

TOPIC 16.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ENGLISH. DIDACTIC TECHNIQUES TO ACHIEVE ORAL COMPREHENSION, TO INITIATE AND ENCOURAGE READING HABITS TO APPRECIATE THE POETIC FUNCTION OF LANGUAGE.

1. INTRODUCTION

- **Communicative competence** definition.
- Natural route for learning any language goes through reception before production (receptive skills are not passive). Relevance of **receptive skills for effective FLL**.
- Children's literature to approach listening and reading.
- Development of reading habits.

2. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

- Definition. Role of technologies (Barone 2011)
- Factors for the development of children's literature (rise of the middle class)
- Brief history: 19th century (flourishing of children's literature...examples). 20th century (comics, entertaining stories...). Current trends (Barone, 2011) →expansion of topics, illustrations...
- Typology of children's literature (adults' books, unmarked audience, traditional, fantasy, adapted classics.
- Using literature in the FL class: (Van 2009) Advantages (meaningful contexts, cultural awareness...
- Children's literature can integrate the four skills:

3. ORAL COMPREHENSION, THE POETIC FUNCTION OF THE LANGUAGE

- Defining listening (Rost, 2005) complex cognitive process (hearing, categorization of sounds, word recognition and comprehension)
- The mental demands in **active listening** are clearly meaning-focused instead of language-focused.
- **"Input Hypothesis"** by **Krashen** (i+1).
- Comprehension strategies: intelligent guessing (predicting, inferring from the context...)
- Staging listening and types of activities (pre-while-post)
- The **poetic function** of the language (can be worked in the FL class through activities related to poems, songs, chants, rhymes...). Practical proposal (food poem, pizza chant, five senses poem...)

4. DEVELOPMENT OF READING HABITS

- D. _____ + block number _____ (regional curriculum) (Comprehension of written texts).
- Principles to develop a taste for reading (usefulness, active and joyful, supported, organisation of reading corner, meaningful and purposeful activities)
- Reading techniques (skimming-extensive reading and scanning-intensive reading)
- key **strategies to support and motivate students** towards reading: word learning strategies, sentence and discourse level strategies (inferring, visuals), take advantage of games (jumbled texts, e-mail friend, pass the message...)

5. CONCLUSION

- The integration of literature in FLT requires devising appropriate sequences of work in which students can apply listening and reading strategies.
- Strategies shall be much more effective if they are embedded in joyful activities in which students perceive the usefulness of the FL.
- By getting students to discover FL literature, practise receptive skills and play, we shall be contributing to the development of our learners' communicative competence.

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0. OUTLINE:
1. INTRODUCTION
2. CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ENGLISH
3. ORAL COMPREHENSION AND POETIC FUNCTION OF THE LANGUAGE
4. DEVELOPMENT OF READING HABITS
5. CONCLUSION
6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. INTRODUCTION

The main goal to be attained in the teaching of a foreign language in primary education is the development of a certain degree of **communicative competence (RD 126/14)**. This term refers to enabling the learner to communicate through oral and written means, using the foreign language (FL onwards) in real and meaningful contexts. Considering the language as an instrument of communication implies using it to express and exchange meanings in contextualized situations, getting the students to apply different strategies to get their meaning across; instead of learning an abstract set of grammatical rules.

Using a FL effectively requires having a number of abilities that linguistics identify as linguistic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, before students are able to produce chunks of language in the FL, receptive skills play a central role, as it happens with L1 acquisition. In other words, the natural route for learning any language goes through reception before production. For many years, receptive skills were neglected in traditional approaches, since they were considered as “passive stages”. As opposed to this idea, recent approaches based on the nature of language comprehension stress the relevance of receptive skills for effective FL learning. In this sense, teaching to understand requires implementing a series of strategies and techniques to engage students in active listening and reading.

In this topic, we shall start by focusing on the relevance of children’s literature as a way to approach meaningful listening and reading. As we know, texts are an essential component of communication; and literary texts, whether oral or written, are invaluable sources to create awareness of the poetic function of the language.

Finally, we shall concentrate on the relevance of developing reading habits amongst our students, stressing the idea that FL teachers are not very likely to succeed in this goal unless we attract our students’ interests towards the pleasure of reading and the usefulness of reading in English.

2. CHILDREN’S LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Defining children’s literature should be an easy task: it is literature written for children. However, how do we consider appealing books for adults and children like “Harry Potter”? Thus, this simple definition is not enough since children’s literature embraces a wide range of works, including acknowledged classics of world literature, picture books and easy-to-read stories written exclusively for children, fairy tales, lullabies, fables, folk songs, and other primarily orally transmitted materials.

Tomlinson and **Lynch-Brown** (2002) define children’s literature by age range: infancy to adolescence. Further, they suggest that it includes “good quality trade books” that “cover topics of relevance and interest to children of those ages, through prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction”. They also note that children’s literature should be interesting and have relevance for a young audience.

Before deepening into types of books for children, it is worth considering two phenomena that have influenced this field: “First, the child audience has gained significantly in stature compared with earlier times, where the only reading material for children was borrowed from adults. Second, technology has advanced the possibilities for illustrations and, with the Internet, it has redefined what a book is” (**Barone**, 2011).

We can state that children’s literature is comparatively a recent phenomenon which emerges in the second half of the **18th century**, after the Industrial Revolution due to economic and social factors.

However, it would be in the **19th century** when children’s literature flourished, particularly in England and the USA. Some famous 19th-century works are “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” (1865) by Lewis Carroll, “Treasure Island” (1883) by Robert Louis Stevenson, and “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” (1884) by Mark Twain. In this time, children’s literature evolved from oral presentation to written form with illustrations. It is also worth noting that children’s literature no longer was primarily didactic, it was now being written for sheer enjoyment. At the turn of the century, Beatrix Potter wrote the first modern picture book for children, “The Tale of Peter Rabbit” (1901).

Some other works for children were: “Ivanhoe” by Walter Scott, “Jungle Book” by Rudyard Kipling, or “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea” by Jules Verne.

Without any shadow of a doubt, the consolidation and full development of children’s literature takes place during the **20th century**. The fact that developed countries had attained universal literacy created a huge market. This century also witnessed major changes in both the marketing and content of children’s books:

- Production of cheap paperback books.
- Spread of children’s bookshops.
- Creation of new marketing techniques.
- The old moral tales evolved into entertaining stories or subtly didactic ones.
- Appearance of comic books.

Barone (2011) suggests that **current trends** in children’s literature are characterized by several **features**:

- **Expansion of topics:** Current writers include sensitive topics such as death or divorce, previously considered inappropriate in their narrative books.
- **Complexity with genre:** For many books, it is easy to identify the genre, whether it is a fantasy, a mystery, or other type of book. However, some current books are less identifiable because the authors incorporate multiple genres within.
- **Acknowledgment of racial diversity.**
- **Appearance of graphic novel.**
- **Growth of informational text:** books are simultaneously entertaining children and teaching them about issues such as presidents, dinosaurs, planets, natural disorders, and world wars.
- **The success of book series:** The Harry Potter series is probably the most vivid example of the popular book series, with children and adults clamoring to read the next story by J. K. Rowling.

According to **Van** (2009), using literature in the FL classroom entails a series of **advantages**:

- It provides meaningful contexts.
- It involves a wide range of vocabulary, dialogues and prose.
- It appeals to imagination and enhances creativity.
- It develops cultural awareness.
- It encourages critical thinking.
- It is in line with CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) principles (literature can enhance meaning and learning is facilitated through involvement and joy).

In order to round off this point, we may summarize some hints on how to **integrate children’s literature in English in the FL class**. **Maley** (1989) suggests that literary texts can be approached through a three-staged procedure:

1. Preparing learners to cope with the text. This stage involves preparation activities, (i.e. making a brainstorm, engaging them in a passage and eliciting ideas and language items).
2. Engaging learners in understanding the text (i.e. extract key phrases and get learners to match them with words expressing learners’ feelings).
3. Engaging learners in activities which extend the theme and allow learners to express their own opinions, feelings and thoughts. As an example, through a role play learners can ask characters about their motives for action.

3. ORAL COMPREHENSION AND POETIC FUNCTION OF THE LANGUAGE

RD 126/14 28th February emphasizes the use of the FL for real communication. In this sense, the FL content blocks are organized according to the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. In this sense, in **content blocks number 1 and 2 concerning listening and speaking**, RD 126 stresses the importance of these abilities in this stage; and notes that due to the usually limited presence of the FL in the students’ social context, the linguistic model provided by schools is the main

source of knowledge and learning of the FL. In addition, the capacity to use linguistic elements to accomplish communicative tasks implies that the FL is both vehicle and object of learning.

As **Michael Rost** (2005) defines, listening refers to a complex cognitive process that allows a person to understand spoken language and encompasses receptive, constructive and interpretative aspects of cognition. This active process involves: hearing, categorization of sounds, word recognition and comprehension.

According to **Lynne Cameron** (2001), **listening** can be seen as the active use of the language to access to other people's meanings. Undoubtedly, the students' construction of understanding requires relying on their previous knowledge and experiences regarding language use. The mental demands in **active listening** are clearly meaning-focused instead of language-focused, since they are related to making sense of a message, a song or a story.

A relevant theory about the importance of input to improve listening understanding is the "**Input Hypothesis**" by **Krashen** (1982). According to this theory, the learners naturally develop their understanding of the language by the comprehension of input that is slightly above their current language proficiency level (i+1).

An important point for teachers to bear in mind is that children concentrate and listen with understanding more effectively if they are **motivated** and engaged in meaningful and enjoyable activities while listening. Children will be involved in the active process of listening if they see the **purpose** of the task.

Comprehension strategies can help learners improve their ability to understand; therefore, it is essential for the FL teacher to promote these strategies which, in turn, shall lead to a more autonomous type of learning, favouring **learning to learn competence**. In this sense, **intelligent guessing** is usually applied by FL teachers who want their students to reflect on the listening task. Some important intelligent guessing strategies are: **predicting**, by using prompts and clues to encourage them to guess what they think it is going to happen; and **inferring meaning from the context**, which is much more memorable for learners than receiving an explicit translation.

When **organising a listening task**, it is useful to consider three main stages:

- A **pre-listening** stage in which students can predict or some language is elicited by the teacher. This stage is particularly useful to engage them in the activity and create an interest towards the FL.
- A **while-listening** stage that requires active listening, as they should show understanding through specific actions like drawing, doing physical actions, using gestures, completing words, etc.
- A **post-listening** stage will finally evidence learning by transferring what has been covered to a different context.

In relation to the **types of activities** to promote **oral comprehension**, **Littlewood** (1981) suggests the following classification:

Performing physical tasks: it is essential to instil the idea that the criterion for success in listening is not the understanding of every single word, but the construction of meaning to accomplish the communicative purpose of the activity.

Transferring information: learners are required to look for specific types of meaning

Reformulating and evaluating information: learners should be asked to reformulate the important content in their own words, in the form of notes or a summary.

The poetic function of the language.

The poetic function of the language can be worked in the FL class through activities related to poems, songs, chants, rhymes, amongst others. However, poetry is a literary genre in which the language is used aesthetically and not only with the aim of communicating something. There are several characteristics of poetic language we may take advantage of:

Musicality: The poetic language is highly related to music. At early stages of FLL, poetry, songs or rhymes are valuable models

Poetic language: Through simple poetry or songs children can start "reading between lines".

Poetic images: An image is a poetic representation of a feeling or an idea. Apart from the motivating effects of using poetry in the EFL class, it helps children see that the FL language can also be used with aesthetic intentions.

Advantages of using poetry, songs, rhymes and chants in the FL class:

- As children are already familiar to songs or rhymes, clear links between school and home are established.
- Children benefit from the sociocultural information in songs and poems.
- Children enjoy listening to and experimenting with the sounds of languages.
- Poetic language provides children with the opportunity to be creative and take the risk to create their own poetic images.

Practical proposals: There are plenty of advantages in the use of poetic language in the FL class; nevertheless, when we think about poetry we may retrieve the image of obscure and complex use of the language, out of reach for our primary school FL learners. This is the reason why we may think of a simple “food poem” (Read, 2007), in which children are walked through the process of creating a poetic product.

In the early stages of learning a FL, **puppets** are useful to **retell** and **repeat** rhymes and chants, particularly amongst introverted students. In this same line, **collaborative tasks** can help students with **specific needs of educational support** overcome their difficulties in understanding and creating poetic language. As an example, we may get children in small groups and use the predictive rhymes to encourage contributions: we could cover key rhyming words with Post-it notes to invite predictions and compare the children’s ideas with the author’s and encourage innovations. Finally, in whole group we may collect lists of rhyming words to display in the “class poetry corner”.

It is also advisable to turn the FL classroom into a **print-rich environment** where students can display their poems, recreate the settings of a chant (i.e. the pizza chant, Read, 2007); draw the characters of a poem or song, and the like.

In what follows we describe a series of activities integrated in a sequence of work (adapted from **Read**, 2007) that meet the different learning styles through comprehension, production and interaction, using a simple “poetic chant” as springboard for further activities. Children draw the shape of a pizza and answer the teacher’s questions to guess the food. We elicit language to add possible ingredients to the “class pizza”. Children listen to the chant and say the number of different ingredients in the pizza. Then they clap the stress to get the rhythm of the chant. Children in pairs practice the rhythm of the chant; they stand up and act out the pizza train chant, playing with the sounds of the ingredients. Children can play the “pizza bingo” or “guess the teacher’s pizza”. They draw and write pizza ingredients in an empty pizza frame and secretly choose five different ingredients. Then they listen to the teacher’s pizza and tick the ingredients they have drawn. Next, in “Pizza Partner” students are given a card with a particular pizza. Then they make questions to find their partner. Finally, children prepare and act out a role play in a pizza restaurant. They divide roles amongst customers and clients. They have to ask for a specific pizza according to the social norms in a restaurant. Children can be supported by visuals and teacher’s help.

As we have seen, developing awareness of the poetic function of the language does not necessarily mean that we have to use authentic poems by recognized English writers. However, a golden rule is that we should try to **engage learners actively**, since the main aim is not a mere presentation of vocabulary and poems to be understood; rather we want our students to experiment and play with the language.

The next proposal gathers these methodological principles. In the “Five Senses Poem”, adapted from **Read** (2007), children can collaborate to create a poem in which the senses lay the foundations to experiment with the language and create poetic images. The procedure goes as follows: the teacher writes “seaside” in the middle of the board (could be any other topic). Then the senses verbs (see, hear, smell, touch and feel) are written around the central word. We suggest children the things they can see, smell, etc, when they go to the beach. In groups, children can link the senses verbs to suitable related words (i.e. I can see the blue sky and the green sea). Once the children have completed the web, they write the poem and share with their classmates: (i.e. I can see the blue sky and the green sea; I can hear the waves and the strong wind; I can smell seaweed...).

Before bringing this point to an end, it is worth remarking that through the implementation of literature in ELT, we can take advantage of children’s natural interest towards joyful activities.

Besides, the positive experience of the use of literature in the FL promotes positive attitudes and develops children's confidence and self-esteem, as learning occurs in a stress-free atmosphere. Therefore, far from being occasional resources, this resource should be considered as an integral part of language learning.

4. DEVELOPMENT OF READING HABITS

The importance of reading is acknowledged in the Spanish curriculum, **RD 126/06**. Thus, content block number 3 **comprehension of written texts**, is devoted to essential understanding of written texts.

In accordance, when organizing their teaching practice, schools must guarantee the incorporation of a daily time to reading, no less than thirty minutes along all the levels in primary education.

Developing reading habits in English is essential if we consider the power of English on the internet and its use as an international language. However, the objective of creating reading habits is a hard nut to crack, since we need to instil **a taste for reading** in a language different from the mother tongue. In order to do so, we have to take some **principles** into consideration:

- Reading should be a **useful activity** from our learners' point of view.
- Reading should be an **active and joyful experience**. In this regard, **organizational measures** to promote reading are essential. Therefore, we may arrange an "English Stories Corner" in the classroom with a small class library and some benches where students can sit to read a book when they finish some activity.
- Reading must be **supported** through different means (i.e. visuals, nonverbal language, teacher's help, etc).
- The **FL classroom** should be a literate, **print rich environment** for English. Thus students may contribute by creating wall charts, labelling furniture or objects, making a birthday calendar or setting the class rules to provide quick eye contact with prints.
- Working on reading skill must be done through **meaningful** and **purposeful** activities with a **clear context**.

On the other hand, the development of reading habits requires considering that the reading ability of the students in Primary Education starts from a very simple reading at the word level to a more systematic and complex reading. Therefore, it is convenient that students get familiar to **intensive and extensive reading** techniques.

In **intensive reading**, students usually work with short texts, from which they will understand basically all the words, paying attention to the details and getting particular points (scanning for specific information).

On the other hand, **extensive reading** is related to the meaning-focused input and fluency development. In this type of reading tasks, learners focus their attention on meaning rather than on the language features of the text, even if they do not know the meaning of some words, since the objective is to get the overall meaning (skimming for the gist).

In more practical terms, we shall now mention some **key strategies** to **support and motivate students towards reading**:

Word-learning strategies are more effective when they are applied within a context previously presented. Some of them are:

- **Pre-teaching vocabulary**. In this strategy, the use of visuals, games, ICTs are very useful, especially internet-based image and video banks.
- **Word walls** and **labeling**.
- **Repetitions** are indispensable for memorable learning. However, in order to avoid boredom, they must be carried out in an enjoyable and contextualized way, as the case of reading games (memory cards) or lyrics.

Sentence and discourse level strategies. When the reading task is more demanding, some other strategies can be applied:

- **Inferencing** includes hypothesizing about what is coming next.
- **Graphic organizers** and visuals. Some possibilities are: semantic maps (i.e. developing a web relating a day at the beach with the five senses, “see the sea, smell fish, hear waves...”), charts and Venn diagrams (i.e. relating animals to food they eat), content frames, and visualizations (i.e. understanding what happens in the story through images or sounds).

Moreover, it is worth reflecting on the fact that **FL teachers may take advantage of children’s natural interest in games and enjoyable activities to develop a taste for reading:**

Mime reading: in this activity learners show understanding of a text by miming it. As an example, the teacher can give students some sentences expressing actions in a story to be mimed (i.e. “The Lion and the Mouse”).

E-mail friend: taking part in an international program (i.e. e-Twinning) in which students can receive information from e-mail friends is an excellent way to motivate them towards reading. In this activity, learners see the usefulness of the FL, as they need to understand their friend to respond them.

The Flashing Game: in this activity learners are asked to predict what will happen in a story. They read a text in a short time (scan) and then they collaborate to imagine the rest of the story.

In guise of a concluding remark to the development of reading habits, we should be aware that the teacher on his/her own cannot instil the habit of reading on the students; but rather we can help students by encouraging them to read in English. In this process, we shall have to consider what the students are asked to read and how they read it. As for **what the student reads**, it very much depends on the aim (whether to consolidate vocabulary, to work on a given transversal content...) and also on the interests of the student. Luckily, teachers are used to solving this problem once we have worked with them for some time and have detected their needs and interests.

However, the problem arises when we get to **how to read**. As we know, going over the words does not imply effective reading and comprehension. Accordingly, teachers often spend some time helping their students learn how to read in the FL. A clear example of this is seen in the use of the dictionary or techniques such as skimming (reading for global comprehension) and scanning (reading for specific comprehension) which teachers incorporate into their teaching practice. As children are engaged naturally in them, whether they deal with any of the four skills and require an effort on the part of the students.

5. CONCLUSION

Throughout this presentation, we have dealt with **children’s literature along history** and its application in the FL classroom. We have also seen that using literature in FL teaching requires considering essential principles, as the creation of **meaningful contexts**. On the other hand, the integration of literature in FLT requires devising appropriate sequences of work in which students can apply listening and reading strategies. As we have seen, these strategies shall be much more effective if they are embedded in joyful activities in which students perceive the usefulness of the FL.

One essential function of the FL that can also be covered in the FL class is the **poetic use of the language**. This does not mean that teachers have to introduce real and complex poetry; rather, we can adapt to the linguistic competence and cognitive level in our classroom to work and play with the sounds of the FL and experiment with the **creation** of poetic images.

After all, by getting students to discover FL literature, practise receptive skills and play with the infinite possibilities of a language (i.e. poetic function of the language), we shall be contributing to the development of our **learners’ communicative competence**, which is the **main aim of FLT in Primary Education**, as it is stated in RD 126/14.

It is useful for teachers to reflect on the characteristics that communicative activities should have to promote willingness to communicate. In this sense, we shall highlight some weighty principles: motivation, purpose of the task, linguistic preparation before the accomplishment of the task, learning support, personalization and adequate timing. Similarly, the adaptation of teaching techniques to our students’ age, cognitive and emotional development shall ensure success in the process.

In a nutshell, we as teachers need to invest time and energy in entertaining the students by making use of multimedia sources to promote the books (e.g. video, audio, CD, film, using puppets, etc.). We should also exploit the power of anecdote by telling the students about interesting titles, taking them out to see plays based on books, exploiting posters, leaflets, library resources, amongst others.

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