



# classroom

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# connections



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# LITERACY FOR LIFE

# STORY SACKS FOR THE EFL LEARNER : An exciting way of bringing books to life!

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Year 2 Teachers-in-training Khadija Al Ameri and Kholoud Al Alawi explore some of the wonderful Story Sack resources created by students in HCT's B.Ed program.





Story Sacks are a non-threatening way of sharing stories with children. The bringing together of spoken word, music and items related to a story has long been recognized as an excellent way of developing communication between pupils and/or adults (Barron, I. and Powell, J. 2003). However, while story sacks have been widely used, and adapted in a first language environment, for example, in 'Curiosity Kits' (Lewis et al., 2000), to date very little has been written about using them in an English as a Foreign language (EFL) setting. It's time to move this practice into the EFL classroom, so what are you waiting for!



The 'Story Sack' concept was developed by former Head Teacher Neil Griffiths in 1995, following research in the UK which showed that the number of children being read a bedtime story was only 16%, compared to over 30% of their parents' generation, and that this

lack of reading could be directly linked to literacy problems.

Neil Griffiths created Story Sacks as an alternative way for children to benefit from books and, most importantly as a fun activity where learning takes place without noticing (Griffiths, 2000). They are designed to help adults share books with children in a way that is positive, theatrical, special, interactive and fun. They are a way to get children of all ages and all cultures more interested in reading. (For more about Neil Griffiths, his work with Story Sacks, and his forthcoming return visit to the UAE, see article on page31. ■

## What is a Story Sack?

A story sack is a large cloth bag containing a good quality storybook with supporting materials, such as puppets, soft toys of the main characters and a game to stimulate reading/language skills. There is usually an audio tape of the story so children can follow along as they read or act out parts of the story. It also consists of a non-fiction book on a related topic.

The sack opens up the world of books and allows further exploration and enjoyment through using props and related activities. Focusing on a particular tale, it is a tool used to promote reading in school and at home. So open up the story sack and discover what's inside! ■

**Bag + Book + Toys + Activities = Story Sack!**

Mister Seahorse Story Sack created by B.Ed student  
Ayesha Khalifa Al Romaiti





### Why use Story Sacks in the EFL Classroom?

What story sacks offer the EFL classroom is the chance to make sharing a book pleasurable (Griffiths, N. 2001). Accompanied by puppets, scenery, activities and games, stories become more lifelike and appealing. Research has shown that learning that provides endless fun and enjoyment has



B.Ed students engaged in a Shared Reading activity, using Neil Griffith's *Ringo the Flamingo* story sack



Young learners are spellbound by the Story Sack presentation

invariably a positive effect on children's retention abilities (James, F and Kerr, A. 1998). By catching and holding sustained interest, story sacks are a visually attractive and tactile resource, providing children with concrete reinforcement of the storyline. This has the potential to motivate and excite children about reading.

By providing a meaningful context in which to learn, story sacks encourage both active listening and participation in reading. All supporting materials included in the story sack are designed to extend the reading experience and stimulate further language activities. This in turn enhances comprehension, vocabulary, phonic, rhyming and decoding skills (Griffiths, N. 2001). Children can participate in dramatizing the events of the story by using puppets and other materials such as scenery that are provided in the bag. Interactive response activities related to the story can be made, helping children understand the 'new language'. Further

more, they encourage children to see themselves as real readers and promote a life long love of reading.

Bringing Story Sacks into the home Research has highlighted the importance of combining family, school, and even community resources to help children reach their educational goals (Come and Fredericks, 1995). Since access to books is critical to any literacy program, loaning a Story Sack to students can be a simple outreach strategy for schools to adopt.

Story Sacks give parents the confidence to enjoy books and reading with their child. Not every EFL parent will find it easy to read stories in English/Arabic but Story Sacks provide the props to help parents share books in an enjoyable way with their child. The goal is to provide books that are likely to initiate positive parent-child interactions. A parent's letter or information sheet could be included in the story sack that explains the

contents of the sack. A 'prompt card' that gives ideas to parents on how to read with their child, what questions to ask, which words to consider and other ways to extend the reading experience could also be included. To ensure all the items in the sack are returned, include a checklist of the sack's contents so that it is ready to lend to others in the class.

Not only does this reading interaction validate reading in the child's mind, but very important reading strategies are passed on from parent to child. Most of all, children remember these precious moments with their parents as fun!

### Bring your books to life!

Story Sacks are fun, interactive, attractive and a powerful learning tool in any Foreign language classroom. Through supplying your time and creativity, they have the potential to enhance children's English language abilities. They also offer the potential for collaboration with homes and provide a valuable resource for parents to share with their child. What better way to enjoy reading with young EFL learners, than through sharing Story Sacks. ■





# HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN STORY SACK

## 1. Start with a Bag

It doesn't have to be a fancy bag! Even a simple paper bag will do. Just decorate the outside of the bag, fill it with the book and supporting materials and there you are! However, if you want to get a bit fancier, go to your local tailor and have a sack custom-designed. These can be decorated using fabric paints, embroidery and the name of the story can be sewn onto the outside of the bag.

What the bag looks like doesn't really matter too much, although you do want it to look



inviting to the children. It is what's inside the bag that counts!

## 2. Picking a Story

What story book you choose will depend on the children you are making it for. Most importantly, pick a book appropriate for the chosen age group. Take into account any special interests of your class including favourite themes, characters, authors, genre. The more interested the children are about the subject of the story, the more likely they will truly enjoy the book and possibly read it independently at a later stage.

If a story has a strong storyline and quality illustrations, then it will have more appeal to the children. However, not every book is suitable for use in a story sack for foreign language learners. If the story has too many

central characters, too few props or too many props in the storyline, then it may be difficult to make into a story sack.

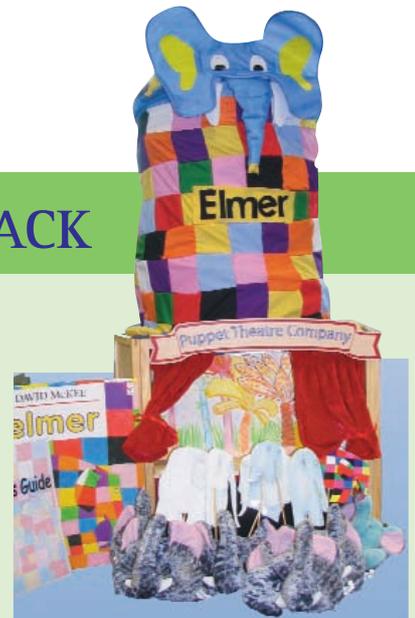
## 3. Filling your Story Sack

The sack should be filled with items that support the central story book. Here are some ideas to help you decide what to put in the sack with the story book:

- \* Soft toys of the main characters (or masks, puppets, costumes)



- \* Props, scenery, artifacts related to the story
- \* A non-fiction book to learn more about the factual parts of the story.
- \* A cassette tape of the story being told (either purchased or home made)
- \* A language game based on the story.
- \* Related videos to watch
- \* Written activities e.g. comprehension questions, wordsearches, crosswords



Each sack may contain materials which bring the story alive and help children learn through play. However, it is important that you make story sacks that are manageable - usually, no more than seven items are included in any one sack, to prevent overload of supporting materials. You just want enough characters and items to bring the story to life. It should also be sturdy and safe, with nothing sharp as a toy. By introducing variety, you will make maximum use of the resources and retain children's interest!



*Story Sacks depicted here were all created by students in HCT's B.Ed (Teaching English To Young Learners) Program*

### References:

Barron, I. and Powell, J. 2003: Story Sacks, Children's Narratives and the Social Construction of Reality. Citizenship, Social and Economics Education, Vol. 5, No. 3

Come, B. and Fredericks, A. D. (1995), Family literacy in urban schools: Meeting the needs of at-risk children. The Reading Teacher, 48, (7), 556-570.

Griffiths, N. (2001) Once upon a time... Literacy Today No.26, p.9

Lewis, M., Fisher, R., Grainger, T., Harrison, C. & Hulme, P. (2000), Curiosity Kits: non-fiction reading kits, UKRA Leaflet.

James, F. and Kerr, A. (1998) On First Reading. Belair Publications Ltd, ISBN: 0 947882243, p.58.

## Where can I find out more about Story Sacks?

- \* National Literacy Trust (UK) Storysacks page - gives examples of story sacks in practice and features links to further resources: <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/socialinclusion/earlyyears/storysackspractice.html>
- \* [www.storysack.com](http://www.storysack.com) - a company offering commercially produced Storysacks for sale, as well as tips on how to use the sacks: <http://www.storysack.com/>
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