

Young learners “read” their picturebooks: a multidimensional study on students with migration biography

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Abstract

This study aimed at shedding light into the very young learners’ behaviour while “reading” picture-books. More specifically, 25 students (15 girls and 10 boys) with migration biography were engaged in this study designed with the purpose to investigate their responses when approaching and dealing with picture-books in Greek language. Towards that goal, the researchers were based on the framework of students’ responses developed by Mourão (2012) as an adaptation of Sipe’s system (2008). In particular, they focused on investigating students’ analytical responses with regard to a) Narrative meaning, b) Illustrations, c) Book as an object and d) Linguistic codes. Within this context, the researchers made use of special record protocols and observation sheets to identify students’ responses and their repertoire while reading their picture-books. Following the analysis of the data, various findings have been revealed. Specifically, the students’ responses seemed to center around the characters of the pictures and pre-/post- scenes based on the picture of the page. In parallel, they appeared to identify, label and describe items that impress them most while they referred to the author of the book and the illustrator of the picture. Last, the students translated words into their L1, paraphrased words/phrases that they were not able to say, and they seemed to make use of coinage and inter-/self-correction techniques. Therefore, proposals for multiple use of picture-books within the second language education context are made to facilitate and enhance students’ language development and creativity.

Key-words: bilingual students, picture-books, immigrants, responses, literature

Theoretical Review

Over the last decades, a great variety of initiatives have been observed in relation to fostering an effective teaching and learning context for young second language learners. Apart from the context of teaching foreign languages to young learners at school, Greece has been an immigrant/refugee receiving country for more than the last three decades, which intensifies the research activity on young second language learners with migration/refugee biography. Indeed, Greece is a geographical and cultural crossroad, encouraging research exploration and finding solutions for the development of an effective and sound language teaching methodology and a flexible adaptation of education to new conditions (Papadopoulou, 2018a).

Within this context, stories/tales have been used in an attempt to teach Greek to such student populations (Papadopoulos & Griva, 2016; Papadopoulos & Theologou, 2017), given that they can motivate more the students, stimulate their imagination and enhance their interests for the target language (Wright, 2013). Especially within a multilingual and multicultural environment, Papadopoulou (2016) points out that in recent decades, the use

of fairy tales from different countries and regions is particularly intense as they allow and cultivate communication between students, monolinguals and non-students. Although special emphasis is placed on making use of tales/stories for the language development of immigrant/refugee students, limited attention is paid to investigating the students' responses to pictures of the books and more especially, to picture-books, which are mainly used in the initial stages of the students' language education.

Picture-books are considered to be important educational tools that can accommodate the needs of weak language users especially in cases they are not able to produce spoken discourse in a target language. There have been proposed various terms to refer to picture-books such as '*storybooks*' (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Ghosn, 2013), '*real books*', (e.g. Machura, 1991) or '*real picture books*' (Dunn, 2003), however, a picture-book is commonly seen as "...a text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a [reader]. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page" (Bader, 1976, p. 1).

It is worth mentioning that picture-books are an authentic form of literature and as such, they have been used in second/foreign language teaching contexts (Ghosn, 2013) as authentic material. In particular, allowing a dual presentation of the target information by providing students with both "*images*" and "*words*", they can be regarded as multimodal texts (Kress, 2003), which facilitate students' meaning making behaviours. To put it in another way, the viewers are engaged in meaning-making procedures the result of which emerges from the combined viewers' dealing with the picture content and the plot-content (Lewis, 2001b).

Moreover, picture-books, as a form of authentic literature tend to enrich young students' imagination and encourage a more reflective behaviour. In particular, these multiple perspectives derived from dealing with picture-books, can promote the students' interpretative skills and high emotional intelligence (Hismanoglu, 2005; Van, 2009; Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011). Not to mention that making use of picture-books can lead to students' overall language development in the target taught language while such an environment can be extremely supportive in the promotion of translanguaging strategies of the students.

Taking the above into serious consideration, it is very important to realise the significance of the students' responses to picture-books within the language teaching context. More specifically, students are engaged in multidimensional reading processes and they are regarded as meaning makers and the ones that construct the meaning coming from a "*text*".

Within this framework, according to Wolfgang (1978), there is an '*implied reader*' who is supposed to have the knowledge and background to fill the gaps or indeterminacies left by an "*author/producer*" of a "*text*". In fact, the "*communication*" between the text and the reader begins when the reader attempts to fill these gaps left by the producer of it. Meanwhile, Louise Rosenblatt placed special emphasis on the reader's engagement and involvement in meaning making through the text, proposing a notion of '*aesthetic reading*' (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 31) referring to the reader's direction of his/her attention on the basis of the affective aspects of the reading experience. This leads to the "*creation*" of a third text, which is the result of the reader's personal reactive behaviour while reading the original one. Last, Stanley Fish stresses the context/interpretive community which influences the meaning making of a "*text*" and shapes the reader's activities (Fish, 1980) and meaning made.

Given the above, dealing with picture-books and responding to them is of utmost research importance. Although response to picture-books has been the focus of researchers since the 1990s (e.g. Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Evans, 1998; Kiefer, 1993; Pantaleo, 2008; Sipe 2000; 2008), in Greece limited activity has been observed with regard to the use of picture-books and how students respond to them, especially immigrant students, learning Greek within the Greek school. It is very important to mention however, that there are no typologies and response is

rarely considered to be a high priority in the second/foreign language education context, as the verbal text of the picture-book is placed at the center of the teaching attention. Nevertheless, Mourão (2012) has adapted Sipe’s categories and shown they are useful for teachers to take into consideration as they share picture-books with groups of children.

The Study

Rationale of the study

The implementation of this study stemmed from the multidimensional role the readers are loaded with, in relation to approaching and dealing with pictures. In particular, appreciating that a “reader” is a meaning maker and the one who constructs meaning from “texts”, this study aimed at investigating L2 learners’ responses and behaviours when dealing with picture-books within the language education context at school and delving into their practices followed when they come into contact with pictures within the broader context of using picture-books in class.

More specifically, this study attempted to investigate young immigrant students’ responses to picture-books in relation to:

- Narrative meaning, which refers to the students’ actions towards guessing the pre- and post-scenes of the story, the students’ views with regard to the heroes, their actions and the repercussions etc.
- Illustrations, focusing on the pictures, the items depicted in each picture, the students’ reactions to them etc.
- Book as an object, which is related to the general context of the book development focusing on the author, the illustrator, the way/reason each picture was developed etc.
- Linguistic codes, referring to the linguistic resources and the codes the students make use of when dealing with picturebooks and respond to them.

The sample of the study

The sample of the study consisted of 15 female and 10 male students coming from Albania. They were 6 years old and they had been staying in Greece for about 4 years. The participation of the students was optional, and the study was carried out within the context of the Cultural Center Activities, implemented in Larissa for the school year 2019-2020 with the purpose to facilitate Greek language learning of immigrant students. All of the students’ parents provided the research team with written permission for the participation of the children. (Table 1).

Table 1. Immigrant Students’ Profile

Gender	<i>Female Students – 60%</i> <i>Male Students – 40%</i>
Years of Age	<i>6 years old</i>
Country of Origin	<i>Albania – 100%</i>
Years of Staying in Greece	<i>4 years – 70%</i> <i>3 years – 25%</i> <i>1 year – 5%</i>
Language Use at Home	<i>Albanian – 53%</i> <i>Greek – 45%</i> <i>Mixed Language Use – 2%</i>

Research Instrument & Procedures

As for the research implementation, the researchers made use of two research instruments with the purpose to delve into the students' responses to picture-books.

In particular, especially designed record protocols were developed and employed by the researchers along with observation sheets with the aim to investigate and record students' responses. It is very important to mention that the record protocols were designed on the basis of and to meet the focus of the research objectives with regard to a) Narrative Meaning, which refers to scenes and parts of the story of the picture-book, b) the Illustration of the picture-book and how people make use of it, c) the Book as an object referring to the author of this particular book and other authors that students are familiar with, either from Greece or from their home countries and d) the Linguistic Codes used by the immigrant students when dealing with picture-books.

Concerning the procedures of the study implementation, the researchers observed ten teaching sessions in which immigrant students approached a picture-book along with their teacher. The teacher made use of ten different picture-books which were placed at the center of the teaching activity in ten different teaching sessions. Observing the learners' behaviour when approaching and dealing with picture-books, the researchers kept notes used the research instruments while qualitative analysis was made with the purpose to investigate their responses and the context they were developed, as well as quantitative analysis was also used in an attempt to examine the frequency of learners' responses.

The particular picture-books were chosen on the basis of the students' interests while an attempt was made to include books close to the thematic areas of the school curriculum of this grade such as: everyday situations, school animals, family, friends and neighbourhood. More specifically, the teacher of the programme used the following picture-books:

Picture-Book 1 – A new friend for Miss Mouse

This picture-book refers to a miss Mouse who likes making new friends. Suddenly, she met a young elephant, she felt really happy that she had a new friend. However, the main problem was that the young elephant was afraid of her while the book describes the continuous attempt of the mouse to persuade the new friend that she is not going to harm him and that she loves him.

Picture-Book 2 – The younger and the elder deer

This particular picture-book outlines a story related to a young and an old deer and their adventures. In particular, through their adventures, it becomes clear that it's not a matter of age and size to defend oneself. Sometimes, courage, wisdom and belief are the most dynamic tools that someone can use to fight against something.

Picture-Book 3 – Melina, the detective

The picture-book refers to Melina, a young girl who wishes to become a detective. She shared her dreams with their friends but they laughed at her, she shared her dreams with her mother and she was impressed. While she managed to carry out a first detective task she had, she was not able to complete successfully her second task to find a lost dog. However, she finds something very interesting in the neighbouring house.

Picture-Book 4 – The Little "Why..."

This particular picture-book refers to Little Why, which is a very lively creature. It cannot stay calm, it is very active and it wants to explore many interesting things. It can explore many wonderful things around it, such as the giraffe's tall and slender legs and the proud buffalo horns. But there are also the sharp crocodile jaws, which can create some problems to it.

Picture-Book 5 – Nothing can frighten a bear



This book outlines an interesting story related to forest bears. In particular, deep in the dense forest, the bears of the story hug until they fall asleep. They are very calm, but the little teddy bear hears a monster and gets frustrated. However, the bear daddy tells him confidently that there is nothing that can frighten a bear.

Picture-Book 6 – Pat the Bunny

This picture-book presents an interesting story which is related to things that young children can do to spend their free time creatively. It is a description of simple daily habits that a lot of young children have and it also encourages young children to do things like smelling flowers in their attempt to explore and interact with the world around them.

Picture-Book 7 – A very hungry caterpillar

This particular picture-book is characterised by its very attractive pictures in its pages. It refers to the process through which a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, placing special emphasis on the magic of nature, the natural phenomena and the blooming of colours.

Picture-Book 8 – The Gruffalo

This picture-book presents the life of animals in a forest. More specifically, the Gruffalo is the basic hero of the book. The reader is provided with amazingly interesting pages depicting different kinds of animals, their habits and their voices (in the versions of the books with interactive buttons).

Picture-Book 9 – The Little House

This particular picture-book is referring to the differences between the city and the village. In particular, the book presents the story of a little house which was located in a village. In the beginning of the story, the little house looked very happy but gradually and while the city was being developed around the little house, it began to feel sad and strange.

Picture-Book 10 – Don't let the pigeons drive the bus!

This was the last picture-book that the students dealt with. This is a very funny picture-book which refers to a story of a bus driver and a pigeon. When a bus driver wishes to take a break from his route, a volunteer appeared to take his position and help him. A pigeon wished to help the driver but no one wished to have such a driver. Thus, the pigeon asks questions that the "readers" need to answer.

Based on the record protocols, the researchers observed the students' responses in an attempt to have a complete view of the students' responses and behaviour when dealing with picture-books. No specific instructions were given to the students, who were encouraged by their teacher to participate freely.

Findings

Upon the completion of the data processing, various findings have emerged with regard to the immigrant students' responsive profile concerning the picture-books.

Regarding the first thematic strand "Narrative Meaning", the students appeared to demonstrate a multiple analytical responsive behaviour (Figure 1). In particular, they seemed to make predictions about the scenes of the picture-book to a great extent (55%) while they usually described potential pre- and post-scenes of the story, based on the pictures of the book (32%). Last, they tended to make inferences about the characters (13%) of the pictures.

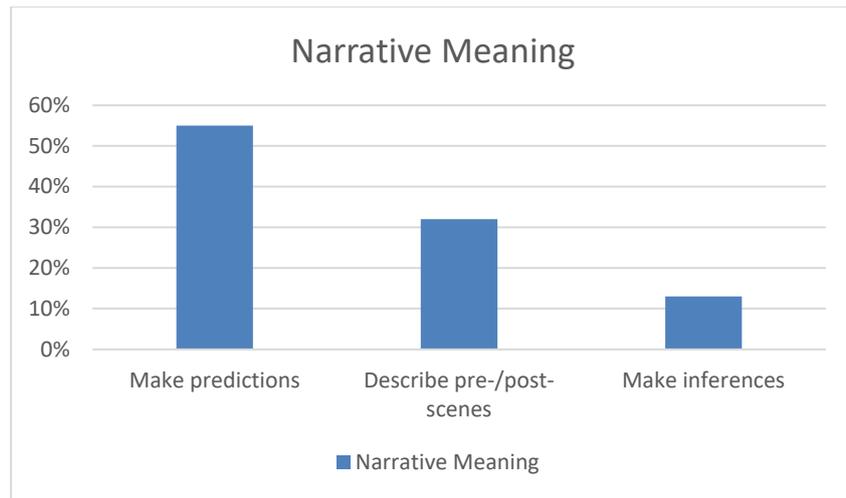


Figure 1. Narrative Meaning Responses

Concerning the Illustration of the picture-books, the following figure (Figure 2) provides a descriptive account of the students’ responses with regard to the pictures of the book pages. In particular, most of the students identified and labelled several items depicted in the picture of the page (63%). Many of them seemed to describe an item, which attracted their attention (30%) while among the common behaviours of the students were their reference to an item which they did not like (3%), or they would like to change (2%) or omit from the page (2%).

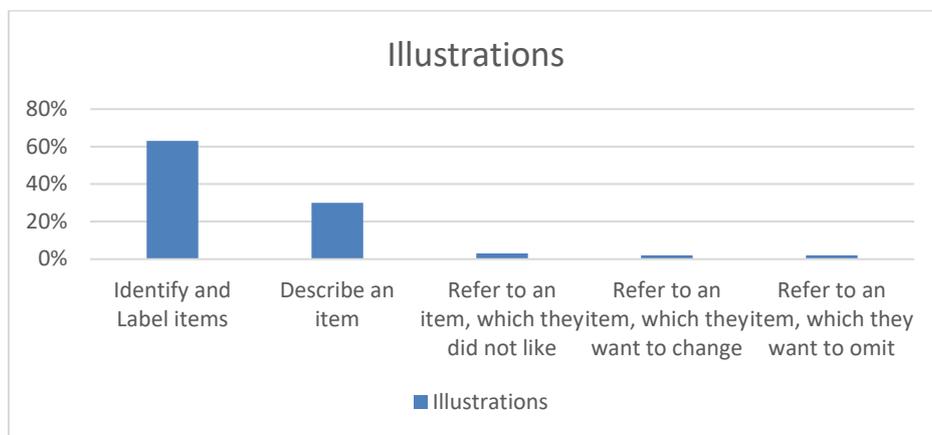


Figure 2. Illustrations – Responses

Delving into the field of “The book as an object”, the following figure (Figure 3) outlines the students’ responses. More specifically, most of the students referred both to the author of the picture-book (48%) and to other potential known authors (35%). They appeared to discuss the illustrator of the book (10%) and expressed themselves with regard to other illustrators and painters (7%).

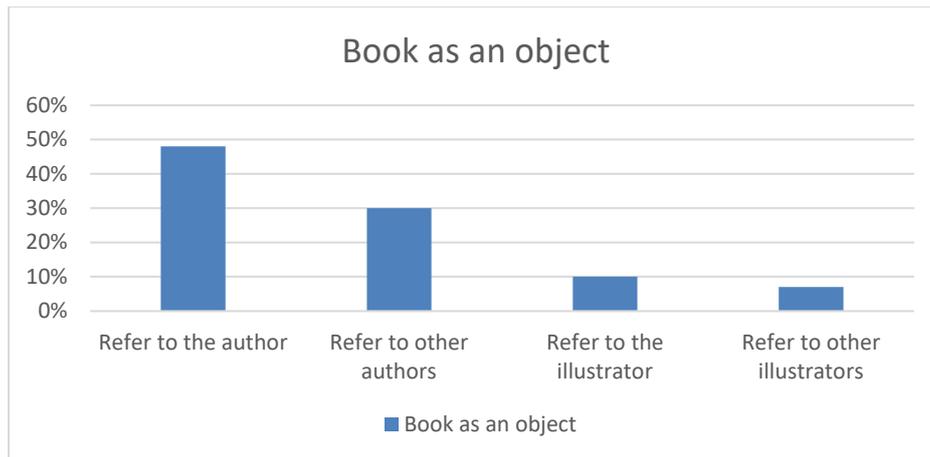


Figure 3. Analytical Response – The book as an object

The last strand of focus was the one of the Linguistic Codes of the students, the findings on which are presented in the figure below (Figure 4). While dealing with picture-books, the majority of the students appeared to translate spontaneously a word or expression into their heritage language (48%), while they tended to translate other classmates’ words into Greek language (25%). They also seemed to paraphrase what they were not able to mention in the Greek language (23%) while they appeared to correct their classmates when they mispronounced or used a wrong word in Greek (18%).

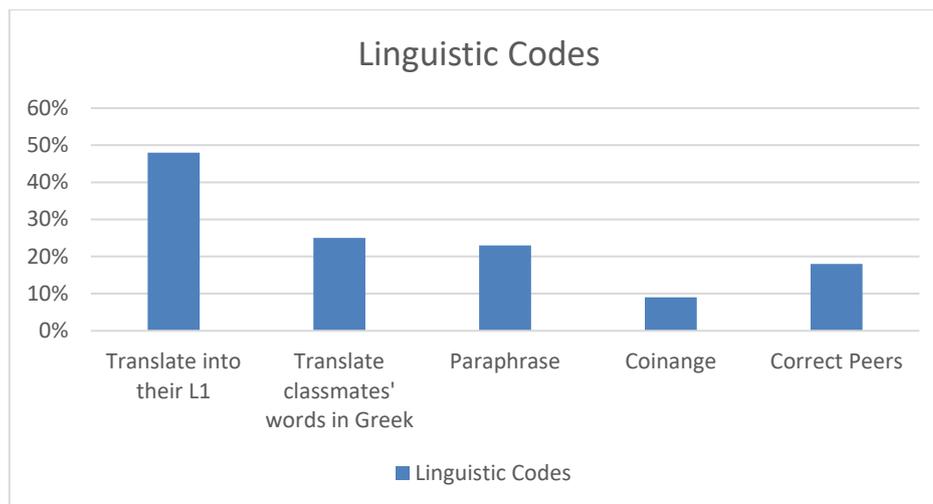


Figure 4. Analytical Response – Linguistic Codes

Discussion

The present paper outlined a study, which was carried out with the purpose to investigate second language students’ responses to picture-books. Through this study, it was shown that students exhibited a great variety of responsive behaviours which are worth further researching.

In particular, the students appeared to focus on the pictures of the pages and make predictions about the plot and the heroes of the picture-book. As picture-books have at least one picture on every double spread, it is worth mentioning that these books are loaded with a great variety of visual support, which encourages students to be engaged in “advanced reading procedures” (Birketveita, 2015). They tend to think both creatively and critically, which are considered important assets of the 21st century and necessary actions in a second language teaching context. To clarify it more, the students expressed their views about the use of colours, the actions of the heroes as well as the importance of particular elements of

in the development of the plot, which are considered to be important competencies of critical thinking for very young learners (Papadopoulos & Bisiri, 2020). Meanwhile, they creatively made their own stories, described scenes that could happen based on the picture they looked at, while they were engaged in creative conversations about authors and illustrators.

Moreover, the students seemed to produce spoken discourse, as they dealt with the picture items, discussed the heroes, actions and they were engaged in discussions on the author and the illustrator of the picture-books. Through being exposed to authentic stories of the books and authentic language, they are offered a wide variety of vocabulary, sometimes more than it happens with course-books or graded readers (Griva, 2020).

Dealing and playing with the pictures can lead to the development of students' visual literacy skills. Although literacy was initially connected to the ability to read and write texts, nowadays, it has come to include both the ability of a person to read images and make meaning, just like in the case of picture-books (Rimmereide, 2013). Needless to mention, picture-books were effective tools even for weak language students and their comprehension, as it was revealed in this study. According to Schmitt et al. (2011) a reader needs to understand 98-99% of the words to feel encouraged to continue the reading activity of a story. However, appreciating that the participants were very young students, with limited knowledge in the Greek language, we decided to use picture-books, as the verbal text and the pictures were equally important in conveying the meaning of the story. In other words, picture-books engage the readers and this interaction between the picture and the "reader" provided the students with ample opportunities for multiple interpretations, leading them to the development of critical visual literacy.

A worth noticing aspect of this study is related to the use of linguistic codes by the immigrant students. Through this study, it was revealed that they made use of various compensation strategies such as translation, transformation and coinage. Picture-books and dealing with pictures of their stories offer the students a relaxing and safe environment which motivates them to use all their linguistic resources and communication mechanisms. Indeed, according to a study of Butler (2004), it was shown that picture-books provided the functional and communicative aspect of language learning, and helped the students to learn how to communicate more efficiently. In this study, the students expressed their views in a free and open-ended environment, which encouraged them to appreciate their full linguistic resources and see "language" as a mean of communication. They made use of their L1 and L2, they also made use of compensation communication strategies, in their attempt to communicate their ideas and thoughts with others. It goes without saying that dealing with picture-books is and should be an energetic and interactive activity which motivates students to employ their productive and their receptive skills, which they develop holistically within such a teaching environment. Thus, the students participated in this study, were motivated to deal with pictures, to express their views and their ideas, to exchange opinions and collaborate. Indeed, in her study Papadopoulou (2018a) also emphasizes the necessity of coexistence and utilization of all the language practices and strategies of expression students in a contemporary and creative language class use

Taking the above into serious consideration, teachers should make regular use of picture-books within their language classrooms, as, in this way, they provide their students with ample opportunities for further language development and communication. Fostering a pleasant environment through using picture-books and dealing with pictures can motivate second language learners to use not only the target language but all their linguistic resources to make meaning, to communicate and interact within and outside the school environment.

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