**Children's Literature and Language Learning**

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Este artículo pretende explorar como un *input* derivado de la literatura infantil puede funcionar como catalizador en el aprendizaje del idioma extranjero. Partiendo del supuesto de la predisponibilidad favorable de los niños hacia este tipo de literatura, examina su potencial como vehículo de aprendizaje así como su factibilidad en el contexto educativo real. Defiende un enfoque que antepone el medio al mensaje para ayudar en el desarrollo de la competencia creativa de los propios niños. Con ello persigue una aportación educativa que combina empatía hacia la alteridad a través de la lengua extranjera a la vez que imaginación radical mediante la literatura no sólo *para* sino también *por* los niños.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This article proposes to examine some aspects relating to the potential of children's literature as a stimulus and vehicle for the learning of foreign languages, taking as a starting point the use of children's literature in English in a Spanish-speaking context. The aim will be to discuss why and how it is felt that such material can contribute to the acquisition of English as a foreign language by non-native speakers. Although our focus will be on the usefulness of children's literature in English at the level of primary school, ranging from very young learners at 5 or 6 years of age to the oldest pupils of 11 or 12, we believe that it is possible to fruitfully extrapolate from this context to others (such as that of EFL teacher training, to take one example close to our own experience). For the purposes of this discussion, we shall understand the expression children's literature with Cervera as the space in which: "se integran todas las manifestaciones y actividades que tienen como base la palabra con finalidad artística o lúdica que interesan al niño" (Cervera 1992: 11). This broad definition of children's literature as verbal creativity and playfulness will also allow us to subvert the traditional implicature of the anglo-saxon genitive in this context by aiming for a literature not only *for* but also *by* children, in keeping with an

educational model whose goal is to facilitate the development of citizens who are actively participant authors of their collective and individual destinies rather than mere consumers.

## 2. IMAGINATION AND THE SYLLABUS

According to Halliday (Halliday 1975: 11-17) one of the seven functions that language performs for children learning their first language is the imaginative function, defined as the use of language to create a world of the imagination. This function, though not ignored, does tend to be relegated to a position of secondary supportive importance thanks to the preeminence in recent methodologies of what has been called the representational function or the use of language to communicate information. This hierarchization of the functions in accordance with the dominant model is reflected in educational guidelines such as the Spanish Education and Science Ministry's *Propuestas de Secuencia Lenguas Extranjeras (Primaria)* where in Proposal A specific mention of Halliday's functions is made (*M·E·C.* 1992: 14-15) as a preamble to a series of syllabus proposals which owe much to the findings of communicative language teaching, beginning from communicative situations such as 'What [children] (feel) like eating or drinking' (*M.E.C.* 1992: 116) and 'What [children] normally buy when shopping' (*M.E.C.* 1992: 118) and moving through the functions, linguistic exponents and vocabulary associated with each communicative situation. Similarly in Proposal C a more specifically thematic approach is again organized in terms of communicative functions leading to grammatical realizations.

These proposals demonstrate an aim to start out from situations which are close to students' experiences and tastes as a means of expanding students' horizons in a movement which Kevin Egan has recognized as symptomatic in children's education, thanks to the influence of Piaget, and characterized as follows: "Educational development proceeds [...] from the concrete to the abstract, from the simple to the complex, from the known to the unknown, from active manipulation to symbolic conceptualization." (Egan 1990: 6) Two points arise from Egan's affirmation. Firstly, while it is accepted that pupils' own experiences and tastes should influence the way in which they accede to a foreign language and culture, it is nevertheless debatable that the kind of functional and situational

input that children are often offered is in any important sense real, immediate or even feasibly imaginable to them, given that they might well be years away from ever communicating with native speakers in order to talk about their dietary preferences or do their shopping. Secondly, as Egan has argued, the overall impetus of the kind of educational development process he describes, of which the proposals we are examining can be understood as an example, is to overemphasize at too early a stage the logical thinking skills of children and underestimate the power and educational uses of their imagination (Egan 1990: 1-2)

## 3. CHILDREN'S PREDISPOSITION TO CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Egan argues persuasively that the very tools which allow children to appreciate stories from early childhood onward, such as an abstract notion of plot to organize and make meaningful the affective force of the story (Egan 1990: 9) are proof of their capacity to deal with abstract notions as well as concrete ones and with contents far-removed from their experience (for example, witches or extraterrestrials) as well as with the more local. Whereas the communicative, functional and situational syllabus aims to convince children that its contents are real and relevant to their lives even though this runs contrary to what their daily social experience tells them, we would argue that a syllabus based on input from children's literature would rather appeal to children's imagination and playfulness, motivating them with fictions which are probably far closer to their cognitive and affective reality than many textbook communicative syllabi, since all children bring with them to school their own experience of children's literature of some sort or other.

## 4. POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN TEFL

In the foreword to Andrew Wright's TEFL resource book *Storytelling With Children* Alan Maley makes the following statement about the relevance to TEFL of stories which we feel can be extrapolated to children's literature understood as verbal creativity and playfulness in general: "Clearly the power exerted by stories in the mother tongue has a similar potency in foreign language learning. They have a universal, archetypal appeal. Stories are comfortingly familiar even if they do not

understand every word. They allow for natural and enjoyable repetition of words and phrases. At the same time they offer opportunities for inventive variations through relating the stories to the learners' own lives and imaginations. They virtually solve the problem of motivation at a stroke. And they offer multiple possibilities for spin-off activities involving visual, tactile and dramatic elements." (Wright 1995: 3). And in the follow-up volume, *Creating Stories with Children*, Maley praises Wright for taking the next step on and not only drawing upon stories from 'out there' but also promoting "children's ability to create their own stories from 'in here'." (Wright 1997: 2)

These comments taken together are suggestive of the many reasons why children's literature has such enormous potential for the teaching of English as a foreign language, and we shall examine some of them in the following pages. First however attention must be drawn to what seems to us the most significant of these points, namely the way in which verbally creative input is seen not as an end in itself but as the catalyst for pupils' own creativity, from the visual, tactile and dramatic to the purely verbal. Such a posture reflects a spirit of imaginative empowerment akin to others such as those of Jean (1981), Zipes (1995) or Rodari (1979). Rodari, for example, proposes the use of children's literature as a springboard to young people's own creative production, itself the necessary precondition for their empowerment and society's renovation.

Another point which Maley mentions is that of motivation. Language acquisition is influenced by the motivation and the affective involvement of learners. Songs, stories and rhymes, which are part of everybody's experience, to a greater or lesser, more or less explicit extent can motivate children in a way that the prospect of communication with native speakers in a distant future might not. As Edie Garvie puts it: "All the world loves a story and wants to know how it ends. Before they know where they are they have learnt a lot of other things besides." (Garvie 1990: 25) The inherent entertainment value of children's literature can serve to lower Krashen's affective filter (Krashen 1982: 30-32) whilst rhymes and stories provide an authentic, structured and meaningful source of comprehensible English language input for acquisition, either in or out of a language classroom context. Because literature for children plays such a potentially important part in any culture, harnessing this potential in the context of foreign language teaching implies undertaking a more holistic

approach to the subject which aims not only at the development of language skills but also at more human, cognitive and affective aspects of children's experience, which again militates in favour of overcoming the affective filter which can stand in the way of effective acquisition.

Krashen and others (Dulay *et al* 1982: 22-26) have also suggested that a silent period at the beginning of a course (or a teaching unit or a lesson) is beneficial for students insofar as it allows them to assimilate without having to produce. Stories and rhymes which are easy to contextualize through visuals, mime and gesture and whose linguistic patterns are aimed at holding and structuring the attention of the audience are excellent input for such a silent stage, the entertainment value we have already mentioned contributing directly to the maintenance of attention. So much so that one story-based course for young children unconditionally embraces this philosophy and bravely proclaims that: "teachers should not expect children [...] to reproduce or repeat language that they hear." (Vale *et al* 1993: 6) In any case, what is clear is that children's literature offers an invaluable opportunity for providing students of all ages with the sort of authentic listening and reading input without which they will never be able to move on to productive skills themselves.

## 5. THE IDEAL AND THE REAL: THE POTENTIAL OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE ACTUAL EDUCATIONAL FRAMEWORK

One question of crucial importance to teachers pondering the possibility of using such an approach is that of how it could fit in with the curriculum, educational system and other parameters within which teachers work on a daily basis. Garvie sees a children's literature approach as constituting a "methodology for pulling everything else together" (Garvie 1990: 19) and indeed there are examples of coursebooks which support this possibility, including the one mentioned above by Vale *et al.* At the same time, given the unstable condition of any method, no sooner elaborated than it is superseded by another newer method, perhaps it is more advisable to be prudent and describe the use of children's literature as an approach that can either constitute the backbone of a foreign language teaching programme or else offer contributions within an overall structure born of some other approach. This is the argument defended by Ellis and Brewster in the introduction to their *Storytelling Handbook* (Ellis &

Brewster 1991) where they point out how the ideas on the use of storybooks that they present: "can be used to provide variety and extra language practice by supplementing and complementing another language course [... but ...] can also be used as short basic syllabuses in their own right." (*ibid*: 6). They then propose just such a syllabus for eight year olds in their first year of English based on Puffin storybooks such as *Meg and Mog* (Nicoll & Piénkowski 1972) or *Where's Spot?* (Hill 1980).

Clearly such a story-based syllabus or one based exclusively on children's literature of all kinds is not an option for all teachers. Many will feel pressurized by school heads, heads of department, inspectors or parents to stay within the guidelines set by the Ministry of Education and stick to a prescribed textbook with a view to achieving results. However, whilst recognizing that the constraints of the system and the material means of teachers might not permit or recommend all to take up such an approach as a radical alternative to the established syllabus, this is no reason not to defend children's literature's suitability to constitute the basis of an approach which can meet the requirements in terms of communicative, functional, lexical and structural contents that education authorities prescribe. It is our belief that by presenting evidence of the maximum potential for the use of children's literature we will also be demonstrating the possibility of its incorporation and importance in more secondary roles, such as are envisaged in the Ministry's *Propuestas ...,* as well.

## 6. MEDIUM OVER MESSAGE

In the field of applied linguistic theory the last century witnessed a certain progression in methods adhered to from synthetic to analytic approaches or from a concentration on the medium towards a concentration on the message. Whilst we undoubtedly agree with Eric Hawkins when he asserts the priority of making exchanges meaningful and the importance this entails as regards having some personal message to communicate in the later productive stages of a unit or class (Hawkins 1984: *x*-xi), we nevertheless would like to insist on the adequacy of certain forms of children's literature for teaching about the medium itself. Hasan has studied how nursery rhymes display an unusual incidence of patterning devices such as alliterations, rhymes and assonances and parallel structure (where

phrases are linked by the sharing of the same basic structure). For Hasan, nursery rhymes: "celebrate, as no other genre does, the potential of natural language to captivate the imagination purely by an exploitation of the linguistic form." (Hasan 1989: 21) This emphasis on the formal and semantic potentiality of language constitutes, as we have argued earlier, a kind of linguistic initiation for children in their mother tongue which we feel can also make an important contribution in the learning of a foreign language. As Cook has also argued, it is important to make the distinction between an adult use of language "conceived more as a way of doing things and making meaning" (Cook 1997: 228) and a child's use, in a world where practical decisions are largely taken for them by adults, "driven by sound rather than meaning" (*idem*). This distinction is worth bearing in mind when designing language teaching syllabi since clearly much of children's natural language is both playful and medium- rather than message-oriented, which reinforces what has been suggested above in terms of the idoneity of children's literature as a source of input to present new material to foreign language learners.

Further support for such a view is to be found in Hawkins' recommendations about the sort of language work at primary level which can best equip youngsters for learning a foreign language, including games such as the rhythm game or the sound pattern game which aim: "to develop the child's ability to focus attention on and derive information from auditory stimuli" (Hawkins 1984: 231). The important thing in the early stages is that children get used to the sounds, patterns and combinatory possibilities of the language, even if they do not understand every word. Research has shown that, in the context of the mother tongue, there are, in the words of Colin Harrison: "strong links between children's early knowledge of nursery rhymes [...] and their developing phonological skills [...] Since such skills are known to be related to children's success in learning to read this result suggests the hypothesis that acquaintance with nursery rhymes might also affect children's reading." (Harrison 1995: 20) If, as we believe, foreign language teaching is to be seen as part of a comprehensive language programme including also mother tongue and language awareness, each area informed and abetted by the others, and if it is accepted that secondary skills in L1 and primary skills in L2 are on the same level of difficulty, then it would follow that nursery rhymes have a fundamental role to play for young children in the foreign language classroom, offering not only immediate knowledge about the sounds of the target language but also

preparation for the cognitive hurdles presented by secondary linguistic skills. Carol Fox has stated in the context of mother tongue classrooms, teachers: "can never discover children's understanding of phonological regularities, never mind teach them, unless rhymes, songs, jokes, puns, verses, and role-play are allowed to *naturalise* those regularities so that they become part of the capital we can draw on in learning to be literate. There is all the difference in the world between doing phonic blending exercises, divorced from all natural uses of language, and discovering phonological patterns because they happen to be part of something hugely enjoyable like tongue-twisters or jokes." (Fox 1995: 138) If foreign language teachers fail to take on board such insights with their own beginner classes then foreign languages, far from offering pupils an expansion of their horizons, will rather continue to signify an entrenchment of obstacles for the great majority.

The possibility of incorporating techniques from the school of Total Physical Response suggests one way of making work on nursery rhymes more engaging and motivating for the students, at the same time as helping to reinforce the work on formal characteristics such as sound patterning and phonemic awareness which is being carried out. The follow ups to activities based on nursery rhymes are numerous and provide ample opportunity for pupils to exercise their own creativity skills as a result of the stimulus from the input. This need not be a matter of verbal production: in the same way as in their mother tongue teachers might ask children to carry out cross-curricular type activities from design or art in response to a poem, so in the foreign language classroom children could be encouraged to perform tasks like making puppets or mini-books based on a rhyme they have heard. This allows for all children to participate, not only the most linguistically gifted - as Edward De Bono has pointed out: "Young people are not always very good at expressing their ideas in words and it would be a pity if their ideas were to be restricted by insisting that they use words. ... Drawings ... are clear and relatively unambiguous. ... With a drawing the whole idea is visible at once and you can work at it with addition, alteration, modification, change, etc." (De Bono 1972: 12). Furthermore the transformation of ideas into artwork or other media is in itself an evaluative and interpretative act that reveals pupils' level of understanding as well as stimulating their creativity.

## 7. PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPIL CREATIVITY

It is our belief that from such beginnings children can move on to elementary creative wordplay themselves with the foreign language. The simple initial word games that Rodari envisages for children in their native tongue (Rodari 1979: 10-16) or the exercises in syllable recombinations that Freire describes as the first step to empowerment through literacy (Freire 1976: 114-122) have their counterpart in the foreign language classroom in games to do with finding all the words that begin with a given letter, solving anagrams, finding as many words as possible out of a given sequence of letters and eventually writing poems themselves. A similar process can be followed at a slightly later stage with stories. There is a steadily growing literature on the potential of stories in the TEFL classroom which suggests that this approach is the next logical step along a path initiated with TPR and with the Natural Approach - for example, both Gerngross & Puchta (1996) as well as McQuill & Tse (1998) cite the influence of TPR while the latter also make clear their debt to Krashen. For McQuill and Tse with the narrative approach: "[t]eachers no longer need to focus on theme-specific vocabulary, particular notions and functions, or specific tasks. Instead language input and class activities are driven exclusively by the telling of captivating, understandable stories." (McQuill & Tse 1998: 18) The language input can then be recycled and rehearsed in a natural way as different versions and related stories are told.

As part of rehearsal work with stories, children can be asked to order pictures or sentences relating to the different episodes either as recall, as prediction or as a mixture of both. Such work leads naturally on to the development of an awareness of story structure. Having been introduced to the narrative building blocks which contribute to the overall structure of stories, or what Rodari refers to as the meccano of fairy tales, students can move on to creating their own stories, from within themselves and their own imaginative worlds (see McNicholls 2000: 281-290 for an example of such sequencing). Such creative activity serves not only to improve their foreign language skills but also links up to what pupils will hopefully be doing in their mother tongue. As Carol Fox has argued, creating stories with children is a way of providing children with tools for learning how to learn (in Grainger 1997: 33) at the same time as it begins to redress the inbuilt imbalance in children's literature, understood as

exclusively *for* and never *by* children, by returning narrative control to them.

In this context special mention must be made of the potential of mini-books in the TEFL classroom. Wright (1997: 115-130) and Cancelas y Ouviña (Cancelas y Ouviña 1997: 36-42) provide useful tips about converting students' verbal creativity into book form while research conducted by Doctor Fernando Beltrán (University of Salamanca) in Ávila confirms reports from other sources (for example in Holmes & Moulton 1994: 14-16) of the beneficial effects of self-creating libraries in schools both in terms of supplementing scarce material resources and of promoting greater student participation in the educational process. For Holmes and Moulton this kind of initiative also allows teachers to communicate their confidence in the value of the their students' contributions: "In our project, students experienced the pride of authorship, for, by publishing their words, we demonstrated our belief in the merit of their thoughts." (Holmes & Moulton 1994: 16) Publicizing such work in this way, be it in the limited context of the classroom itself by letting classmates read each others' work, or in the wider context of the school or of a group of schools embarking on a joint project or even in the actual publication of students' work, is a way of boosting students' self-esteem and motivating them to learn more.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

By using children's literature in the ways we have described, it is thus hoped that speaking and writing skills can constitute an opportunity for students to find their own voice by manipulating the story or poem they have heard or read, rather than just being taught to receptively admire it as it stands. This involves implicit work on the mechanics of creative writing, where children can begin to develop an understanding of how literary texts work, by deconstructing and then reconstructing rhymes, poems and stories in different forms before moving on to producing creative written work themselves. Teachers in such an approach inhibit themselves at the appropriate moment by no longer insisting on the meaning of the source so much as encouraging the students to make meaning themselves, thus enabling student creativity to flourish. The aim is that students be able to achieve not only a communicative but also a creative competence

in the target language. This, in turn, will be reflected in their cognitive and affective growth as a whole, and in the unfolding story of our collective educational endeavour, bring them nearer, be it ever so fractionally, to the goal of competent participative citizenship in the global village, surely a happy ending worth striving for.

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