant the difference between two sets of data is. In other words, taking into consideration that in the first t-test  $p = 0,932$ ; and in the second t-test  $p = 0,133$  we can conclude that the difference between the experimental and control groups has become more significant as the mean of  $p$  has changed to a great extent. Since the period of instruction was relatively short, such a change in the significance of difference between two groups proves our hypothesis stated at the beginning of this experimental study.

The results of two t-tests showed that the use of stories adapted according to the brain-friendly learning theory has a positive impact on the learners' success in English classes. The students from the experimental group, who were taught through the adaptations, got higher results during post-testing. In spite of the fact that the results of the experimental and control groups do not vary very much, still, there is difference between them. Considering the period of the experiment, this difference is considered to demonstrate the efficiency of the adapted stories in English language teaching.

## **5. Conclusion**

Teaching English as a foreign language to young learners has become a relevant field in recent years. The way young learners learn differs to a great extent from that of adults. The teacher should be aware of young learners' peculiarities when planning lessons and designing activities.

The fact that BFL principles in the best way satisfy young learners' needs and wants has resulted in increasing popularity of that approach. The significance of using storytelling in teaching young learners has not been underestimated either. However, many studies are mostly focused on defining characteristics of stories with the purpose to choose the most efficient ones. Thus, researchers examine already existing stories without the intention to change or adapt them. Furthermore, little research was carried out on adapting stories with regard to brain-friendly learning.

The main principles of BFL were examined with regard to English language teaching to young learners in order to elaborate an effective way of adapting stories. Four stories were adapted considering the philosophy of BFL. The results of the pre- and the post-tests showed that using adapted stories had a positive impact on young learners' second language acquisition when stories are designed with respect to young learners' characteristics and the principles of BFL. If stories and activities are designed properly, both learners and teachers will benefit from them. As the study showed, stories adapted in that way enhance the learning process by stimulating brain activity, they provide young learners with more comprehensible input, arouse learners' interest in reading, make learners much more motivated that results in effective teaching and learning. Adapted stories are much more useful tool of learning than studying usual reading passages. Therefore, our hypotheses made at the beginning of the study are valid which was proved statistically.

It is hoped that results received during this study will be valuable for teachers, learners and course designers. The principles of adapting stories according to BFL can be implemented in English classes at other schools. The data obtained may lay the basis for further research in teaching English to young learners.

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**Tables**

**Table 1**

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Test_Scores	C	21	81,5238	11,89798	2,59635
	E	20	81,2000	12,38675	2,76976

**Pre-test Statistics**

**Table 2**

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Test_Scores	Equal variances assumed	,932	,32381	3,79258
	Equal variances not assumed	,932	,32381	3,79640

**Independent Samples Test (For the Pre-test)**

**Table 3**

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Test_Scores	C	21	82,0000	11,52389	2,51472
	E	20	87,2000	10,10263	2,25902

**Post-test Statistics**

**Table 4**

		t-test for Equality of Means		
		Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Test_Scores	Equal variances assumed	,133	-5,20000	3,39146
	Equal variances not assumed	,132	-5,20000	3,38038

**Independent Samples Test (for the Post-test)**