



Dialogic Reading in Infancy and Early Childhood Education: Setting the Stage for a Preliminary Analysis of Educational Materials in Specific EFL contexts

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Abstract

Dialogic Reading refers to a multi-faceted approach to reading picture books with young children that revolves around the selection of appropriate materials, “scaffolded adult-child interactions”, and carefully constructed feedback [12]. The diverse initial conditions for this approach to be implemented in an EFL context may require careful assessment, possibly resulting in adaptations to match the age and language skills of the relevant actors and target audience. Studies have already outlined the need for adjustments to traditional Dialogic Reading activities under certain conditions [7]. An ideal context for selected inquiries into Dialogic Reading has been provided by Hearing and Feeling English (and Other Languages) in Infancy and Early Childhood, an ongoing three-year action-research project funded by the Region Emilia-Romagna and the University of Bologna (Italy). The project is now in its second year, and its main aim is to extend free language education to a growing number of children (6-36 months) by bringing the sounds of English—and, to a lesser extent, other languages—into the daily routines of public and private nurseries by means of Dialogic Reading activities. Firstly, this analysis aims to pinpoint the variables involved in choosing picture books and crafting reading guides for Dialogic Reading experiences in English conducted by Italian nursery staff with little or no knowledge of the language and aimed at children whose receptive skills in English tend to be equally limited. To support effectual decisions, this paper will explore assessment criteria including age-specific constraints, local factors, issues to do with the native language and culture of the actors involved, and their personal, linguistic, and professional sets of skills, thus sketching one possible approach to adapting Dialogic Reading activities for an Early Years EFL environment [8]. Finally, further developments and research questions will be outlined to offer an initial contribution in shaping a comprehensive framework supporting the real-life application of EFL Dialogic Reading in Italian contexts.

Keywords: *Dialogic Reading, Early Years, EFL, action-research project*

1. Introduction

In educational settings, Dialogic Reading (DR) has been clearly linked to boosts in emergent literacy, generally defined as “the skills, knowledge and attitudes that are [...] developmental precursors to conventional forms of reading and writing [...] and the environments that support these developments” [9, p.849]. Thus, DR can aid language acquisition, and the environments where DR is applied deserve close attention; backgrounds involving specific variables and initial conditions may call for adaptations of traditional DR guidelines [see 1, 2, 3, 7, 8]. Working towards a reliable framework for assessing conditions and making informed decisions would require pinpointing one context and analysing two foundational issues for DR to take place: book selection and preparation.

To this purpose, we intend to investigate specific Early Years EFL environments within Hearing and Feeling English (and Other Languages) in Infancy and Early Childhood, an ongoing three-year action-research project funded by the Region Emilia-Romagna and the University of Bologna (Italy). The project is now in its second year, and its main aim is to extend free language education to a growing number of children (6-36 months) by bringing the sounds of English into the daily routines of public and private nurseries, supporting future language acquisition with DR activities. DR is implemented by Italian nursery staff with diverse fluency levels and aimed at children whose receptive skills in English tend to be rudimentary; FL reading activities are based on selected picturebooks and detailed reading guides, which offer practical suggestions for interactive, scaffolded reading, along with phrases and complete sentences for nursery staff to use. As Panza remarks, “a distribution of books accompanied by guides on how to read in a dialogic way is a virtuous path to improve [...] shared reading and educational capacity” [6, p.101, translated from Italian]. This line of action—in accordance with project objectives—brings the need for DR training and pre-while-post reading support to a whole new level [11].



2. Hearing and Feeling English: book selection

From an FLT perspective, the picturebooks chosen for DR within the project should be age-appropriate, authentic, and linguistically relevant. Age-appropriate books would contain language that supports the processes underlying early language acquisition; they should present comprehensible and compelling language with repetitions, concise and transparent utterances with nouns and activity verbs that unequivocally match the context [5]. Incidentally, this sort of simplicity may contribute to lower anxiety levels when less proficient caregivers are involved.

Authentic picturebooks written for English speakers are reliable sources of language in use “within the domain of children’s/childhood discourse”; phrases and expressions contained therein “realize speech acts” that open the doors to “a speech [...] and discourse community [...] [reflecting] the target language culture”. Adult readers can rely on high-quality input during DR and simultaneously develop “critical language [and intercultural] awareness”, experiencing the kind of language featured in real-life child-adult interactions—language which is not often explicitly taught [4, p.1-2]. In-service Italian nursery staff are not required to master foreign languages and receive training in FLT. With a view to decision-making within the project, developing caregivers’ skills through extensive training would be advantageous but only partially feasible.

From a traditional DR perspective, readers should opt for books containing “clear illustrations, relatively little text, and an engaging story” [12, p.7]. They should have “illustrations that could serve as a basis for introducing new vocabulary” and they should “support a story narrative through the illustrations alone”; these features elicit interactive reading styles and maximize children’s chances for active participation [11, p.682]. One of the books chosen for the project is *I touch* by Helen Oxenbury, containing six nouns, the subject pronoun *I*, and the verb *to touch*. Language and content are concise and transparent, inasmuch as the book introduces words that are amongst the first to be acquired at a very young age [5], supporting vocabulary growth and DR practices in which adults encourage children to notice the relationship between words and real objects. The book may lack explicit narrative, but it lends itself to verbalizing basic derivative narratives based on illustrations. The underlying logic is reiterative and consistent; research shows that adults with less advanced reading skills interact more when dealing with predictable texts [12].

3. Hearing and Feeling English: reading guides

Adults trained in DR strategies tackle videos, assignments, and role-playing materials [11, 12], but most of those adults seem to have a good command of the target language, just like the majority of the children involved [2]. The implications DR may have in an FL environment require further exploration, even more so when the research context does not allow for large-scale, regular contributions by proficient English speakers.

As far as caregivers’ training is concerned, Zevenbergen and Whitehurst mention six points [12], some of which we intend to discuss considering excerpts from the reading guide provided to nursery staff for the book *I touch* by Helen Oxenbury. We will concentrate on the reading materials relating to the first page, which shows a smiling baby lying face down on a colourful ball:

- “Ask *What* questions”, “Follow answers with questions”, “Repeat what the child says”, and “Help child as needed” [12, p.3-4]. To allow for less proficient caregivers and children to operate in their Zone of Proximal Development [8], the suggested approach must be linguistically progressive in terms of difficulty and sought-after reactions. The guide starts with basic reading suggestions such as *A ball. Look! Baby’s on the ball*, then moves on to *Can you touch the ball?* to elicit active participation, although still silent. Given the specific context, caregivers should refrain from asking *What* questions that require verbal production until later, once the children have developed the necessary confidence and are ready to utter the words—this is instrumental in avoiding common pitfalls, such as the tendency to identify comprehension objectives with production ones and to formally instruct children. Besides, if free to improvise, nursery staff with limited language proficiency may confirm and/or model incorrect/inaccurate language, or they may feel inadequate to the detriment of their motivation and self-efficacy. Motivation towards the project and the need to provide reliable linguistic input to children must be prioritized, along with repetition and reinforcement.

- “Praise and encourage” [12, p.4]. This can be done by reinforcing appropriate formulaic language, using expressions such as *Well done!*

- “Follow the child’s interests” and “Have fun” [12, p.4-5]. Our guide allows for a degree of flexibility and personalization because it offers three levels of suggested interactions to play with words and ideas and to allow nursery staff to expand upon their initial utterances when ready. Examples are: 1) *I touch a ball*. 2) *Baby’s on his tummy*. 3) *Baby’s rolling back and forth*.



The underlying spiral approach, which allows actors to feel more confident and empowered as they progress, contributes to keeping DR activities fun and engaging.

4. Conclusions

Researchers have been administering questionnaires concerning the perceived efficacy and feasibility of the suggested EFL DR activities within the project. Preliminary results seem to provide evidence for benefits to be gained by selecting authentic picture books with specific features, paying close attention to the processes underlying language acquisition in the early years, and producing tailor-made reading guides to maximize effectiveness and assist nursery staff in day-to-day practice, language improvement and professional development. The guides and selected adaptations of DR strategies seem to offer scaffolding for the actors involved, contributing to self-efficacy, and ensuring quality input in terms of FL, thus confirming the significance of variables such as initial objectives, actors involved, personal skills and local/cultural factors when modifying traditional DR. In addition, a significant number among nursery staff has informally reported engagement, motivation, and well-being among the children who have consistently taken part in the proposed activities. All in all, further analysis of the collected and incoming data is required, especially in terms of fidelity to the suggested approach; for example, we plan to investigate possible relations between the nature of project materials (books and reading guides, as presented in this paper) and reasons why some nursery staff have not fully complied with guidelines, since studies have shown that consistency and fidelity are among the variables that can heavily influence the outcomes of DR activities [12].

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