

The Effect of Story Read-alouds on Children's Foreign Language Development¹

La Eficacia de la Lectura de Cuentos en Voz Alta en el
Desarrollo del Idioma Extranjero en Niños

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Abstract

This action research project examines the impact of reading stories aloud on the development of children's reading and critical thinking strategies as well as on the improvement of English as a foreign language. Analysis of journal entries and transcriptions of recordings of the sessions were used to gather the information. Data collected revealed that children improved their speaking skills by talking about the story, and that they also learned new words they used to express their opinion even if they had a low proficiency in English. Findings also revealed that resources and methodologies helped students develop their critical thinking as well as their reading comprehension towards books.

Keywords: reading comprehension, critical thinking, reading aloud, foreign language acquisition

Resumen

Este proyecto de investigación acción examina el impacto de la lectura de cuentos en voz alta en el desarrollo de estrategias de comprensión lectora y de pensamiento crítico así como también analiza el impacto en el aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera. Con el propósito de recolectar información se analizaron las notas de los diarios y se hicieron transcripciones de las grabaciones de las sesiones de lectura. Los datos recolectados revelaron que los niños mejoraron sus habilidades de comunicación discutiendo diferentes aspectos del cuento leído, al mismo tiempo aprendieron nuevas palabras que emplearon para expresar su opinión, a pesar de tener un bajo nivel de inglés.

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Los resultados también revelaron que los materiales y metodologías utilizados en las clases, contribuyeron a que los niños desarrollaran su pensamiento crítico y su comprensión lectora.

Palabras clave: Comprensión lectora, pensamiento crítico, lectura en voz alta, aprendizaje de una lengua extranjera

Resumo

Este projeto de pesquisa ação examina o impacto da leitura de contos em voz alta no desenvolvimento de estratégias de compreensão leitora e de pensamento crítico, assim como também analisa o impacto na aprendizagem de inglês como língua estrangeira. Com o propósito de recolher informação se analisaram as anotações dos diários e se fizeram transcrições das gravações das sessões de leitura. Os dados recolhidos revelaram que as crianças melhoraram suas habilidades de comunicação, discutindo diferentes aspectos do conto lido, ao mesmo tempo aprenderam novas palavras que empregaram para expressar sua opinião, apesar de ter um baixo nível de inglês. Os resultados também revelaram que os materiais e metodologias utilizados nas aulas, contribuíram a que as crianças desenvolvessem seu pensamento crítico e sua compreensão leitora.

Palavras chave: Compreensão leitora, pensamento crítico, leitura em voz alta, aprendizagem de uma língua estrangeira

Introduction

Reading aloud as a pedagogical activity has been one of the most widely used methodologies in the elementary classroom. It helps develop learners' enjoyment of reading as well as literacy skills. Participants in this action research study were students attending classes once a week to learn English as a foreign language. The Reading Corner is an additional voluntary space provided by the institute where the study took place; these sessions are offered for students between 7 and 12 years of age. As the Reading Corner was an optional activity after class, the number of participants changed each session. The data was collected throughout one entire academic semester.

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The main objective of the Reading Corner sessions is to help students become successful readers by “developing critical thinking skills which allow them to analyze facts, organize and generate ideas, defend opinions and solve problems” (Centro Colombo Americano, n.d.). In terms of social interaction, the purpose is to provide students with a different space and environment that helps them be in close contact with the language while they share ideas with other students.

The Reading Corner is intended to be a non-threatening activity since students do not have the pressure of being tested. Nevertheless, some of them feel reluctant to participate actively because they do not know how to express what they want to say or they lack the words needed to express their opinion. Consequently, this fear of participating often prevents them from enjoying the story.

Reading aloud has been practiced in different settings with the goal of improving reading behaviors and reading pleasure in students. However, little research has been done on the impact of this methodology on students who are learning English as a foreign language. This action research study aimed to understand to what extent reading aloud can develop reading comprehension and critical thinking skills, as well as to what extent reading aloud can improve students' English level.

Literature Review

Reading is one of the most important components of achieving a balanced literacy in children. However, reading in a different language is a demanding cognitive process where new words and structures have to be understood in order to make sense of what is being read to enjoy and understand the story. In the reading aloud context, the relationship between the reader, the child and the book makes a huge difference. In this perspective, constructivist and cognitive theories play an important role in the development of the present study.

Within the constructivist theories, Vygotsky (as cited in Pentimonti & Justice, 2009) is the pioneer of the instruction theory which emphasizes the importance of providing children with an accurate instruction guide in order for them to master the abilities they are still acquiring. This theory is strongly related to the scaffolding process needed to learn and internalize a new concept or idea. Indeed, learners require the support of the teacher to make the new knowledge accessible and comprehensible for them. Thus, scaffolding becomes a bridge for transforming reading from a possibly dull activity into a fruitful and interesting one. In the same way, scaffolding and constructivism have to do with how students use their previous knowledge to build new mental structures.

It is also important to include cognitive theories about second language acquisition, which are relevant to this study. Krashen's theory of comprehensible input (as cited in Curtain, & Dahlberg, 2004) explains that input should be the amount of language that the student understands plus a little more. This theory is derived from the input hypothesis, which states that the message conveyed to the child must

be understandable even if all the words are not familiar. Cognitive theory is important for this study because reading engagement can be achieved if the child feels comfortable with the book and if its language is comprehensible. Krashen's concept of input just beyond the learner's language level ($i + 1$) has to be considered when choosing a book to read aloud. McDavid (n.d.) developed a rule to know how to select the right book to read. Books are too easy if children already know almost all the words; books are too hard that contain more than five words in one page that the child does not know, and finally books are just right in which almost all the words on the page are known and just a few are new. These new words can be easily understood with just a little bit of help. Thus, taking into account the criteria to choose an appropriate book will then enhance the child's interest since the input would be $i + 1$ and the new vocabulary would not be above their level.

Story schemata or story grammar is also important to consider. Understanding how a story is structured helps readers of all ages to make real sense of the story and therefore, to personalize it. Mandler & Johnson (as cited in Rand, 1984) define story grammar as a set of episodes that occur in the story and allow the story to flow. Dealing with story grammar helps readers define outcomes, expectations and reactions towards what is being read. Lehr (1997) also considers the importance of analyzing how the episode generates a certain reaction in a character. This character then sets a goal that needs to be achieved along the story, and when it is achieved, the story ends. This theory is relevant for this study because the use of materials and methodologies that foster story grammar may help children develop their literacy understanding.

Vocabulary acquisition has also been studied when using interactive reading aloud strategies since acquiring new words is a reading skill that has to be developed to achieve comprehension and fluency. However, teachers should define the most appropriate instruction to maximize word learning without distracting children from the story itself. Considering the previous aspect, Kindle (2009) developed a study in which three different levels of instruction (incidental, embedded, and focused) emerged when analyzing the data. First, incidental exposure "occurred during the course of discussions, before, during, and after reading and resulted from teachers' efforts to infuse rich vocabulary into class discourse" (Kindle, 2009, p. 3). Secondly, embedded instruction emphasized the meaning of the words that were provided along with the reading. Finally, focused instruction "occurred when target words were considered important to story comprehension or when difficulties arose communicating word meaning" (Kindle, 2009, p. 3). Kindle's findings

show that students learned words from the three types of instruction, and that this instruction promoted understanding without distracting from the reading.

Reading engagement is also achieved by the degree of enjoyment and comprehension of the book. Sipe (2002) studied how readers' engagement can be expressed in different verbal or physical ways. The author mentions how readers seek to understand the narrative elements of the story, including plot, setting, and characters. However, this level of comprehension does not necessarily increase engagement. That is why, when readers make the story their own, they "compare and contrast the events of the story to their own lives, saying 'that happened [or didn't happen] to me'" (Sipe, 2002, p. 1). Sipe examined the construction of literacy understanding (how readers construct meaning by supplying what is not written) by means of children's responses to read-alouds. Five different categories of understanding resulted from the analysis of the data: analytical, intertextual, personal, transparent, performative. These five facets were also affected by the stances assumed, the actions performed and the functions of the texts.

Children can also demonstrate engagement by drawing. Ducan's (1998) integrated competition hypothesis posits that visual input can portray things that words cannot. Images in general are a great tool to express feelings and thoughts in a more pictured and visual manner. In this regard, Pflaum & Bishop (2004) asked students to draw one experience in which they were not engaged and one activity in which they were. In general, students demonstrated preferences for collaborative reading experiences.

Engaged readers not only have acquired reading skills, but use them for their own purposes in many contexts. They possess beliefs, desires, and interests that energize the hard work of becoming literate. From this perspective, motivation and social interactions are equal to cognitions as foundations for reading (Guthrie & Anderson, as cited in Pflaum & Bishop, 2004).

In this sense, reading in a collaborative environment helps children feel comfortable about what they know and about what they are learning. Reading aloud is a space for sharing ideas and thoughts about a specific situation. Having the opportunity to listen to different perspectives increases comprehension.

Methodology

Research Design

This action research study emerged from the need to take advantage of the time students spend in the Reading Corner sessions in order to develop reading comprehension, critical thinking skills and to improve students' English proficiency level. The purpose of the intervention was for children in the Reading Corner to have contact with the language in a different environment outside their scheduled class and to learn by getting close to books and stories. Each week, a story was chosen that could be appropriate for all the children who attended the Reading Corner, which changed from week to week. The story was read along with pre-, while- and post-activities. The activities were designed based on students' learning profiles and they are thought to engage learners even more in the foreign language.

Context and Participants

The children who participated in the study came from different school backgrounds and attended English classes once a week. The Reading Corner sessions were offered to students between 7 and 12 years of age. Each group of students attended a fifty-minute session every Saturday. Considering that the read aloud sessions were a voluntary activity, the number of participants varied from eight to four.

Data Collection Instruments

Qualitative data collection techniques were used as the primary research methods for this action research study. Field notes were taken after each session during the semester. Different information was gathered for the younger learners (7-9) than for the older learners (10-12) as the type of strategies used and the didactic material varied. A total of nine sessions of two hours each were audio recorded. Not all of the sessions were recorded as parent's consent was not obtained for all the students in each session.

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Transcriptions of nine sessions of audio recordings were used to find patterns and to answer the research questions. Two different surveys were carried out at the end of the semester in order to evaluate the vocabulary strategies used and the students' behaviors and attitudes towards reading.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In order to analyze the transcriptions of the nine hours of recordings, basic concepts of Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory were used (as cited in Van den Heuvel-Panhuizen, & Van den Boogaard, 2008). The data analysis of the recordings generated a coding framework, which was used to analyze the recordings and the field notes. The transcriptions were divided into short dialogues that came up during the discussions of the read alouds. In general, such dialogues contained an answer to a given question or a spontaneous response in the middle of a conversation. The story read aloud by the children was neither transcribed nor taken into account for the present study. During the open coding phase, five different categories emerged: MSTO (made story their own), SE (story engagement), RC (reading comprehension), FLD (foreign language development) and IC (inter-textual connections).

Considering that the research questions were focused on the students' English improvement and the development of critical thinking skills and literacy understanding, it was necessary to concentrate on two of the categories in the first phase: RC (reading comprehension) and FLD (foreign language development). Therefore, during the selective coding phase, some other subcategories emerged. Within the LU category, the following subcategories arose: LS (library-skills development), DT (focus on decontextualized text), PI (prediction based on illustrations), PBK (prediction based on background knowledge) and SS (story schemata). Within the FLD category, the following subcategories arose: SD (syntax development), WE (target words explanation), 2LC (mother tongue and L2 combination), AW (asking for L2 words), SW (spelling words), L2BK (L2 background knowledge). These categories classify the different responses children produced and their analysis brought the findings described later. Table 1 shows the final coding framework that emerged after the data coding of the recordings. The framework includes a definition of the category or the subcategory and an example taken from the transcriptions.

Table 1. Coding classification of children’s responses during the read aloud, open coding phase

<p>Category R1: Reading Comprehension [RC]</p> <p><i>Description</i> Child makes connections between the main narrative elements and their background knowledge in order to understand the flow of the story.</p> <p><i>Example</i> 13:37 <i>Teacher</i>: Something wrong is happening 13:47 <i>Children</i>: the stairs 14:00 <i>Samanta</i>: they go down from the stairs and continue skating 14:03 <i>Teacher</i>: how do they go down? 14:04 <i>Samanta</i>: they sit down and go down 14:05 <i>Lucia</i>: they jump</p>
<p>Category R2: Inter-textual Connections [IC]</p> <p><i>Description</i> Child makes connections between the story and other literacy products like movies or TV shows.</p> <p><i>Example</i> 22:23 <i>Teacher</i>: what about the penguins? ... 23:47 <i>Lucia</i>: I think I watch a movie..... 24:03 <i>Santiago</i>: Yes! The mother goes to get food and the father look after the eggs 24:21 <i>Lucia</i>: mmm now I remember. The mother emigrates...the male penguin keeps the eggs 24:39 <i>Teacher</i>: do you remember the name of the movie? 24:41 <i>Santiago</i>: “Happy Feet”</p>
<p>Category R3: Personal Engagement [SE, MSTO]</p> <p><i>Description</i> Child asks for the turn to read during the session or makes connections between the facts of the story and their personal lives.</p> <p><i>Example (Story Engagement)</i> 31:08 <i>Teacher</i>: volunteers for reading this page? 31:10 <i>Children</i>: MEEEE!!!! 31:11 <i>Samanta</i>: I don’t read.</p> <p><i>Example (Made the story their own)</i> 27:39 <i>Bryan</i>: George is in a swimming pool with apples 28:00 <i>Samanta</i>: No! It’s a game that you How do you say “poner la cabeza en el agua”?</p>

28:09 <i>Lucia</i> : put your head in the water ...
28:13 <i>Samanta</i> : and you pick up the apple with your mouth
28:14 <i>Lucia</i> : I have played that game but with candy...you have to put your head and pick up one candy and you close your eyes. There is another game that you put in a bowl water with little balls.
Category R4: Foreign Language Development [FLD]
<i>Description</i> Child asks for the meaning of new words or tries to give his opinion.
<i>Example</i> 05:28 <i>Fernanda</i> : How do you say “toallas” in English? 05:29 <i>Children</i> : towels 05:32 <i>Teacher</i> : t-o-w-e-l

Bearing in mind that conversations were not recorded in the journal, none of the subcategories of the FLD category were considered for the analysis. On the contrary, two new categories emerged throughout the analysis of the field notes: SM (scaffolding methodologies) and BV (building vocabulary). Table 2 includes the definition of these two categories during the analysis of the journal. In the case of the sessions that were recorded, transcriptions were compared with the field notes and observations in order to identify patterns and in this way, to define the codes that characterize the session as a whole.

Table 2. Coding classification of children’s responses during the read aloud, selective coding phase

Category R1: Reading Comprehension
Subcategory 1.1: Library-skills development [LS]
<i>Subcategory 1.1</i> Library-skills development
<i>Description</i> Child identifies the different parts of a book and predicts based on the information found in the cover.
<i>Example</i> 09:06 <i>Teacher</i> : what is the function of the author in the book? 09:09 <i>Samanta</i> : he writes the book 09:12 <i>Teacher</i> : and the illustrator? 09:15 <i>Samanta</i> : he puts the characters in the book, the image.

<p>Subcategory 1.2: Focus on decontextualized text [DT]</p> <p><i>Subcategory 1.2</i> Focus on decontextualized text <i>Description</i> Child focused his attention on the language used in the book rather than on the images in order to comprehend the meaning of the text. <i>Example</i> 10:20 <i>Santiago</i>: yellow woman [talking about the image] 10:26 <i>Lucia</i>: that is her sister 10:43 <i>Teacher</i>: how do you know? 10:49 <i>Lucia</i>: it's in the text</p>
<p>Subcategory 1.3: Prediction based on Illustrations [PI]</p> <p><i>Subcategory 1.3</i> Prediction based on Illustrations <i>Description</i> Child predicts what is going to happen in the story based on the images on the page of the book. <i>Example</i> 12:58 <i>Teacher</i>: so what does Gracie's sister think it's inside of the basket? 13:00 <i>Sandra</i>: fruit, a chicken..... 13:07 <i>Lucia</i>: ahhh because it's moving</p>
<p>Subcategory 1.4: Prediction based on background knowledge [PBK]</p> <p><i>Subcategory 1.4</i> Prediction based on background knowledge <i>Description</i> Child predicts what is going to happen in the story based on their background knowledge. <i>Example</i> 12:07 <i>Teacher</i>: what are they talking about in this page? 12:09 <i>Samanta</i>: the muscles 12:17 <i>Lucia</i>: they protect the bones 12:18 <i>Teacher</i>: they also help us move and stretch</p>
<p>Subcategory 1.5: Story Schemata [SS]</p> <p><i>Subcategory 1.5</i> Story Schemata <i>Description</i> Child recognizes the main elements of a story such as characters, plot, settings, climax and episodes (story grammar).</p>

<p><i>Example</i></p> <p>26:13 <i>Teacher</i>: now what was the problem in the story?</p> <p>26:18 <i>Samanta</i>: the streets</p> <p>26:22 <i>Lucia</i>: the problem was that they could not go down the stairs</p> <p>26:35 <i>Samanta</i>: and the grandfather borrowed the ramp</p> <p>26:43 <i>Teacher</i>: and that was...</p> <p>26:45 <i>Children</i>: the solution</p>
<p>Category R2: Foreign Language Development</p> <p>Subcategory 2.1: Syntax Development [SD]</p>
<p><i>Subcategory 2.1</i></p> <p>Syntax Development</p> <p><i>Description</i></p> <p>Child tries to construct his opinion using the grammar he knows in order to give his opinion during the read aloud.</p> <p><i>Example</i></p> <p>25:35 <i>Teacher</i>: what do you think it's behind number 9?</p> <p>25:37 <i>Julian</i>: nine apples red</p> <p>25:40 <i>Teacher</i>: nine....[crossing fingers]</p> <p>25:48 <i>Julian</i>: nine red apples</p>
<p>Subcategory 2.2: Target Words Explanation [WE]</p>
<p><i>Subcategory 2.2</i></p> <p>Target Words Explanation</p> <p><i>Description</i></p> <p>Child explains the meaning of a word using the grammar structures they know in the second language.</p> <p><i>Example</i></p> <p>14:53 <i>Cata</i>: do you know this word? (sheet)</p> <p>14:55 <i>Lucia</i>: it's the thing you put in your bed. [B-05/p.5]</p>
<p>Subcategory 2.3: Mother tongue and L2 combination [2LC]</p>
<p><i>Subcategory 2.3</i></p> <p>Mother tongue and L2 combination</p> <p><i>Description</i></p> <p>Child gives his opinion by constructing a sentence that combines their knowledge in the second language and some words in the first language.</p> <p><i>Example</i></p> <p>14:03 <i>Monica</i>: that is the brain</p> <p>14:17 <i>Santiago</i>: the brain is made of "camarones"</p>

<p>Subcategory 2.4: Asking for L2 words [AW]</p> <p><i>Subcategory 2.4</i> Asking for L2 words <i>Description</i> Child asks for a word in English that he needs to express his opinion. <i>Example</i> 25:18 <i>Ricardo</i>: teacher how do you say “asustado”? 25:23 <i>Teacher</i>: scared 23:25 <i>Ricardo</i>: the cat is scared</p>
<p>Subcategory 2.5: Spelling Words [SW]</p> <p><i>Subcategory 2.5</i> Spelling Words <i>Description</i> Child spells a word and writes it in the mini-board. Child makes connections between how a word that is not in the text is pronounced and how it is written. <i>Example</i> 02:24 <i>Teacher</i>: do you know how to write that word? 02:35 <i>Lucia</i>: o-w-n-e-r</p>
<p>Subcategory 2.6: L2 background knowledge [L2BK]</p> <p><i>Subcategory 2.6</i> L2 background knowledge <i>Description</i> Child uses his knowledge in L2 in order to answer to a question or to give his opinion. <i>Example</i> 28:19 <i>Teacher</i>: do you know opposites? 28:31 <i>Javier</i>: soft and hard 28:35 <i>Teacher</i>: black 28:36 <i>Children</i>: white</p>

Results

Results gathered from the vocabulary survey show that more than 50% of the students who used this strategy felt that it helped them learn new words and believed it was a useful methodology to learn vocabulary. Besides this, a mini-board was used for students to reinforce the new words. Results from the vocabulary survey show that more than 50% of the interviewed students felt that the strategy

helped them learn new words and that it was a useful methodology to memorize new vocabulary. This indicates that didactic material facilitates learning in any kind of context. The teacher's challenge is to find the most appropriate material which can meet the academic needs of the students.

In terms of foreign language development, Table 3 shows the subcategories and the number of times they were found in the transcriptions.

Table 3. Foreign language development

Subcategory	Recording Code	Total
Syntax development	SD	9
Target words explanation	WE	4
Mother tongue and L2 combination	2LC	9
Asking for L2 words	AW	15
Spelling Words	SW	3
L2 background knowledge	L2BK	6

Having the students motivated to attend the sessions and to participate actively was one of the main barriers during the study. However, results from the surveys revealed that 11 out of 15 students said that they liked being read to, and in the same way, 10 out of 15 said that they paid attention when the teacher read the story for them. It is also important to mention that allowing the combination of students' mother tongue and English facilitated communication.

Talking about critical thinking, results from the general survey said that children (10 out of 15) made use of images in order to predict the meaning of the new words. Development of critical thinking was not only observed during the post-reading activities children worked on, but also during the conversations in the read aloud. From the 118 short dialogues that were transcribed, 49 belong to this category. However, during the selective coding phase, six subcategories emerged. Table 4 shows the number of times each subcategory appeared in the transcriptions.

Table 4. Reading comprehension

Subcategory	Recording Code	Total
Library-skills development	LS	7
Focus on decontextualized text	DT	8
Prediction based on illustrations	PI	18
Prediction based on background knowledge	PBK	2
Story schemata	SS	
PI and SS	PI, SS	2

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study shows that reading aloud provides students with opportunities to interact with others while they are reinforcing their knowledge of English. Children who attended the reading sessions learned new vocabulary in context and also developed their speaking skills using the language they had, regardless of their English level, when giving their opinion about the story. Emphasis on communication rather than in error correction gave students confidence to express themselves in English and motivated them as well. This supports the communicative language teaching theory (Richards, 2006) which states that language production happens when the teacher guides students but does not control their speaking. Other studies support that reading a book aloud in two languages permits comprehension of the story instead of limiting the improvement of the other language (Lyster, Collins, & Ballinger, 2009). Reading comprehension of the story increases motivation and when students are engaged in the text, they will feel the need to communicate.

Read-alouds gave students a space where they could improve their listening skills as well as reading strategies. In a similar study, Beck & McKeown (2001) reported that the words and expressions found in the books improve verbal functioning since those words are not commonly heard in conversations; therefore, story words improve students' vocabulary. In the present study, the strategies and methodologies used helped students learn new words in order to express their thoughts aloud.

Building just the right environment for all the students to feel comfortable regardless their English level was a relevant factor to

increase their motivation towards the sessions and towards reading. Modeling good reading behaviors and enjoyment for reading helped children be motivated. Fox (2008) expresses the importance of building a relationship among the adult, the child and the book in order to facilitate interaction and to help children personalize what they are reading.

Students in this study learned to identify the parts of a story by analyzing the book from a critical point of view. They developed their critical thinking skills when talking about the events of the story or when relating them to their own lives. This finding is linked with the story schemata theory described by Mandler & Jonhson (as cited in Rand, 1984), which is based on the idea of understanding the sequence of episodes in the story by analyzing the goals and reactions of the characters. The different categories that emerged during the analysis of the audio recordings demonstrated how children used several perspectives to interpret the information given by the book and in this way, analyzed it according to their background knowledge and the aids given in the sessions.

Finally, the different uses of resources and didactic material such as graphic organizers helped children comprehend the stories more easily and interpret the story grammar. In general, reading aloud develops children's thinking and allows them to learn new expressions and to express themselves while they are immersed in the magical world of a book.

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