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# Storyline: Why? What? How?

## The Storyline Approach in Teacher Education (TEFL)



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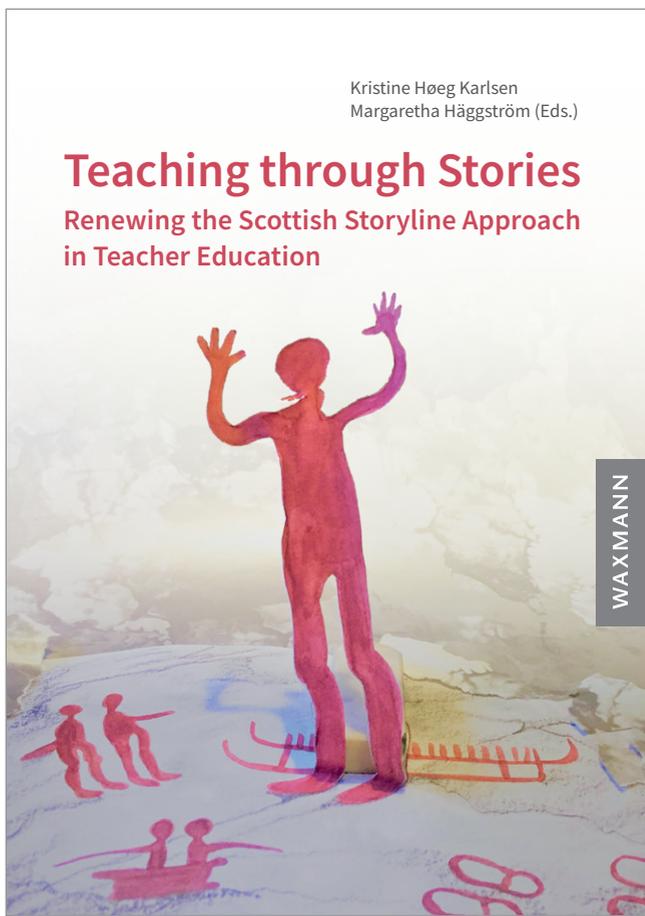
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## Chapter 7

### Storyline: Why? What? How?

#### The Storyline Approach in Teacher Education (TEFL)<sup>1</sup>

*Doris Kocher*

*Abstract.* University students often complain that they learn a lot of theory but not how to apply their theoretical knowledge in educational contexts, e.g., in “real” language classrooms. As a consequence, they would rather stick to outdated methods and feel unhappy. In my research I searched for sustainable solutions and designed a specific course concept to overcome this discrepancy. The theory behind my research and course concept is closely linked to the theory and research on motivation, constructivist approaches, task-based language learning, learner autonomy, action-based learning and multiple intelligences. This chapter is based on the findings of three action research case studies which contain observations, questionnaires, written reflections and Storyline projects designed by the student teachers. In order to examine, analyse and interpret the various perspectives and data, I decided on mixed methods research with a focus on qualitative research (qualitative content analysis) and triangulation. The course was considered as highly relevant, motivating and effective. The data revealed that the course concept provided a multifaceted picture of the Storyline Approach because theory, praxis, reflection and transfer were closely related.

*Keywords:* TEFL – Storyline in secondary school – Storyline at university – sustainable teaching and learning

### Introduction

Our young generation is confronted with many new challenges in a globalised, media-based and fast-turning world where intercultural communicative competences and English as lingua franca seem to become more and more important. Teaching at school thus means preparing learners to master complex situations where they need to apply profound knowledge, various competences and appropriate attitudes to become successful, critical and life-long learners. But how can (language) learners and teachers cope with these multifaceted demands effectively?

University students often complain that they learn a lot of theory but not how to apply their knowledge in educational contexts. My experience from various courses in the field of foreign language teaching confirms the fact that many students are able to recite and explain subject-related terms and concepts such as *task-based language learning*, *interdisciplinary learning* or *learner-centredness* but still do not know how to design lessons or tasks according to these principles. When I point out this problem,

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1 TEFL = Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

they frequently mention that lecturers tend to give impressive presentations but often do not serve as role models when it comes to new practical experiences because their frontal teaching is (apart from the PowerPoint presentations) more or less the same as in the past, namely teacher-centred. One of my students frankly outlined her concerns: “Focusing on the learner is the new way to teach in high-school, and it is mentioned in every other article and book I read. But how am I supposed to teach like that when I have never experienced what it really means?” (SA3St7)<sup>2</sup>. As a consequence, student teachers would rather stick to “safe” methods and teacher-centred procedures to avoid disruption and unpredictable situations, even if they are highly motivated and eager to try out something new.

Obviously, there has to be a change in teacher education to help young teachers overcome the shortcomings of their own school experiences and develop from the sage on the stage to the guide on the side. My research with various English classes (10-17-year-old learners) and with student teachers in university courses has proved that the Storyline Approach (TSA) is a very suitable tool to support this change (cf. Fehse & Kocher, 1998a; 2000; 2002; Kocher, 1999; 2006; 2007; 2008; 2016; 2019). This chapter is based on the findings of three action research case studies which were carried out between 2006 and 2011 (cf. Kocher, 2019) as well as on my ongoing research into Storyline in teacher education (TEFL).

## Context and Background of My Research

Over the last decades, various methods and approaches have been developed to make school-based language learning more motivating, meaningful, authentic, communicative, learner-centred, autonomous, holistic, cooperative, efficient and sustainable. In addition, an enormous number of publications on motivational processes (e.g. Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2020; Gardner, 2010; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013; Küppers & Quetz, 2006; Nakata, 2006), constructivist approaches (e.g., Meixner, 2005; Timm, 2013; Wendt, 2000; Williams & Burden, 1997; Wolff, 1994; 2000; 2002) or task-based language learning and teaching (e.g. Eckerth & Siekmann, 2008; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; 2013; Van den Branden, 2006; Van den Branden et al., 2009; Willis, 1996; Willis & Willis, 2007) offer suggestions, reasons and strategies to reach the above-mentioned goals.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it seems like theory and research findings are not realised and transferred to language classrooms – for many reasons: “However, reports of the implementation of different task-based initiatives (...) suggest considerably more unease among practitioners working with tasks ‘on the ground’ than is generally acknowledged in the literature” (Samuda & Bygate, 2008, p. 195). Nunan (2013, p. 25) points out, “(d)espite all of this activity, the concept is still widely misunderstood, and is only slowly beginning to gain traction in the classroom”. Among others, also East (2012) and Van den Branden (2006) criticise the discrepancy between theory and classroom

2 Coded source (written reflection, case study 3, student 7).

3 For further details see Kocher, 2006; 2007; 2008; 2016; 2019.

practice. Why is there a gap between theory, research and classroom practice (Königs, 2013, pp. 18)? How can this gap be overcome?

## Aims and Research Questions

While implementing TSA in various TEFL classes to study motivational aspects and learning outcomes, I experienced that the learners of all age groups in secondary school enjoyed the projects and put a lot of effort into their work (cf. Fehse & Kocher, 1998a; 2000; 2002; Kocher, 2019). However, I also noticed how difficult it was for teachers to move away from teaching traditions and outdated beliefs, even though I explained every step in detail and prepared all the material for the Storyline projects. Obviously, it was not sufficient to (only) explain what Storyline is and how it works to cause a change in teacher behaviour regarding more learner autonomy. The statement that “(t)eachers tend to teach the way they are taught – and not the way they are taught to teach” (Gaderer, 1984, p. 171), has been quoted many times, as it clearly illustrates how vigorously our brain prefers to stick to routines and thus tends to avoid risks and changes of behaviour. Teachers who do not feel confident in the classroom are – for obvious reasons – not open towards new approaches with unpredictable outcomes but rather “continue to teach as they have been taught” (Nunan, 2013, p. 17).

As a result of my classroom observations, I asked myself how to design a Storyline course that integrates subject-related knowledge (*know how*) as well as procedural knowledge (*do how*) to make university students proficient and confident to use TSA in their internship and to also cope successfully with heterogeneous classes. How can they develop from traditional *explainers* to reflective and competent *enablers* (cf. Scrivener, 2011, pp. 17–23)?

In order to answer this question I finally set up a specific course concept. My aim was to *teach* TSA to my university students to initiate a change in their teaching behaviour and at the same time *use* TSA as a tool to reach this goal. This means, I taught Storyline through Storyline to convince my students of the numerous qualities of the approach. At the same time I wanted to find out if my course concept was motivating as well as learner- and learning-centred with regard to my target group.

## Research Methods

Quantitative research methods are usually based on prior results that are again tested in closed questions. If there are neither former studies nor clear anticipated results, as was the case with my research, it makes sense to use other methods. Qualitative research methods do not have a very long tradition in the field of language learning and applied linguistics but obviously they are becoming more and more popular because of “the growing recognition that almost every aspect of language acquisition and use is determined or significantly shaped by social, cultural, and situational factors, and qualitative research is ideal for providing insights into such contextual conditions and influences” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 36).

In order to examine, analyse and interpret the various perspectives and complex areas of language learning, it makes sense to choose mixed methods, and thus combine qualitative and quantitative methods (triangulation) to achieve more profound and reliable results. Flick (2008, p. 288) suggests flexibility with regard to data collection, and also Dörnyei highly recommends to “*adopt a pragmatic approach and feel free to choose the research method that you think will work best in your inquiry*” (2007, p. 307, italics in original).

In the case studies referred to in this paper I decided on mixed methods research with a strong focus on qualitative research: I was not only the *practitioner* who taught the courses but also the *researcher* who observed the classes, took notes (research diary) and photos of the frieze, collages etc., initiated class discussions and interviewed course participants. Furthermore, I reflected on my observations and experiences regularly (introspection) and documented my thoughts in the research diary.

For their term paper, the students of my courses had to design Storyline projects in small groups and also write an individual reflection on their learning processes. Additionally, on the last course day they were asked to complete a semi-structured questionnaire without giving their names, so they could also list negative aspects without being identified or blamed. This is of course a crucial aspect which called for a critical reflection on my roles as a researcher and a practitioner (cf. Flick, 2012, pp. 143).

## Outline of My Storyline Course

The participants of the examined Storyline courses were either primary or secondary student teachers with different backgrounds (e.g., age, learner biography, teaching experience, language proficiency, social competences etc.). For the simulation I chose two different Storylines that are appropriate for inexperienced teachers: either *Our Farms* (Kocher, 2001; 2002) or *Witches* (Fehse & Kocher, 1998b). The course was (and still is) designed as a compact course (4 days) with a strong focus on learning by doing and critical reflection (cf. Dewey, 1936). Right from the beginning, it was clear to me that I did not want to be the traditional “explainer” but rather model the role of the Storyline-specific “enabler” (cf. Bruner, 1966; 1996; Scrivener, 2011). In the following I will summarise and explain my course concept which is based on three major phases: theory – praxis – transfer.

Before the course starts, the students receive a reader with articles on educational standards and curricular requirements, diversity, constructivism, project-oriented learning, autonomous learning, task-based learning, the role of textbooks in TEFL etc., and of course a number of texts on TSA including several practical examples. They have to read the texts before the course starts, so it is their own decision how much they need to read to be well-prepared for class discussions.

As language anxiety is a well-known problem in any language learning context around the world (Gardner, 2010), the first day starts with a warm up activity (e.g., double circle), and the student teachers have the opportunity to chat about anything of interest in the target language. In the next step they share their own experiences with project work or theme-based work in TEFL. At the same time, they try to define

these terms and design a poster with their group results. After the poster presentation I show some examples of so-called projects or tasks from various English coursebooks. The students evaluate the examples according to their collected criteria, and thus show whether they can apply their knowledge.

The second day starts with a discussion of the theory and published knowledge concerning TSA. Again, the students work in groups to establish a positive class atmosphere and reduce existing language anxiety. Each group gets a different set of questions (e.g., about the roles of teachers and learners, the functions of the frieze and key questions, the similarities and differences with regard to task-based instruction), and again designs a poster. In this step they refer to the reader and also make up hypotheses about TSA. After the discussion of results, all posters are displayed on one part of the frieze to make sure that we can refer to them at any time.

Before we start with the class simulation, I ask the students whether they now feel confident and well-prepared to carry out a Storyline in school. We then collect all their questions, fears and problems with regard to teaching TSA on a poster, and I also encourage the students to add further questions whenever they come up during the week. After lunch the experiential learning phase starts and is continued on the next day. This means, I carry out one of the above-mentioned Storyline projects in a class simulation which allows the student teachers to experience and “feel” what it is like to be a pupil but also to observe me in the role of the teacher. In the afternoon of the third day we discuss chances and challenges of Storyline in TEFL. To make clear that TSA is not a recipe but a very flexible approach which needs to be adapted to one’s specific class context, I present photos, materials and learner products from other Storyline topics, and we also watch a video example from a Storyline classroom. In addition, I present some of my own and other research findings to further illustrate the teachers’ and the learners’ view.

Now that they have not only read about TSA but also experienced it for several hours, the student teachers look at the previously designed posters with “educated eyes” (Vos, 1991, p. 93). They might revise or confirm their hypotheses but maybe also add new questions to the specific poster of questions. In the next phase some course members examine the curriculum to find out which skills and competences have been trained and “covered” in our Storyline simulation, while others think of how to assess and evaluate the various learning products and processes. If time allows, we briefly discuss the concept of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2002; 2007) and its benefits for language learning before we finish day three.

The last day starts with the already mentioned questionnaire to find out what the students think about the course (e.g., likes, dislikes, course preparation, learning outcome, suggestions for improvement, comparison with other courses etc.). This early course evaluation allows me to go through the questionnaires during the day and give feedback before the course finishes. Before the groups design their own Storyline projects, I display various Storyline books on a table and also give some hints to facilitate their work (e.g., suggestions for beginnings, incidents and endings). Then the students work autonomously wherever and however they want. I am available if they struggle with problems (cf. Kocher, 1994), but I do not teach actively. In the afternoon each

group briefly presents a rough sketch of their Storyline project while the others listen carefully and give feedback. If possible, I also invite former students who have carried out a Storyline in school to share their experiences. In the evening we discuss the results from the questionnaires, then go through the poster(s) with the listed questions and make sure that all questions are answered.

## Data Analysis and Interpretation

The raw material in qualitative studies often appears “‘messy’ if not chaotic” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 244), therefore the researcher is challenged to find an appropriate procedure that leads to useful and transparent results. Usually the data in qualitative studies are transformed into a textual form, which means that the analysis of qualitative data is typically language-based (ibid., 2007, p. 243). For this reason, I transcribed interviews, described frieze products, summarised observations etc. and finally decided on the method of qualitative content analysis.<sup>4</sup>

In qualitative content analysis researchers either *construct* or *apply* a system of so-called categories (Mayring, 2015, p. 29). As I could not refer to any earlier studies, and also because I was not sure what to expect in my case studies, all qualitative categories had to be derived inductively from the data (cf. Mayring, 2013). This means that the data from the various sources were coded, that is, aspects that referred to my research questions were marked and then tested in follow-up studies. In the end I had a catalogue with different codes that were split up into relevant categories (e.g., *learning atmosphere, language competences, social learning, holistic learning, tasks and activities, course concept* etc.). Thus, the interpretation of the data and the drawing of conclusions were both transparent and criteria-based (cf. Steinke, 2013). In my opinion, the triangulation of data, methods and perspectives was an effective strategy that led to a “thick description” (Denzin, 1989, pp. 157), a “thick interpretation” (ibid., 1989, p. 159) and finally to fairly valid and reliable results of my case studies.<sup>5</sup>

## Results

All in all, the Storyline course examined in the three case studies as well as in my ongoing research was considered as highly relevant, motivating, learner-centred and effective. Quite a number of students agreed that “this seminar has been the best and most inspiring for me as a future language teacher” (SA3St8). One student wrote that “(t)he class about storyline which I participated in during the semester break was one of the few English classes at the University of Education that actually helped me in planning lessons in school” (SA1St11).

4 For further details on qualitative content analysis see Dörnyei, 2007 or Mayring, 2015.

5 All names etc. were coded (e.g., SA3St.7; see above). As the students’ reflections were handed in together with their Storyline projects, I decided to have questionnaires as well which were filled in anonymously. This means the students were free to say whatever they wanted to say (cf. Kocher, 2019). This is why triangulation is so important.

The data revealed that the course concept provided a multifaceted picture of TSA because theory, praxis, reflection and transfer were closely related. Therefore, the students were not only able to acquire procedural knowledge and action-based competences to professionally design and confidently implement Storyline projects in school, but they also gained valuable insights and profound theoretical knowledge to give reasons why Storyline is not only motivating but also an efficient approach in TEFL. There is clear evidence that the tight combination of *know how* and *do how* convinced the students of the qualities of TSA and besides motivated them to try out Storyline projects in their internships and future schools:

Apart from having gotten to know how the storyline approach works, I think this was the most beneficial point for me: experience language learning the way we are nowadays supposed to teach it. Beforehand, I just heard about the new way of teaching but could observe myself falling back into the structures of teaching I experienced as a pupil myself, even though I knew better in the theory (SA2St15).

Even though each single phase was considered as valuable and stimulating, it was noticeable that especially the class simulation contributed to a high learning outcome. Almost everybody mentioned in the written reflections (at least 84%),<sup>6</sup> in the class discussions and in the questionnaires that this was the best and most enlightening part of the course, and that “(i)t is very helpful to be taught with the same principles which we are supposed to use at school” (SA2St6).

Reading subject-related texts ahead of time was seen as a positive strategy to have more time for discussions, questions, reflection and (of course) the simulation. Most interestingly, the anonymous questionnaire revealed that many students had read most of the texts or even the *complete* reader before the course started, although I had told them to choose the texts and topics according to their individual needs and pre-knowledge. On the other hand, almost everybody agreed in the class discussions that just reading or maybe listening to a lecture was definitely not enough to get a clear picture of this new approach. The questions on the posters mirrored many fears of critical parents, colleagues or head teachers but also doubts and insecurities with regard to losing control, means of assessment, forms of correction, curricular requirements, disruption etc. The importance of positive role models in teacher education was explicitly highlighted in multiple students’ reflections:

I personally liked the idea that the tutor was the ‘teacher’ and the students stuck to the ‘pupil’ role. Thus students were able to observe excellent teaching and consequently learned a lot. In other seminars students sometimes have to teach according to an approach about which they have read, but not experienced themselves. This often results in rather poor performances due to a lack of students’ experiences. Since Mrs Kocher

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6 In qualitative studies it is difficult to provide concrete and absolute numbers. The figures above only refer to what the university students mentioned explicitly in their reflections. This means that more students might have mentioned a specific aspect if this had been asked for explicitly in a questionnaire or in a structured interview.

is an expert in teaching Storylines, (...) I am sure everybody will benefit from this experience (SA1St18).

Observing a role model (e.g., me and the teacher in the video), looking at authentic learner products and evaluation sheets from various school classes, but also consulting the curriculum and discussing means of assessment definitely caused a reduction of these fears and thus initiated changes of attitudes and new insights:

As a teacher you have to justify your work towards yourself, the students, the parents, the Ministry of Education and other interested people. It is amazing how *Storyline* meets the standards in the curriculum. The *Storyline* ‘Witches’ covered most of them. (...) In contrast to linear teaching *Storyline* combines most of the required students’ competences in a few hours. As a consequence, it is no problem to legitimate *Storyline* (SA2St5).

Buzz words such as *affective filter*, *meaningful tasks*, *purposeful communication*, *fluency before accuracy*, *entrepreneurship* or *learner- and learning-centredness* changed from abstract terms to something the students could relate to because of the experiences they made and the discussions we had:

I think whoever wrote that you should make this course compulsory, was totally right. In this course we learned how to put an approach actually into practice, whereas in most of the other courses the theories predominate. I really enjoyed and benefited from the course since the experiential learning was so impressive that I will not forget this approach as easily as all the other ones I only know theoretically (SA2St15).

As a result, the students were satisfied and proud, because “(a)t the end of the seminar we were able to answer these questions by ourselves. It was not somebody telling us the answers to all the questions that occurred. It were the students themselves to answer the questions. This showed the learning outcome of the seminar and I was surprised about our improvement” (SA3St15).

Although we all know that designing your first Storyline is hard work (Kocher, 1994), many students mentioned in their course reflections that this was an integral part to make them feel more secure and competent. In their teams they could discuss upcoming questions or consult me if necessary. Apart from the workload, it was apparently also very motivating for the students to design their own Storylines and present their first ideas in class to receive a feedback from their peers:

After experiencing a storyline, designing a storyline was the ideal step to get the whole view of every important aspect which has to be taken into consideration when planning a storyline. Problems which were not obvious until now got room to be discussed and solved. Designing a storyline supported the own learning process extremely (SA3St1).

What I found interesting and very positive was (and still is) the fact that the groups appreciated the visits of former student teachers, even though not everything went well when they tried out TSA in school:

I particularly liked the visit of the two students who had already carried out a storyline project themselves. It was very interesting to find out what they experienced during the project and what difficulties they had to deal with. Even *though* Ms Kocher had already told us a lot about her own experiences, the conversation with the students was particularly stimulating, as it opened up a different perspective (SA4St10).

In his speeches and publications, Steve Bell has often mentioned *mutual respect* (Bell, 2001) and *structured freedom* (Bell, 2007) as two essential criteria of TSA, and this is exactly what a number of students found very beneficial, because “(t)hese are also reasons why one, as a teacher, has no need to be afraid of doing a ‘Storyline’ in class as theme and level of guidance can be chosen and adapted“ (SA3St18).

After the course the students had three months to finish their Storylines in the semester break. The positive feedback in their course reflections proved that motivation, interest and conviction did not diminish over time as one might expect. On the contrary, many students mentioned that they were looking forward to trying out their first Storyline in school because “I feel that we had a complete introduction to the method of storyline. Now it is on us, to introduce the method to our students and use the benefits of the approach” (SA3St15). Some students actually contacted schools and asked for permission to carry out a research project and try out their Storylines. This, of course, is a great idea to complete the learning process and consolidate what students learn at university. In addition, school teachers might become inspired by their ideas and engagement, while the young student teachers profit from their mentors’ long experience. In my opinion, everybody would gain from a joint venture like this.

Unfortunately, not all of the students found teachers who were willing to try out something new, and “in contrast to finding a school, writing the storyline was rather easy” (SA2St18). This rather negative attitude caused some frustration:

During my (...) [internship] I mentioned that I would like to do a Storyline in one of my classes but there was no time. And I think that this could be a problem in school because it won’t be easy to get all the lessons you need to do a good Storyline. In my opinion most of the teachers don’t want to spend the time you need to prepare a Storyline. You have to think of different activities and create a story which has a clear structure and you need to be able to give some freedom to the pupils that they can be creative (SA3St10).

But luckily, quite a number of students gained very positive experiences in school, and they were highly motivated to report back to me:

Instead of just using the coursebook which I was told to do, I used the *storyline approach*. Right from the beginning, the students were active and curious about this new way of learning. I was really wowed by the enthusiasm of the children and it was great to see that they were motivated and engaged with the whole story even though it was really short. My colleagues commented how much they had heard the students speak about ‘Rebecca’s Birthday Party’ during their lessons which made me proud and realize what learning a language is really about (SA3St8).

Even those who did not get an immediate chance to try out TSA in school confirmed that the course had a strong impact on their future professional career. One student confessed in her reflection:

I am happy that I got to experience this different approach to teaching English, since I didn't do much project work when I was in high school, and my English lessons were very grammar drill and exercise based. I know that I don't want to teach my students the way I was taught but it is very hard to break with habits when you don't get to experience new ways ... (SA3St7).

Another one stated: "The course's content is/was absolutely relevant and it was [one] of the rare seminars where one has the feeling at the end: yes, I am really going to be able to use that" (SA3St9).

## Conclusion

TSA combines and integrates many up-to-date principles with regard to good language lessons such as task-based learning, learner- and learning-centredness, cooperative learning, content-and-language-integrated learning, media-based learning or self-dependent learning – to name just a few – even though it was developed in the 60s and 70s of the last century. Storyline allows every child or teenager to be a successful language learner and has great potential for life-long learning (Kocher, 2019).

A course on TSA can be connected to many relevant topics in teacher education: pedagogy, psychology, didactics, lesson-planning, assessment, differentiation, inclusion, role of textbooks, disruption etc., and it is important to teach and discuss all these issues not in bits and pieces but – with regard to sustainable learning – in a situated learning context. If student teachers experience the power of this approach and learn to design their own projects, they implicitly learn a lot about theory because they have to give convincing reasons for their decisions which again prepares them for their future profession. This point has been explicitly confirmed by many of my students over the years.

There is no empirical evidence (yet) where, how and how often TSA is implemented in TEFL, but based on the findings of my longitudinal research on Storyline in teacher education I am optimistic that the idea is spreading slowly but surely because more and more young teachers are "convinced that storyline is an approach that should be taught more often at universities and should be used regularly in school. I think not only the students' marks will improve but also their motivation will increase. During a storyline, students will be more willing to learn than during a text book based lesson" (SA4St12). One student even demanded to "(m)ake this course compulsory!!!! In order to have more students experience Storyline" (SAB2St1).

We still need more published research on Storyline in TEFL as well as in the field of teacher education at university, but my findings showed how important it is to teach what you preach (Van den Branden, 2006) and to practice what you preach (Barr & Frame, 2006, p. 57). We all know, "(b)eing a teacher is not easy, especially in the area

of foreign language teaching but it can be creative, enjoyable and rewarding if teachers feel that they have a creative part to play as designers of education” (Bell, 2006, p. 59). My research proved that teacher education at university definitely matters (Johnson & Golombek, 2016, p. xii).

TSA will of course not solve any and every school problem but it can certainly serve as a helpful tool in educational reform measures: “The fact that the concept of Storyline is used in so many different contexts surprised me a lot and gave me the feeling that it is the future” (SA3St12). There is nothing else to add.

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## **Strand 2**

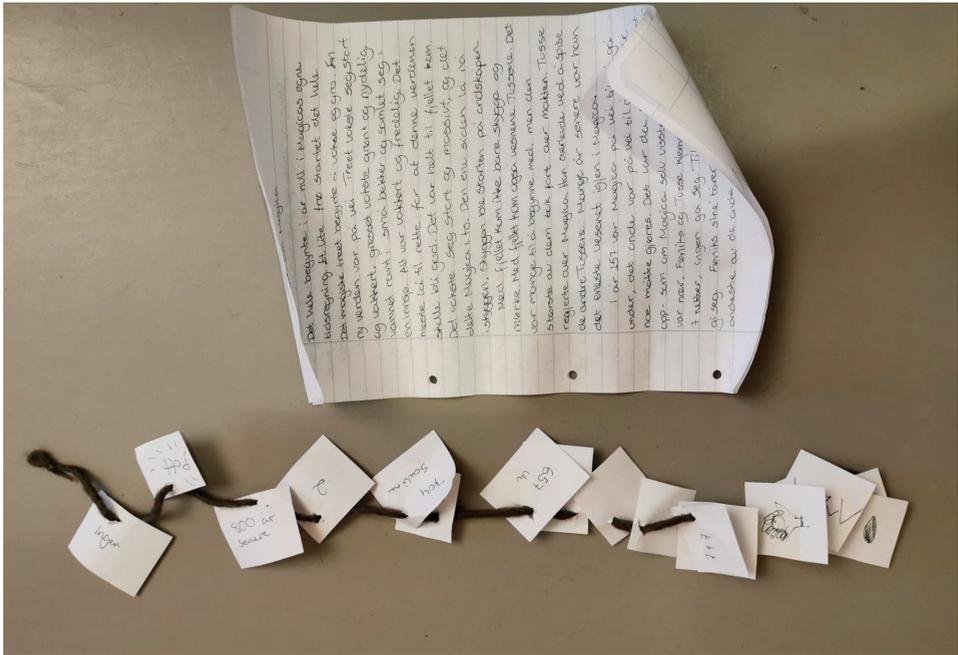


Image from the Storyline *Where good and evil forces fight for power* showing a student-made story that conveys the creation of their universe. Credits Kristine Høeg Karlsen.