The impact of the *Storyline* approach on the young language learner classroom: a case study in Sweden

<u>Background to the Study</u>

In the *Storyline* approach, a fictive world is created in the classroom. The learners, working in small groups, take on and retain the roles of characters in a story, which is set in a particular time and place. The story develops through the use of open *key questions* (for example, *who are you?, what is your house like?, what is your typical day like?),* devised by the teacher on the basis of the curriculum content to be covered. Work on the *key questions* integrates theoretical and practical subjects. In the case of English the aim is to create meaningful tasks which practise in a holistic way the skills of *reading*, *writing*, *speaking* and *listening*, and which provide practice for grammatical structures and vocabulary with which the learners are familiar, at the same time as creating conditions for the learning of new grammar and vocabulary. In other words, tasks within a *Storyline* framework are intended to develop learners' all-round communicative competence, the stated aim of the Swedish national curriculum (Lgr11).

As a teacher trainer, I have worked with *Storyline*, with student teachers and teachers, for ten years, and during this time have been able to observe children working with *Storyline* topics. Both adults and children usually describe the experience as *fun*. I wanted to investigate what it is about the *Storyline* approach that is *fun* and how it can contribute to the learning of English as a second language. In January/February 2009 I conducted a study to investigate the impact of *Storyline Our Sustainable Street*, on the development of English in a class of 32 children aged between 11 and 13, and consisting of 13 boys and 18 girls. The original proposed study group was to have consisted of half this number, but owing to delayed building work at the school, two

classes were combined for the spring term, with both class teachers working together. Normally the year 5s in these classes work with one teacher in English and the year 6s with the other teacher though for most subjects they work in their combined 5-6 class. So this was new in two respects – not only would the 5s and 6s have English together but that two classes would be put together. The new class was housed temporarily in a new building and in a room which was not intended ultimately to serve as a classroom. The class also had access to the new art room and two group rooms.

Storyline took place four days a week and for approximately two hours a day, mostly in the mornings. This was twice as much English as the children normally had. They worked in groups of four; in forming the groups the teachers took into account those who would work well together as well as trying to balance the sexes and ages.

Our Sustainable Street was designed on the basis of the curriculum goals for English in year 5, the school's goals for year 6 as well as to include some goals for other subjects, such as social studies (for example, the *key question*, *what problems can people have with their neighbours?*), natural science (*key question, how do you harm the environment?*), Swedish and art. The story was about a group of families who move into a newly built street in the fictive English town of Danbury, near Manchester. The families take part in a project to live in a more sustainable way, and they also have to deal with the problems of illicit dumping of rubbish and anti-social neighbours. The new vocabulary concerned aspects of sustainability – pollution, rubbish recycling, climate change, carbon footprint, extreme weather conditions etc. Because the subject was a challenging one in English, the children worked on the concepts in Swedish immediately prior to starting the *Storyline*.

<u>Research Design</u>

The theoretical framework for the study was sociocultural theory, based on the theory of mind of Vygotsky (1978), which maintains that learners learn through interacting with others. Sociocultural theory is concerned with *change*; with regard to language learning it makes no distinction between language *use* and language *acquisition*, but considers the two to go hand in hand. The research questions to which I attempted to find answers were: to what features of the *Storyline* do the learners respond positively and less positively respectively; what changes in language use can be observed during the course of the *Storyline*; how do the learners mediate the requirements of the task for each other and to what extent do they use tools such as dictionaries, computers, reference materials and first language to mediate the task; finally in the learners' own view, *what* and *how* do they think they learn English through working with the *Storyline*.

In order to study how this *Storyline* impacted on the children's language development I used the following data collection tools: a pre-*Storyline* questionnaire, which was intended to find out what kinds of task the children liked to work with in their usual English lessons (textbook, role play, pair work etc), what they didn't like, how they rated their own English skills, whether or not they used English outside school. The point of this was to provide baseline data – for instance, if a learner did not like drama in the *Storyline* it might be explained by a more general dislike of drama. During the study I was present at every session and made observation notes. I had access to the children's reflective journals, which were completed once a week regarding their experience of the week's work. Also included in these journals were evaluations of the learners' own goals at the half way stage and also at the end. (These goals were set up at the beginning of the *Storyline* on the basis of the school's syllabus for English).

I had copies of the three extended pieces of writing which they completed during the study (a character description, email to a friend and longer letter to a friend after a year in the street). I also had access to the evaluations written for the teachers, and used my own post-*Storyline* questionnaire to ascertain the popularity of the various tasks and what/how the children thought they had learnt. They were also asked to rate their own English in the four skills as before and to compare working with *Storyline* to working in their usual English classes. I conducted interviews with some of the children and both teachers. I also videoed a typical *Storyline* task immediately after the study with the purpose of illustrating the kinds of interaction which can take place between learners. I did not use video during the study on the basis of experience during the pilot study the year before. The children were distracted by the camera and the noise level in the room made the sound quality too poor to be useful.

The research literature on sociocultural theory maintains that learners working collaboratively are able to reach a higher level of achievement than individuals working alone can do. This is particularly so where there are no great differences in ability level and where the learners' different knowledge and skills complement each other so that each can be seen to contribute to the work of the group. Where groups do not work well this can usually be attributed to personality conflicts. This view is also reflected in the research literature on young learners, in both first and second languages.

The consensus in the literature is that young learners learn best when they are involved, when their attention is focused on meaning and with experiences with which they can identify (for example, Cameron 2001, Moon 2005, Pinter 2006). Games and stories appeal partly because of their unpredictability (Halliwell 1992). Practical work appeals to most young learners and is especially valuable to the less proficient, who may be able to contribute a creative talent to the group work. At the same time, working

collaboratively does not come naturally to young learners and they need instruction in how to do this. They also need help in setting up goals for the period of work and in assessing how well they have fulfilled their goals. There is also consensus that formal grammar teaching is not effective with this age group, that they still learn holistically, although some at the older end of the scale may be developing an analytical capability which allows them to benefit from formal grammar. Learners of this age may also benefit from writing as this contributes to learning – it makes the language visible, and as such can be talked about.

The research view is that learners of this age group are in danger of losing their motivation as they approach puberty. For one thing, they may become reluctant to sing or take part in role play – activities which can contribute to language development. Learners may also experience loss of motivation through a sense of not learning anything new and a feeling that teachers focus more on what the learner cannot do rather than what they can. One result of loss of motivation is an unwillingness to speak English, largely from fear of being laughed at or corrected in front of peers. At the same time National Education Agency (Skolverket, 2010) research into the national tests in year 5 has found that learners of this age do like speaking English, when they can do it with a friend in pairs, as opposed to in front of the whole class. It is important that children of this age develop a positive self-image as a language learner since it is linked both to motivation and to effective learning. For example, Skolverket (2004) found a correlation between negative self-image and failure in the national tests in year 9. The negative impact of a poor self-image on achievement is reflected in research conducted in other western countries.

<u>*Storyline, Our Sustainable Street*</u>

In the *Storyline* the learners created characters within their families and introduced them to the class; they wrote about the character and drew a self-portrait; they drew their family car, homes and gardens and wrote an estate agent's advertisement for their house. This work was displayed on the frieze in the classroom. (In *Storyline* the frieze plays a central role – it displays the children's work, depicts the developing story and can create a sense of anticipation, for instance a change can be made to the existing display or something added to it by the teacher).

Many new developments in a *Storyline* come about when the learners receive a letter. For instance, the families received an invitation to take part in a study about the harmful effects of people's daily lives on the environment. This involved them writing about a typical day, analyzing it and producing a collage of their impact on the environment, which they then talked about to the class. In preparation for this, they attended a lecture on climate change (given by one of the teachers in role as a climate expert), read a text in which the same information was presented and thought about ways to lessen their negative impact on the climate.

As part of the same theme, they came into the classroom one day to find rubbish strewn all over the floor, introducing the subject of the kinds of things that are carelessly thrown away. In groups they mimed the illicit dumping of large objects, the identity of which the others had to guess. They read a letter to a newspaper from an old lady complaining about rubbish thrown into her garden. As a result one group wrote a letter to the council, asking for the waste ground at the end of their street (which they had collectively voted to name *Manchester Street*) to be turned into a park. A reply was received, saying they could do this.

One group was then responsible for designing a small park to include things which the class as a whole had suggested. When they had finished each person then took a member of their family outside and led them blindfolded around the `park´. Those who had been led had the task of together recreating the description they had heard and the two drawings were then compared. Other tasks included a four corner exercise on the subject of problems with neighbours and the drama technique `sculptures´ to show the problems people can have with neighbours, followed by discussion in the class.

One day, the remaining plot of land had a *sold* sign put on it and soon after a removal van appeared. The Grimshaw family had moved in. The children read about them and their anti-social behaviour, considered how the arrival of the family had impacted on their own lives, then agreed on questions they would like to ask the newcomers. They interviewed the mother (teacher in role) with a view to making things better. The story concluded with a street party for which the children produced games in English and for which some baked cakes in the school's home economics room, getting the English recipes from the internet, going to the local shop and working together to produce food for the party.

The Findings

Some groups worked better than others, and where they did not work effectively it could be traced to personality conflicts. Some learners attempted to dominate or were felt by others to dominate; some were considered by others to do less than their share of the work. However, group work was one of the most popular features suggesting that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages, and there was a strong sense of solidarity within the `family´, to which many referred rather than `group´. The journals and evaluations also show a sense of awareness of how much the children individually felt they contributed, how much or how little English they spoke, and what caused that

to change. When asked if they would have preferred to have the *Storyline* with their usual, smaller English class, only three said they would, the others citing the chance to make new friends and work with old in the other class, the chance to work with younger/older learners. Reasons for liking group work were that there is support, everybody helps and it is more fun. The boys in particular evaluated group work positively. However, the girls always reacted positively when they were allowed to work in all-female groups; the teachers' explanation was that girls often bear the weight of group work, taking more responsibility, while many boys avoid this if they can.

The most popular feature with boys and girls was art work. This was also seen in the responses of the older children who had taken part in the pilot study, *The Circus*, where the characters were made as models and where caravans were made from shoe boxes. Slightly more of the children preferred *The Circus* to the current study topic, and the reason they gave was not so much the story as the fact that they had done more practical work. Their liking for this practical work was apparent in the study – in making posters and drawing. All wanted to draw and where only one of a thing such as the car could be drawn, there was often conflict over who should do it. I asked the children whom I interviewed how art work could help them learn English and they seemed surprised at the question – of course, you need to be able to talk about what you have drawn; you learn in different ways.

Both boys and girls liked the variety of the tasks. The boys in particular liked not working with a textbook and the girls liked the chance to use their imagination. This is linked especially with writing: *kändes som om man verkligen skrev till en kompis (it felt as if you were really writing to a friend)*. That the children did feel as though they were writing to a real person can be seen in phrases such as: *take care of yourself, give my regards to your parents, don't worry, you are still my best friend too* (in the email after

describing a new friend). The teachers were surprised by the quantity and quality of the long letter produced at the end of the *Storyline*. When analyzing the written work I can see the use of grammatical structures which were new (based on study of textbook) or not yet learnt, inclusion of new vocabulary, use of markers such as *at last*, *finally*, *in the end*, references to other characters and events.

This point is worth remarking on because although it is true to say of course that children can produce written text outside a *Storyline* framework, the key is to find a subject which can motivate them. When children write freely and are not bound by the constraints of a textbook they are able to use the full extent of their language capability, both that which is becoming more stable and that which is unstable, possibly because it is new or because the learner has not fully understood it. This provides the teacher with an invaluable insight into the learner's development and where correction at this stage can be most beneficial, because unless the learner is ready to learn a particular grammatical structure, then correction will not help. At the same time, the research literature tells us that writing is often unpopular because it is hard work. Therefore in order to motivate children to write and to give that writing their very best effort the task has to feel meaningful and it has to stir their imagination. When the children write as their character in a make-believe world, many of them are engaged in a way that they might not be in other writing tasks.

However, there are those who find it hard to know what to write and how to write it, and for these children it is necessary to have some written support in the form of content and structure – for example, questions they can answer or sample sentences. Another suggestion is to do as one teacher did, and interview one of the least proficient learners in English and write his answer for him. In a *Storyline* framework it would be possible to have the stronger learners do this, working with a less proficient group member. For

instance, it could be arranged that the weaker learner's character had a broken wrist and needed some help with the writing! The research literature supports the view that the more proficient learners can benefit too from working with those who are less proficient, consolidating their own knowledge.

Tasks which had an element of competition were popular as were those which were timed. Those with a time limit led to more focused work. The climate lecture, at half an hour, was too long. One learner comments that `you hardly got to do anything´, and this reflects the view in the young learner literature that they need to be involved. The task which had the learners so focused they did not realize it was playtime was when the families received a letter telling them that a relative had died leaving them £1000, but this had to be spent furnishing one room and the furniture had to be bought at IKEA. Using the catalogue and the IKEA UK website the learners set about finding furniture and prices, producing a poster, with the aim of getting as close to £1000 as they could and explaining what they would do with the rest of the money. When time ran out for each group to present the children were keen that all would have a chance to do it the next day.

This brings us to speaking. They were reluctant to speak English , and the reasons given by both boys and girls is fear of making mistakes and being publicly corrected or fear of being laughed at. This did get better. One reason – given for all the skills – was the sheer amount of speaking, listening and writing they had done. It became easier to find the words. One pointed out that it takes time to get into an English lesson but with *Storyline* they had that time because the sessions were longer. It became more obvious in the warm ups, where the learners mingled and had to stop and chat with their neighbours that while in the beginning they would stick to the periphery of the room or position themselves near a friend, this became less so.

Some of the children would have stuck to English throughout but when others started to speak Swedish, they followed. Given the difficult nature of the *Storyline* it may have been unreasonable to expect all to stick to English, which had been the aim. Just after completing this study I helped another teacher at the same school carry out a similar *Storyline* with a year 4. This was simply about families in a street. What struck me here was not only the lack of embarrassment of these children at speaking English but that many of them continued to speak English in their group work when the teacher was not present. This is also consistent with the research literature, that reluctance to speak English can set in by the age of 10 – 11 as the learners approach puberty.

The teachers in the study spoke only English. By the third week it was clear that the children could understand much better what they had to do, without needing a Swedish translation and without needing to ask questions. Many were aware that it became easier to understand. In addition one boy wrote that he could now identify British and American English better (the varieties spoken by the teachers). Others wrote that they had listened a lot, not just to the teachers but to each other. Many pointed out that they had to listen as it was important information and also because the class was large they had to concentrate more.

One of the biggest gains was in new words – this is not surprising as it is easier to judge learning of vocabulary than to judge whether one's writing or speaking has developed. From a motivational aspect it is important that the children feel they are learning new words. The writing contributed to this, with spelling and word order being named as areas of improvement by the children. One of *Storyline*'s strengths is the way that core vocabulary for a subject is naturally recycled in different tasks during the life of the *Storyline,* in this case words to do with *home* and *family* but also the new words to do with sustainable development. Vocabulary research makes clear that

learners have to meet and use words many times for these words to be learnt. Textbooks are usually structured in a linear way and words rarely recur. As one of the teachers said, in commenting on the very positive results of a vocabulary test, *de har levt med de här orden (they have lived with these words)*.

However, some find it hard to know that they have been working with a particular skill and their view of learning is determined by what appears in a textbook. One of the more proficient wrote that he didn't know if he had fulfilled his goal to be more secure in tenses *vi har inte pratat om det de senaste veckorna (we haven't talked about it recently)*. Yet the three extended pieces of writing were designed to practise present tenses, present perfect, the past and aspects of the future. Another wrote *Storyline hjälpte inte mig att lyssna bättre. Men jag har blivit bättre att förstå när någon har förklarat något på engelska till mig (Storyline hasn't helped me listen better, but I've got better at understanding when someone explains something to me in English)*. This shows that it is important that the learners understand how they will know whether they have learnt or not. This is a pre-requisite to them formulating and being able to evaluate their own learning goals.

All the learners felt that they had improved in one or more of the skills, and to varying degrees. This is borne out by the teachers' view of the learners' achievements and by my observations. The words which occur in the evaluations more than any other are *rolig* and *kul*. The children link this with learning: in answer to how she had improved in English one year 5 girl writes *skriva och prata för vi pratade väldigt mycket och när vi pratade var det roligt (writing and speaking because we talked a lot and when we talked it was fun)*. Another girl, year 6, says *ju roligare det är ju mer lär man sig (the more fun it is the more you learn)*. By contrast, usual class work is described as with textbook, CD for listening, reading texts in the book and learning vocabulary. The

children's association of *learning* and *fun* reflects the research literature. In 2009, John Hattie (Professor of Education, University of Melbourne) published a review of 800 studies conducted over 15 years and came to the conclusion that although there is no empirical evidence for *learning styles* or *multiple intelligences* it can be said that achievement is higher where there is enjoyment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

My conclusions are that a *Storyline* topic, conducted over a period of four to six weeks with one to two hours a day, can contribute to language learning for reasons that are in line with the research literature. In my view *Storyline* creates the kinds of conditions which the research into young language learning recommends, not least the importance of a warm and supportive atmosphere in which every individual's contribution is required and respected. In my view particular grammatical structures can be targeted in the design of the tasks in order to provide practice. It is also possible to introduce new grammatical structures through *Storyline* work. Where a task is used to practise language which the learners have already met I would recommend that any review of this language comes after the task rather than before it. The reason for this is that if they are told what aspects of grammar they are to practise this may limit what they write and how they write it. The exceptions are the learners who are weakest and who need support. They will benefit from being given sample sentences containing the grammatical structures they are supposed to use. When it comes to vocabulary, brainstorming sessions prior to doing a task are beneficial as they gather together vocabulary for everyone's use. The key is to limit the number of words on the whiteboard. The strongest learners can be encouraged to find more words but the least proficient will have a hard job even writing up the words that are on the board, which

was the case in my study. I also recommend that whenever learners copy words from the board that these are checked by the teachers.

I set out to study *Storyline*'s impact on these learners, how we might see change in their language development. Some changes were more apparent than others – the way in which the children's collective listening skills improved, the way in which some individuals display learning in their writing if one compares an early piece with a later text, the slightly greater willingness to speak English. However, the change which occurs is not always an obvious one. It may be a change in attitude, a feeling of being braver, of daring to speak more, as some of the learners describe it. This change in attitude may not be obvious but it is an important step towards developing language skills. After all, if you don't speak you don't get better. So the sense of all being in it together – the *shared narrative* as Jerome Bruner (2002) describes it is not to be underestimated. One comment which sticks in my mind was made in the journal by one of the least proficient learners, who was deemed by the teachers to say more than in the usual lessons. For me, an outsider in the classroom, she was not as visible as others during the study. In light of the teachers' comments I went back to the observation notes, and sure enough there she was, often the first to speak, although it was never more than a word or two, there to help out a member of the group with a suggestion. In her journal at the halfway stage she writes (in answer to the question *how do you feel about going to school to work with the Storyline*, *längtar* (*longing*) and at the end writes: *Har blivit modigare att prata högt för klassen bara för att ingen skrattar åt mig när jag sager fel. Men det gjorde de inte innan heller, men nu vet jag.* (*I've got braver at speaking in front of the class just because no one laughs at me when I make a mistake. They didn't before either, but now I know*). Those last words sum up the feeling of solidarity which is expressed at different times and in different ways in the study. This is the feeling learners need to have in the language classroom if they are

going to take chances and in so doing develop their skills in English. In the traditional language classroom individual learners are often like islands in a sea filled with other islands, answering the teacher's questions one at a time; they can feel very exposed especially in speaking, when their mistakes are on display to everyone and when there is a chance they will be corrected in front of everyone. Working together in a *Storyline* topic, in groups where all are contributing to a developing story, brings these individuals closer together, creating an atmosphere in which they are willing to take risks. One year 6 boy, responding to the question how the *Storyline* had helped him learn English sums it up thus: *lyssna, läsa, skriva, prata för att vi gjorde så många olika saker och de flesta var intressanta och roliga så man gav sig in lite mer och förstod det mesta så jag lärde mig mycket på vägen (listening, reading, writing, speaking because we did so many different things and most of them were interesting and fun, so you put more in and understood most of it, so I learnt a lot along the way).*

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