An example of a successful submission
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Young learner writing and the *Storyline* approach

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**Background**

*Storyline* was developed in Scotland in the 1960s as a way of meeting the requirement for interdisciplinary teaching in primary schools. Today it is used at all levels of education in L1 teaching contexts in many parts of the world, but less so in L2.

*Storyline* has been called a specific kind of task-based approach. The differences are that the tasks are situated in a narrative framework; each task develops the story. The learners take on, and keep, the role of characters, speaking and writing in role, and thus *experiencing* the language rather than learning *about* it (Wright 2009). Other features are that learners work predominantly in small groups, and that practical work is integrated with language work.

**The study**

Learners often talk of *Storyline* as being ‘fun’. To investigate which aspects particularly appeal to young learners and what impact this might have on their L2 development, I conducted a five-week study with a class of Swedish 11–13 year olds (Ahlquist 2011). In *Our Sustainable Street*, the learners took on the roles of families who had moved into a newly-built street in a fictive English town. Among the tasks they worked on were writing a letter of complaint to the council about rubbish dumped in their street and designing a new park.

The study was a multi-strategy case study in which the data consisted of observation, questionnaires, interviews with learners and teachers, learner reflective journals, and samples of the learners’ writing. Among other work, they wrote three extended texts: a character description at the beginning, an email to a friend halfway through and a longer letter, also to a friend, at the end of the study, recounting the events in the character’s life over the past year.

**The findings**

Analysis of the data showed group and art work to be the most popular features, and that there was development to greater and lesser extents in all learners and in all the language skills. That which showed particular development for many was writing. This is significant since writing, often considered by learners to be laborious, is the least popular skill (Moon 2005), as was the case with the boys in this study. However, some of the less-proficient boys reported that writing in a group was easier and more fun; they could ask questions and get help. For many girls, writing was linked with art work and using their imagination (the girls’ third most popular feature). Writing in another persona was highly motivating, a typical comment being: ‘Fun, it felt like...”
writing to a real friend’. Some of the learners also stated that they learn through writing—new words, more unusual words, spelling and word order were cited in this respect.

Regarding structures, the three pieces of extended writing targeted, respectively, present tense (character description), present perfect (email) and past simple (letter). Writing the character description followed brainstorming of personal attributes and lexical sets such as hobbies and jobs. Concerning the email, the learners had to write at least half a page of A4 and include six new words. All but three managed this. The teachers noted that when the learners wrote on the template of an email, with its heading, New neighbourhood, new neighbours, they took more care with their writing than was normally the case. When it came to the letter, they were supported by bullet points about the events of the year. Though there was no minimum requirement, all but five wrote over a page of A4, which took them beyond the curriculum goal for their age, and exceeded the teachers’ expectations.

Giving learners the opportunity to write freely provides the teacher with insight into developing interlanguage. In the study learners showed attempts to use new words and varying degrees of control over structures which were not new (the present and past tenses) and those recently met (relative clauses). At the same time, there are instances where learners have had no formal teaching of a structure, but attempt to express it using their existing knowledge, as in this example of a younger learner and the relative clause: ‘Then we met a old women she’s name is mrs brown and she was very angry bicus she has a Damp in her gaden.’

In conclusion, it can be said that Storyline benefits the development of young learner writing for these reasons: content is provided by the story, and the motivation to engage with it comes from meaningful tasks and the learner’s active role in developing the story.

References

