



Writing Stories for Malaysian Children

A Workshop Course by Brighton Training Fellow Ruth Wickham at IPGKDRI, Kuala Terengganu.

Participant's Notes for Session 6



Session 6: Adapting stories to suit reading and language ability.

Children will become discouraged if the story they want to read is presented in language that is too difficult for them, or print that is too small, or there are no illustrations.

However, that doesn't mean they have to know every single word. They should be intrigued enough to puzzle their way through small obstacles and increase their reading skills.

Objectives

Participants will

- Become aware of levels of English reading ability of Malaysian children and in particular the children they teach.
- Decide on the suitability of some commercial children's books for particular ability levels of Malaysian children.
- Adapt a story to a higher and/or lower ability level.

Materials

You should have your own laptop with Internet access (dongle), notebook and writing materials.



There are three factors to consider with Malaysian school children reading stories in English:

- Knowledge of the English Language
- Reading ability (in English or Bahasa Malaysia).
- Age and related interest level, and cultural interest.

Each of these can affect the suitability of reading materials.

1. English Language Ability Level

The less confident children are in the language, obviously the more pictures they need, and less print per picture. They need to be able to use clues from the picture to understand what is happening in the story.

A story for children with very limited English should have

- Limited vocabulary use – repetitive use of words to encourage the reader.
- Simple verb tenses – present simple tense as much as possible.
- Simple grammar structures – simple rather than complex or compound sentences.
- Short (one or two sentence) paragraphs.

In the earliest stages of learning, we might expect a **picture** with a single word (noun or verb), leading up to phrases (an adjective and noun), and then a simple sentence (subject verb object).

Look at the sample children’s books – are any of them at this level?

Make notes about a couple of books

Title	Vocab	Verb tenses	Grammar	Paragraphs



An older child may have reasonable reading skills but without learning much English and this does not make for a very exciting, engaging story. The real story in this case must be in the pictures themselves and the plot must be engaging enough to encourage continued effort.

As English ability increases, the stories can of course use a greater range of vocabulary, more interesting verb tenses, more complex grammar structures, and longer paragraphs.

2. Reading Ability Level

There are many reasons why children have limited reading ability. They may be young and just starting their schooling. Or they may be older and have a learning disability of some kind (such as dyslexia).

The restrictions for a poor reader are similar to the limitations for limited English. However, a student who has reasonable spoken English skills does not necessarily need to have simplified grammar such as tenses.

Stories for low level reading ability should have

- Limited vocabulary.
- Short sentences.
- Short paragraphs

And, of course, great pictures.

Of the simpler books that you looked through, were any of them designed for low level English skills rather than low level reading skills? How can you tell?

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3. Age and related interest level, and cultural interest

Of course, *in general*, young children have limited English and underdeveloped reading skills, and older children have more English and can read more.

Here are some **general rules** about word counts and age groups from the website 'The Children's Book Insider'. (Backes, 2012) Bear in mind that this is designed for children who are reading in their first language.

Picture Books for Ages 3-6: 32 pages, up to about 600 words.

There should be text and illustrations on each page.

Very simple stories based on familiar routines, or simple nonfiction related to a young child's world. There should be rhyming or rhythmic language, action, minimal dialogue.

Picture Books for Ages 4-8: Average 32 pages, about 1000 words, colour illustrations.

Genres are humour, realistic, fantasy, historical fiction, adventure, etc.

These books are meant to be read out loud to children, so don't have a controlled vocabulary. The text and illustrations work together to tell the whole story.

Picture Books for Ages 6-10: This is a fairly new category of picture book. The text might be up to 1400 words, with books up to 40 pages. These stories work well for third through fifth grade classrooms, providing teachers read aloud books that tie in with school subjects. Therefore topics like historical fiction work well.

Easy Readers for Ages 5-9: 32-64 book pages, with text of less than 100 words up to about 2000 words.

These are written for children who are starting to read on their own. Though these books are illustrated, they look more "grown up" than picture books. Stories are told through action and dialogue. Each publisher has a very specific format for their easy reader series; it's essential that you study these books and get writer's guidelines from the publisher before submitting. Most publishers have three or four levels to their series, beginning with very simple texts of only a few words per page, and advancing to short chapter books.

Chapter Books for Ages 6-9, or Ages 7-10: Sometimes called "transitional books", the manuscripts average 6,000-15,000 words, with books 64-96 pages long. Most have black-and-white illustrations. These are short novels with chapters of about 4 pages each. Stories still rely primarily on action and dialogue, with very little description. Characters are in second through fourth grade.

Middle Grade for Ages 8-12: Books are 84-150 pages long on average, with manuscripts of about 20,000-35,000 words. No illustrations. No restrictions on writing style, but characters tend to be 10-13 years old.

Which category might you be able to write for?

A story to simplify - choose 'Just like Mother' or 'Ron and the Pie'

1. Just like Mother.

Just like Mother



My mother and I had been shopping all morning when we felt hungry. We went to a restaurant for lunch. At a table close by, there were three people — an old woman and two young people — who looked like her daughter and son-in-law.

They ate silently, and the old woman looked unhappy.
I saw Mother looking at them while we were eating.

When we had finished lunch, Mother walked to their table. "I had to come and talk to you," she said, as she put her arm around the unhappy old woman. "You look so much like my mother. May I put my arms around you?"

The old woman smiled a beautiful smile as she held my mother in her arms. She even turned her lined cheek for my mother's kiss.

After we left the restaurant, I said to Mother, "That was really nice of you, Mother. But I didn't think she looked like Grandmother at all."

"Neither did I," said Mother happily.

restaurant : a place where you can buy and eat food



2. Ron and the Pie

Ron was hungry. He had only three dollars. He went to a shop which sold buns and pies.

"May I have a bun, please?" he asked.

"That'll be seventy-five cents," said the man.

Ron paid the man and ate the bun quickly.

"I'm still very hungry," he thought.

"I think I'll buy another bun."

"May I have another bun?" he asked. "Here's the money."

This time, Ron ate the bun slowly. "That was very good," he said, "but I'm still hungry. I'd better have another bun."

So Ron bought a third bun and ate it. He ate the first part slowly and the rest quickly.

"Oh dear, I'm still hungry," he thought.

"How much is a pie?" Ron asked the man.

"Seventy-five cents," said the man.

Ron gave the man the last seventy-five cents in his pocket. He ate the pie and felt happy.

"I'm not hungry any more!" he said. Then he stopped to think.

"How silly I am!" thought Ron. "Why didn't I ask for a pie first? After three buns, I was still hungry. But after just one pie, my stomach is full. What a waste of two dollars and twenty-five cents!"





Read the storybook scan, 'Vroom', below.

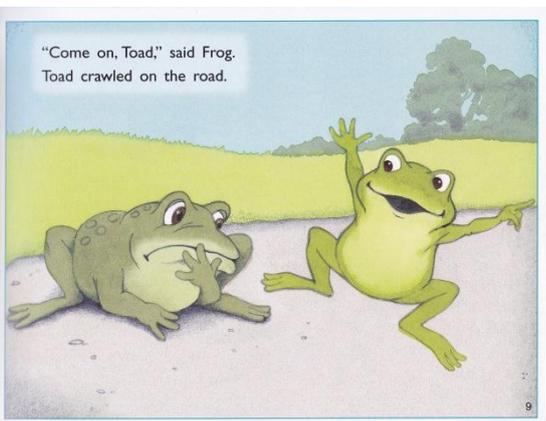
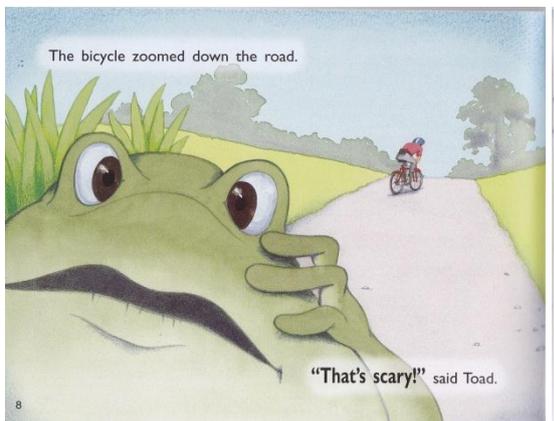
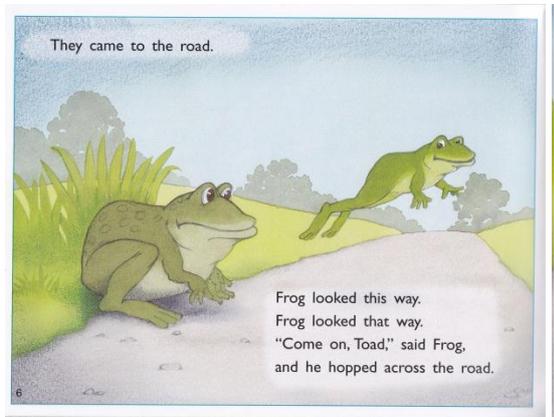
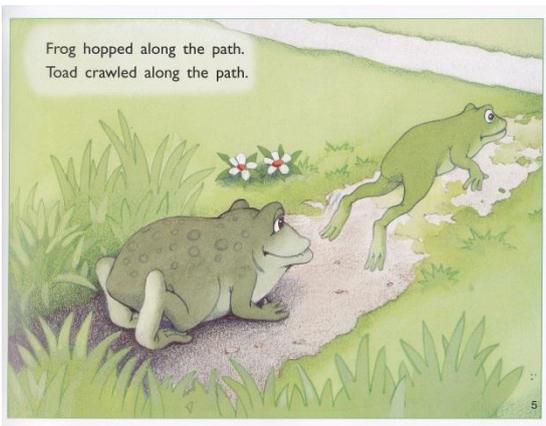
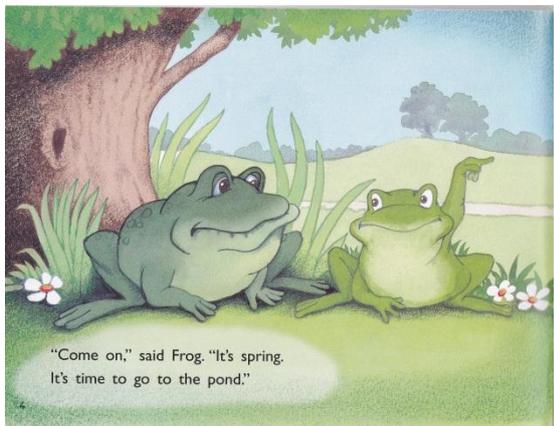
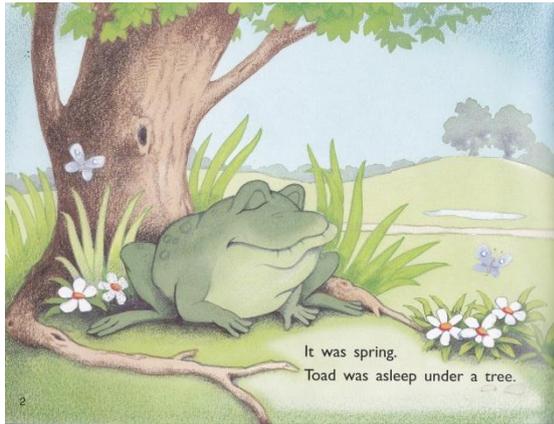
Rewrite the story for older more capable readers.

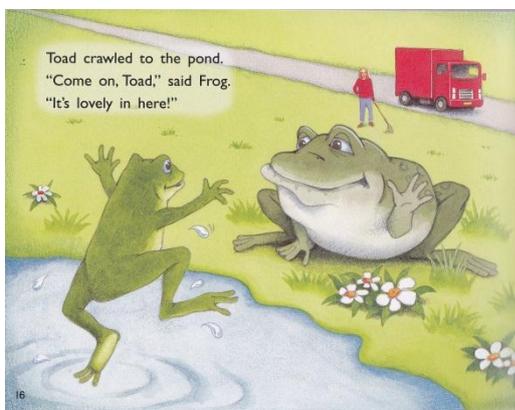
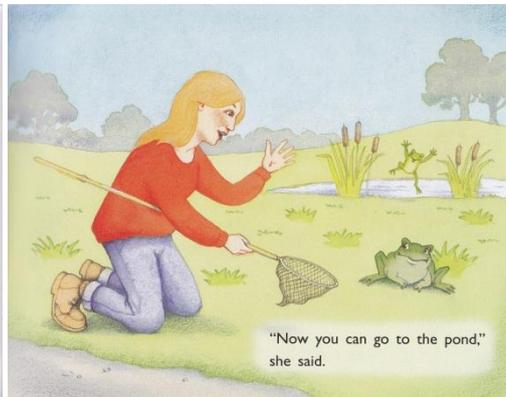
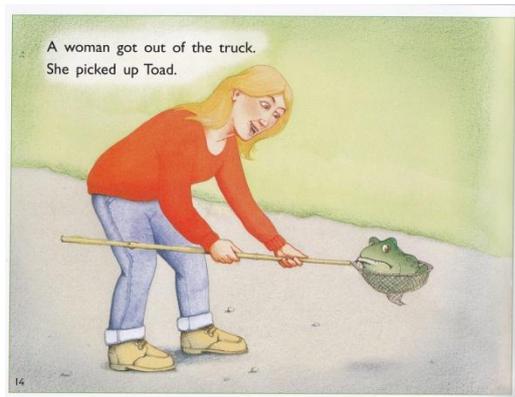
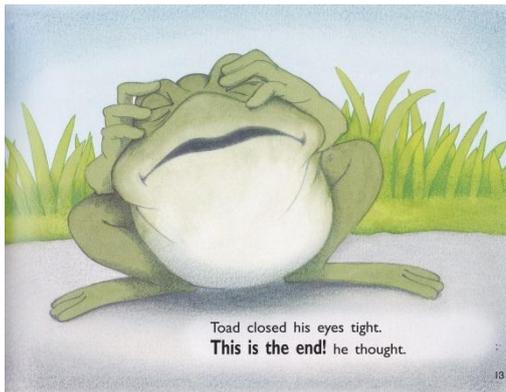
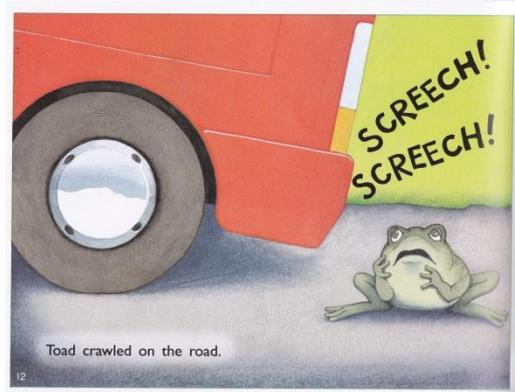
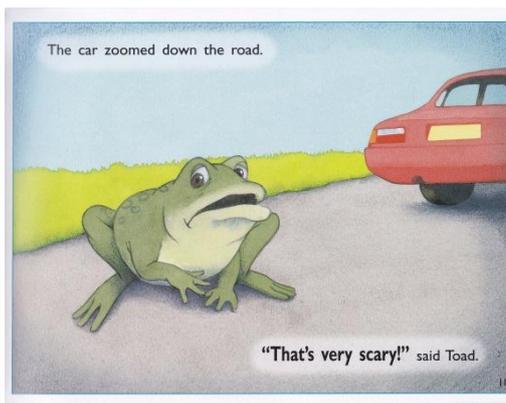
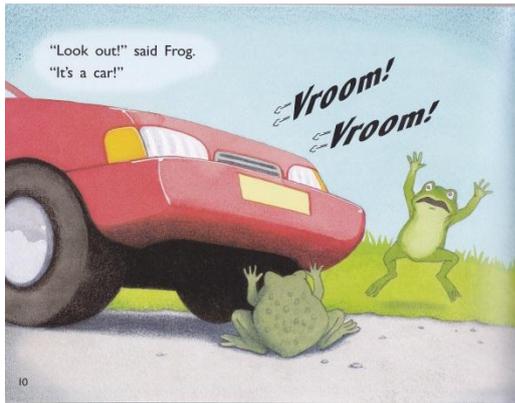
Write the story so that the words explain the pictures more and maybe make them unnecessary.

You can write the story here, or open a Word file on your computer.

A series of horizontal dotted lines provided for writing the story.

'Vroom': a story to make more complex







Share and discuss your rewritten stories with other participants.

Upload your stories to the [Stories for Malaysian Kids](http://storiesformalaysiankids.com) website.

(at <http://storiesformalaysiankids.weebly.com>)

Works Cited in this session:

Backes, L. (2012, Feb 10). *Nuts & Bolts: Word Counts & Age Groups in Children's*. Retrieved Jan 23, 2012, from CBI Clubhouse: <http://cbiclubhouse.com/2012/01/nuts-bolts-word-counts-age-groups-in-childrens-books/>