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USING POPULAR CULTURE IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM

by Koh Guat Hua

Our students are exposed to television programmes and computer games daily. Yet, it is not something that often features in school, especially in the Primary 1 classroom. Perhaps it is time teachers consider the use of popular culture to enhance learning in the language classroom.

Article highlights

What are the different profiles of Primary 1 children?

How do primary school children engage with popular culture?

How can popular culture be used in the primary classroom?

Primary 1 teachers know that young children are differentially prepared for school when they enter primary school. A brief description of five preschool children illustrates this point:

Emmanuel loves reading and possesses a wide vocabulary. For example, he is able to describe the owl as a "nocturnal" animal. He can effectively describe the effects of brain waves. He plays language games on the computer and watches DVDs of his favourite movies.

Laura is deeply immersed in popular culture. She loves stories about princesses, mermaids and Barbie dolls. She spends a lot of her time at home watching television while doing art and craft work.

Callie loves reading. When she was in K2, she was already reading stories written by Enid Blyton. When she is not reading, she spends a lot of her time doing exercises from assessment books. She hardly watches television.

Finn attends several tuition classes in English, Math and Art throughout the week. Much of his time at home is spent completing homework assigned by his tuition teacher and mother. When he reads books, a lot of effort is spent understanding individual words.

Zan attended a neighbourhood kindergarten. When he is at home, there is nothing for him to do. As a result of that, he spends most of his time watching television. His parents do not interfere with the way he spends his time.

The Primary 1 Classroom

In any Primary 1 classroom, there would be a combination of "highly proficient" students like Emmanuel and Callie, as well as "high support" students like Zan and Finn (Unsworth, 2001). Laura seems to represent the average student.

How then do Primary 1 teachers customize their lessons to meet the needs of students with varying proficiencies?

As a start, teachers could try to learn more about their children's common interests.

One thing these five children have in common is their interest in the use of the computer. Another area that they have in common is their engagement with popular culture - television programmes, computer games, movies, storybooks and comics.

There may be some teachers who object: "What? Popular culture?" Technology, "Yes." But popular culture, "No!"

Popular culture seems to belong to the category of "things that are considered objectionable" in the classroom, even today. But a combination of popular culture with technology presents teachers with a potentially powerful pedagogical tool.

Why Popular Culture?

Children do learn a lot from popular culture, as evidenced by these five children.

Emmanuel was already able to produce an imaginary running commentary on a "grand tournament" when he entered Primary 1. He was able to do this because of his exposure to *Knights' Kingdom*, a popular online game.

Laura knows the names of the Barbie characters and various place names. She even knows the meaning of the phrase "The First Lady of America" - the name of one of her Barbie dolls. She is able to talk about her dolls at length with adults.

Callie only came into contact with popular culture when she was in Primary 2, when she was given a *Tamagotchi* digital pet as a present. Through learning to care for the digital pet, she has learnt to read the instruction manual.

Finn started reading the story *Cars* after watching the movie of the same name. He is also able to pronounce the character names found on the *Pokémon* cards. He understands the rules of the game and plays it with his younger brother.

Zan learns a lot through watching television. Usually very quiet, he would try to describe specific scenes in his favourite shows using his limited command of English.

Popular Culture In The Classroom

How then can we make use of popular culture in our primary classroom?

Let's take, for example, a current favourite among young children - the popular cartoon series *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

While there are some characters in the cartoon who are rude and could influence children negatively, there are enough positive elements in the programme which teachers could use.

The case of *SpongeBob SquarePants*

We can use *SpongeBob SquarePants* to teach children to be critical viewers. Children can be challenged to identify rude behaviours they see on the screen, asked to explain why they consider the particular behaviour as being rude, and encouraged to provide polite alternatives.

The *SpongeBob SquarePants website* also provides opportunities for teaching literacy. Most children enjoy learning "big words" and using them in their writing. Teachers can select video titles that lend themselves to teaching vocabulary.

Introducing the word *crustacean*, and then having the children view a snippet from the episode "Mid-Life Crustacean", for example, will surely make the word more meaningful than simply writing it on the whiteboard.

Children who remember the content of certain episodes could be called upon to recount the story to the class or to each other. Those who are able to write extensively can even produce the story in their own words for their classmates to read.

The vast amount of knowledge that children acquire outside of the classroom is known as their *funds of knowledge* (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Teachers can make use of these funds of knowledge as springboards to their English Language lessons.

In this case, by using something the children are interested in, such a popular cartoon, they are exposed to the use of language, a range of vocabulary, and a variety of genres.

Like it or not, many of our children are exposed to popular culture, and they become very excited when they discuss their favourite programmes. You may wish to try incorporating other forms of popular culture into your language classroom. You'll be surprised how well your students take to it!

References

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About the author

Ms Koh Guat Hua is a Lecturer with the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education. She is interested in early childhood education, in particular, the kinds of literacy practices that take place in the homes of preschool children in Singapore.



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