Supporting Literacy in English as a Second Language: The Role of Picture Books

La alfabetización en Lengua Inglesa como segunda lengua: el papel de los libros ilustrados

María Victoria GUADAMILLAS GÓMEZ
Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

Recibido: julio de 2014
Evaluado: octubre de 2014
Aceptado: marzo de 2015

Resumen

La mayoría de los maestros de inglés comparten la necesidad creciente de apoyar la enseñanza de inglés en Educación Infantil debido, principalmente, a las deficiencias presentes en el curriculum de la Comunidad Autónoma de Castilla-La Mancha. De acuerdo con los decretos vigentes en Educación Infantil, solo 90 minutos semanales se dedican a la enseñanza de la lengua inglesa en colegios no bilingües. Así, y teniendo en cuenta diferentes posibilidades que puedan servirnos para incrementar la citada enseñanza, consideramos la creación de un taller de libros ilustrados. Observamos para ello el papel de la motivación y cómo los talleres pueden representar una buena práctica en esta etapa educativa para incrementarla (León, 2009; Fernández, 2010; Rebolledo, 2012). Además, y de acuerdo con las aportaciones de Wright (1995) y Baldwin (2003) nos fijamos en los libros ilustrados o de dibujos, en concreto, en Dear Zoo (2007), como un contexto adecuado para promover el aprendizaje de nuevo vocabulario y expresiones sencillas en lengua inglesa, adaptadas a la etapa educativa objeto de estudio. En primer lugar, este artículo pretende destacar el papel de los libros ilustrados para contribuir al aprendizaje de la segunda lengua en edades tempranas. A continuación, desarrolla una propuesta didáctica basada en la historia de Dear Zoo adaptada al segundo ciclo de Educación Infantil y por último, proponemos algunas conclusiones.
Abstract Most English teachers share the idea that English teaching in Infant Education is not supported enough in the present curriculum in Castilla-La Mancha. According to the current law, just 90 minutes every week are due to English in non-bilingual programs. Considering the possibilities for increasing English Language Teaching, the idea of creating a picture book workshop emerges. Taking into account that motivation is a key factor in Infant Education and picture books one of the main resources for increasing this motivation; this workshop may represent one of the best practices to increase it (León, 2009; Fernández, 2010; Rebolledo, 2012). Besides, picture books support language acquisition, giving a context for understanding and promoting new vocabulary learning (Wright, 1995; Baldwin, 2003). Firstly, this paper tries to describe the role of picture books in Infant Education to contribute to second language learning. Secondly, it develops a didactic approach to the use of picture books in Infant Education. Finally, it states some conclusions.

Keywords Picture Books, English Teaching, Infant Education, Curriculum

Picture books are those in which pictures are more important than written text. They are a form of literature that more than any other is designed specifically for children. The assumption is that understanding pictures comes before understanding words, so children can understand picture books much better than normal books. Therefore, we have designed a workshop on a very popular picture book: Dear Zoo (2007) by Campbell.

English Language Teaching in Infant Education is rapidly developing in Spain and particularly in Castilla-La Mancha. Educational Laws state the importance of preparing students from early ages for: “an international, multicultural and multilingual society” (RD 1513/2006, 7th December; p. 43090). Different references to the role of English in the curriculum can be also found in the Royal Decree 1630/2006 that focuses on the minimum content areas that must be dealt with, especially in the second stage of Infant Education. The document underlines “languages: communication and representation” as one of the main areas of teaching, considering mother tongue acquisition and second language learning through simple texts or messages, so the first approach to the second language can be a positive and motivating experience. Besides, the main objectives for this
educational stage include the use of foreign language to understand oral messages or to show understanding, underlining the importance of picture books, tales or stories.

Learner-centred rather than learning-centred teaching is followed at this stage, placing the child in the centre of every teacher’s thinking and curriculum⁸ (Cameron, 2001, p. 1). Thus, stories are a very significant resource in Infant Education, not just for mother tongue development, but also for second language learning according to the learner-centred approach. Slattery and Willis (2001) state that young learners learn the language unconsciously, so the activities, projects and tasks carried out during a lesson must contribute to this unconscious learning. For this reason picture books open the door to a new world full of visual support, familiar characters and stories that draw a significant input for them. Besides, children are used to listen to those stories in their mother tongue and they are familiarized with their narrative style, including rhythm and pace, which makes them more comprehensible. Moreover, the illustrations help immediate comprehension of these stories.

As Balwin (2003) points out, the gestures, mimic and intonation, as well as illustrations and or other visual support that are used for telling stories, are essential for young learners to understand the whole meaning of the story. Besides, Wright (1995) adds that picture books as well as tales promote a motivating environment creation, since they build an atmosphere to learn and understand better; this contrasts with other activities carried out in a class that do not have any interest or added value for kids. Then, picture books as well as other visual tales give a full context for second language learning and promote repetition of language, particularly vocabulary. Also, picture books help to develop comprehension and oral expression, as well as sounds repetition and intonation.

**Picture Books and Infant Education**

The process of learning in Infant Education is determined by different factors, being motivation one of the main aspects. According to Murado (2010), motivation is the key factor in second language learning, so getting a positive attitude in students is directly related to a successful learning. Besides, affective and emotional factors must be considered to contribute to

---

⁸Lynne Cameron makes further reference to the perspective that should be followed to teach young learners and the importance of tales into this perspective.
an intensive learning. To consider motivation means to pay attention to the interests and needs of learners, offering them an attractive context for learning to promote real and authentic communication in English. Picture books are a great way of increasing motivation and a source of elements linked to the students’ interests aged between 4 and 6. Gardner (1993) considers motivation “a key factor to be successful in learning a second language” (Gardner, 1993, p. 89).

Nowadays, picture books are also studied as multimodal texts (Moya, 2014), rich in visual elements that enhance literacy at Early Stages in Education. We must also consider that children make meaning in a variety of ways, so the notion of literacy is slightly different and should be extended “beyond the confines of just being able to read and write” (Liu, 2013, p. 1261). Literacy should include other elements such as analysing, understanding or creating new meaning in different modalities; therefore, picture books represent a main resource to develop literacy as a wider term in early educational stages.

### Common approaches in infant education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methodological principles</th>
<th>Humanistic approaches</th>
<th>Current trends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tpr</td>
<td>Tpr9</td>
<td>Task based a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning of L2 as L1</td>
<td>1. Learn the second language as the mother tongue</td>
<td>1. Global learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Transmission of meanings using body language</td>
<td>2. Comprehensible Input</td>
<td>2. Learn by doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Oral skills beyond writing skills</td>
<td>3. Gradable input</td>
<td>3. Focus on tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teacher controls at the beginning</td>
<td>4. Emotions and attitudes’ importance</td>
<td>4. Learning focus on realia that surrounds the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Introduction to language using oral commands</td>
<td>5. Filter Hypothesis</td>
<td>5. Different sequences produce language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Relaxed atmosphere</td>
<td>6. Teacher is a source of input</td>
<td>6. Language is a tool for tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Roles’ exchange</td>
<td></td>
<td>7. Teacher as a facilitator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Any kind of interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td>8. Responsible learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Evaluation through observation</td>
<td></td>
<td>9. Evaluation is done having into account complexity, fluency and accuracy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Common Approaches (adapted from Pino and Rodríguez, 2006)

---

9 TPR means Total Physical Response, is one of the approaches to language teaching, commonly used at early stages.
Moreover, picture books are brief stories that arouse curiosity and their objective is to please, distract and entertain students. These stories also have an important role in children’s internal growth and personal enrichment. Before moving into the importance of picture books and their characteristics, we must take into account the most suitable methodologies to teach English to young learners.

First of all, we should consider carefully these characteristics in the learning process for the mentioned Educational Stage and how picture books may have an impact in the process. The cognitive development of Infant students is very fast, they are quickly able to classify, sort and identify things. The significant sensitivity to language is particularly important. At this stage, they have an excellent “ear” for the second language and they are able to reproduce many sounds. Their memory is rather mechanical, short-term and unconscious and it is also highly emotional and affective, as it is observed in the Natural Approach principles. Young learners also have a very good imagination, which is a key factor for telling, listening or understanding stories, being also a way of learning by doing, as (is) described in the Task Based Approach.

Another aspect that must be considered is the learners’ curiosity: they long for knowledge and they are interested in new stories or materials that make their motivation grow. It is also important to take into account that children at this stage are self-centred, which should be considered when teachers select the activities or stories for the class. Children of this age also like playing with sounds and words, which can be incorporated into learning by the combination of text and image. But their language development is not completed in their mother tongue, so according to Clarke and Silberstein (1977), teachers should also consider not to: “teach children to say things in a foreign language that they cannot say in their own language” (Clarke and Silberstein, 1977, p. 6). That is one of the reasons why picture books are a great resource to teach second language in Infant Education, since they normally tell stories that are predictable or known for the learners as well as their characters’ behaviour, which is usually common in every story.

Moving into the particular reasons for using stories at this stage we must consider Mourao (2009), who points out some important elements on stories that make them great tools for second language learning:

Stories helped in developing liking for learning English in general and reading comprehension skill in particular. Also, stories helped in guessing the meaning of the difficult words from context and in
improving essential vocabulary. As for understanding the usage of English stories helped in learning and understanding idiomatic expressions as well as most required structures. Tales offer the much needed exposure to the target language, making learning English a fun activity. (Mourao, 2009: 37)

Stories also develop the different types of intelligences that contribute to language learning, “including emotional competence” (Brewster, Ellis and Girard, 2003, p. 2) and help kids to predict, guess and hypothesize around the meaning, as we will see in the workshop description. To summarize some of the reasons to use picture books in Infant Education, we must consider the following diagram

![Diagram](image)

Figure I. Main reasons to use picture books in Infant Education

**Dear Zoo Workshop Description**

Workshops for Infant Education promote cultural exchange and enrichment as well as interaction among them and with the content itself. Therefore, this educational practice is a way of organizing learning, giving the opportunity to develop a particular teaching area. Workshops also make learning happen in a natural way, focusing on general learning through the development of specific tasks. Moreover, the main objective is the students’ performance rather than their assessment.

In addition, Marín (2010) points out some of the workshop’s pedagogical values, one of them being its motivating context that allows teachers to present content in a progressive and continuous way. It is also important how it can help to work on motor skills development, since workshops normally offer more opportunities for active learning.
Another aspect that must be considered is the appropriate selection of stories. Picture books’ selection will give students exposure to new and illustrated vocabulary in context (Brown, 2006). Smallwood (1988) recommends that the criteria for selection should include: “age-appropriate theme, simple language, limited use of metaphor and unfamiliar expressions, unambiguous plot or good illustrations” (Smallwood, 1998: 66). Steinbeck (2008) also adds some characteristics that should be considered when using stories with young learners such as “comprehensible input” or “allowance for context extension” (Steinbeck, 2008, p. 13).

Considering the ideas above, the chosen picture book for the workshop is *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell. The main reason is probably the topic, since animals are always attractive for kids. Besides, it offers a lot of adjectives to describe them: “too heavy, too tall, too fierce, too jumpy…etc.” Repetition is also an important characteristic: “They send me…” and “I sent him back,” a sentence that is repeated with every animal along the story. Moreover, illustrations are also very powerful and give young learners the possibility to understand not only animals, but also the adjectives and other expressions, just by looking at them.

Taking into account the different methodological principles and picture books characteristics, a workshop has been designed for Infant Education which is based on the previous revision of methods and techniques useful to teach English at this stage. Teaching objectives, contents and learning outcomes are described below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Objectives</th>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Learning Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To identify different animals</td>
<td>Animals in English</td>
<td>To be able to name ten animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To review colours in English</td>
<td>Colours in English</td>
<td>To be able to listen and identify colours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To identify and express the main characteristics of animals</td>
<td>Characteristics and description of animals</td>
<td>To be able to use adjectives to describe animals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To understand and use classroom language in English</td>
<td>To practise and understand classroom language: commands, greeting…etc.</td>
<td>To be able to understand and give a mental or physical response to classroom language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To use body language to show understanding and learning</td>
<td>Use of corporal expression to perform the new vocabulary</td>
<td>To be able to show understanding through body response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To develop artistic skills like cut, paste or colour

Development of artistic techniques

To be able to cut, paste or colour different animals and shapes from the tale

To promote a positive attitude to reading and storytelling

Drama and tales

To be able to perform picture books in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To develop artistic skills like cut, paste or colour</th>
<th>Development of artistic techniques</th>
<th>To be able to cut, paste or colour different animals and shapes from the tale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To promote a positive attitude to reading and storytelling</td>
<td>Drama and tales</td>
<td>To be able to perform picture books in English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Relationship between objectives, contents and learning outcomes

The workshop will be divided into two different sessions of 60 minutes each. Those sessions will be distributed in a week and they can be developed in the last term. As far as the methodology is concerned, the workshop will promote significant learning that allows them to establish relationships between background and new knowledge. In the process the game will have a main role, since second language learning is more effective when it happens in an unconscious and natural way. The atmosphere must be warm, safe and welcoming, so the students feel comfortable and self-confident creating situations in which they can practise what they learn. Time must be also flexible and adjust to the different learning paces, using the target language to promote communication in the classroom. It is also very important to foster language learning with visual support, gestures and corporal expression to improve comprehension. Students need to learn at this stage through observation and an active methodology: actions must be done by themselves. Errors must be tolerated and considered as the natural way of learning and developing communicative skills.

Grouping must also be considered and it will be in pairs, global or individual depending on the activity. Resources will be different and most sessions are planned to be carried out in a big room, so the students can move. Also, picture books, toy animals, TV or computer to play videos and audios will be needed. Other common materials such as crayons, scissors, glue or balls are needed for some activities.

The activities are described according to the PPP approach, which divides the workshop’s session into different stages: warm-up, presentation, practice and production. According to Richards (2006), the three-phase approach is still widely used today due to its communicative focus. It consists of three phases plus a previous warm-up. In the warm-up, a game, song or daily routines are introduced; then in the presentation, new vocabulary is presented and the teacher checks the students’ comprehension. After that, there is a practice phase, also referred to as the
controlled practice in which students practice the new vocabulary or grammar in context through games or arts and crafts activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Procedure_Description</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase: Warm-up Activity: Listen, look and say Timing: 10 minutes Contents: Picture book <em>Dear Zoo</em> Grouping: global, taking turns Aim: To familiarize with the story</td>
<td>The teacher tells the story <em>Dear Zoo</em> using audio-visual or traditional methods. NOTE: Animals’ visual support is important to foster comprehension</td>
<td>Audiovisual or traditional storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase: Presentation Activity: Listen and identify Timing: 15 minutes Contents: Animals Grouping: global, taking turns Aim: To recognize the different animals</td>
<td>The teacher posts different flashcards with the animals that are learnt with/through the story around the classroom. Then he will say aloud the names of the animals. Students must find the animal that the teacher says and point it out.</td>
<td>Animals’ flashcards and classroom realia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase: Practice Activity: Listen and do Timing: 20 minutes Contents: animals Grouping: two groups Aim: To know some parts and characteristics of animals</td>
<td>The teacher distributes some of the elements that the animals in the tale have (i.e. a trunk made out of paper, a snake’s rattle…etc.). One of the kids in every group will go with the teacher who puts him or her the trunk or the rattle while the other students close their eyes. Then, the students will show that to one of the class groups who has to guess the animal and learn the name of the different elements</td>
<td>Different materials to make a trunk, ears or a rattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase: Production Activity: Listen and perform Timing: 15 minutes Contents: adjectives and characteristics of animals Grouping: Global Aim: To know and use adjectives to describe animals in the story</td>
<td>The teacher shows an illustration from the story, paying attention to the main characteristics of every animal and performing it. Then, children one by one will perform one of the animals. (i.e. <em>a very tall giraffe</em>)</td>
<td>Picture book</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table III. First Session. Teaching Plan
Finally, in the production, students use the content or information previously learnt in order to develop fluency with the new knowledge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Procedure_Description</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Phase:** Warm-up  
**Activity:** Listen and guess  
**Timing:** 15 minutes  
**Contents:** animals  
**Grouping:** Global  
**Aim:** To recognize different animals by their description | The teacher tells the story again to review the contents learnt in the previous session. Every time that a new animal appears, the teacher will describe its characteristics before showing the illustration, so children should guess it. | Picture book: *Dear Zoo* |
| **Phase:** Presentation  
**Activity:** Look, remember and say  
**Timing:** 10 minutes  
**Contents:** animals  
**Grouping:** Global  
**Aim:** To memorize animals’ names and their characteristics | The teacher plays *Dear Zoo*’s song there are different versions available on the Internet. Every time that a new animal appears, the song will be stopped and children should say the name again and mimic the animal. | A computer connection to the Internet, speakers and *Dear Zoo*’s song. The activity can be supported by using illustrations in flashcards or in the story |
| **Phase:** Practice  
**Activity:** Look and guess  
**Timing:** 15 minutes  
**Contents:** Wh- question and answer (i.e. What animal is it? It is a …..)  
**Grouping:** Global, taking turns  
**Aim:** To make questions and answers in English | The teacher distributes students in a circle. One of the kids will throw a soft ball to other student and mimic animal, then he/she will ask: *What animal is it?* The second kid should answer: *It is a…* They will repeat the process. | Ball |
| **Phase:** Production  
**Activity:** Perform a story  
**Timing:** 20 minutes  
**Contents:** animals, patterns, colours  
**Grouping:** Global and small groups  
**Aim:** To perform a story | The last activity is to act out a play. Students will do it by using puppets in flashcards, pasting a straw. The puppet theatre will be done by the teacher using cardboard. The teacher will help the students by retelling the story to them. | Puppet theatre, puppets made out of flashcards and a straw and *Dear Zoo*’s story |

Table IV. Second Session. Teaching Plan
According to Richards (2006) the P-P-P lesson structure has been modified to be used today. But it is still a great model to organize the different teacher’s steps in a lesson. Richards (2006) points out:

Many speaking- or grammar-based lessons in contemporary materials, for example, begin with an introductory phase in which new teaching points are presented and illustrated in some way and where the focus is on comprehension and recognition. Examples of the new teaching point are given in different contexts. This is often followed by a second phase in which the students practice using the new teaching point in a controlled context using content often provided by the teacher. The third phase is a free practice period during which students try out the teaching point in a free context and in which real or simulated communication is the focus. (Richards, 2006, p. 8)

It can be noticed that even if practice and production phases can be named as controlled-practice and free-practice and more attention is paid to simulate real communication, the main principles in the approach are considered by Richards (2006).

A brief description of the different activities is divided into two different sessions and their main aim and procedure are gradually explained below:

As it can be observed in the first session the kids learn in context new vocabulary related to animals, particularly those names of those that are presented in the picture book. Besides, they learn new adjectives to describe those animals. The process of learning is active, they learn by doing or performing, which are some of the principles studied at the different approaches for second language learning in Infant Education. As the session will take place between two or three days after the first one, a repetition of the story will be needed to start the new session, as described below:

The second session pretends to consolidate vocabulary and adjectives, but simple grammatical patterns are also practised with students. Drama is also a very important phase in the session, since it helps the kids to memorize the vocabulary and expressions previously learnt and to have a clear understanding of the whole story. TPR approach (Asher, 1969) gains also an important role, since kids are required to respond physically to some verbal stimuli throughout the activities in the session. Dear Zoo’s song also enhances the memorization as well as fast development of listening, pronunciation and intonation (Brewster, Ellis and Girard, 2003, p. 163).
Dear Zoo can be finally practised at home with kids’ families, taking into account that the role of the family is crucial in Infant Education. Family provides parental feedback, participation, and support to the program, not only to reinforce the learning of the child in the home environment, but also to allow knowledge to permeate into other areas of the community as well. Besides, it should be mentioned that the workshop helps to reinforce curricular contents in English at this stage and supports English learning, creating a motivating atmosphere that will make kids enjoy their learning and love the language.

Conclusions

This paper provides a workshop’s design that can be useful to teach and learn second language vocabulary through storytelling based on a particular picture book. Particularly, it focuses on animal’s vocabulary, which is one of the contents in Infant Education. In addition to this, the tasks included here illustrate the didactic and educational use of storytelling in Infant Education. Mainly, it exemplifies a specific approach to carry out a workshop on a particular picture book to support language learning out of school time.

Additionally, this paper shows the main methods used in Infant Education to teach second language, most of them focusing on games, mimic, repetition and body language as well as the importance of workshops at this stage. This paper also shows the role of picture books at this particular Educational Stage, which are fully advisable to learn and experience new vocabulary in a real context and promote early literacy.

References


España. Real Decreto 1513/2006, de 7 de diciembre, por el que se establecen las enseñanzas mínimas de la Educación Primaria. Boletín Oficial del Estado, 8 de diciembre de 2006, núm. 293, pp. 43053-43102


Correspondencia con los autores

Mª Victoria GUADAMILLAS GÓMEZ
Profesora del Departamento de Filología Inglesa
Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha
e-mail: victoria.guadamillas@uclm.es