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Understanding authentic picture books. How do children do it?

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This article describes just a part of a small-scale study which explores how to make authentic English language picture books available to children in a pre-school environment. The children eventually took the books home to share with their families. It was noted that while preparing the children to do this, they used many different strategies to understand the picture book script. This study attempts to analyse some of these strategies, discussing how they differed depending on the amount of repetition within the story, highlighting a repeated storytelling procedure, and concluding that in this study that those picture books with a more repetitive story script enable children to acquire English more effectively, whereas picture books with less repetition build on other areas of children's learning.

Objectives

The brief for this project was to read an authentic English picture book at the end of every pre-school English session and arrange for the children to take the book home to share with their families. This particular part of the study was to discover which strategies the pre-school children used to understand the authentic English picture books, and whether repetition within the story affected these strategies. See Mourão (2005) for further discussion on this project.

The context

Portuguese pre-schools

Pre-school education in Portugal is non-statutory and there is no official Portuguese pre-school programme. Pre-school teachers are not trained to teach early reading and writing, and so it is not taught at this level. English projects in pre-schools occur randomly depending on availability of teachers.

The children and their teachers

This project started in September 2003 and ended in June 2004. It took place in a large, state subsidised pre-school establishment, situated in a city of approx 75,000 inhabitants in central Portugal.

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 consisted of twenty 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 was responsible for the group. She had studied English when she was younger to an upper intermediate level. I had worked in this school, as an EFL teacher, for 12 years, visiting twice a week for 30-minute sessions. English content was planned with the pre-school teacher, accompanying their educational programme. All children attended the English sessions.

The picture books

Provision of picture books

The picture books were kindly donated by REALBOOK News. Three copies of twelve different storybooks were provided for the pre-school classroom. All the picture books were relevant to the age group in terms of level, and content matter; illustrations synchronized appropriately with the story text providing excellent support for understanding. The scripts from each picture book can be found at the end of the article.

Telling the story

To enable the children to take an English picture book home and provide for successful interacting in English at home, it was thought that the EFL teacher would have to re-read the picture book many times over, so that the children were given opportunities to acquire chunks of the story language. According to Cook (1994) “repetition (and learning by heart) are two of the most pleasurable, valuable and efficient of language learning activities”. Cook describes repetition as providing comfort and security, which in this case would hopefully give the children an opportunity to analyse the language and make sense of it as well. Yaden (1988:556) too, describes repeated storytelling as helping comprehension, writing that “increased understanding and enjoyment of story most often followed a growing familiarity...”. Yaden also cites investigations, which reveal children “assimilating stories bit by bit”.

Thus, a picture book was read at the end of every English session for eight consecutive sessions over a period of three to four weeks and one of the picture books was read just four times. To encourage further interaction with the picture book, as soon as it was introduced, three copies were left in the classroom library, for the children to browse and look at as they wished.

The pre-school teacher was also required to read the picture books to the children in addition to the EFL teacher. No attempt was made to interfere with her approach to this. She re-read the picture book 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 asked the children to repeat the story words after her and she asked them comprehension questions, in their mother tongue, to check their understanding.

The Data

Research tools

Data from this study was collected in two ways:

- a) Recordings of two picture books being told by the EFL teacher;
- b) Reflective journal notes by the EFL teacher

Data source - the picture book recordings

The picture books in this project could be divided into those that included repetitive language and those that did not. The 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. The picture books were:

1. Peek a boo friends (Lucy Su 2001) - included lots of repetition and was told a total of ten times – four times by the EFL teacher and six times by the pre-school teacher.
2. My Daddy (Van Genechten 1999) - included little repetition and was told a total of sixteen times – eight times by the EFL teacher and ten times by the pre-school teacher.

The tapescripts from each picture book were analysed in a comparative way, in an attempt to discover if children's interactions differed depending on the amount of repetition in the picture book script.

Results

Repeated storytelling

Similar procedures have been called "repeated readings" (Martinez & Roser 1985, Parkes 1998); "repeated read-alouds" (Yaden 1988), and "shared book experiences" (Strickland & Morrow 1989). However, it was decided that this particular procedure should be labeled as *repeated storytelling*, for two reasons; first the EFL teacher was not actually reading but telling the story, as the script was simple and easily memorised. Second, the children never actively read any words being dependent upon their memory to retell the story.

From analysis of the tapescripts it was noted that the children passed through three defined phases to acquire the story script. When reaching phase 3 the children were able to successfully retell chunks, or on occasions, the whole of a picture book script from memory.

Table 1: Repeated storytelling

Phases	Teacher	Children
Phase 1	Read / tell	Listen
Phase 2	Read / tell	Join in from memory
Phase 3	Read / tell	Initiate story script from memory

Repeated storytelling, in practice, is not as simple as "teacher read – children listen". Children are not empty vessels to be filled quietly! Parkes (1998:45) describes children interacting in different ways to each storytelling repetition, taking an active role as meaning makers and storytellers. She portrays each storytelling interaction as being a "perpetual firstness'... meaning is created through interactions involving the readers prior knowledge and experience with the book (...)". Strickland & Morrow (1989:322) also describe the social interaction in picture book reading as motivating interest and cooperatively constructing meaning.

It was noted that through the children's interaction with the picture books, the repeated storytelling process became a joint venture of discovery and shared pleasure. This was especially evident in 'Peek a boo Friends' where the joining in phase (phase 2) was reached

by almost all children, in just four EFL teacher sessions, and the children visibly enjoyed retelling the picture book script in unison.

Repetition was an important factor in enabling the children to reach the join in phase. ‘My Daddy’ on the contrary was not as successful. After eight EFL teacher storytellings the story still lacked the communal feeling of retelling a story together. Only a few children reached the join in stage.

The children as meaning makers

The children were very active in their quest to understand and interact with the picture book script and six strategies emerged from studies of the tapescripts.

Commenting on the picture book illustrations

The children were encouraged to discuss the picture book illustrations, but their constant interruptions had not been anticipated. There was a clear difference in the comments depending on the amount of repetition within the picture book.

‘Peek a boo friends’

As this story was retold the children used the illustrations to help them remember what was coming next, pointing at certain illustrations and calling out words in Portuguese or in English. The illustrations became signs on a journey through the picture book. After three storytellings the children stopped discussing these signs, using them as aids only, enabling them to successfully join in with the storytelling, often pre-empting the script and initiating it.

‘My daddy’

During the first session with this picture book, children used the illustrations as supports for a running commentary, discussing what they could see and trying to make connections. The children commented on illustrations throughout the eight sessions and found new things to comment on each time, as well as repeating comments made in previous storytellings. An example of the latter is the constant remarks made about Daddy’s large slippers in the title page. The slippers are not mentioned in the picture book script at all, but were discussed by the children during the EFL teacher’s sessions 1 to 5.

This picture book also allowed children to understand how illustrators use their art. A discussion ensued from pages 1 & 2 during the first session. The illustration shows just Daddy’s legs and hand with Jack running after him.

Storytelling session nº 1 – page 1 & 2			
	Interlocutor	Speech	Translation
1	Child 1	Esta cortado...	<i>It’s cut...</i>
2	Storyteller	Porque é que está assim, com ele sem cabeça, o Daddy?	<i>Why is it like that, with the little boy and his daddy with no head?</i>
3	Child 2	Que é muito grande	<i>’Cos he’s very big</i>
	Storyteller	That’s right!	
	Child 3	É deste tamanho! (showing height with hands!)	<i>He’s this big (showing height with hands!)</i>

Later children commented that when daddy was lying down he fitted into the page! They were beginning to show an understanding of illustration techniques.

Translating words or chunks of picture book script

'Peek a boo friends'

There was very little translation by the children during the retelling of this picture book. During the first session it occurred occasionally with single words, recasting what the EFL teacher said into their mother tongue, Portuguese.

'My daddy'

With this picture book, translating the story script continued beyond the first session. The children translated chunks, as well as individual content words. The following examples from storytelling session 5 are typical.

<p>Storytelling session nº 5. Page spread 9 & 10 Picture book script: I can sit up so high. Child translating : Muito alto (<i>Very high</i>)</p> <p>Page 11&12 Picture book script: Or ride on his back Child translating: O cavalinho (<i>Piggy back...</i>)</p>

This increased use of translation could be due to the fact that the children have not acquired much of the story script. They felt the need to join in during the storytelling, but didn't feel confident to do so in English, using their mother tongue instead.

Imitation and repetition

Imitation and repetition were used in three different situations:

1. With single words and chunks of language
2. With actions associated to the illustrations
3. With the storyteller's intonation

Both picture book tapescripts showed numerous examples of all three uses of imitation and repetition. 'My Daddy' showed evidence of fewer cases of repeated chunks and more instances of isolated content words. This could again be put down to the difficulty of the language in 'My Daddy', and the lack of repetition within it.

Connecting the picture book story to their own past experiences

Children did this with both picture books in two different ways:

1. Relating repeated words and/or concepts covered in previous picture books;
2. Relating more personal experiences.

The relating of personal events were richer and more frequent in 'My Daddy' than in 'Peek a boo Friends'. The following is a typical example.

'My Daddy' Storytelling session nº 3 – page 17 & 18			
	Interlocutor	Speech	Translation

1	Storyteller	A. tambem sabe dizer tickle! Não é? Tickle!	<i>Look A, you also know how to say "tickle"! Yes? "Tickle"!</i>
2	Child	O meu pai também faz isto a mim, mas não é aqui é aqui na... (points to her armpits and her tummy!) É aqui, é aqui.	<i>My Daddy does that to me too, but isn't there it's here in the ... (points to her armpits and her tummy!) it's here , it's here</i>
3	Storyteller	Aha!	<i>Yes!</i>

These reflections were made in Portuguese, meaning that there was a higher amount of spoken Portuguese used during the 'My Daddy' storytelling sessions than with 'Peek a boo Friends!'

Repeated a discussed topic related to the story / illustrations

This strategy was surprising, and only occurred during 'My Daddy'. As the children interacted with the picture book script and illustrations, commenting and discussing, certain elements would stick in their memories and be brought up in consecutive storytelling sessions. The story script became extended to incorporate those bits the children had slipped in themselves.

The slipper discussion, previously mentioned, was repeated from session 1 to 5 Further examples came from discussions related to illustrations throughout the picture book.

- On page 13 & 14, we see Jack jumping on his daddy's tummy. In session 1 a child initiated a discussion about making Daddy sick if we were to do that. This point was included in storytelling sessions 2 to 6, and not always by the same child.
- A drawing was noticed in session 4, on pages 3 & 4. The children discussed what it was, who had drawn it and what they had used to draw it. They then continued to comment on this drawing during sessions 6 and 7.

Yaden (1988: 559) suggests that children savour selected points of a picture book, as adults may enjoy favourite lines in a novel. These personal additions to the picture book script may hold more meaning to the children, hence the repetition of these extensions.

Commented / reflected on picture book script

Metalinguistic awareness at this age is much debated. Garton & Pratt (1989:126) define metalinguistic awareness as "an ability to focus attention on language and reflect upon its nature, structure and functions." It does seem that the children did think about the words and expressions they heard, and used their understanding of words in Portuguese together with the illustrations in the picture book to reflect on use and meaning.

This strategy happened just once during the sessions with 'Peek a boo Friends!' This could be because the story was simple, predictable due to the repetition, and easily understood from the illustrations.

'My Daddy' on the other hand provided opportunities for several attempts to reflect on language and meaning. It also became apparent that it took a long time for children to contemplate on what they understood. The following excerpt took place in session 5, when the children had heard the picture book a total of seven times. The child in question was one of the brightest children in the group, who picked up the picture book script very quickly. At

this stage he already knew some chunks of language from the script and was able to join in and even initiate one or two times. Yet he was still unsure about the meaning of the word 'legs'. Notice how child 2 goes on to confirm that the wooden blocks couldn't be lego pieces!

Storytelling session nº 5 – Pages 3 & 4			
	Interlocutor	Speech	Translation
1	Child 1	Esta ali legs porque ta ahi legos montados.	<i>There's "legs", because there is a lego construction</i>
2	Storyteller	Legs são pernas, G. mas parece a palavra legos não é? Legs é pernas.	<i>"Legs" means legs G. but it sounds like the word legos doesn't it? "Legs" are legs</i>
3	Child 2	São madeiras	<i>They're wooden blocks</i>
4	Storyteller	Pronto! São madeiras, mas o G. achou que talvez o nome deles era legs. Não é G.?	<i>Right! They're wooden blocks, but G. thought they might be called "legs", didn't you G.?</i>
5	Child 2	São madeiras igual a estas. (pointing to the wooden blocks in the classroom)	<i>They're wooden blocks like these. (pointing to the wooden blocks in the classroom)</i>

In the same storytelling session another child asked why Mummy wasn't in the last picture. On page 24 it reads "... *he's all mine*". 'Mine' sounds like 'Mãe' in Portuguese, which means mother, and it is perhaps where his confusion stems, despite the fact that this chunk had been translated several times in previous sessions.

This questioning of meaning continued into session 7, which could lead to the argument that repetition of stories is essential in allowing children to reflect upon their understanding. With the repeated storytelling sessions children were able to gain a greater appreciation of the picture book script, which hopefully enabled them to take this understanding home.

Conclusion

The re-reading of a picture book 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 brought to light a repeated storytelling procedure, which defines three phases the children pass through to acquire the story script. This project needs to be repeated to clarify whether both procedure and phases are mirrored by other groups of children. It would appear that repetition within the picture book script was the key to how easily children acquired the story language and were able to successfully pass through the three phases of the repeated storytelling procedure.

Strategies used by the children to understand the picture book script differed in intensity depending on the amount of repetition within it. It would appear that children made every attempt possible to understand what the picture book was about, using storyteller, picture

book illustrations and picture book script as supports, as well as their own prior knowledge and experience.

In this study, when the picture book contained fewer repetitive refrains and more difficult lexis children tended to interact more and throughout the ensuing storytelling sessions. They discussed illustrations; asked questions; gave running translations; connected past experiences to the picture book script and illustrations; introduced whole new topics to be repeated in subsequent storytellings and reflected on the picture book script.

Both picture books were successful in this classroom setting, but for different reasons. 'Peek a boo Friends' gave the children the opportunity to acquire the English in the picture book script with ease, enabling them to feel confident about both using English and their retelling ability. 'My Daddy', on the other hand did not cater for this aspect of their learning, possibly even failing for most of the children. Instead it allowed children to succeed in other areas, from the rich discussions which evolved around the picture book. By using their mother tongue to ask questions the children learned how illustrations work to support text, how personal experiences can become part of a story and that together they can help each other understand.

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Annex I - Picture book scripts
'Peek a boo Friends'

Pg 1: Robbie is looking for his friends.
Pg 2: Peekaboo - it's giraffe!
Pg 3: Robbie and giraffe are looking for his friends.
Pg 4: Peekaboo - it's penguin!
Pg 5: Robbie, giraffe and penguin are looking for his friends.
Pg 6: Peekaboo - it's puppy!
Pg 7: Robbie, giraffe, penguin and puppy are looking for his friends.
Pg 8: Peekaboo - it's rabbit!
Pg 9: Robbie, giraffe, penguin, puppy and rabbit are looking for his friends.
Pg 10: Peekaboo - it's donkey!
Pg 11: Robbie, giraffe, penguin, puppy, rabbit and donkey are looking for his friends.
Pg 12: Peekaboo - it's teddy!
Pg 13: Kitten is looking for everyone.
Pg 14: Peekaboo – we're here!

'My Daddy'

Pg 1 & 2: This is my Daddy, says Jack.
Pg 3 & 4: I can crawl between his legs...
Pg 5 & 6: and swing from his arm. I'm so strong!
Pg 7 & 8: I can fly over his head like an aeroplane.
Pg 9 & 10: I can sit up so high...
Pg 11 & 12: or ride on his back.
Pg 13 & 14: Sometimes I jump up and down on his tummy...
Pg 15 & 16: and play peek-a-boo, Daddy!
Pg 17 & 18: He likes it when I tickle his toes...
Pg 19 & 20: and count all his fingers: one, two, three, four, five...
Pg 21 & 22: I listen so quietly when my Daddy reads me a story.
Pg 23: He's the very best Daddy in the whole world. And best of all...
Pg 24: he's all mine!

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