

STORYBOOK READING AS A STRATEGY TO PROMOTE VOCABULARY TO  
EFL EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNERS FROM A STATE KINDERGARTEN  
INSTITUTION.

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## **Abstract**

Amongst the several ways for young learners to acquire English vocabulary, storybook reading is one strategy to do so. It can arouse children's interest in listening to stories and promote the learning of English, mainly, its lexicon. This classroom project had as main goals to explore and check the impact of the implementation of storybook reading as an aid for young learners (preschoolers) to experience English vocabulary growth through the pictures in storybooks and be able to relate words to sounds and/or things in their immediate reality. Several storybooks were read to the children, and no more than five words were explained in each session. The results showed that the pictures help learners to understand the meaning of the main vocabulary of the storybook; additionally, illustrations contributed to the relation made by learners between the words with sounds and things of the reality. Also, teacher's interaction with the learners enhanced their motivation and interest in regards of the vocabulary learning process during the implementation.

## Resumen

Entre las diferentes formas disponibles para que los aprendices de primera infancia aprendan vocabulario de la lengua inglesa, la lectura de libros de cuentos ilustrados (Storybooks) en inglés es una de esas estrategias para hacerlo. Ésta puede despertar el interés de los niños con respecto a la escucha de historias y promover el aprendizaje del inglés, principalmente su vocabulario. Este proyecto de aula tuvo como principales objetivos explorar y comprobar el impacto de la implementación de libros de cuentos ilustrados como una ayuda para que los niños de edad preescolar experimenten la adquisición de vocabulario de la lengua inglesa a través del uso de las ilustraciones en los libros de cuentos y del mismo modo que éstos sean capaces de relacionar las palabras aprendidas con sonidos o cosas de su entorno inmediato. Varios libros de cuentos ilustrados fueron leídos a los niños explicándoles como máximo cinco palabras por sesión. Los resultados mostraron que las imágenes ayudaron a los niños a entender el vocabulario principal de los libros de cuentos ilustrados; adicionalmente, las imágenes contribuyeron a que los niños encontraran la relación entre las palabras y ciertos sonidos así como con su realidad inmediata. Del mismo modo, la interacción profesor-estudiantes aumentó el interés y la motivación de los niños con respecto al proceso de aprendizaje del vocabulario durante la implementación.

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## 1. Introduction

This document presents a teaching strategy known as storybook reading, which is used to promote vocabulary in preschoolers. According to Sénéchal & Cornell (1993) it is an effective and appealing strategy that has a positive effect on the young learners' vocabulary acquisition.

It is important to note that this paper explains the characteristics that storybook reading contain such as the ways to implement it, which include interactive and dialogic reading, in order to identify the features and benefits of each according to the population. Also, the vocabulary-fostering techniques (e.g. choosing of keywords, use of home language, etc.) that are related to the techniques for using the storybook appropriately and get the most benefit of its features. Likewise, the setting and factors involved in the storybook reading practices are presented to have an idea of beneficial physical arrangement, reading variations, among others within the reading practice. Finally, material considerations and recommendations are presented since they aid and contribute to the implementation and use of storybook reading.

This project also includes two related studies that worked as examples of success of this vocabulary teaching strategy.

The methodology of this project includes several aspects such as context, planning, design, assessment, among others, which lay a firm foundation for the implementation of the project.

Finally, the reflection stage revolves around three major aspects, which are professional growth, students' responses and linguistic outcomes.

## 2. Justification

Nowadays, English is considered the lingua franca that represents the bridge for communication of many people from different cultures, and it is also the language used for a vast variety of activities like business, science and education. As a result, it is presently necessary to promote English learning in nearly every part of the world. On the other hand, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2011) states that a foreign language is indispensable to promote a shared intercultural living in order to provide an understanding from different points of view. This view might have influenced the educational policies and standards about teaching and learning foreign languages implemented in several countries.

A result of the worldwide interest in the mastery of foreign languages is that, in Colombia, the Ministry of Education has considered English as a linchpin in the educational system and has proposed various projects for promoting English language learning, the latest being one named “*Colombia Very Well*”. This proposal aims at facilitating that Colombian students acquire English as a foreign language to better face the professional challenges the world is currently presenting.

However, according to a report based on the results of “*Las pruebas saber 11*” from 2013<sup>1</sup> more than 50% of eleventh-graders did not achieve even a basic level of proficiency in the English language (A1), and only 6% of them got the expected level (B1). Based on the foregoing figures, it is necessary to work harder on Colombian students’ English language development.

An opportunity to start working on this problem is to promote English learning in the early stages of education such as preschool. The Colombian Ministry of Education requires

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<sup>1</sup> The “Pruebas Saber 11” are a standardized test applied by the state to all students in the country before they finish 11th grade in order to measure the quality of education. They include an English test.

that English is included in the school pensums from primary education onwards. However, no attention is given to the preschool stage even though many children attend public educational institutions called Centros de Desarrollo Infantil (CDI). As evidence of the last point it should be noticed that although there are national standards of competence for English directed towards primary and secondary education, there are not such standards for the early childhood stage.

In this respect, we seem to be wasting a really productive educational period since, as Chomsky (1959) states it is in early childhood when learners are more cognitively willing to develop foundations of other languages because in that phase of life they acquire knowledge of different matters, namely, languages, more easily. Thus, English language foundations could be built in one of those phases of development such as preschool.

Storybook reading, a teaching strategy consisting of reading stories to children and presenting vocabulary through their illustrations, could be an excellent way to help young learners develop English language vocabulary from the input contained in the storybooks and the teacher's instruction and guidance.

This proposal of storybook reading is intended to start English language development in early childhood and measure its impact to work as a way in which English foundations could be established from early stages of education, namely, preschool with 4-5-year-old learners. Additionally, storybook reading is not only useful as a strategy to present English vocabulary to learners, but it is also helpful to develop pronunciation and listening skills.

Finally, as a result of the project learners will have some existing knowledge of the English language by the time they get into primary school and, in turn, will develop a better attitude and interest in relation to English language learning.

### **3. Objectives**

#### **3.1. Learning objectives**

- Develop vocabulary knowledge through illustrations found in storybooks.
- Recall the vocabulary practiced during storybook reading sessions.
- Retell a story based on storybook illustrations and teachers' questions.

#### **3.2. Teaching objectives**

- Design lessons including storybook reading to promote English vocabulary acquisition in early childhood learners.
- Apply teaching principles such as classroom management, sitting arrangement, and time management to develop storybook reading practices.
- Increase pre-service teachers' professional development and experience as teachers of early childhood population taking into account the implementation sessions, the observations and the reflections.

## **4. Conceptual framework**

This chapter will deal with the most relevant aspects of storybook reading in relation to the promotion of vocabulary in young learners,

The first part of this chapter will provide the definition of storybook reading and explain its two different ways of its implementation, which are interactive and dialogic. Even though both of them share the same vocabulary objectives, they differ in the way they are put into practice.

The second part will present some vocabulary-fostering techniques that help in the development of this strategy by assisting the implementer to obtain the most benefits of it.

The third part will describe the setting and other factors also conveyed in the implementation of this vocabulary teaching strategy.

Finally, the last part of the chapter will mention important characteristics in relation to material including both storybooks and complementary tools to arouse interest in learners.

### **4.1. Storybook reading: what is it and how can we implement it?**

Storybook reading is a strategy, which consists of reading storybooks to children in order for them to acquire foreign language vocabulary. Sénéchal & Cornell, (1993); and Robbins & Ehri, (1994) defend its usefulness for lexicon growth and for the development of children's conceptual knowledge, and understanding of meaning.

As with any strategy, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of the ways, dialogic and interactive, in which it can be implemented. The former dealing with the role of the teacher as the reader of the storybook and the latter focusing on the role of the student(s) as reader(s)

being assisted by the teacher's questions and illustrations from the storybooks. Trivette & Dunst (2007) propose the most important aspects of both, and they are presented below.

#### **4.1.1. Interactive reading**

It is a modality of storybook reading in which the teachers read a book without making emphasis for learners in single words from the story. While the teachers read, they ask easy questions to stimulate learners' thinking and guide them towards the meaning of the keywords of the text based on the pictures in the book. For example, according to the article "Interactive and Dialogic Reading in Preschool" (2007), whilst the teachers present the story to the learners, they can take advantage of the pictures to ask questions like "what's happening in these pictures? Do you think the man is running?" Also, Trivette & Dunst (2007) state that questioning during interactive reading aims at getting children engaged in the story before, during and after the book is read.

#### **4.1.2. Dialogic reading**

It is a second modality of storybook reading in which the young learners become the readers of the storybook. This means that the facilitators prompt learners to tell the story based on the illustrations from the book. In this case, the teachers become the listeners and audience, and at the same time they ask questions. Trivette & Dunst (2007) claim that throughout the reading session, the facilitator and the learner exchange roles for the facilitator to provide feedback and guidance in order to foster learners' motivation and learning.

Similarly, Whitehurst (2012) suggests two different procedures that are part of dialogic reading. One of them is PEER, which is the acronym of Prompt, Evaluate, Expand and Repeat. The other one is CROWD which stands for Completion, Recall, Open, W-questions and Distancing.

The first procedure has to do with a brief, but key interaction between the reader and the listeners, being its main goal to motivate them to participate actively during the storybook reading practice.

PEER is an acronym that stands for the following stages in the procedure:

Prompt: a stage in which the learner is encouraged to comment something related to the shared story. For example, “What does a cat say?”

Evaluate: a stage in which the teachers assess the young learners’ answers with the purpose of checking if it is related to the asked question. For instance, “Well done, a cat says meow-meow”, or on the contrary, “no, the cat does not say woof, the cat says meow”.

Expand: a stage to expand learners’ comments, that is to say, to motivate the children by giving positive feedback and adding some knowledge they already know. E.g. “Great, the cat says meow-meow, and the dog says woof-woof”.

Repeat: a stage in which learners are encouraged to repeat or do again the prompt, but with another keyword. I.e. “What does a chicken say?”

As shown above, this procedure gives a clear notion of how to sequence the storybook reading practice in a dialogic way to help the children understand the meaning of the words and keep them engaged.

CROWD is an array of prompts that are helpful to lead the young learners to the understanding of the proposed topic, and relate what is being learned with their own experience.

CROWD is an acronym that stands for the following stages in the procedure:

Completion: a stage in which the teachers ask learners to complete sentences according to the shared story. E.g. "This cat is black, and this cat is \_\_\_(white)"

Recall: a phase in which teachers check for understanding by asking. For example: “Is this cat black or white?”

Open: a stage where teachers ask the learners about what the reading and the pictures are about. I.e. “What is the cat doing in this picture?”

Wh- questions: A phase where the teachers make use of the wh- questions to expand learners’ understanding. Example: “Why is the cat saying meow?”

Distancing: A stage in which the teacher motivates learners to relate the story with things that happen in their reality. Ex. “Look at a cat! Do you have a cat at home?”

In short, when teachers want to use storybook reading to promote English language vocabulary growth on young learners, it is advisable to choose between a defined way to implement it either interactive or dialogic, taking into account that the first one is related to the way how teachers engage and involve the learners by means of asking questions and guiding them to understand the story and the meaning of the words through its illustrations, whereas the second one involves the children as the readers of the story with the teachers’ assistance. Nonetheless, to take advantage of the storybook reading practice, it is also suggested to be aware of some complementary key aspects which will be presented in the following lines.

#### **4.2. Vocabulary-fostering techniques for storybook reading implementation.**

Gillanders & Castro (2011) compiled some of the ways to achieve vocabulary gains proposed by several authors. For example, the use of gestures and children’s first language as well as the expansion of the contexts to use the keywords, among others.



The following techniques present several characteristics to assist the storybook reading practice environment and development, and can help the teacher approach children throughout the activity.

#### **4.2.1. Choosing of keywords (3-5 words)**

Collins (2005) proposes that for learners to get a clear idea of the story, they should be exposed to direct instruction of the words which are common or relevant to the story. This can be done by asking questions like “Who is...?” “What is s/he doing?”, pointing at pictures, showing objects, using facial expressions and allowing learners to say the words aloud as well as giving children a definition to the terms in words they can understand.

#### **4.2.2. Use of objects, pictures and gestures by children**

Gersten & Geva (2003) suggest that the active participation of children within the reading is key; for that reason, they may be asked by the reader to show illustrations or objects such as toys to the group when they are mentioned in the reading.

#### **4.2.3. Home language usage to help in the understanding and acquisition processes**

Lugo-Neris, Wood Jackson, & Goldstein (2010) highlight that it might be beneficial if the story is first read in the home language (L1), then on the following occasion read in English so that children get a brief idea of the story before they are inserted in the English language reading.

#### **4.2.4. Incorporation of relevant thematic units or books**

This refers to topics which are helpful to the young learners, so that the lexicon acquired from the stories can be used when they are inside the classroom, playing with friends, and even during familiar experiences.

#### **4.2.5. Make learners dramatize or retell the story after having heard it many times**

This refers to making learners retell the story in their own words either by using the illustrations of the storybook as aids or guiding questions asked by the facilitator.

#### **4.2.6. Expansion of contexts to use the vocabulary learned**

Provide children with examples and opportunities to utilize the novel vocabulary in different contexts and activities.

In like manner as Gersten & Geva (2003) and Collins (2005), the National Reading Panel (NRP) also pays special attention to the techniques that make a storybook reading practice workable. The NRP got underway a research in which they found several aspects that can be useful when implementing storybook reading to promote English vocabulary growth. The following are some of the findings of the research:

#### **4.2.7. Provide direct instruction of vocabulary words for a specific text**

Anderson and Nagy (1991) consider that “there are precise words children may need to know in order to comprehend particular lessons or subject matter” (p. 49). This means that there are keywords within a storybook that are necessary to be explained and known by the learners.

#### **4.2.8. Repetition and multiple exposures to vocabulary items are important**

Stahl (2005) warned about “*mere repetition or drill of the word*” making emphasis in the possibilities that learners should have to encounter the target words within different contexts. In other words, children should be provided with several opportunities to practice the set of words teachers want them to acquire, not only when the story is read.

#### **4.2.9. Vocabulary learning beyond definitional knowledge:**

Stahl & Kapinus (2001) suggest that efficacious vocabulary growth is fostered by the young learners’ active involvement in the process of learning which, in turn, leads to the word meaning and its functions in distinct situations.

#### **4.2.10. Vocabulary can be acquired through incidental learning**

Cunningham & Stanovich (1998) deem reading volume as a key element for permanent lexicon growth. In later research, Cunningham (2005) considers that discussion time is useful for lasting vocabulary knowledge. In other words, post-reading conversation about the story characters and facts allow learners to practice and use the keywords learned from the storybook.

Taking into consideration what is proposed above, it is important to highlight that vocabulary-fostering techniques can be useful to help children in their English vocabulary development when using storybook reading. That is, young learners acquire knowledge about words, stories, and other features by means of effective and continuous reading prompts (Pentimonti & Justice, 2010). Nevertheless, although techniques are key to the process, other factors related to the setting also intervene in the execution of this strategy, and that is why they are proposed and discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **4.3. Setting and other factors involved in storybook reading practices.**

In the use of storybook reading to exploit vocabulary benefits, there are factors concerning the immediate environment which are necessary to highlight and deal with. For instance, the surrounding environment (Classroom), reading styles, vocabulary focus and instruction may seem rather obvious; nonetheless, they should be considered to obtain the best outcomes out of this strategy.

Ezell & Justice (2005) propose five (5) different factors which intervene in the development of the storybook reading practice. They pay special attention to aspects like the while-reading involvement, eye-catching material, the reader and listeners layout in the classroom, among others. They are explained in the following lines.

#### **4.3.1. Physical arrangement**

The reader or facilitator should be sitting in order to make students feel active participants of the reading as well as to allow them to look at the pictures from the storybooks.

#### **4.3.2. Social involvement**

This refers to the fact of showing positive attitudes to children by means of smiles and winks so that they feel more comfortable in the activity. Ezell & Justice (2005) affirm that when this type of rewarding situations emerge, students become eager to take conversational turns, and that is something that not only favors language skills development, but also facilitates the creation of confidence bonds between the children and their teacher.

#### **4.3.3. Material selected**

*It is necessary to take into consideration the kind of book selected guided by the following enquiries: Is it interesting to children? Does it encourage students' attention? Does it have appealing illustrations? Is it short so as to keep students' interest?*

#### **4.3.4. Reading Styles**

In terms of reading styles it is important to keep in mind some features such as the variation of pitch and vocal characteristics while reading, in order to maintain students' attention and interest. Also, the volume of the voice may play an involving role in the reading because it provokes different sensations within students like suspense or drama.

#### **4.3.5. Conversation**

It involves allowing learners to ask and answer questions since it works well to enhance language and emergent literacy. That is to say, when using storybook reading, students should have active participation (e.g. answering questions, interacting, etc.) instead of a passive attitude; for instance, being quiet during the whole lesson.

Based on the five (5) storybook reading aspects presented above, it can be highlighted that it is not only the reading what matters, but also the way in which it is read, the layout of each participant of the activity as well as the confidence between the reader and the listeners. That is, these aspects can affect positively and, in turn, enhance the impact of this vocabulary teaching strategy.

Finally, it is important to note that besides the techniques and setting aspects and factors, material plays a role as important as the ones' above.

#### **4.4. Material for the implementation of storybook reading**

Material is a key matter to draw attention on since the book size, practice activities like making masks and drawings can turn an ordinary reading practice into a dynamic and entertaining activity in which children feel comfortable as well as included.

To begin with, the storybook is undoubtedly the most important tool in the storybook reading practices as it is the resource from which the lessons rely on. Hence, attention has to be given to the book characteristics like how colorful the book is and its size inasmuch as the bigger the book is, the bigger the illustrations it contains. Kerry & Mason (1994) claim that large format print texts allow pictures to be used for reading interactively since illustrations and story notions can be observed by the teacher and the children. On the other hand, Neslihan & Simsek (2014) state that the use of illustrated cards and puppets may intervene positively in the storybook reading practices as they can be utilized to bring variety to the lessons.

It can be then evidenced above that there is a great deal of importance on the storybook that is going to be read, but also on the variety of material that we can bring to the lessons or ask the learners to elaborate. Therefore, in storybook reading activities attention should be given to the storybook as well as to the learners' involvement as listeners and doers in the same degree.

Finally, it is important to highlight that the success of storybook reading in relation to English vocabulary development in children entirely relies on the way in which it is implemented, the techniques used, the factors considered, as well as on the material selected. All in all, each of the previous features determine whether the storybook reading strategy will work and provoke the expected beneficial results or, on the contrary, will not be effective.

## 5. Literature Review

Getting young learners to acquire vocabulary of the English language has always been a complex task. For that reason, teachers and researchers have realized of the need to use innovating and eye-catching strategies that allow the children to learn English language vocabulary. Amongst all the ways to do so, storybook reading is a pedagogical strategy which has been given a lot of importance and has aroused a large amount of interest. According to S  n  chal & Cornell (1993) storybook reading is beneficial for vocabulary growth because by reading stories to young learners, they are encouraged to learn novel words, making use of the meaningful pictures found in them. Based on this notion, several studies have been done to prove its appropriateness and effectiveness in early childhood population; for instance, Collins (2005) conducted a qualitative research in which the effects of storybook reading in an English as a Second Language<sup>2</sup> environment were analyzed as well as the use of rich explanations on words for lexicon development. In the same fashion, Modh (2014) carried out a qualitative research on the importance of storybook reading to prompt children to recognize and incorporate new words to their repertoire by making use of the pictures in storybooks, and consequently measure the impact that the illustrations had on children's vocabulary acquisition.

Collins (2005) conducted a qualitative research with the purpose of identifying the effects of storybook reading in second language learners of English regarding vocabulary gains. This study was based on the following research questions: (1) *“Are rich explanations helpful to ESL preschoolers' acquisition of sophisticated vocabulary from storybooks?”* (2) *“Does initial L2 vocabulary level contribute to children's target vocabulary acquisition?”*

As for the context and population, this study involved seventy (70) children who were native Portuguese speakers, whose ages ranged between 4 and 5 years old. Besides, they

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<sup>2</sup> ESL

belonged to a program of early childhood education. The data collection methods used in this study were the following; firstly, all the participants did a pre-test in their Portuguese receptive lexicon and in their English receptive and expressive vocabulary repertoire in order for the researcher to be aware of the subjects' vocabulary knowledge both in Portuguese and in English. Afterwards, the participants were either put in an experimental or control group depending on their age, gender and English receptive test results. Besides the pre-tests previously mentioned, post-tests were implemented after the storybook reading activities. In relation to the procedure, the participants belonging to the experimental group were exposed to two stories which were read three times per session throughout three weeks. The implementers of the storybook reading exercise in this group provided the children with rich explanations that involved illustrations, brief definitions, synonyms and gestures (if applicable), as well as other contexts to present the target lexicon. Similarly, the control group received the same amount of reading, but explicit explanations on the words were not given.

When it comes to the findings obtained from the study presented above, it was found that rich explanations were useful inasmuch as the experimental group participants had more gains in vocabulary acquisition in comparison with the ones in the control group. Therefore, direct explanation of the target words is helpful to increase learners' lexicon no matter how limited their second language knowledge is. Likewise, the researchers realized that children with better results in the pre-tests regarding the receptive level acquired more vocabulary than those with lower results. To sum up, based on the results, it can be stated that to increase the gains and benefits of storybook reading, it is advisable to provide the participants of the story with clear and rich explanations of the relevant words of the story in an effort to make the story as comprehensible and vocabulary-enriching as possible.



In like manner, a qualitative study conducted in the city of Selangor, Malaysia by Modh (2014) shared several affinities with the work presented above since it was done to check the suitability of storybook reading to develop English vocabulary in young learners. The main objective of this research was to analyze the importance of pictures in storybook reading activities for vocabulary gains within young learners. Hence, the author's research question was guided to know how useful the pictures in the storybook were for children to deal with unknown words. As for the study itself, unlike Collins' research which included seventy subjects, Modh's study only involved 4 participants<sup>3</sup> between 5 and 6 years old, who were young foreign language learners of English from a kindergarten in Malaysia. Different from Collins' study in which pre-tests and post-tests were used, the data collection methods in Modh's work were interviews and observations. In contrast to the procedure in Collins' study, the researcher in this one made use of the illustrations from the storybooks to present new words. Furthermore, when the storybook reading practice was finished, the researcher did a vocabulary recognition activity in which he asked the participants to recall certain words. Moreover, the implementer repeated three times some specific words from the storybook without explaining them, in order to elicit their meaning from the learners. Thereupon, in case the participants were not able to identify the meaning of the words, they received either an explanation by referring to a picture in the book or an example different from the one found in the story which happened to be alike to Collins' techniques to present novel words.

In relation to the results, some issues were found. Firstly, sometimes there was need to use unknown words in complete sentences, which was a technique also used by Collins in her study, in order for children to be able to understand their meaning because, in some cases, the listeners of the story were not capable of identifying the meaning of the words if they were presented isolated. Secondly, it was found that the use of images from the book is important

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<sup>3</sup> Two boys and two girls.

to aid learners to recognize the message of the story and acquire the new range of repertoire. Also, it is necessary to keep in mind the context in which words are found since during the conduction of this study, the participants did not differentiate the meaning of some words due to the variation of scenario.

Considering implications, children should be encouraged and prompted by the teacher or reader to guess what happens next in the story as a way to engage them in it. Furthermore, the findings unveiled that there are words which might be so ambiguous for children that they may mistake them depending on the context. Hence, it is strongly recommended that the words have clear meanings in the story when they are presented to the learners; moreover, the illustrations can be used to represent the meaning of certain words, especially, nouns. Lastly, this study clearly exemplifies storybook reading as a strategy to teach vocabulary of the English language taking into consideration the importance of the illustrations to allow the learners to recognize the meaning of certain words.

To conclude, it should be highlighted that these studies reveal some key aspects of the storybook reading strategy and its benefits for young learners in their English vocabulary acquisition. Likewise, these research works stress the importance that rich explanations<sup>4</sup> and the usage of illustrations from the books have since they allow the storyline to be followed as well as to develop children's vocabulary. Additionally, the strengths of these studies are in relation to the techniques used to explain the meaning of the words and how necessary they are when reading a storybook. In short, these research works have several similarities with the work we want to do since they aimed to analyze the effects of storybook reading on young learners' English vocabulary acquisition. Although they were conducted in different contexts, this strategy can also be enriching in the Colombian context since the ages of the learners are similar and alike techniques to present and reinforce vocabulary gains will be

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<sup>4</sup> e.g. using gestures, providing synonyms, etc.

used. Thus, we consider that the two research works presented above are useful to our proposal taking into consideration that they paid special attention to the most relevant aspects of storybook reading, which are the use of illustrations and rich explanations, to make English vocabulary accessible to the learners.

## 6. Methodology

The program of Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa, from Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira (UTP) participates as a member of the Circulo Virtuoso, an initiative that links public and private institutions into providing better opportunities for underprivileged children that attend local centers for children development (Centros de Desarrollo Infantil, also known as CDI).

Within this initiative, it was devised a project aimed at helping early childhood<sup>5</sup> population from selected CDIs develop English vocabulary foundations. The project involved conducting a research work focused on the teaching of the English language vocabulary. As part of such project, storybook reading was implemented by two pre-service teachers to determine its contribution to English vocabulary growth in early childhood population.

### 6.1. Context

To begin with, the Centros de Desarrollo Infantil or CDIs are regulated and standardized by the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) and were founded by the initiative “*De Cero a siempre*” proposed by the Colombian government in 2012.

The classroom project described in this paper was implemented in a Centro de Desarrollo Infantil (CDI) located in Pereira, Risaralda. It was a public establishment whose main objective was to assist children in their integral development throughout early ages, helping them to develop motor skills, social involvement, acceptance of others, healthy hygiene and eating habits, among others.

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<sup>5</sup> “*The years from conception through birth to eight years of age are critical to the complete and healthy cognitive, emotional and physical growth of children*”. UNICEF (n.d).

This institution was a two-story building, which had around 7 rooms where children attended classes, a library known as “*Bebeteca*”, a game field with a garden, a kitchen and a big dining room located on the ground floor.

Within this institution, there were several actors who contributed to achieve its goals: there were a total of 9 people who cared for the children, both teachers and caregivers (some of them with professional studies) accompanied by pedagogical assistants who helped in the classrooms, the principal of the institution, in charge of the management of the establishment, and a psychologist.

Finally, this early childhood establishment had several agreements with both public and private organizations to assist children in different aspects such as health, cognition and physical development.

## **6.2. Participants**

This classroom project was conducted with kindergarteners who had not received any input of the English language previously. Also, it included 2 pre-service teachers that belonged to the English teaching program from La Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira. In the following paragraphs both categories of participants are presented in detail.

To start with, the young learners who participated in this classroom project attended a state kindergarten institution (CDI) from low socioeconomic status. They were 32 children, 17 girls and 15 boys, whose ages ranged between 4 and 5 years old. According to the cognitive stages of development proposed by Piaget in 1936 they were in the “*pre-operational stage*”<sup>6</sup>, in which children have not developed “*logical thought*”; however, they have a language increase (Piaget cited by Wood, Smith, Grossniklaus, 2001),.

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<sup>6</sup> This stage goes from 2 to 7 years of age.

It is imperative to highlight that the young learners were illiterate, this means that they neither had the ability to read nor to write.

In the second place, the pre-service teachers who led this classroom project were two eighth semester students from the program of Licenciatura en Lengua Inglesa from Universidad Tecnológica de Pereira.

During the implementation each pre-service teacher had a specific role: one teacher was the implementer of the storybook reading lessons, whereas the other observed and analyzed his colleague's performance as well as learners' reactions and vocabulary recognition.

Likewise, it is important to mention that only one teacher planned and designed the vocabulary instruction sessions that were guided two hours per week; nevertheless, the two pre-service teachers were the designers of the lessons in which storybook reading was applied.

### **6.3. Planning**

The planning of this classroom project started by taking into consideration that the kindergarteners would be exposed to 2 hours for the teaching of English vocabulary mostly and 1 hour for storybook reading implementation; nevertheless, the vocabulary taught in those 2 hours was not the same as the vocabulary from storybooks, in order not to affect in any way the results of the strategy.

Nine storybooks were chosen taking into account that they could be adapted to the learners' needs and interests, and being careful with how long they were and how many pictures they included.

Additionally, the planning included the materials used the expected vocabulary and amount of words, the anticipated problems (e.g. disruptive behavior) and their possible solutions (e.g. concentration techniques) in relation to each session.

In overall, ten storybook reading sessions were implemented, and they were divided into nine storybook reading lessons and one assessment session, which involved the children's recognition of the vocabulary taught.

#### **6.4. Design**

The lesson plans for this classroom project were based on the model ESA7 (Harmer, 1998) which presents an easy-to-follow sequence to implement lessons by going through three defined phases, which are introducing the topic, studying it, and practicing it. Under those circumstances, the classes included an engaging part that involved such activities as playing songs, showing pictures or asking questions related to the topic of the storybook to be read. Then, there was a study stage in which the expected vocabulary was taught by means of the reading of the storybook; moreover, this phase also included the use of questions by the teacher in order to encourage children to predict what could happen next in the story. Lastly, the activate stage concerned with eliciting from learners the vocabulary taught during the previous phase; this was done through asking questions, showing images and requesting artifacts in relation to the storybook itself.

Finally, it is necessary to note that interactive reading was mostly used throughout the whole implementation as the teacher was the reader of the story and the one who asked

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<sup>7</sup> ESA is the acronym that stands for Engage, Study, and Activate.

questions in order to involve the learners in it; however, some sessions had a dialogic reading component since the children were asked to retell the story being assisted by the teacher's questions and the pictures from the storybooks.

### **6.5. Assessment**

This classroom project employed a continuous assessment, what means that “the student is assessed on not just one performance, but on many performances” (Baxter, 1997, p.94). Also, the assessment was grupal and informal since it was not intended to provide a grade for the students. Its only purpose was to provide information to the pre-service teachers about the success of storybook reading in order to replan when necessary.

The mentioned type of assessment was applied by asking purposeful questions to foster learners' engagement and predictions in relation to the story, checking learners' understanding of the vocabulary, among others. That is, questions worked as an assessment tool since they helped to determine if the children understood the sequence of the story and if they related the vocabulary presented to the illustrations.

At the end of the implementation, there was a final assessment, which consisted of showing pictures and playing sounds<sup>8</sup> of all the vocabulary taught to the children throughout the implementation of this strategy, so as to realize the learners' progress.

### **6.6. Resources**

In the execution of this classroom project, the pre-service teachers used physical storybooks in the first 3 sessions of the implementation. Those books had little text and

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<sup>8</sup> The sounds were played when they were applicable.



several images; also, they were colorful and had a medium size except for the third one, which was small. However, due to the lack of appropriate material available for the sessions, it was necessary to make use of PowerPoint presentations using adapted storybooks from PDF formats found on the web. Such storybooks were colorful and full of images.

Moreover, a 32-inch television and a laptop were used to present the storybooks in the new format; besides, the use of the laptop fostered the presentation of videos that were mostly shown in the engaging part. Finally, printed flashcards were also utilized during some sessions in the activate stage.

## **7. Reflection stage**

Fade (2005) defines reflection as a process that “involves describing, analyzing and evaluating our thoughts, assumptions, beliefs, theory base and actions” (p.4). In other words, reflecting falls upon questioning what we do to identify if it really works or not and what needs improvement. For that reason, this reflection revolved around three major items which were professional growth, students’ responses and learning outcomes.

The first element was based on the teacher’s notes, conclusions of lesson plans and the observer’s comments. The professional growth was mainly focused on classroom management and layout, material design, and lesson planning, among others.

The second aspect, students’ responses, intended to analyze how learners reacted towards the sessions, how involved they were in the identification of vocabulary within the story, and explore if the stories were useful to develop English vocabulary in the learners. Students’ responses were identified through observations and registered in written notes.

The third aspect, learning outcomes, was assessed taking into account informal observations, learners’ vocabulary recognition and artifacts (e.g. masks and drawings).

### **7.1. Professional growth**

The professional growth was analyzed from the following perspectives:

#### **7.1.1. Classroom management**

Throughout this implementation, classroom management was an important feature to focus on. It involved two important aspects: Ground Rules for the class and Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT).

In relation with the first component, Ground Rules, there was one specific ground rule established by the pre-service teacher, and it had to do with asking learners to keep silent

during the reading of the stories; however, participation was encouraged if it was related to the story. In case disruptive behavior was evident in the classroom, the pre-service teacher stopped reading the storybook and used the technique of clapping twice to regain the learners' attention. Likewise, the pre-service teacher organized the classroom by placing the learners in a kind of horseshoe shape with a line in the middle, due to the limited space of the *bebeteca*,<sup>9</sup> so that all the learners had a clear view of the storybook to be read and, at the same time, for the teacher to monitor learners' participation and behavior.

Additionally, it was planned in the lessons to allot students as much talking time as possible during the sessions, encouraging their participation through interactive reading. This involved preparing and asking questions to maintain students' attention and engagement. This strategy was successful and it was noticed in the observations that Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Students Talking Time (STT) were almost equivalent. The pre-service teacher read the storybook and asked questions, and the learners answered those questions and commented in relation to the story.

It has to be mentioned that TTT and STT involved a high amount of Spanish<sup>10</sup> in comparison with English<sup>11</sup>. Nonetheless, STT became disruptive behavior in some cases and it was mostly identified in the learners who were sat at the back of the classroom. This could be due to their distance to the storybook; yet, as stated above, it was amended as soon as possible.

Finally, there was no need to use grouping techniques in the storybook reading sessions since the organization of the sessions demanded to have a whole group where learners acted

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<sup>9</sup> The Bebeteca is the library of the institution.

<sup>10</sup> Around 65% of the lesson interactions were in Spanish

<sup>11</sup> Approximately, 35% of the lessons interactions were in English.

as listeners and participants giving their own comments,<sup>12</sup> predicting or answering the questions the pre-service teacher asked them, and repeating<sup>13</sup> some key vocabulary from the storybook.

### **7.1.2. Lesson planning**

Each lesson plan included several items such as objectives, anticipated problems and their possible solutions, and the procedure to be followed during the implementation.

In the first place, the objectives of each session were directed toward the acquisition of no more than five words from the storybook, which Collins (2005) considers an appropriate amount for young learners. In the second place, the anticipated problems had to do with unexpected issues that might happen during the sessions in terms of classroom management and availability of resources such as the TV, the computer or the room; hence, the pre-service teacher applied some solutions like reserving the Bebeteca and the resources four days before the session was implemented and confirming said reservation one day before the lesson. Finally, concerning the procedures, the lesson planning was designed based on the Engage, Study and Activate sequence (ESA, Harmer, 1998). Every stage had its own purpose; for instance, the engage part was focused on the introduction of the topic through the use of questions, pictures, sounds, etc. The Study part was centered on reading the storybook, and the Activate part involved strategies to check learners' understanding of the vocabulary. All the lesson plans were sequential in terms of vocabulary and topics and had clear aims.

It has to be highlighted that some aspects were neither included in the lesson plans nor in the project itself. For instance, the standards for the learning of the English language were not considered because in such standards pre-school education is not taken into consideration.

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<sup>12</sup> Those comments were in Spanish.

<sup>13</sup> The repetition of the keywords was in English.

### **7.1.3. Material design**

In the first three sessions of the implementation, the storybooks used were in printed format, and flashcards were also utilized to assist the learning and practice of the vocabulary. According to Gersten & Geva (2003), the use of flashcards within the story reading may foster learning. Nevertheless, the difficulty for finding printed materials, adequate for our storybook reading strategy, motivated us to search for other alternatives such as the use of storybooks in PDF<sup>14</sup>, which were adapted to Powerpoint presentations to present them in the sessions. Consequently, the implementation started to involve technological digital equipment such as a TV and a computer in order to present and read the story, show videos, play sounds, etc.

The flashcards, both digital (slides from PPT presentations) and physical, were recycled if a storybook was related to the one to be read in the next session; also, images were re-used when possible in order to take advantage of the children's visual memory to consolidate learning of previous vocabulary.

It is important to realize that the students' learning styles were considered. In the first place, in order to cater for the needs of visual learners, there were several images in the storybooks that helped to follow the storyline; in the second place, for auditory learners, before reading the storybook, the pre-service teacher played or sang a song related to the vocabulary or the story; also, in order to contextualize the learners, he played some sounds related to elements present in the storybook, like the different noises from means of transportation, the sounds made by different animals. Also, during the reading of the storybook, the pre-service teacher used voice dramatization to emphasize the different events, scenarios, feelings, etc.

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<sup>14</sup> PDF stands for Portable Digital Format.

Finally, with attention to kinesthetic learners in mind, the pre-service teacher proposed some activities at the beginning of the sessions that involved moving while they sang songs similar to “*if you’re happy, happy...*” which allowed to refresh learned vocabulary and motivate students.

#### **7.1.4. Strengths developed by the pre-service teachers**

During the implementation of this project, both the implementer and the observer learned to deal with many factors that were useful for them to grow as professionals. To start with, they learned to be more disciplined and resourceful since they needed to design the lesson plans considering the context, the appropriate content<sup>15</sup> and material<sup>16</sup>, as well as the teaching stages to follow. Similarly, we became more patient as the project was implemented with children and they wanted to have activities that involved moving, and that issue made it difficult to deal with classroom management in some cases; however, this disruptive factor did not affect the implementation of the project.

In addition, the implementer became dynamic and creative throughout the implementation in order to meet and understand the learners’ interests and needs in terms of pedagogical activities; for example, he realized that the learners enjoyed singing, watching videos, listening to stories using voice variation; consequently, these elements were considered and implemented almost in all the sessions. This strategy is supported by Ezell & Justice (2005), who claim that reading styles such as the variation of pitch, volume of the voice and vocal characteristics while reading foster learners’ curiosity and interest.

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<sup>15</sup> The content is the vocabulary from the storybook.

<sup>16</sup> Most of the material used was storybooks and flashcards.

### **7.1.5. Learning strategies**

Different learning strategies were included in the sessions. For example, memory strategies were used when learners were encouraged to associate images with meanings. We also implemented cognitive strategies like summarizing or retelling the story at the end of the class. It is necessary to highlight that other aspects such as prediction and guessing were fostered in the sessions, prompting learners to imagine what the story could be about. Such predictions were expressed by the learners in Spanish.

It was found that in the sessions conducted in the *bebeteca*, classroom management became easier. We discovered that learners had a special respect for the place and even considered it a magical site, since the books lived there and it was used for listening to stories read by the teachers. They knew they went there to listen and had to be silent. The observation skill of the pre-service teachers in relation with students' behavior allowed them take advantage of this discovery, and they programmed the reading sessions in the place as often as possible.

It is also important to mention material design as a developed strength, given the fact that when the sessions started to be done in a different setting with technological aids, more resources like videos, images and songs needed to be added to the sessions, and that made them more dynamic and engaging for the learners. Likewise, storybooks adapted to PowerPoint presentations resulted in more interest in learners since even though they emerged as the solution to a problem, it allowed to use larger images and include better effects.

### **7.2. Students' responses**

The students' responses were reported considering the following aspects.

### **Learners' reactions towards the implementation of the classes**

At the beginning, the classes seemed to be a new world for the learners to explore. Even though they knew how to say some numbers in English, the reading of stories in a different language was a new experience for them. However, they always showed themselves interested in the stories and were eager to participate every time they were invited to. Moreover, they even asked the teacher “*¿Teacher, cuándo vamos a ir a la bebeteca?*”, what demonstrated their liking and interest in the activities carried out there. The learners tended to use English every time the pre-service teacher entered the classroom by saying “*hello*” and “*goodbye*” at the beginning and at the end of the sessions respectively. This was also evidenced when learners expressed their desire to listen to the songs in English by saying things to the pre-service teacher as “*Teacher, ponga la canción de los numbers*” among others<sup>17</sup>.

### **Learning of the language (English)**

Taking into account that this strategy was implemented with preschoolers, the learning of the English language was limited to lexicon acquisition. However, learners' acquisition of vocabulary was a positive result made possible by the learners' constant participation as well as the continuous exposure to the language in the storybook reading sessions. For instance, the teacher usually asked learners in English and Spanish “*What do you think that is going to happen? - ¿Qué creen que pasará?*” And learners responded “*El boy va a buscar la gorra*”<sup>18</sup>. Based on that, the learners responded positively by using the vocabulary learned in their sentences in Spanish, which, in turn, showed their progress in the language and the acquisition of the vocabulary.

### **Learners' participation, engagement and interest in the classes**

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<sup>17</sup> e.g. “If you're happy, happy”, etc.

<sup>18</sup> Appendix 2.



Learners were always participative and showed interest in the stories since the pre-service teacher encouraged them to answer questions, sing songs and repeat the vocabulary that was studied. The previous is in agreement with the ideas of Stahl & Kapinus' (2001), who claim that vocabulary growth is fostered by the young learners' active involvement in the process of learning. Hence, lesson plans were designed with activities to promote learners' continuous participation; for instance, the learners were allowed to participate by repeating, commenting, answering questions or giving opinions on the storybook being read. In this aspect, we followed Ezell & Justice's (2005) suggestions in relation to the power of questions during readings for promoting conversation and enhancing language and emergent literacy.

It is important to mention that even though sometimes disruptive behavior emerged, learners showed themselves interested in being involved in the lessons, and this was also provoked by what Ezell & Justice (2005) define as social involvement, which refers to the positive manners the teacher demonstrate to children such as smiles and winks so that they feel more comfortable to participate in the activity.

### **Affective factors**

It was noted throughout the sessions, that most learners felt motivation towards participating and saying what they thought in regards to the storybooks and they even got angry if they were not listened to or chosen for a specific question. Most learners were extroverted and risk-taking, that is, they took chances and dared to pronounce and say some words in English like "*profe, usted tiene una camiseta blue, como el monster*".

### **Challenges**

It was noticed in some sessions that learners' responses towards words that had a complex pronunciation (e.g. turtle) were not appropriate due to the difficulty they had to pronounce some phonemes they were not used to. However, it was solved through the focus

on one and two-syllable words without complex pronunciation like cap, boy, monster, etc. and constant pronunciation of three-syllable words.

Another situation that was amended was that learners did not respond eagerly to stories in small format print since they were not able to see the pictures in detail, and that made them feel bored. Kerr & Mason (1994) explain that large format print texts allow pictures to be used for interactive reading since illustrations can be observed in detail by the teacher and the children. For that reason, small format print storybooks were discarded, and given the scarcity of large format print books in English, we started to use PDF storybooks adapted to PowerPoint presentations, which became a key feature in the implementation of storybook reading. In them, learners could see all the details of the pictures and follow the story more easily.

Students' behaviour and self-control were among the most challenging aspects because the participants were children from 4 to 5 years old, and they were more interested in dynamic activities, which made it difficult in some cases to get them engaged when the implementer read the storybook<sup>19</sup>. The strategy to solve this problem was to find some concentration activities that were used to make learners concentrate in the session again.

Finally, getting the children to make the connection between the learnt vocabulary and the real context<sup>20</sup> was also challenging, what made necessary the use of realia and flashcards to contextualize the keywords learned from the storybook. This has a close relation to what Stahl (2005) warned teachers about: "*mere repetition or drill of the word*", this means, learners should be provided with opportunities to encounter the keywords within different contexts and situations.

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<sup>19</sup> This happened in the first three sessions.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. the word "tree" with an actual tree.

### **7.3. Linguistic outcomes**

The linguistic outcomes were assessed in relation with the planned learning objectives defined for each lesson.

It was observed that the children acquired most of the vocabulary planned for the project. In each session, the children easily learned between 3 and 5 important words from the story, which is the appropriate amount vocabulary recommended by Collins (2005), and supported by Anderson & Nagy (1991), who claim that “there are precise words children may need to know in order to comprehend particular lessons or subject matter.” (p.49). Besides, those words were always non-abstract nouns so the pre-service teacher could use a graphic representation to aid in their understanding.

The use of the storybooks with children showed to be a useful tool for these learners to develop vocabulary, as their images were appealing to them, who demonstrated to be entertained and engaged in the lessons.

During the sessions it was observed that most of the time the learners participated and wanted to use the keywords although they said them in Spanish at times. However, when the pre-service teacher replied “*no, así no le decimos*”, they (were able to) express(ed) the word in English.

An aspect of particular difficulty was mispronunciation, especially of three syllable words. Wrong pronunciation was amended in situ and reinforced by the pre-service teacher, through drilling and extra-practice to make pronunciation easier for them .

As a consequence of this strategy, in the activate stage, the children were able to identify and utter<sup>21</sup> most keywords practiced in the story even though sometimes the pre-service teacher had to assist them with pronunciation of the first phoneme of some words.

#### **How were students’ performance and achievements assessed in the classroom?**

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<sup>21</sup> Assisted by pictures or elicitation.

Learners' performance was not assessed individually but in group. This assessment was informal (through observation only) and took place in every class, before, during and after the reading of storybook.

In the first place, at the beginning of each lesson, the pre-service teacher made a review of vocabulary by eliciting previous knowledge and making learners recall the topic studied in the previous session; this exercise was done by asking easy and comprehensible questions in both languages, first in English and then in Spanish.

In the second place, at the moment of the reading practice, the pre-service teacher assessed learners by pointing at the pictures and asking them to say the keywords. Moreover, this assessment was utilized to help learners incorporate and practice the vocabulary provided by the storybook.

Finally, at the end of the lessons, learners were assessed by completing some activities such as relating the vocabulary learned to the images presented by the pre-service teacher; for that reason, the lesson included such exercises as guessing the words before the flashcards were completely shown, playing sounds for learners to identify what they were, making drawings, among others.

Equally important, learners' achievements in terms of vocabulary were observed through a final group informal assessment that was carried out at the end of the implementation, and in which there was use of images taken from the storybooks as well as from reality, since according to Modh (2014), the use of these visual representations is key to aid learners to get the message of the story and acquire the new vocabulary.

In the final group informal assessment, it was observed that learners were able to identify most of the vocabulary presented throughout the storybook reading sessions even though some lexicon had been introduced to them in the first sessions. Moreover, such lexicon was not practiced by the learners in other situations or contexts, but only in the

storybook reading sessions. However, difficulties were evident with some specific words. For example, the color “*Orange*” and the animal “*Seal*” were difficult for the children to remember; and when they saw the animal “*Turtle*” they said it, but in Spanish.

## 8. Conclusions

This document presents the results of a teaching strategy called Storybook reading for the development of English vocabulary with young learners in a public educational institution.

Our experience and reflections about the process as well as the literature consulted for the design and implementation of this strategy support its usefulness for such a purpose.

It was evidenced throughout the implementation that the learners positive responses in terms of recognition and use of vocabulary endorse the use of storybook reading for learners to acquire English lexicon since the images from the storybooks and learners' involvement in the reading of the stories assist in this process. Likewise, it was evident that the opportunities to participate provided by the teacher helped in the acquisition and learners' involvement in the sessions inasmuch as they felt eager to share their ideas during the reading of the storybooks.

The experience helped us to grow significantly as teachers since it provided a great opportunity for having to hone our skill for teaching in a very particular context with young learners from 3 to 5 years of age, a very demanding population who requires of completely different strategies and personal traits in comparison with teenagers and adults. The challenges encountered in this project forced us to become more resourceful, patient and organized than we were before and also brought about a deeper understanding of the needs, rewards and challenges of the teaching profession.

## 9. Appendices

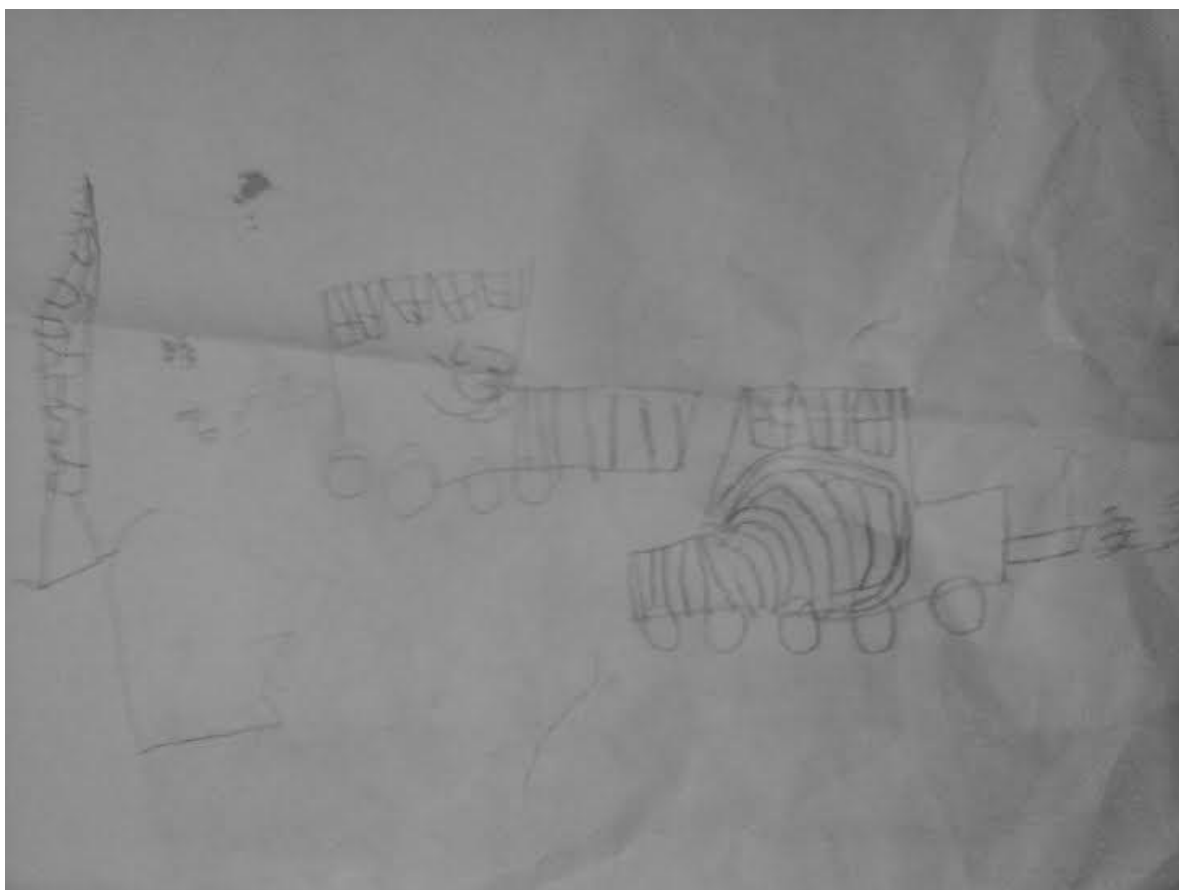
### 9.1. Artifacts

- Storybook reading session 6 “The blue monster” – “Masks”



- Storybook reading session 8 “Bodmin’s adventures” – “Drawings”







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