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Understanding and sharing: English storybook borrowing in Portuguese pre-schools

Introduction

This article describes a small-scale research project which took place in a pre-school in Portugal. The objectives of the project were to provide the pre-school children with access to picture books and the possibility of taking them home to share with parents and carers. From analysis of questionnaires, this article describes how children successfully shared the picture books with their families. The research also highlights a repeated storytelling procedure, based on the study of recorded storytelling sessions and concludes that in this study those picture books with a more repetitive story script enable children to acquire language more effectively.

Research Aims

The main objectives of this study were to explore how best to make the language of authentic English picture books available to children in a pre-school environment. In addition, ways of implementing a book borrowing system were explored with the objective of including families in the educational triangle and thereby further promoting foreign language learning.

The results of this project shed light on many aspects of using picture books with children. In this article the researcher has chosen to focus on:

1. Ways of using picture books in the classroom and preparing the children for taking the picture books home.
2. The reactions obtained from parents and carers to this shared experience.

1 The context

1.1 English teaching in Portuguese schools

The education system in Portugal is made up of nine years of compulsory schooling, called *Ensino Básico*, spanning from the age of 6 to 15 years old. Pre-school education is non-statutory, but the state provides pre-school care for children aged 3 to 6 years. Private institutions also provide a large percentage of the pre-school care. There is no official Portuguese pre-school programme and English projects in pre-schools are rare, but do exist.

1.2 The study pre-school

This project started in September 2003, in a large, state subsidized pre-school establishment, with two pre-school groups. For this article the researcher shall be citing evidence from just one of these groups. The school is situated in a large city of approx 75,000 inhabitants in central Portugal.

Reading and writing is not taught at pre-school level in Portugal, mainly as there is no official ministerial programme for pre-school education. It is not a compulsory part of the education system, therefore pre-school teachers are not trained to teach early reading and writing and do not feel it is their role as educators. This is reflected in their approach to reading, the role of early writing in their classrooms and the lack of classroom environmental print.

The libraries, or book corners, in the pre-school classes were poor: a small shelf with a handful of picture books of dubious quality. There is no tradition in Portuguese education of book borrowing in schools and this is also an attitude adopted in Portuguese pre-schools.

Children are encouraged to bring books from home to share with their peers, but the opposite is rarely considered.

1.3 The children and their teachers

The pre-school group was made up of 22 children - nineteen aged from 5 to 6 years and four aged from 4 to 5 years. The group was made up of 20 monolingual Portuguese speakers and two bilingual Ukrainian -Portuguese speakers. All but two children had already had one year of pre-school English.

A pre-school teacher, who had already been involved in a pre-school English project, and an auxiliary member of staff, cared for the group. The pre-school teacher had studied English when she was younger to an upper.intermediate level.

The researcher had been working as an EFL teacher in this school for 12 years. She visited the group twice a week for 30-minute sessions. English content was planned with the pre-school teacher, accompanying their educational programme and all children attended the English sessions.

2. The picture books

2.1 Provision of picture books

The picture books were obtained through research sponsorship. Three copies of twelve different storybooks were provided for each of the pre-school classrooms (see reference list). All the picture books were relevant to the age groups studied in terms of level, and content matter; illustrations synchronized appropriately with the story text and provided excellent support for understanding.

2.2 Telling the story

When a monolingual pre-school child borrows a book from a library in their mother tongue, the book is read to them by their parents and it is a shared experience: shared through language. Taking a foreign language storybook home does not provide for a guaranteed shared foreign language experience. If a child does not know the book and the parent does not know English they can only look at the pictures and talk about them in their mother tongue. This is an important educational activity in itself, but one of the purposes of this research project was to guarantee some way of allowing for quality English interaction in this shared experience. To enable the children to acquire chunks of story script, the EFL teacher retold the same picture book as many as eight times. The picture books were read at the end of every English session and all but one picture book was read at least eight times, over a period of three to four weeks. To encourage further interaction with the story script, as soon as a book was introduced, three copies were left in the classroom library, for the children to browse and look at as they wished.

It should be noted here that mostly no explicit lexical preparation was given to the children to prepare them for the language in the picture book, but, when possible, connections were made. For example:

- "My Daddy" (a book about a little boy called Jack and what he does with his father), read in March when it is Father's Day in Portugal

One of the roles of the pre-school teacher, if she felt able, was to read the picture books to the children, in addition to the specialist English teacher. No attempt was made to interfere with the approach chosen by the pre-school teacher to do this. She re-read the storybook at regular intervals between the EFL teacher's visits, sometimes up to four times a week. From

her comments and descriptions, it was evident that she often requested that the children repeat the story words after her and she asked them comprehension questions, in their mother tongue, to check their understanding of what they had heard.

2.3 Taking the books home

After a maximum of eight EFL teacher repeated storytellings, children were encouraged to take the picture book home for two / three days at a time. The pre-school teacher and her assistant devised a rota system so that each child was able to take each picture book home at least once. Because children never took mother-tongue books home, this was an exciting event and children were highly motivated.

3. The Data

4.2 Research tools

Data from this study was collected in four ways:

- a) Recordings of two picture books being told by the EFL teacher;
- b) Reflective journal notes by EFL teacher
- c) Reflective observational notes by pre-school teacher
- d) Parents' questionnaires.

The data will be discussed from two perspectives.

3.2 Data source - repeated storytelling

The picture books in this project can be divided along a continuum of those that include repetition to those that do not. Here, data discussed is selected from recordings of two picture books being read to the children, one with many repetitive structures and one with few of these. These recordings are accompanied by anecdotal observations and notes made by the EFL teacher and the pre-school teacher, which provided further corroborative data for analysis.

The recordings were of:

1. Peek a boo friends (includes lots of repetition)
2. My Daddy (Includes little repetition)

3.3 Data source - home / school link

When the children took the storybooks home parents and carers were required to complete a questionnaire. The researcher received a total of 188 questionnaires. A total of ten picture books are dealt with in the analysed questionnaires. The questionnaire focussed primarily on the child's ability to retell the story and who was involved in the shared activity. The results from this analysis are discussed below. In addition, the comments of the carers also provided a very clear picture of this experience.

4. Procedure and results of the repeated storytelling tape scripts

4.1 Repeated storytelling: a three-phase procedure

It was assumed that the children would acquire the story script through hearing it repeatedly. It was predicted that they would go through three phases.

Phase 1: Listen to EFL Teacher

Phase 2: Join in from memory

Phase 3: Imitate story script from memory

Results, on the other hand, showed that repeated storytelling was a more complicated process.

a) The first phase was short and covered just the first storytelling session. Children were observed interacting and interrupting from the very beginning, using every strategy possible to understand what is happening in the story. From the tape scripts it was clear that in some instances the children repeated and imitated words and short expressions, sometimes even imitating the intonation the EFL teacher used. She reacted to the interruptions and questions, and often translated sections of the story script.

The interactions included a mixture of English and Portuguese and at times the story script became irrelevant. An analysed section of 'Peek a boo friends', containing the first 14 interactions in storytelling session 1, revealed that just two involved the story script. The rest of the interaction involved children making an effort to understand and comment on illustrations with the teacher responding.

b) The second longer phase included storytelling sessions from 2 onwards. It differed from phase 1 in that the children began to accompany the story script from memory.

It would appear therefore that the first two phases became:

Phase 1: Listen, interrupt, repeat and comment about story script and illustrations.

Phase 2: Listen; interrupt, repeat and comment about story script and illustrations; begin to predict and join in from memory using teacher / illustration prompts.

The role of the EFL teacher during the storytelling sessions in phases 1 and 2 is one of facilitator. The EFL teacher scaffolded the children's language in several ways:

- i. Providing praise to any attempt to use English or make connections to the story script.
- ii. Replying to comments and giving feedback about illustrations and story script, in Portuguese and English.
- iii. Prompting children verbally to use the story script
- iv. Prompting children non-verbally to use the story script

A point to be made about iv): There is much scaffolding provided by the EFL teacher in the form of gesture and facial expression. As the stories were told, sufficiently simple to be learned by heart, the EFL teacher kept constant eye contact with the children, her face ached from smiling and making faces, her whole body was involved in encouraging them to participate in the storytelling procedure.

4.2 The importance of repetition in the story script

The results indicate a connection between the ease with which children acquire the story script and how much repetition exists in the story itself.

In 'Peek a boo friends', at the repetitive end of the continuum, by tape script 3 there is an obvious increase in the amount of English being used, which is unsurprising after so much exposure to the story script. Children even initiate and predict what will come next. In contrast, there is no indication of this occurring at the same point in tape script 4 of 'My Daddy' (a book with less repetition).

After four EFL teacher storytellings, (a total of 14 if we include the pre-school teacher's tellings), the children were impatient to take 'Peek a boo friends' home. It was obvious that they were able to retell large chunks of the story script individually and no longer felt the need to hear it from the EFL teacher.

On the contrary, even after six EFL teacher storytellings, (a total of 17 including the pre-school teacher's tellings), the children were not ready to take 'My Daddy' home. Anecdotal notes after storytelling session 5 of this picture book, express concern from the EFL teacher as children are distracted and not paying attention. On this very same day the researcher noted a conversation with the pre-school teacher, who discussed the lack of repetition as being one of the possible reasons for the children's difficulty in acquiring some of the story script. This was the first picture book to have such a large amount of non-repetitive script and it was becoming more apparent that the children were struggling. However, after storytelling session 8 (a total of 24 repeated storytellings) children regularly joined in with the story script and on occasions initiated story script, which the researcher felt showed they were capable of retelling the story with prompts.

4.3 Increased use of English in three defined stages

It became apparent that the children passed through three stages as they repeatedly heard the story script. Children did this at their own individual rates, some quicker than others, but they all appeared to go through the same stages:

Stage 1: Listen to story script and repeat

Stage 2: Listen to story script and join in

Stage 3: Initiate story script

The key factor to being able to reach stage three successfully, enabling the child to independently retell the story script, again suggests that it is the amount of repetition within a story script which is important. One child took just 8 repeated storytellings (EFL teacher and pre-school teacher tellings) to feel at home with the story script of 'Peek a boo friends', and a large number of other children were able to successfully retell the same story after 14 repeated storytellings. The researcher counted a total of nine initiated story script chunks in the final tape script of this story.

The story "My daddy" was a different matter altogether. Even after a total of 24 repeated storytellings, there were just two initiated story script chunks produced by the children. The following part of the results discusses the implications for this when the children take the picture books home.

5 The results of the questionnaires

This phase was not easily monitored, as the context was different. No longer were the children in a group of 20 plus but alone with another person, in more intimate surroundings within the family. Children repeated from memory to the listener, who may or may not have been able to read in English. This listener was assumed to interact in diverse ways to the child's storytelling and it was through the returned questionnaires that the researcher was able to determine what happened in this phase.

5.1 Retelling in English or Portuguese?

To focus on phase 3 of the repeated storytelling procedure, whether children were able to retell the story script, question 7 of the questionnaire is most immediately relevant - use of the story script in English.

Quantitatively the results are interesting. 'Peek a boo friends' showed a far superior number of category A responses (Did your child retell the story in English, using one or two English words only?) Results: 66%, compared to 'My daddy' which received only 29,4% category A responses.

Category B (Did your child retell the story in Portuguese and in English, using a mixture of English words / expressions in Portuguese sentences?) gives the opposite result: 52,9% category B responses for 'My Daddy' and 13,2% for 'Peek a boo friends'.

If you compare these results with the other picture books in the project, there is a trend. Those picture books with lots of repetition have a much higher percentage of category A responses, showing that children were able to retell the stories using a large amount of English.

Those picture books at the other end of the continuum, with little or no repetition, have a much higher percentage of category B responses, showing that the children were unable to memorise and retell the stories sufficiently well to get the story idea across and needed to use Portuguese to interact successfully with the listener. This has implications for the selection of English picture books to be included in a pre-school library, especially if a book borrowing system exists.

5.2 Carers' comments

Comments written by the carers in the questionnaires were very positive. Carers noted that children were able to say just single words or whole chunks of language; they indicated when a child could tell the whole story or just bits of it. Some carers emphasised how important the child felt it was to tell the story using only English and would go so far as to use gestures to be understood. Focussing on the two picture books analysed in part 1 there is a noticeable difference between the comments given by the carers.

a) 'Peek a boo friends':

Four carers noted that their child told the whole story in English and three carers noted their child knew the majority of the story script by heart. One parent wrote the following:

"J. was very interested in this book, she read it several times over the weekend. There were times that she would remember the story and start telling it out loud, without the picture book at hand." (Questionnaire J response NB 03 peek a boo)

b) 'My Daddy':

No carer noted that their child could tell the whole story script, but comments were generally positive.

"He knew lots of the words, but others he asked me to read!" (Questionnaire F response NB 03 My Daddy)

One carer's response stood out; as the child was highly motivated by this project and previous picture book questionnaire responses had shown to be very positive from this family: *"This book was difficult. L came home sad because she couldn't say a big part of the story. It had difficult sentences for her. She understood the ideas but she couldn't remember the words"*. (Questionnaire L response NB 03 My Daddy)

5.3 Repeated storytelling - phase 3

Comments from carers suggested that if prompted with story script children were able to retell the story script more successfully. This occurred especially with “Number one, tickle your tum”. This may be because the picture book used rhyme and thus enabled the child to remember what came next.

Some carers also described the child listening to them read the story script and then repeating after them, mirroring their performance in our classroom context.

Phase 3 of the repeated storytelling process is therefore not just the child repeating the story, but an interactive activity, with carers listening, reading, prompting and commenting with the child. A final table clarifying this three-phase process could look like this:

Table 1: Repeated storytelling

Phases	Teacher	Children	Carers
Phase 1	Read; give feedback; translate	Listen, interrupt, repeat and comment	
Phase 2	Read, give feedback, and encouragement and translate	Join in from memory using visual and audio prompts; listen, interrupt, repeat and comment	
Phase 3		Initiate story script from memory, join in from memory using visual and audio prompts;	Listen, read, prompt and comment

5.4 Other results obtained from the questionnaires.

5.4.1 The most popular picture book

Of the ten picture books represented in the returned questionnaires, the children were most enthusiastic about taking home ‘Old MacDonald’ (Souhami 1969). This could be related to the fact that it was the first of the picture books to be sent home. ‘Peek a boo friends’ (Su 2001) was seventh most popular and ‘My daddy’(Van Genechten 1999) was the least popular.

The top five most popular books were either very repetitive or had very simple scripts. The top two were versions of songs which the children knew very well. Having sung a text, which is presented in a picture book appears to motivate children greatly. Carers noted again and again that their child took pleasure in being able to say all the words written on the page from memory, often using a sing song voice.

5.4.2 How many times did the child look at the book with their parent / carer?

In all but three picture books over 50% of the children repeated the storytelling activity with their carers at least twice, some carers indicated repeating the storytelling procedure as many as six times.

In 65.5% of the questionnaires carers stated that 'Peek a boo friends' was retold at least once. Carers reported retelling of 'My Daddy' in 52% of the questionnaires. 'Hello ducks' was retold the most, in 77% of the questionnaires. This latter picture book does not contain repetitive script, but is very simple using 'hello' and 'good bye' plus a noun.

5.4.3 Did the children show the book to more than one person?

The picture books were shown to a wide variety of family members and friends. As is to be expected, 70,2% of the questionnaires were completed by mothers. Further repeated storytellings included fathers, siblings, grandparents, godparents, uncles and aunts, cousins and neighbours and friends. Anecdotal information came from the pre-school teacher, describing parents worrying that they did not know any English and enrolling the support of neighbours in the storytelling activity.

5.5 Parent's additional comments

5.5.1 Parents and carers retelling the picture book

In section 9 of the questionnaire parents were asked to comment on their child's reaction to their attempt at reading the picture book. There were several very positive comments, in general about how the child enjoyed the activity, "He loved it!"; "She listened carefully"; "He helped me tell the story". Some parents described a surprised child who had not realised they could speak such good English!

Some parents were very creative in their approaches, one mother wrote the following:
"He liked it when I swapped some of the words on purpose, he was paying attention and said that it wasn't like that."
(Questionnaire H. response Hello Ducks)

These responses show that when provided with the opportunity parents can play a very important role in not only encouraging their children, but also assessing their children's ability in a foreign language. It is perhaps appropriate to consider using this technique in the future to provide a picture of a child's English experience in pre-school and later.

5.5.2 Parents and carers sharing their enthusiasm

Parents were obviously proud of their child's ability to retell parts of the story script and the whole process of sharing a book from school created a much-needed bond. Even if a child could say just one or two words of a story script the parents were pleased.

The pre-school teacher also commented on the number of parents who spoke to her about English and the book borrowing project. She was surprised by the positive comments from parents and by their enthusiasm. One parent even sent a note to her after the EFL teacher had read the picture book "Hello Ducks", saying the following:

(translated from Portuguese)

"H. arrived at the car and said that he had learned new things in English and he already knew how to say, 'hello Teddy, hello park, bye bye slip (=sleep) ... took off his nappy.' The story was about a boy's toy, which was very sweet, 'Tendy' (=Teddy). Hugo didn't know the little boy's name."

The pre-school teacher rarely got written information from parents with descriptions of behaviour related to school, so it was extra special when this happened in connection with an English picture book.

Throughout the twelve years the researcher had been working in this pre-school parents had never contacted her about their child's English. But during this project she also received notes from parents and phone calls expressing delight and apologising if they were unable to complete questionnaires. She was asked to meet with two sets of parents, both showing concern about their children's continuity with English after pre-school. Anecdotal evidence came from a meeting with a set of parents, who described the activity as being a whole family thing, mother father and sibling would crowd around the picture book as the child retold the story script, with and without their help.

6. Conclusions

For the researcher the most important aspect of the project was to establish a triangle linking school, English and home in the children's education. This triangle appears to have been successfully created, and results show that all involved benefited from the collaboration. The pre-school teacher was both surprised and encouraged by the parents' and carers' willingness to collaborate and received feedback which, until this time, had been either non-existent or minimal. The parents and carers were given the opportunity to become involved in their child's English education, and although this had been encouraged previously it had not been promoted in such a structured form. Parents became aware of the child's English ability and many were surprised. It appeared to trigger a more positive response towards learning a foreign language in the pre-school and an interest in providing a continuation in the English education. Many of the parents' comments provided the researcher with information she could otherwise not have accessed, in some cases related to the child's ability to use the English story script.

The children showed themselves able to share the English picture books, to greater and lesser extents, with their families and carers. All children were generally highly motivated during the repeated storytelling sessions in the pre-school and this motivation was carried into their homes.

Concerning the types of books suitable for this kind of project, it would appear that picture books with more repetition, which are easier for the children to memorise, provide a better base for the children to take chunks from and to share with others. The repeated storytelling procedure is made easier and in some cases less frustrating for the children.

Re-reading of a picture book itself has proved to be a valuable technique in enabling the children to acquire the story script. Analysis of the tape script has shown that children, generally, do not tire of this repetition. On the contrary, they enjoy the feeling of security provided by communally repeating a shared story script.

Analysis of the tape scripts has brought to light a repeated storytelling procedure, which includes stages the children pass through to acquire the story script. This project needs to be repeated to clarify whether both procedure and stages are mirrored by other groups of children. If this is the case, identifying the stages could provide an important starting point for any EFL teacher wanting to tell a foreign language story in a classroom, especially one which does not include active readers.

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