

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE AND LITERARY COMPETENCE
DEVELOPMENT: A DIDACTIC PROPOSAL USING THE PICTURE BOOK
AMAZING GRACE IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Esther Alabau Rivas
Universitat de València

1. A BRIEF INTRODUCTION: DEFINING WHAT LITERARY
COMPETENCE IS

There are many researchers who have defined what literary competence is (CHOMSKY, quoted at LAZAR: 1993; VAN DIJK: 1972, quoted at BALLESTER: 1999; CULLER: 1975, quoted at AGUILAR & SILVA: 1980; FISH: 1989, quoted at BALLESTER: 1999; COLOMER: 1994; etc.); also, there are researchers who have carried out a compilation of these definitions —such as Ballester's (1999)— but we start this work from two definitions, one by Mendoza (2004) and the other one by Reyes (2014). Mendoza says that:

competencia literaria es un conjunto de conocimientos que se activan ante los estímulos textuales, de modo que intervienen en la actividad cognitiva de identificar componentes y de reconocer valores y funciones en el discurso literario (MENDOZA: 2004, 139).

Besides, Reyes Torres asserts that: «[we develop literary competence] when the literacy education enables a person to control the cognitive, linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of written or spoken language in an effective and dialogical manner» (2014, 43). The author states that the literary competence is a marvelous link between reading and literacy because he understands this competence such as the final objective for the Literary Education and, furthermore, a vehicle to it.

It is also known that, when reading a picture book, the reader also needs to develop what Nikolajeva (2010) calls visual literacy, in other words, the ability to read the images is necessarily connected with the ability to read the written text. This is due to the two codes contained in a picture book. Her argument reminds us the connection between the signifier (iconic sign) and the signified (SAUSSURE: 1916). In conclusion, the interaction between text and image is a decisive issue when we talk

about developing the literary competence through picture books because the reader must understand that «two images represent a connection or that they are independent [due to this] picture books stimulate interactive reading rather than passive ingestion» (BARTHES: 1977).

2. REYES TORRES PROPOSED MODEL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY COMPETENCE

From this standpoint, we present—in order to help our students improving their five literacy skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking and thinking) at the same time that they are developing their literary competence—the Reyes’ Model for the development of Literary Competence (2014). This is a triangular model that gives support to the idea that the reader establishes a dialogue with the text; its three elements are: *a)* the constitutional and cognitive dimension; *b)* the level of performance that takes place from the linguistic and literary knowledge; and *c)* the sociocultural and aesthetic dimension.

The first factor is one that Reyes Torres names as *the student’s basic machinery*, that is, the constitutional and cognitive dimension which is related to the ability and the attitude of each student to get close to a text and think for himself. Secondly, the performance dimension is related to the way we use our internalized language rules and notions besides our literary knowledge. Every reader should be able to rationally discuss texts; this knowledge is essential to identify the most significant aspects of a literary work. Finally, the sociocultural and aesthetic dimension is the one where we find the concept of literary competence. It is understood as a tool to expand the mind of the reader and, also, to develop the thinking skill, from an interactive and imaginative relationship with the text.

Likewise, this model encourages teachers to go beyond contextualizing language around functions or structures. This model brings us the possibility of showing that students can learn language, through and about it; on the other hand, both languages found in picture books—written and visual—facilitate reading comprehension, what gives support to the Reception Theory. Needless to say, the Reception Theory is connected to the literary competence because it activates textual, discursive

sive, linguistic and pragmatic knowledge when reading (MENDOZA: 2004).

3. AMAZING GRACE, WRITTEN BY MARY HOFFMAN AND ILLUSTRATED BY CAROLINE BINCH

McRae (1991) affirms that it is possible to teach language, reading and literature due to a clearly cognitive link between texts, reader and reading; thus, at the core of this proposal lays the idea that literacy is a dynamic and multidimensional concept.

We, as teachers, guide our students in making-meaning processes by using picture books because they are motivating and they help our students to achieve meaningful learning while enjoying the language, the content and literature in the English class. For this reason, we introduce the picture book *Amazing Grace*, written by Mary Hoffman and illustrated by Caroline Binch, to our Primary School students in the English class. Otherwise, we have chosen this type of children's literature because we agree with Mínguez reasoning when he says that:

other products that should be included under the area of study of children's literature should be those that share many literary features with it and where methodological analysis is specially fruitful, such as comics, animation and picture books (MÍNGUEZ: 2014, 26).

3.1 WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF OUR DIDACTIC PROPOSAL?

The story is about Grace, a girl who loves acting stories out and, when her teacher tells her and her classmates that they are going to perform *Peter Pan*, Grace really wants to play Peter but she finds that her classmates don't think that she could do it because she's a girl and besides, she is black. It's a narrative text but you can find some dialogues when Grace is interacting with other characters. On the other hand, it has visual stimuli and gradually increases the verbal components that accompany the illustrations.

3.2 WHY DO WE THINK THAT *AMAZING GRACE* IS A GOOD PICTURE BOOK?

Nodelman (2010) establishes some ideas about picture books that we can easily identify with the one we are going to use in our didactic proposal. Below, we numerate those we find in common (2010, 23-24):

- Presence of pictures
 - Pictures can be associated with a word easily*
 - Other more complicated words can be replaced by an image (how an object looks)*
 - Pictures providing extra information*
- Two different means of communication: words plus pictures
- Children’s literature exults in two —ness: black/white, good/bad
- They invite identification with a childlike protagonist
- There are characters that represent a childlike way of thinking and doing and a more mature one
- Happy endings (hopeful, optimistic)
- Its central characters are children
- A plot-oriented literature that shows rather than tells
- It implies more than it says
- Normally, a familiar story told for us

4. HOW SHOULD THIS DIDACTIC PROPOSAL BE CARRIED OUT?

Our methodology provides recreational and aesthetic experiences through children’s literature, that is, it creates an environment where students enjoy literature, the pleasure of reading. Therefore a communicative approach is necessary: the student is the main agent of the teaching-learning process participating actively in the development of his or her literary competence.

4.1 OUR DIDACTIC PROPOSAL

We divide our didactic proposal into four parts:

- a) The title of the book. We analyze the book cover and the title. Once we have read the story, we design an alternative book cover and we choose the title that we prefer.

- b) Knowing the main character. We know Grace thanks to the first pages.
- b.1) Introducing Grace: who she is, what she likes. When our students know her, we ask them: «What are your dreams?» and they make a poster whose title is «Our dreams».
 - b.2) Using storytelling: students can see its wonderful illustrations and listen while telling them the story. It is also interesting to identify and to infer emotions while doing storytelling: they create associative emotional reactions.
- c) The parts of the book
- c.1) Giving advice to someone. We encourage our students to give advice to Grace, writing down simple sentences and decorating them. Then, we create a collage.
 - c.2) Parts of the story. We generate reading and writing experiences for our students. We challenge them to create *A train story* where each wagon corresponds with one part of the story (beginning, middle and end).
 - c.3) Summing up. Understanding the plot and having an elementary knowledge of what a narrative is (it contains temporal and casual components).
 - c.4) Drama. Acting *the classroom scene* out (when the teacher says that they are going to perform *Peter Pan*). With this activity, language becomes a magical vehicle and imagination plays an important role: «Imagination is in this way of paramount relevance because children relate reading with playing» (REYES: 2014, 45).

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, by this proposal we are improving our students' five literacy skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking, and thinking) meanwhile they are developing their literary competence. Reading is the key for learning and challenging activities are the best way to start relating reading and learning.

Picture books are literature for young readers and an interesting tool to control students' literacy development. Reading is a complex activity due to the need of understanding and connecting both languages contained in its pages (visual and written). Besides, it makes possible learning language in a practical way: by using it. Listening and speaking, when sharing ideas and feelings, explaining our insights and illusions, become essential skills because students understand that they need them to communicate something they care about. If we talk about writing, linked to arts and crafts, helps to develop a positive attitude towards the language. The last skill, thinking, is related to emotional connections: there exists an emotional relationship between the reader, the main character and her story.

On the other hand, as Bleich (1978) said: «reading can produce new understandings of oneself not just a moral here and a message there, but a genuinely new conception of one's values and tastes as well as one's prejudices and learning difficulties» (as cited in WILAND: 2011). Intra-personal and interpersonal intelligences, self-esteem, creativity, imagination, values, etc., are worked at the same time that language and literature; as a result, students enjoy reading in a safe environment and they achieve meaningful learning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BALLESTER, Josep (1999): *L'educació literària*, València, Universitat de València.
- COLOMER, Teresa (1994): «La adquisición de la competencia literaria» at Gretel [Consulted: 08/11/2015].
- DE AGUILAR, Víctor M. (1980): *Competencia Lingüística y Competencia Literaria*, Madrid, Gredos.
- LAZAR, Gillian (1993): *Literature and Language Teaching. A guide for teachers and trainers*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- MENDOZA, Antonio (2004): *La educación literaria. Bases para la formación de la competencia lecto-literaria*, Málaga, Ediciones Aljibe.
- MÍNGUEZ, Xavier (2014): «Exploring Education and Children's Literature», at Agustín REYES, Luis VILLACAÑAS & Betlem SOLER

- (coord.), *Thinking through Children's Literature in the Classroom*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 26-41.
- NIKOLAJEVA, Maria (2010): «Interpretative Codes and Implied Readers of Children's Picturebooks», at Teresa COLOMER, Bettina KÜMMERLING-MEIBAUER & Cecilia SILVA (coord.), *New Directions in Picture book Research*, New York/London, Routledge, p. 27-40.
- NODELMAN, Perri (2010): «Words Claimed: Picturebook Narratives and the Project of Children's Literature», at Teresa COLOMER, Bettina KÜMMERLING-MEIBAUER & Cecilia SILVA (coord.), *New Directions in Picture book Research*, New York/London, Routledge, p. 11-26.
- REYES, Agustín (2014): «Literacy Education: The First Step towards Literary Competence», at Agustín REYES, Luis VILLACAÑAS & Betlem SOLER (coord.), *Thinking through Children's Literature in the Classroom*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 42-52.
- SAUSSURE, Ferdinand de (1916): *Course in general linguistics*, New York, Philosophical Library.
- WILAND, Signe Mari (1978): «How to Develop Literary Competence in the English Classroom» at Fremmed [Consulted: 11/11/2015].