



Multi-lingual Storytelling

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Anna McQuinn discusses storytelling with children with different home languages.

Storytelling to groups of small children with different home languages can be a challenge. Dual-language books are not always the answer when working with very young children. Community Librarian Anna McQuinn, whose picture book **Lulu Loves the Library** was first published in 2006, has come up with another solution! **Anna McQuinn** explains.

I began writing **Lulu Loves the Library** just before I started a new job as a Community Librarian for Sure Start in Acton. As I threw myself into outreach work in the community ? visiting baby clinics, drop-in clinics, free milk days, play groups etc ? I realised that many of the arguments around using books with very young children are not yet won.

I?ve worked in children?s publishing for almost 20 years. After so many wonderful years of BookStart and other great initiatives, there is a temptation to think that everyone knows how important it is to read with young children. However, when I started doing outreach, I realised that I had to make these arguments all over again; mums had to be persuaded that it is not silly to read a book to a toddler who can?t read; parents had to be persuaded that it is appropriate to bring a little child into a library and that they will be welcome and find things to do?

A year after its publication **Lulu Loves the Library** was doing really well. Librarians and school librarians were big fans. Nursery and Reception class teachers, EMA*, EAL** and Family Learning professionals were all using the book to prepare for library visits and encourage parents to join their local library. Outreach and community librarians were using images of Lulu on posters to advertise Rhymetimes and Storytimes in their libraries. Fantastic!

The function of dual-language editions

I began to be asked when was I planning to publish some dual-language editions and which languages would be chosen (accompanied by many, many suggestions for languages that were needed). What to do? From a publishing point of view, dual-language editions are a huge logistical problem. Lulu?s publisher, Alanna Books, is a small company and could not afford to print lots of different editions and hold such a large amount of stock. Invariably, once a publisher has chosen two or three languages to print, customers request five different ones!

I have been interested in the role of dual-language editions for a long time but I think they pose a number of problems. Firstly, I?m not convinced there is a case for using dual-language books with very small children. Since such children cannot read the text, it does not have the function (as it does in picture books used with older children) of validating the child?s home language and of showing them that language in print. Of course, dual-language books do enable parents to read the story to their child in their home language and this is certainly a very worthy objective ? though with such simple books a parent could probably do this anyway with a little encouragement.

However, there are still one or two problems. Firstly, what of parents who did not learn to read and write in their home countries? Who grew up in areas where education (particularly for girls) may have been inadequate or difficult? Who grew up during times of conflict when education was haphazard? Who learned to read and write in this country in

English only while continuing to speak their first language at home? How helpful is it to hand them a dual-language edition of a story and suggest they use it with their child?

And what of languages like Urdu or Arabic which run from right to left? These are always a problem for dual-language editions and particularly so for very young children who are only just learning which direction a book works and text runs. And what about languages which are spoken by smaller yet significant numbers of people like Tigrinya or Amharic?

In the end, technology offered a solution. I decided to make a CD where I recorded people telling the story in their first language. That way, the book could be printed in English but the CD could have (as I thought then) five or six languages on it ? so six languages in one edition. The book would be accessible to parents and children who spoke those languages and, perhaps, it would encourage parents to tell other stories in their first languages.

Good quality tellings

I began by finding a 'proper' recording studio and sound engineer. With so many famous actors like Dawn French, Stephen Fry, Jamie Theakston etc. featuring on audio books, I thought it was vital that our tellings should be as professional-sounding as possible.

I approached some of my colleagues and one parent who I knew would do good tellings and we made the first three recordings in Polish, Irish and Portuguese. I was then able to burn copies of the CD to use to explain to other parents what I had in mind.

Firstly I asked them to translate **Lulu Loves the Library** and prepare to tell it as if they were reading it to their own child. It was more important to me that the tellings sounded natural than that they were academically correct translations. So, when parents asked what to do when there wasn't a word for something (like library, or bear) in their language, I encouraged them to use whatever word they would use if they were chatting to someone else in that language in this country ? most likely they would use an English word. Since I grew up in an almost dual-language household, I knew this would sound natural. For this reason most tellers decided not to translate the song title, 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', since it was more natural to refer to it in English.

I asked parents to introduce themselves and to mention that they attended my library sessions. While I wanted the best recordings possible, I also wanted it to be clear that these tellers were parents and not professional voice artists.

Navigating round the CD

I asked all the tellers to do their introduction in both English and their first language. This was so that listeners who do not speak a particular language could still understand each introduction. I hoped that people would listen to tracks other than those in their own language. It is also important that professionals using the CD can navigate round it ? I often find it difficult to sort out the dual-language section in my library when the language is not named on the cover.

The response to the CD

Well, the project really took off! We ended up with 19 languages on the CD and each one is fabulous! It is amazing to me how professional the parents sound ? they really did a fantastic job. And I can't say enough about the incredibly talented sound engineer, Ren Ahadome, who edited each language perfectly, despite not speaking any of them.

Now the book and CD have been out for a few months, I'm getting a feel for how they are being used and I'm so proud that it is all that I hoped for. Unsurprisingly, the biggest number of users are children who speak English. They listen to the story while looking at the pictures and 'read' the book in the usual way. They then go on to listen to the other tracks and are interested to hear other tellings ? what a nice uncomplicated way to encounter other languages!

Children who speak languages other than English are delighted to hear their first language spoken. They can share the

book both with their parents and with other adults and children who don't speak the same language. They too listen to the story in their own and in other languages ? something I'm finding they really enjoy doing.

Finally, professionals in multi-language settings can use the CD with different groups of children. I use it a lot in the library ? I have it playing during the beginning of my sessions while we work on puzzles and art ? it's like a kind of aural ?welcome poster?. Children look up in amazement when their language comes on and I know it makes them feel comfortable and at home.

Working with multi-lingual groups

More than 70% of the children in the groups I run in Acton Library are speakers of languages other than English. When I first started running the groups I felt that this precluded any kind of storytelling ? how would the children understand? However, during the six years I've been running the groups I've learnt that we can share stories if we select the books carefully and let go of our own hang-ups and inhibitions.

Choosing the right book for group storytelling is so important. Some wonderful books (which have a subtle text or word play or a text which runs contrapuntal to the illustrations) do not work with such groups.

When the illustrations clearly tell the story, I point to the pictures, showing what I'm talking about or naming so the children can follow what's going on. You have to project your voice and emphasise your gestures more than you might normally do ? this is part of the letting go process! When I use **Lulu Loves the Library** I usually tell the story in English and point to the pictures. Sometimes I'll put on one of the language tracks on the CD and hold up the book and point to the pictures thus sharing the story in another language.

Sharing a story is such a wonderful experience that parents who observe a group in the library may then try it at home. I hope that, inspired by the Lulu CD, they will tell stories in their first language where they can tease out the subtleties for their children.

If we hand speakers of different languages different language editions of the same book, we risk allowing language to be a great divider. I find that children enjoy having a shared experience ? as they listen to the different language tracks on the Lulu CD, they are all sharing the same story and this opens up their minds and hearts. As we muddle through sharing **Lulu Loves the Library**, pointing at pictures, gesticulating wildly, laughing together at funny pictures, our different languages are just one more interesting thing about us rather than a barrier to communication. And if we all sing ?Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star? together, we can be reassured that in the end, we are all far more alike than we are different.

* EMA are Ethnic Minority Achievement workers funded to come into Children's Centres and schools and work to raise standards with Ethnic Minority students.

** EAL are English as an Additional Language assistants ? usually in schools which have big intakes of children newly arrived and with little English.

Lulu Loves the Library (with free multi-language CD) by Anna McQuinn, illustrated by Rosalind Beardshaw, is published by Alanna Books (978 0 955199 82 0, £7.99). The languages on the CD are English, Welsh, Irish, French, Polish, Italian, Turkish, Gujarati, Urdu, Ndebele, Luganda, Igbo, Arabic, Somali, Amharic, Tigrinya, Portuguese, Spanish and Mandarin. The last track is ?Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star? ? which Lulu sings in the book.

As well as writing books for children **Anna McQuinn** works part time as a Community Librarian for Sure Start Acton running Mother & Toddler Groups and Family Book Groups in Acton Library.

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