Storybooks Canada:
A Digital Resource for Multilingual Education

By Espen Stranger-Johannessen and Bonny Norton

ACCORDING to the 2016 Census, more than 7 million Canadians speak a language other than English or French as a mother tongue. To help children learn English (or French) as well as maintain the home language, a UBC team in the Department of Language and Literacy Education has developed Storybooks Canada (www.storybookscanada.ca). This website has been designed specifically for teachers and parents, making 40 stories from the African Storybook (www.africanstorybook.org) freely available in the major immigrant and refugee languages of Canada, as well as English and French. What is unique about Storybooks Canada is that it not only offers children's stories in many languages, but interlinks these stories so that the user can easily switch between English and one of the 13 other available languages. In this way, a class can read a story in English, and individual students can check the translation of the story in their first language, page by page.

Furthermore, since many ESL students, particularly children, do not fully master the written form of their mother tongue, Storybooks Canada provides recordings of most languages (others are coming). This feature allows users to comprehend the meaning of the story, page by page, even if they can't read the text in their own language. Users can therefore read or listen to a story in English, and then refer to the text or audio recording in a familiar language to understand individual words or the meaning of a given passage. This is particularly helpful for students with limited understanding of English, since teachers often struggle to explain words and expressions and are seldom able to draw on the students' home languages as a resource. By bringing students' own languages into the classroom, Storybooks Canada also helps teachers value and acknowledge the languages that students speak at home.

Background

The stories come from the African Storybook initiative (www.africanstorybook.org), which was created by the South African organization Saide to address the shortage of literacy materials in African languages. Since their stories are released under Creative Commons licences, the Storybooks Canada team started translating the stories into other languages, using the tools developed by team member Liam Doherty in the Global African Storybook (www.global-asp.github.io). We invited volunteers to translate stories into Mandarin, Persian, Norwegian, and other languages, and also recorded some of these stories. We soon realized the potential of these translated stories, and with funding from UBC's Language Sciences Initiative (www.languagesciences.ubc.ca) and a UBC Research Cluster Grant, we could pay honoraria for additional translations and recordings, which are still ongoing. Darshan Soni, a computer engineer and team member, has primary responsibility for website development.

We selected the 40 stories out of several hundred from the African Storybook, and sought to create a collection of stories of different lengths that balance the African origin of the stories with internationally relevant themes. There are traditional animal fables as well as contemporary stories about city life. Some stories cover serious topics like responsibility and gender equality. Others are just written to make you laugh. Our hope is that the universal values reflected in the stories will resonate with children across Canada.

The selection of languages is representative of the most widely spoken languages in Canada according to Statistics Canada. We have also included the main African languages spoken in Canada, in part because the stories are of African origin, and in part because Canadians who speak African languages have fewer resources available to them than speakers of many other languages.

في يوم من الأيام، قرر نيام أن يعطي وعاء الحكمة إلى أنانسي. في كل مرة كان أنانسي ينظر في وعاء الفخار، كان يتعلم شيئا جديدا. كان أمرا مثيرا!

↑	← previous page
↓	← next page
◀ᴗ	← audio
en	← change to English
fr	← change to French

Sample of a story in Arabic
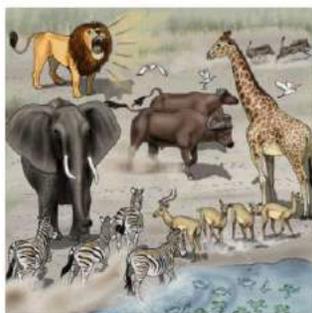
The Storybooks Canada website

While Storybooks Canada focuses on immigrant and refugee languages, it is important to acknowledge and support the many Indigenous languages of Canada as well. There are several websites that offer Indigenous stories. Little Cree Books (www.littlecreebooks.com) contains books in Cree, while the South Slave Divisional Education Council (www.ssdec.nt.ca/ablang/ablanguage/aboriginallanguages.html) has stories and other resources in Chipewyan, Cree, and Slavey. Math Catcher (www.mathcatcher.irmacs.sfu.ca) has mathematics stories in in English and several Indigenous languages. Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada (www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca) has several stories in English, some with audio recordings.

Experience so far and the way forward

The Storybooks Canada website recently went live, and we are eagerly looking forward to reports from teachers and others on the use of these stories in Canadian classrooms and homes. Preliminary responses have been very positive. The mobile and tablet friendly website is popular with young children, who can swipe and click on the buttons themselves.

Identifying connections between the stories and the new BC Curriculum is central to the next stage of the project, and we will seek additional funding to promote collaboration with teachers, parents, and policymakers interested in using the Storybooks Canada website. Revisions and updates to the website will be made in response to findings from our research. Storybooks Canada provides much needed resources for migrants and new refugees, including those from Syria. More

broadly, it encourages gradual change in the direction of global communication (e.g., from North-South to South-North), while supporting both English/French literacy and mother tongue maintenance in Canadian communities. We are excited to provide teachers and parents with a resource that promotes English language learning while at the same time supporting heritage language maintenance. We hope Storybooks Canada will be of interest to BC TEAL's members, and that you will share your thoughts and experiences with us.

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