Chapter 6

The Applicability of Picturebooks to Teach English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

Interactive shared picturebook reading with learners of different ages and levels has proven to be a prominent practice in all languages. The overall aim of the chapter is to explore the applicability of shared picturebook reading to teach English as a foreign language. Due to the affordances of the multimodality of picturebooks to develop language and content knowledge, this critical investigation seeks to integrate shared picturebook reading as a mode of instruction into the young learners’ academic curriculum to promote oral language abilities and conceptual knowledge. In order to provide practical advice for educators of young learners, the chapter describes ways that picturebooks boost vocabulary, language learning, and conceptual knowledge in English L2. The chapter develops criteria to select picturebooks for subject-area instruction, paying attention to the picture-word dynamics.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s globalized world, advances in technology and neuroscience have brought about many changes in education (Kress, 2003; Kuhl, 2011; Conkbayir, 2017), not least in the teaching of additional/second/foreign languages (L2) (Rixon, 2015; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). With the adaptation to the recommendations of the Council of Europe (2001), many schools have developed programmes in which young learners are exposed to an L2 as early as three years of age and English is positioned as the most offered L2 language at private and institutional levels (Rixon, 2013). As Murphy & Evangelou (2016) note, in some countries, “different forms of education are offered through the medium of English to non-English speakers” (p. 4) at all academic levels. While the immersion model (Baker & Wright, 2017; Cummins, 1979; Genesee, 2010) or the bilingual programmes under the CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) umbrella have proliferated in pre-primary and primary education (Coyle, Hood & Marsh,
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2010), English as the Medium of Instruction (EMI) has rocketed in the sphere of higher education around the world (Dearden, 2015).

Despite this rapid increase of bilingual education programmes through the medium of English, fewer studies have investigated the best teaching practices that benefit language and content knowledge development at an early age, in settings where the new language is both the medium and the object of instruction. In early instructed settings, where languages are acquired without formal instruction (Johnstone, 2002; Cameron, 2001; Meltzoff, Kuhl, Movellan, & Sejnowsk, 2009), receptive skills, such as listening and understanding, as well as oral expression play an important role for language development and for the development of conceptual knowledge. Moreover, in pre-primary and primary settings, oral language becomes the main vehicle for early language and content learning for many years (Cummins, 1979; Cameron, 2001; Lightbown & Spada, 2013), since teachers’ talk is most of the time the main and the only linguistic model which provides support to develop content-specific vocabulary and educational outcomes during oral communicative interactions (Moon, 2000; Cameron, 2001; Gibbons, 2015). In this respect, one of the teacher’s roles is to develop the learner’s listening comprehension and speaking skills to prepare him or her to learn how to read and write.

Given the importance of teacher-learner talk for teaching and learning, the aim of this chapter is twofold, to explore the theoretical and pedagogical potential of the multimodality of picturebooks for language learning and for content knowledge development, and to present effective teaching practices utilizing picturebooks during story times. These practices provide opportunities for communicative interaction, which in turn helps to develop language and subject-areas in English L2. This study deals mainly with the applicability of picturebooks for effective instruction with pre-primary and primary English language learners during shared reading sessions. To that end, the paper begins with a discussion about the importance and implications of using picturebooks to expand young learners’ listening comprehension skills and oral expression. Here, the relevance of the aural and oral skills for language acquisition is considered. This is followed by a section that discusses the applicability of picturebooks for teaching language and content to young English L2 learners. In order to widen in-service and pre-service teachers’ knowledge about the affordances of the multimodalities of picturebooks, this section provides guidelines for language and subject-area content teaching based on a selection of picturebooks. Finally, the last section of this chapter provides a picturebook-based pedagogical proposal with a series of steps for practice with a range of simple, multisensory and multimodal tasks grounded in teaching practice on shared picturebook reading in an anxiety-free environment.

THEORETICAL GROUNDS FOR PICTUREBOOK READING INSTRUCTION

The purpose of this part of the chapter is to establish the importance of integrating interactive, shared picturebook reading as a tool for English L2 instruction. As stated above, the teaching of English L2 is no longer focusing on the study of language in isolation, but as a medium and object of instruction. As Bland & Lütte (2013) acknowledge, “[t]he English language as the object and sole focus of study is gradually diminishing, and content-based EFL classrooms are becoming the norm in many types of schools” (2013:1). From the language acquisition perspective, it is well known that receptive skills, such as listening and understanding, are paramount for language learning (Long, 1996; Mackey, 2007, Fleta 2015). Regarding language learning, this section raises awareness of the fact that at an early age, languages are acquired through extensive listening with the focus on meaning rather than on language