

JMCS Reviews

Learning from Picturebooks. Perspectives from child development and literacy studies.

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Title: Learning from Picturebooks. Perspectives from child development and literacy studies.

Edited by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, Jörg Meibauer, Kerstin Nachtigäller, and Katharina J. Rohlfing.

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A picturebook is a very common and usual, yet exiting artifact that is plainly adored by children and highly appreciated by parents. Although relatively simple at first glance – especially where language is concerned: some of the picturebooks do not even tell a story, but only contain pictures representing everyday objects (so-called *early-concept books*, cf. Chapter 3) – they are very complex aesthetic products. They are books that convey information “through either a series of picture-text combinations or a series of pictures only. In contrast to ‘illustrated books’ in which the illustrations play a subordinate role, text and pictures in picturebooks intimately depend on each other” (Introduction, p. 1). In other words, the main characteristics of picturebooks is the meaningful and unique interaction of words and images. For this reason, picturebooks are considered to be an autonomous subgenre of children’s literature and are increasingly acknowledged as an important object of study in a variety of research fields, such as linguistics, literary studies, pedagogy, and cognitive psychology. “Like newborn babies, picturebooks *are* important simply because they are delight and a wonder to children and adults alike”, states Elaine Reese (Chapter 10, p. 205). She further adds that “like babies who grow into useful and productive adults, picturebooks also serve an important purpose in growing young children’s oral language skills and – eventually – their reading” (ibid.). Pamela Blewitt in Chapter 6 (p. 117) specifies: “Children’s literature and adults’ reading to children

contribute to every aspect of language growth, from vocabulary building to metalinguistic understanding”.

A deep conviction that picturebooks play a crucial role in child’s cognitive and linguistic development is a mutual motive and a common denomination for the presented collection. The editors notice (Introduction, p. 4) that “relevant studies in the field of linguistics, literary studies, cognitive psychology, and picturebook research are scattered in diverse journals, collections and monographs [...]” and that “scholars often work in their own fields without knowing much about investigations and research undertaken in other disciplines [...]”. They admit that for this reason “one important aim of this collection is to gather together these different findings and recent discussions and to show how they are interrelated with regard to the examination of children’s developing linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic/literary competencies by means of picturebooks and the social interaction they are embedded in” (ibid.). It must be stated that the editor’s aim was achieved brilliantly. The contributions of the volume give the readers an insight into a great variety and diversity of research problems related to learning processes by picturebooks. The authors are scholars working in every field of research mentioned above, that is linguistics, literary studies, cognitive psychology, and picturebook research, who give this collection a truly interdisciplinary character. In view of this interdisciplinary character, “each chapter briefly refers to the state of art, thus contributing to a better understanding and evaluation of the analysis” (Introduction, p. 5). In chapters where experiments are presented “the contributors will explain their design and introduce the reader to the underlying theoretical framework” (ibid.). The value of this approach for the readers cannot be overestimated.

From the broad range of questions touched upon in the respective contributions that reach from visual learning, learning about fiction and narration through learning about emotions, as well as moral and social learning up to language acquisition I would like to select and discuss some matters that are crucial also from a perspective that is not represented in the volume – from the glottodidactic point of view.

It may be admittedly observed that none of the particular chapters deals with the topic of second or foreign language learning by picturebooks. All the authors focus on the issues connected with (shared) reading of books in the mother tongue and its contribution to the child’s development. But none the less, there are some very important reasons why these findings should be worth looking at from the glottodidactic perspective. They allow to draw some conclusions that are of the greatest importance for the theory and practice of second and foreign language teaching, especially at the early stages of learning.

To begin with, it ought to be stated that reading picturebooks might be considered to be the most important method of early second and foreign language teaching. As can be read in Chapter 6 (p. 117), “reading to young children gives them

exposure to new words and practice with grammatical forms and pragmatic conventions". It is obviously the exact wording to define the goal of second and foreign language teaching. The main target group that picturebooks are created for are preschool (and primary-school) children (cf. Introduction, p. 1; Chapter 3; Chapter 8; Chapter 11 *et al.*). The preschool stage – the age between 3 and 6 years belongs to the so-called *sensitive period*, a phase in a human life that is especially beneficial for language acquisition. In this period the mother tongue develops intensively, and an additional language can also be acquired more efficiently than at later age. It is well known from the research findings in the field of the study of bilingualism and bilingual education that in the sensitive period the acquisition of both languages processes in the same or, dependent on specific conditions, a very similar way. It can be therefore concluded that the ways how picturebooks support learning and language development of children will be the same for their first as for their second language. It may be assumed that the same characteristics of picturebooks that facilitate children's learning of the mother tongue will also enhance the development of their second language at this stage. Finally, it can be presumed that there will be no qualitative difference between their mother tongue and their other language(s) considering the impact of the specific behavior of adults (e.g. parents or teachers) during the reading of picturebooks to children, such as making pointing gestures, asking questions or using affective strategies of presentation. Knowing about the significance of adult's strategies of reading and interaction with the picturebooks will be crucial for the practice of second language teaching in the preschool.

The presented volume is divided into three parts:

The first part "*Symbol-based learning in picturebooks*", consisting of four chapters, centers on the questions of the cognitive processes that guide children's learning during shared reading of picturebooks with an adult. The scientific observation that language acquisition is closely connected with the cognitive development, or even to a large extent dependent on it, is true not only for the first language of the child, but also for his or her other language(s) in the sensitive period. From this point of view the findings and study results presented and discussed in this part of the volume are of the greatest interest for glottodidactic research, too. As Bettina Kümmerling–Meibauer und Jörg Meibauer state in Chapter 1 (p. 29): „picturebooks have a crucial impact on the child's knowledge acquisition“. They explain that it is so because, despite a common belief, human beings do not learn mostly from their own experience, but instead, from early on, rather through testimony handed over to them directly or indirectly by other human beings (cf. Pinker, 2005, 110-111). The authors observe that testimony may be handed over to children also through picturebooks. How picturebooks assist conceptual and narrative development in children is the main issue of their contribution. Bettina Kümmerling–Meibauer und Jörg Meibauer explore two problems related to this question: the first one – the interaction between language acquisition and

the acquisition of early literacy and the second one – the characteristics of picturebooks that affect the children's cognitive and linguistic development. The authors point out that one of the most significant qualities of children's literature is "to be accommodated to the cognitive and linguistic abilities of children in different developmental stages" (p. 14, cf. Chapter 11, p. 216). With respect to this statement, Jörg Meibauer presents in Chapter 3 a taxonomy of picturebooks (p. 53) and demonstrates that not only complex storybooks – that can affect children emotionally thanks to their narrative properties, such as a hero who the child may feel empathy with, a conflict or complication that can engage her or him etc. – play an important role in the child's learning. Simple descriptive books, or even wordless early-concept books can not only be interesting for children up to 5 years of age (cf. Chapter 1, p. 28), but they are also very effective in supporting the transfer of new knowledge in children – an ineffably precious information for a language teacher who is convinced that complicated language of a story that is suitable for a native speaker of a particular age lay beyond the comprehension capacity of a foreign language learner. Jörg Meibauer shows in his chapter (p. 53 ff.) what children may learn in particular from that kind of books (e.g. about grammar, cf. also Chapter 11) and reflects on their properties that make the learning process possible in a reading situation (e.g. children are interested in the meaning and concepts of words, hence, they are ready to analyze complex words and their components). In Chapter 2, Patrica A. Ganea and Caitlin F. Canfield also examine factors that affect children's learning from picturebooks, both in a positive and in a negative way. According to them (p. 40 ff.), children learn better from picturebooks when they are asked questions during reading interactions, and when adult readers point to relevant pictures and add brief explanations, especially when they use generic phrases (p. 44; cf. also Chapter 5). They also state that children are able to acquire new information about the real world from picturebooks particularly when the stories they listen to and the pictures they look at are realistic (p.41) while fantastic illustrations and language may not be favorable to learning. Surprising, yet very important – not only for a language teacher – can be also the ascertainment by the authors (ibid.) that books that are visually very attractive, such as, for example, manipulative books, might not be advantageous for learning because they may distract children and draw their attention away from relevant information. Instead of focusing on the intended subject of learning, children may be more interested in interacting physically with the book (e.g. lifting the flaps, pulling the tabs etc.). Nevertheless playing with a manipulative book means great pleasure to children and they are undeniably always going to learn more from books that they enjoy (cf. Chapter 10, p. 204). Thus one should not avoid employing attractive books in the didactic process, especially that, as Patrica A. Ganea and Caitlin F. Canfield suggest, "a manipulative element that draws children's attention to the relevant, to-be learned information might actually facilitate learning" (p. 42). Mei Ying Boon and Stephen J. Dain, the authors of Chapter 4, also emphasize that enjoyment is

“essential in the learning process” (p. 71) and that picturebooks are designed to trigger enjoyment in children (as well as in adults) because of their aesthetic values. They investigate when and how children learn to identify and to appreciate color in pictures as a constitutive element of picturebooks. Among many fascinating experiment results they discuss in their contribution is one that confirms the findings of Patrica A. Ganea and Caitlin F. Canfield’s presented in the previous chapter (Chapter 2), namely that children at early stages of age prefer realistic pictures or photographs. Subsequently, they like better picturebooks in which there is a distinguished similarity between the pictorial depictions and their referents in the real world.

The second part of the volume *“Co-constructed learning from picturebooks”* is composed of four chapters that focus on the problem of the shared attention of children and adults during reading interactions and analyze the impact of various factors that shape the process of child’s learning from picturebooks, such as the attributes of verbal and nonverbal behavior of adult readers. According to Katharina J. Rohlfing, Angela Grimminger, and Kerstin Nachtigäller, the authors of Chapter 5, the quality of verbal behavior during the book reading is considered to play a more important role in the learning process than the frequency of reading (p. 99). However, since a reading activity is not restricted to verbal behavior, the authors investigate into the impact of gesturing in reading situations. They identify pointing gestures (of mothers, p. 101 ff.) accompanied by questions or by naming (labelling) the proper depictions in the book as one of the crucial factors that affect children’s acquisition of new knowledge (e.g. new vocabulary) from picturebooks. In this respect, looking at pictures in books is even more effective than free playing because “pictures – rather than objects – elicit a higher proportion of generic and labeling phrases from mothers and [...] children” (p. 102; cf. Chapter 2). “Growing vocabulary in the context of shared book reading”, is the title and the main issue also of Pamela Blewitt’s chapter, Chapter 6. The author focuses on two cognitive processes that are responsible for the child’s acquisition of new words: the fast mapping and the slow mapping (p. 118 ff.). Fast mapping occurs when the phonological form of a word is associated with its referent. This relation can be established already after one or two expositions to a new word (in the mother tongue). Slow mapping is the second, much longer phase of the word learning when the child acquires the full understanding of its meaning. This process includes learning about the referent’s properties and functions and occurs when children “experience multiple exposures to a word with a range of referents in a variety of contexts” (p. 119). For a language teacher this finding bears a very significant consequence: multiple, but contextless repetitions of words, or repetitions in a restricted variety of contexts may not have the desired effect on the child’s long-term remembering of new vocabulary. Lesley Lancaster and Rosie Flewitt, the authors of Chapter 7, point out a further didactic principle that is also essential for the practice of second and foreign language teaching. It is the need “to build bridges between written inscriptions and the social, emotional, and bodily lives of the

children” (p. 137). To be able to reach the child emotionally and to be noticed by her or him as a part of a communicative interaction a text must have the property of being a “social action” (p. 141). This is a quality that authentic texts, such as picture- and storybooks, undeniably have, and teaching materials for young learners, unfortunately, plainly lack (cf. Olpińska 2015). How adult’s emotional expressions and affective strategies facilitate children’s understanding of picturebook stories and thus enhance their learning is the main theme of Chapter 8 by Eleni Moschovaki and Sara Meadows. Their contribution is of a very special value from the glottodidactic point of view because it deals with the reading interactions that take place in kindergarten schools between the children and their teachers. The experimental results discussed in this chapter allow to draw direct conclusions for the scaffolding of the second or foreign language teaching situation.

The last three chapters of the collection, constituting the third part “*Learning language skills from picturebooks*”, concentrate on the advantages of picturebooks for the development of oral language skills in children, especially vocabulary, pragmatics and grammar. Jessica S. Horst demonstrates in Chapter 9 under which circumstances shared storybook reading may best facilitate the word’s learning by children. Linda Stark in Chapter 11 analyzes picturebooks in order to show why they can be especially favorable to learning grammar – in this case the past tenses *Perfekt* and *Präteritum* of the German language. And Elaine Reese in Chapter 10 identifies the components of oral language that appear to be most important for later reading. These components are: vocabulary knowledge, comprehension of stories heard aloud, production of stories and an awareness of the sounds of words (p. 194). The author investigates which of these skills could be best supported by means of shared reading.

All three last chapters of the collection are of the greatest value from the glottodidactic perspective. The conclusions that can be drawn from the research findings and results discussed in these chapters can be directly applied to the practice of second and foreign language teaching. Thanks to Elaine Reese’s contribution the language teacher may learn that shared reading of picturebooks has a great impact on the development of both receptive and productive (expressive) vocabulary, as well as on listening comprehension and narrative skills, but not so much on their phonological awareness and early reading skills. The latter skills should be, in consequence, supported in another way than by means of picturebooks. Linda Starks’s presentation may help the language teacher to overcome her or his fear of authentic texts as of a kind of text that is much too complicated to be applied in the process of second or foreign language learning. The author namely observes– on the grounds of her analysis of 19 selected picturebooks recommended for different stages of age from 1-2 to 5 years on – that “an essential characteristic of children’s literature is that it takes into consideration children’s linguistic and cognitive development” (p. 216, cf. Chapter 1, p. 14) and thus provides a valuable input in the process of language acquisition. This may be surprising for a language teacher who is

accustomed to think that teaching materials for foreign languages meet the learner's needs better than authentic texts by means of a strict lexical and grammatical progression. Perceiving these qualities in the picture- and storybooks can be the first step to change the glottodidactic practice. Jessica S. Horst's contribution allows to distinguish these attributes of the picturebook reading practice, both at home and in the classroom settings, that are especially enhancing for language learning. As already mentioned above (cf. Chapter 6, p. 119; Chapter 2, p. 45), there are two very important factors that improve the children's word learning from picturebooks: the context and repetition. Jessica S. Horst corroborates with the results of her experiments that children who heard a new word three times by listening to the same story repeated remembered the word significantly better than children who heard the word the same number of times but received a single reading of a story (that included the target word three times in three different contexts – p. 184). What is even more baffling, "children who heard the same story repeatedly recalled significantly more words than children who heard three different stories" (both groups of children heard the target words the same number of times – p. 185). On the face of it, this may seem counter-intuitive, because children who heard more stories had more varied exposures to the target word, which could result in a deeper understanding. Nevertheless, these findings provide converging evidence that repetition and encountering a word in fewer contexts lead to a better word learning, especially during the early stages of word learning (shortly after a new word is initially encountered – *ibid.*). It ought to be added, however, that variable contexts distinctly aid later stages of word learning (*ibid.*, cf. Chapter 2, p. 119).

Concluding this review, it must be once again clearly stated that the presented volume can be considered not only to be a very important interdisciplinary study that uniquely connects the recent findings in the linguistic, psychological and pedagogical picturebook research but also as a milestone in the field of early second and foreign language teaching research. It introduces the readers to a great variety of current issues concerning the investigation of picturebooks and their role in the child's learning about the world and about the language and helps to build a cohesive understanding of different aspects of the impact of picturebooks on children's learning and development.

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