Emergent literacy across languages: using stories and technology to teach English to three and four year old Spanish children in a foreign language context

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Introduction

English programs around the world are being increasingly integrated to the preschool school level curriculum. In some countries, this integration is accompanied by a growing interest in the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to support the delivery of education across all school levels. These developments are explored in a PhD research project through the implementation of a work scheme aimed at teaching English to preschool children based on stories delivered via a computer. The research took place in Spain which, according to Andrews (2004), is considered a foreign language context since English is neither the official language of the country, the medium of instruction nor the primary language spoken in the children's home.

Research questions

Based on the aims of the project, the research questions explored in this paper are:

1. Can some form of development in children's emergent literacy skills be observed throughout English lessons prepared under a work scheme based on ICT-delivered stories?
2. What is the children's attitude towards learning English using ICT-delivered stories?

Methods

A total of ten preschool children aged between 3 and 4 years old participated in the study. The teacher who delivered the course was also a participant and she was interviewed twice, before and after the implementation of the trial lessons prepared under the work scheme. The participant children took a total of 12 lessons 45-min. in length spread out in three weeks.

The lessons were organized in three separate instances: (a) Whole-class storytelling sessions (b) Story-related tasks and (c) Computer tasks. In the classroom children worked individually with me on the story-related computer tasks. One of these tasks was to sequence the story watched by rearranging pictures on the screen. A narrative task happened after the sequencing and although the pictures were available on the screen to help the child remember the story, they were asked to try re-telling the narrative without looking at the pictures. In addition, the children were not pressured to re-tell the story in English. All of the children participated in the re-telling task after having viewed the story two times at least. Three stories were used throughout the course, one per week. Goldilocks and the Three Bears was the first title and the children were

familiar with the story. The other two titles, The Gingerbread Man and Three Billy Goats Gruff were new to the children and are not traditional in the Spanish context. In order to control variations in design and software features of the stories, which can differ significantly between software designers and publishers (Jong & Bus, 2003), the three stories used were taken from the same series (Inside Stories, 2003).

Results

Children's story retellings were audio taped and transcribed for analysis under the Narrative Scoring Scheme (Miller & Chapman, 1984-2006). This scheme evaluates young children's narratives extending the Story Grammars approach (Stein & Glenn, 1979) by categorizing narratives in seven components: Introduction, Character Development, Mental States, Referencing, Conflict resolution, Cohesion, and Conclusion. Four independent reviewers evaluated and scored the story transcriptions and the scores were averaged in order to establish a week-to-week comparison. The analysis of children's narratives based on the scores showed changes in the use of story grammar elements between narratives. The following case illustrates these assertion.

Figure 1: Changes for the component of Introduction in Enrique's narratives
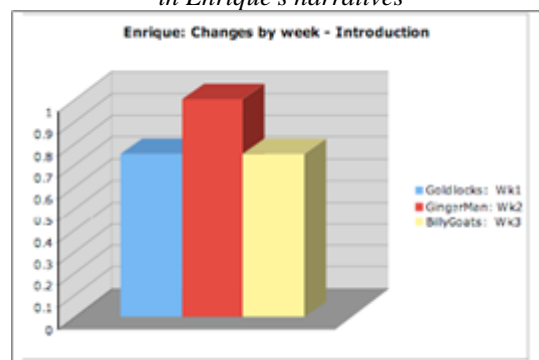

Figure 1 presents an example of the changes in the narratives of one of the participant children, a boy called Enrique. His narrative of The Gingerbread Man improved for the Introduction component in week two (Wk2) of the course, but interestingly the narrative for week three (Wk3) based on the story of The Three Billy Goats Gruff did not show the same level of complexity for the same component.

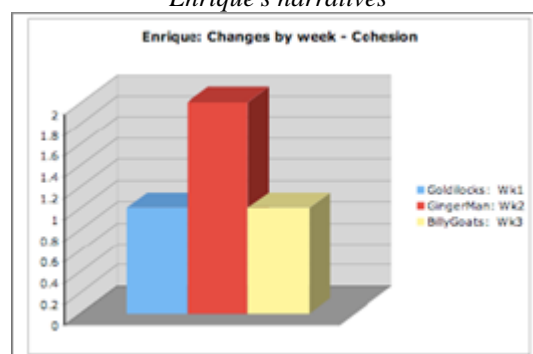*Figure 2: Changes for the component of Cohesion in Enrique's narratives*

Figure 2 shows the scores for Enrique regarding Cohesion. It illustrates Enrique's use of this component during his narratives of Goldilocks with a score of 1, improving in one point for the second narrative. An increase of one point under the NSS indicates development in the use of a story grammar component.

Conclusions

Regarding emergent literacy development across languages through growth of story grammars.

The project results can be an indication of emergent literacy skills development (Teale & Sulzby, 1986) across languages since the stories were heard and viewed in English but retold in Spanish. Also, they provide evidence of the support offered by stories to young children's development of literacy skills in situations when literacy is not the teaching aim considering that the focus of the lesson was the teaching of English but the analysis of the children's narratives showed developmental story grammar changes between weeks. A possible explanation for the changes in children's narratives could lie in their preferences of the stories used during the course. In the case of Enrique, he selected The Gingerbread Man as his favourite story and this narrative is incidentally the one with the highest average scores as evaluated by the reviewers.

In connection to the benefits of using ICT-stories in the teaching of English and specifically on EFL.

Children learning English from an early age can benefit in other ways than attaining native-speaker fluency as could be observed in the development of emergent literacy skills. Additionally, children who are being exposed to the foreign language linguistic structure by watching stories created for native speakers, can have long-term benefits related to comprehension of discourse of the foreign language (Garvie, 1990). This is particularly useful in foreign language contexts considering that the practice of the language is largely restricted to the classroom. The use of ICT as the delivery medium of the story allowed the children to construct meaning without the need to hear the translated version. This reinforces the notion of exposure to the foreign language discourse as the stories are delivered without adaptations.

Teacher's views on children's increased motivation and interest in learning English via ICT-delivered stories.

As observed by the participating teacher, children's motivation towards learning English increased after the introduction of the computer and the stories into the lessons. She observed changes in children's attitude towards the lesson between the first two weeks of the course (pre-implementation of the trial lessons) and the last three (implementation). She considered that the stories provided the children with a lesson structure, allowing them to take advantage of the contents of the lesson. Furthermore, the teacher felt that watching stories from a computer allowed the children to listen to properly-spoken English, supporting the children's development of native-speaker fluency. Finally, she

considered that the animations in the story provided the children with support tools to help them construct meaning from a story that was being heard in English, making translation unnecessary.

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