

# The Princess in the Tower: Activities for 3-11 year olds

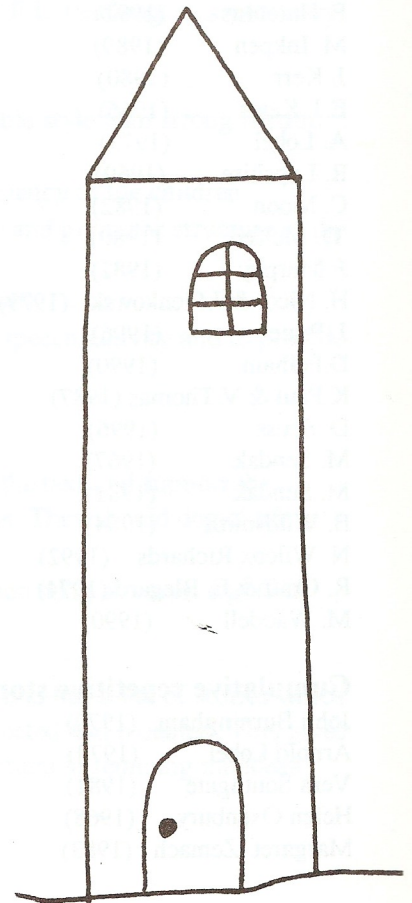
Carol Read

Few teachers need convincing of the value of using stories to develop language with young children learning English. Among some of the main benefits are that stories provide a natural, relevant and enjoyable context for exposure to language. The discovery and construction of meaning is supported through things such as visuals, voice and characterisation. Stories provide a shared social experience and classroom event and help children to develop concentration skills as well as their imagination. They also allow for the expression of personal, divergent responses, not always easy to achieve in English when children's own language repertoire is at such an initial stage. Last, but by no means least, stories provide a springboard for a wide range of activities designed to develop language, thinking skills and positive attitudes, not only in English but across the whole of the primary curriculum.

Among the types of stories with the power to engage children's interest and enthusiasm in class are traditional stories or fairy tales with which they are already familiar in their own language. One of my favourites is the story of *The princess in the tower*. Here is a simple version of it:



Once upon a time there was a princess. She lived in a tall tower. One day a witch cast a spell. The princess fell asleep. A big forest grew. One day a prince came riding by on his horse. He cut the trees with his sword. He took the princess by the hand. And everybody was very happy.



This has all the classic ingredients of a universal fairy tale and lends itself to a wide range of multi-sensory activities which can be adapted to suit children of different ages and levels. Part of the attraction and magic of doing the story of *The princess in the tower* in class is that it can also be linked to singing and acting out the traditional primary school song *There was a princess long ago*:

There was a princess long ago,  
Long ago, long ago;  
There was a princess long ago,  
Long, long ago.

And she lived in a tall, tall tower,  
Tall, tall tower, tall, tall tower  
And she lived in a tall, tall tower  
Long, long ago.

A wicked witch she cast a spell ...

The princess she fell fast asleep ...

A great big forest grew around ...

A handsome prince came riding by ...

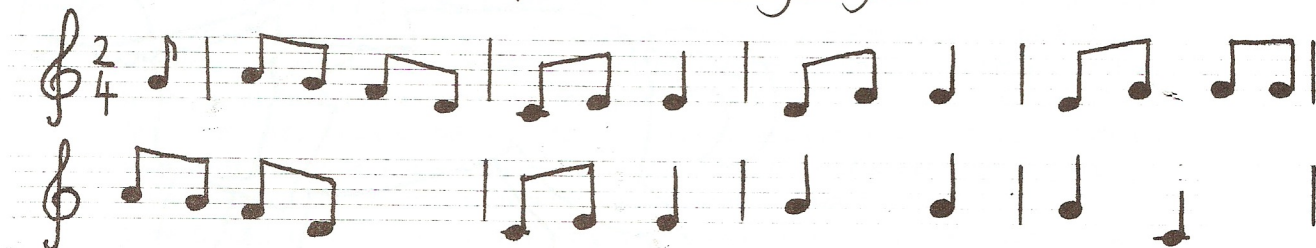
He cut the tall trees with his sword ...

He took the princess by the hand ...

And everybody's happy now ...



### There was a princess long ago



To make flashcards, photocopy and enlarge the pictures and stick them on coloured card. To make the pencil puppets or story mobile, draw an oval shape around the pictures before photocopying in order to minimize time spent cutting them out.

Some practical ideas for using *The princess in the tower* (and the accompanying traditional song) with children spanning the ages of three to eleven are given below. Although these suggestions are categorised according to approximate ages, this is not intended to be arbitrary or inflexible but rather to reflect general developmental processes in children during the infant and primary years. The suggested activities are designed to develop a range of language, thinking, social and motor skills as well as to provide a suitable level of challenge for each age band. They also aim to show how very often teaching materials for young children, in this case a story and a song, can be exploited in different ways, using different techniques and procedures, in order to make them appropriate to use with children whose general stage of development is very different.



## Ideas for using 'The princess in the tower' with 3-5 year olds

- Tell a very simple version of the story, using pictures or flashcards (see above). Use voice and mime to highlight the names of the main characters and other key items e.g. pretend to hold a mirror and comb your hair for the princess, hold your arms up high, joining the tips of your fingers for the tower etc.
- Tell the story again. Point to the pictures and encourage the children to join in doing the mimes with you.
- Assign children in groups a picture and word from the story. Point to the pictures, say the words and get the children to respond with their mime. Do this with them at first.
- Get the children to sit or stand in a circle. Tell the story again pointing to the pictures. Children take turns to do their mimes in the centre of the circle when they hear their word.
- Children take turns to do their mimes with you and to join in saying what they are e.g. I'm the princess. / I'm the tower.
- Sing the first verse of the song. Children mime being a princess with you. Repeat this verse, substituting the names of the other characters in the story (witch, prince). Children mime and join in singing with you.
- Children make plasticine models of one of the characters or items in the story of their choice. Use the children's models to tell the story again and encourage the children to join in saying words they know. Use the children's own language if necessary to ask if they like the story and the characters in the story. Do they know any other stories with a prince, princess or a witch?

## Ideas for using 'The princess in the tower' with 5-7 year olds

- Tell a simple version of the story using flashcards or pictures (see above). Encourage the children to predict what happens next after showing them each picture (children are likely to make predictions in their own language but you re-model and expand these in English).
- Tell the story again. Re-cap frequently, pointing to the pictures and encouraging the children to join in saying the key words.
- Children make pencil puppets for one of the characters or items in the story in groups (use the pictures in above). Say the words in random order and children respond by holding up their puppets.
- Form new groups so that there is at least one child with each puppet in each group. Tell the story again. Children hold up their puppets when they hear their words.
- Children stand in a circle. Play or sing the song. Do actions with the children to accompany each verse and establish meaning. Repeat the procedure and encourage the children to join in singing the song.
- Children stand in a circle. Assign roles (princess, witch, prince and horse). The princess stands in the centre of the circle. The witch, prince and horse stand away from the circle. Children sing and act out the song. The children standing in the circle pretend to be the tower (hands held high and joined at the tips) and the forest (arms waving like branches). In the last verse, everyone takes a partner and dances together. If you sing and act out the story more than once, it is a good idea to vary the roles to avoid stereotyping e.g. the princess can rescue the prince, the witch can be a troll or wizard.
- Give the children a handout with all the key pictures from the story (see above) and do a colour dictation e.g. The tower is blue, The horse is brown. Children listen and colour the pictures.

## Ideas for using 'The princess in the tower' with 7-9 year olds

- Tell the story twice (as for 5-7 year olds). Elaborate on the basic version in a way that is appropriate to the children's level.
- Play a few flashcard games with the pictures to familiarise children with key words in the story. For example, tell the children to close their eyes. Remove one of the flashcards. Children open their eyes and call out the name of the flashcard that's missing. Stick the flashcards on different walls around the classroom and give instructions e.g. *Point to the princess!*
- Invite pairs of children to match word cards to the flashcards on the board. Play board pelmanism with the pictures and words.
- Give the children a handout with all the pictures in the story (see above). Tell the story again. Children listen and number the pictures in the order they hear them in the story. They then write the words under each picture.
- Play or sing the song once. Children listen and point to the pictures on the handout as they hear them in the song.
- Children stand in a circle and sing and act out the song (as in the penultimate suggestion for 5-6 year olds). It is, however, important to be aware that some children, especially at the top end of this age range, may already feel self-conscious acting out the story in this way or feel that it is too young for them. The boys and girls may also not want to hold hands or dance together. If this is the case, avoid doing the song in the way suggested.
- In pairs children make a mobile of the main characters and items in the story, using wire coat hangers, thread and the pictures in above. On the reverse side of each picture they write e.g. *This is the princess / This is the tower*. The mobiles can then be displayed in the classroom.
- Talk to the children about the story. Children use their own language if necessary and you re-model or expand their answers in English e.g. *Do you like the story? What other stories do you know with a princess / a witch? Would you like to be a prince / princess? Why /why not? Is the story like real life? etc.*

## Ideas for using 'The princess in the tower' with 9-11 year olds

You may decide that *The princess in the tower* and the song are too young altogether for children at the top end of this age range. This will depend on the maturity and interests of the children themselves and the educational and cultural context in which you are working. If this is the case, you may prefer to choose a modern or 'anti' princess story, such as *Princess Smartypants* by Babette Cole (Collins Picture Lions, 1986). If you do use *The princess in the tower*, the following suggestions may be suitable:

- Tell the story twice, elaborating on the basic version in a way that is appropriate to the children's level, and play a few flashcard games (as for 7-9 year olds).
- In groups, give the children sentences from the story on separate pieces of card. Children read the sentences and order the cards. They then compare their versions to check that they have done this correctly.
- Give the children a handout containing the story with missing words (key vocabulary items in the pictures in above). Children work individually and read and complete the story. They check their answers in pairs and then with the whole class.
- Talk to the children about the story. Children use their own language if necessary and you re-model or expand their answers in English, e.g. *Do you like the story? What other stories do you know with a princess / a witch? Is 'The princess in the tower' a modern story? What would a modern version of the story be like? etc.*

- In pairs, children invent and write a new (modern) story using the one they have got on the handout as a model. After a process of drafting and editing with help from peers and you, the children can make books from card, e.g. origami books, and write and illustrate their stories. Children can take turns to read each other their stories in groups. The stories can then be kept in a plastic folder on the classroom noticeboard and used as a reading resource for fast finishers in subsequent lessons.

In conclusion, stories are a wonderful way to develop children's language in a naturally contextualised, relevant and enjoyable way. The classic traditional qualities of *The princess in the tower* combined with the feelings of familiarity and expectations it awakens in even the youngest children make it a story of ageless appeal. By adapting procedures and techniques in the ways suggested above, it is very often possible to devise activities, based on the same core materials, which are appropriate for different ages and levels in the infant and primary range. This flexibility not only allows us as teachers to save time and get maximum mileage from materials we use in class, but also helps to heighten our awareness of the continuum of developing competences throughout the infant and primary years and allows us to respond sensitively and appropriately to the special characteristics and needs of the children we teach.

### *Acknowledgement*

I would like to thank all the participants on a recent in-service training course I ran for infant and primary teachers at the Teacher's Centre, CPR Vallecas, Madrid, whose enthusiastic response to a task I set them to brainstorm ideas for additional activities based on the 'The princess in the tower' gave me the idea of writing this article.

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