

Teaching reading strategies in the primary school classroom through picture books

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1. Introduction

In daily practice, it becomes evident that students face difficulties with reading comprehension. This observation is confirmed in the results of the reading evaluations not only in Argentina but also in different parts of the globe. PISA evaluations, carried out by UNESCO, reveal a decrease in the reading comprehension levels of primary and secondary school students. Besides, analysis of the material used in the classrooms is evidence of the divorce there exists between a classroom material that relies heavily on the written mode and texts students encounter in their daily lives that rely on people's capacity to understand the intertwining of different modes to create an ultimate meaning (Serafini, 2012). Therefore, there is a need to create new pedagogic practices that will allow us to reverse this process. We believe this is necessary since the ability of reading comprehensively has a fundamental role in people's lives.

This research is restricted to present day social reality, in which every person becomes an audience of multimodal messages in which the text and the image are combined to provide different meanings. This is why the concept of literacy is in a process of change. What does knowing how to read implicate in the 21st century? Knowing how to read does no longer imply being able to decode letters that form words, but reading words and images understanding that there is a semantic association between them that will lead to the uncovering of particular meanings. Picture books allow us to share with children a book where they can experience the world of images, sounds and words.

The selection of the material for this study was based on the learning theory proposed by Ausubel, Novak & Hanesian (1978), in which they state that in order for the learning to be significant, the ideas in the teaching material should be connected

with the previous knowledge of the students so that the new knowledge can be closely linked to the new. The selection of our pictures, like Intercultural Exchange by Isol (2010), is based on their value as generators of meaning, emotions and analysis.

This paper presents the results of a research project in which children were taught to read picture books with the aid of language strategies applied to reading tasks. In this paper we share a learning experience in which our students were taught language strategies to foster their reading skills.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Language Strategies in Reading

The teaching of reading strategies is key to empowering students to enhance their own learning by making them aware of the different paths they can follow in order to solve problematic situations on their own (Oxford, 2011). When students are exposed to and encouraged to use these strategies from an early age, it is likely that, once these processes become automatized, they will become habits. In other words, explicit teaching of the reading strategies at very early stages of learning will likely lead to the development of skilful readers.

Oxford's (1990) classifies language strategies in three different categories of language strategies memory (retrieving information), cognitive (understand and use new language), compensatory (use language despite existing gaps in knowledge). Memory strategies help learners store large numbers of words. It is our capacity to store and retrieve information from our lexicons that makes us better readers as our knowledge of the skill becomes procedural knowledge. These strategies are particularly helpful in relation to picture books since they work with the association of word and image. As Oxford (1990) points out

Linking the verbal with the visual is very useful to language learning for four reasons. First, the mind's storage for visual information exceeds its capacity for verbal material. Second, the most efficiently packed chunks of information are transferred to long-term memory through visual images. Third, visual images may be the most potent device to aid recall of verbal material. Fourth, a large proportion of learners have a preference for visual learning. (Oxford, 1990: 39)

Cognitive strategies help students manipulate and transform the target language by practicing (repeating, finding patterns), receiving and sending messages (skimming and scanning), analysing and reasoning (taking elements from L1 to understand L2) and creating structure for Input and output. Finally, compensation strategies allow students to use the language either for compensation or production of language despite students' limited linguistic knowledge. Some activities that require the use of compensation strategies are guessing, using mime and gestures, and switching to mother tongue (Oxford, 1990).

2.2 Reading Multimodal Texts

Working with multimodal texts implies working with a new concept or reading. As Kress states "reading has to be rethought given that the commonsense of what reading is was developed in the era of unquestioned dominance of writing" (Kress, 2010, p. 17). In times in which visual images are pervasive and often take over the power of the written word, the concept of reading has been stretched out to make room for a new concept of reading that entails the combination of modes to create ultimate meaning. Kress understands "[r]eading as taking and making meaning from many sources of information, from many different sign systems" (Kress, 2010, p. 17). In other words, readers will be exposed to a wide range of messages built from different composing elements that come from different semiotic systems. Skilful readers will have to know how to read each individual element and notice how each element contributes to creating an overall meaning. Furthermore, students will have to understand the dynamic essence of reading since nowadays readers become active readers who, in turn, become authors of their own messages (Kress, 2010, pp. 18-19).

Picture books are an example of multimodal texts. The ultimate meaning of the picture book is created by a careful intertwining of different modes: linguistic (written words), spatial (layout and design of characters and objects on the page), movement (created by the dispositions of lines in the pictures), body language (gestures and positioning of the body) (Martens, 2012, p. 287). Also, some of the books chosen for this research are actually told from the perspective of a child, making it easier for students to establish emotional connections with the material and, thus, perceive it as relevant.

In these books the meanings are created by both the verbal and the visual modes. Unlike illustrated books, in picture books, both the verbal and the visual mode have the same weight on meaning production. Thus, the way in which we read picture books has to follow the logic of space, not of time. The way readers access the text depends entirely on the readers themselves and on what draws their attention.

2.3 Reading an image

In his book, D.A. Dondis (1974) expresses that as in written texts syntax orders words appropriately to create meaning the same happen in visual texts: images also have a syntax that orders the visual system. Dondis (1974) states that readers create meaning as well as the artist producing the image. Students well know that in order to read a text they should read from left to right, top to bottom, and line by line. In picture books apart from following this conventional way of reading the text, students should learn how to read the image and consider it as a kind of text that has to be read in order to understand the book. Images have been carefully designed by the authors and everything in them has some meaning.

In order to be visually literate it is necessary to understand the significance of individual elements in the image such as colour, tone, line, texture, among others. It is the combination of all these elements in an image that creates meaning in the stories. One of the most distinctive elements that catches children's attention is colour. Different colours can transmit feelings. For example, yellow can evoke a feeling of happiness and white, feelings of purity. It is important to bear in mind that the meanings evoked by colours may vary from culture to culture.

In the following section, we have selected pictures from different picture books to exemplify how each of these elements are significant in the creation of meaning.

Dot

The dot represents the "simplest, irreducibly minimum unit of visual communication" (Dondis, 1974, p. 40).



Sendak, M. (2013) *Where the Wild Things Are*.

Line

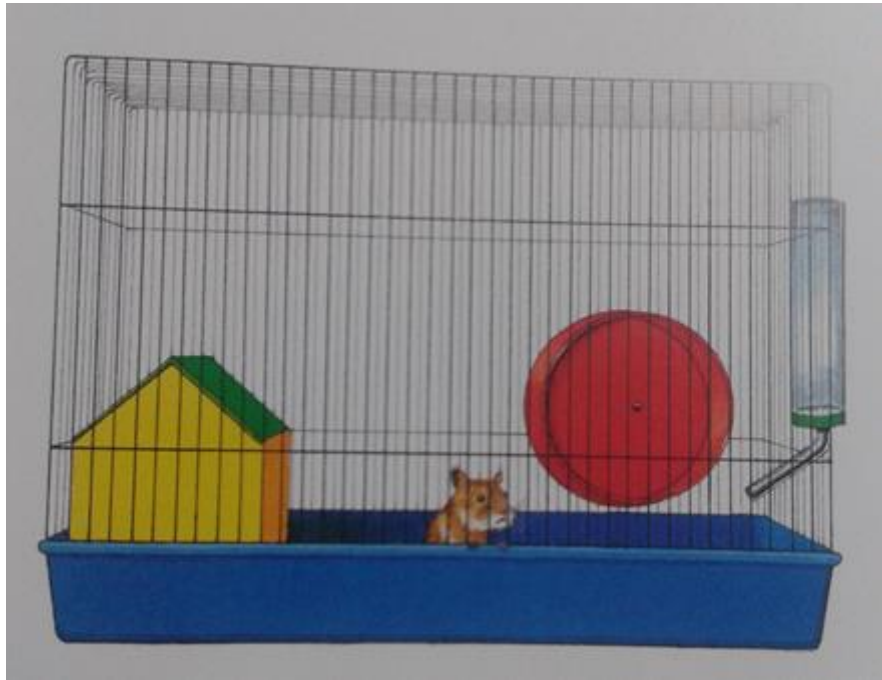
Lines are a bigger unit of visual communication. “When the dots are so close to one another that they cannot be individually recognized, the sensation of direction is increased, and the chain of dots becomes another distinctive visual element, a line” (Dondis, 1974, p. 42). Lines help to direct the viewers’ attention to or away from a particular focus.



Browne, A. (1994). *Zoo*.

Shape

Line describes shape. Shapes are flat and simple figures (Dondis, 1974, p. 44).



Browne, A. (1994). *Zoo*.

Direction

There are different visual signs that convey the meaning of direction. “Every basic shape expresses three basic and meaningful visual directions: the square, the horizontal and vertical: the triangle, diagonal; the circle, the curve. Each of the visual directions has strong associative meaning and is a valuable tool in making visual messages” (Dondis, 1974, p. 46). The square usually represents stability, straightness and balance. The triangle symbolizes tension, conflict and action. And the circle is used to express protection, warmth and repetition.



Browne, A. (1994). *Piggybook*.

Browne, A. (2001). *Voices in the Park*.



Browne, A. (2004). *En el bosque*.

Tone

Tone is understood as “the intensity of darkness or lightness of anything seen” (Dondis, 1974, p. 47). Tones help to set different moods for an image and influence the viewers’ interpretation of the characters’ feelings.



Browne, A. (2004). *En el bosque*.

Colour

Together with tone, colour is used to express the characters’ feelings towards other people or their surrounding context. “Colour provides information. It has symbolic meanings” (Dondis, 1974, p. 50).



Browne, A. (2004). *En el bosque*.

Texture

Texture taps upon the memories collected by our sense of touch. “Texture is the visual element that frequently serves as a stand-in for the qualities of another sense, touching” (Dondis, 1974, p. 58).



Bernasconi, P. (2011). *El Zoo de Joaquín*.

Scale

Scale is a visual meaning making sign that provides us with information about the characters' perception of what is going on around them; e.g: the idea of powerlessness projected by an element that is a higher scale in relation to the main character. "All visual elements have the capacity to modify and define each other. The process, itself, is the element of scale" (Dondis, 1974, p. 59).



Browne, A. (1994). *Zoo*.

Dimension

Dimension offers viewers a representation of the characters' point of view. The value placed on a person, object, etc will be registered in the design of the image.

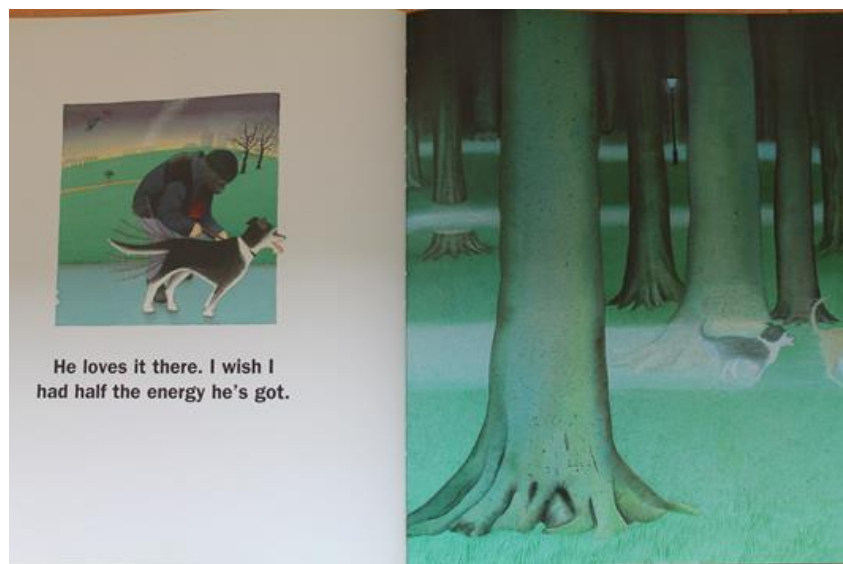
"Representation of dimension in two-dimensional visual formats is also dependent on illusion" (Dondis, 1974, p. 62).



Browne, A. (2001). *Voices in the Park*.

Movement

The element of movement is clearly conveyed by the use of straight lines. “The visual element of movement, like dimension, is more often implied in the visual mode than actually expressed. The eye also moves in response to the unconscious process of measurement and balance through the “felt axis” and left-right, top-bottom preferences” (Dondis, 1974, p. 67).



Browne, A. (2001). *Voices in the Park*.

3. Research

3.1 Setting

This research explored how language strategies applied to the reading of postmodern picture books can have an impact on the reading proficiency of L2 young learners. This research was carried out with 75 children from a 3rd grade of a semi-private primary school in city of Córdoba. The material selected was based on students' age, accessibility to reading material and topic related to the unit students were learning. The picture book selected was *Intercultural Exchange (Intercambio Cultural)* by Isol since it allowed us to deal with different language topics students have studied such as animals and the modal verb "can" to talk about abilities. This book also lends itself easily to the teaching of values. The book is written in Spanish so teachers had to adapt it into English.

3.2 Methodology

This is a case of action research so we worked with our own classes. First, books were selected taking into account students' age, language level and topics suitable to match the content of the syllabus. Once the appropriate material was selected, different activities were planned taking into consideration the integration of reading comprehension strategies with content and language instruction (Oxford, 1990). We also talked to the art teacher of the institution to see if, from her subject, she could help to carry out this project by teaching students how to read images. She introduced the groups of students into the basics of reading pictures like the use of line, colors, emotions and feelings provoked by them, among others. To make it clear to the art teacher what our objective was, we shared with her the book *Picture This: How Pictures Work* by Molly Bang (2000). This is a book that provides readers with a thorough analysis of how images work in picture books.

When we started working with *Intercultural Exchange*, we taught and asked students to work with (cognitive) reading strategies like prediction, establishing associations and guessing from context cues by looking at the cover of the book. Students were also encouraged to guess the emotions of the characters by reading the visual content of the cover page. During the reading of the picture book, students were asked questions that helped them to focus their attention on different cues that would

allow them to predict, establish further associations with context cues, with previous knowledge and with their own lives, and link words, sounds and images. These activities meant that students had to use compensatory and cognitive language strategies when reading. The comments that students made during the reading and post reading tasks made evident that students could successfully draw on the different modes to understand the meaning of the text. Students on their own also created phonological associations between words that shared similar sounds or that were minimal pairs. This association works as a proof that students were carefully paying attention to the auditory mode since they had a clear purpose to do it: a change in sound could spark a different meaning represented by the visual or written mode. Students were reading picture books multimodally. As a post reading activity, students were encouraged to respond to the text by creating a drawing. The drawing activity was an extension activity in which students had to find connections between the content of the picture book and their daily lives. While students were drawing, teachers talked to students who were crafting images according to what they had learnt in the art class and during the analysis of the text. The language used to talk about their drawings showed that they were able to retrieve knowledge and use the appropriate grammar and language that had been previously taught.

The use of the different language strategies was assessed through observation of whole class reading strategy instruction using picture books; the talking drawing technique (Paquette, Fello & Jalongo, 2007) and interviews were used after students were exposed to certain strategy instruction. Some students were interviewed separately during break time. Individual interviews (appendix 1) were carried out in Spanish since students lack the language level to talk about the topic of language strategies. The first questions were always general questions about the story to set the mood for the interview. All the other questions made students reflect on their reading comprehension skills. All different modes of assessment showed that students were able to analyse the text and comprehend it successfully.

3.3 Results

Through classroom observation, it was noticeable that students' level of motivation was high. Most students were happy with the degree of novelty and challenge that the material presented. The pre teaching of image cue to understand pictures proved to be extremely valuable to put compensatory strategies to use. Students

showed that they are excellent readers of images and more than once they surprised the researchers by gathering more meaning from the images than the researchers had been able to do. Due to students' motivation to understand the story, they were receptive of teachers' explanations of language strategies and they risked their use whenever they thought it would be appropriate. Students were also eager to help their weaker peers to put these strategies to use by repeating the teacher's explanations or by explaining parts of the narrative. In this way, students could retrieve more knowledge of the content topics (animals and the modal auxiliary verb can) and, at the same time, reinforce language strategy instruction. The Talking Drawing strategy is a strategy that helps researchers dwell on each individual learning process (Paquette, Fello & Jalongo, 2007) so researchers could inquire about the strategies that weaker students in their classroom had put to use and how effective they had been for them. The individual interviews (Appendix) confirmed that students thought that reading strategies were effective for the understanding of texts.

4. Conclusion

In order to teach language strategies in reading in the second language classroom, it is necessary first to provide students with basic content knowledge. After acquiring this knowledge, students can concentrate on the reading task ahead. Picture books proved to be motivating for students who were focused on task, were receptive of teachers' instructions and participative in the different classroom interactions. The teaching of art cues to understand the multimodal texts was a powerful tool for students to unravel deeper meanings hidden in texts and understand how the different meaning making signs work together.

Due to the visual, auditory and verbal input of the stories, students were willing to invest time and effort in understanding the text. The use of different reading strategies proved useful for all students since even the weaker ones could actively participate in whole class activities and were able to produce meaningful responses in the post reading task.

These positive results in whole class and individual tasks evidence the fact that the explicit teaching of reading strategies has a positive effect on the reading comprehension strategies of young learners. At the same time, the results establish a solid ground to suggest that multimodal texts are materials that easily lend themselves

to the teaching of reading strategies since they catch students' attention and motivate them to be on task during extended periods of time.

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Appendix 1

1. ¿Te gustó la historia? ¿Qué parte te gustó más?
2. ¿Qué te ayudó a entender la historia?
3. Las estrategias que te dio la seño, ¿te sirvieron para entender el texto de una mejor manera?
4. ¿Qué estrategia te sirvió más? ¿Por qué?