Developing language skills in second language learners through literature discussions

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DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS
THROUGH LITERATURE DISCUSSIONS

by

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in

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Department of Instructional and Curricular Studies
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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed book discussions of primary aged ESL students and their teacher to examine the benefits to language development. Collected over one school year, data included transcribed audiotapes of the book discussions, class interviews, and personal journal entries of the teacher which described classroom events and interactions. Analysis of the transcripts resulted in the identification of seven categories which illustrated the diversity of types of talk. In addition, changes in the amount of student and teacher talk over time were noted, with student talk increasing, and teacher talk becoming less pronounced. Four students were highlighted to illustrate the benefits of picture book discussions for different English proficiency levels. Finally, the role of the teacher in these discussions was explored. Several benefits of discussing picture books with ESL students are suggested in terms of their importance for language development.
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CHAPTER I
Introduction

It is early December, and thirty-six ESL second graders sit on the floor in front of me. I have just held up the book, The Art Lesson by Tomie DePaola (1989), and the students and I talk about the picture of the author on the cover and the information I have gathered about Tomie DePaola from Something About the Author (1994). Two students who are just learning to communicate in English sit close at my feet, their eyes roaming the cover illustration. A discussion about the picture of the author has started even before the story has begun.

Miguel: He is a story man?
Teacher: Yes. He writes stories. He is an author. Ana?
Ana: Maybe, when he was a little...another person he looked when he was an illustrator, and he came just like the other man he saw?
Teacher: So...when he was little he saw an illustrator and he became just like that illustrator? Is that what you're saying?
Ana: Mmmh.

The world is full of talking, and within the environment of the classroom we can hear much of this talk through listening to discussions about picture books. As the above dialogue illustrates, the discussions are rich in meaning for the participants, and those who listen in can learn much about the language development of children by studying the conversations. These conversations allow us a brief glimpse into the minds of the participants. The classroom based research project which is described in the following pages was designed to systematically study the talk which occurred during read aloud sessions of picture books in a primary English as a second language (ESL) classroom.

Background and Purposes

As a teacher of primary children I have always read aloud to my students because I felt it was an important part of the learning experience. I used books to build background
knowledge for areas of study, and also because I simply enjoyed sharing a good story which was well told with my students. My students would raise their hands, and I would ask them to wait until the end of the story with their questions or comments. Not surprisingly, they had forgotten their queries by the end of the story—but I had shared a great story with them.

Early in the Fall of 1993 I began to read articles about classroom discourse which caused me to wonder about my methods and purposes for reading aloud. It became clear to me that picture books were a vehicle for providing the sort of similar reference point needed to build new knowledge. The books contained rich vocabulary within a meaningful context, and provided a shared experience which the students and I could discuss during reading. I realized that I was stifling an opportunity for oral language practice by not allowing students to talk during the reading of the books. Based on information gained from my reading of research, I decided that I would not stop the children from talking during the story. I swallowed my desire to read from the beginning of the story to the end without stopping, and waited to hear what the children had to say. Fortunately for me they had not lost their desire to talk about the stories.

Picture books present a great deal of vivid vocabulary and literary language used in a meaningful context. During story time students not only hear new words, but quite often see what those words mean through the contextual use of the pictures. As the students began talking about the books being read they illustrated their ability to use the books for more than their listening pleasure. As they asked questions and made comments about the occurrences in the stories, they began to demonstrate their use of critical thinking skills. They began making predictions about story happenings and character actions. They made sense of the text by making inferences about situations presented in the books based on their own personal experiences, and on situations presented in other books that we had read as a group. Their book discussions demonstrated a development of literary language use in which they used words and ideas from the text to describe or
discuss the book. This vocabulary carried beyond the discussion time, and into the day-to-day classroom talk.

As an ESL teacher, my job encompasses assisting students in meeting their daily academic needs, as well as facilitating their English language development. Therefore, a constant question for me is: How do I best facilitate the language acquisition of my ESL students? The thirty to forty minutes I was spending reading aloud to my ESL students every morning and the discussions that took place seemed beneficial. Through general observations I thought that the students were talking more and changing in the ways that they were using language. However, just because it felt right didn't mean that an administrator would agree. ESL instruction has in the past utilized a grammar based drill and practice method of language learning in order to build English language skills. Much time was spent on teaching grammatical rules and reinforcing their correct usage, rather than concentrating on communication between people. Krashen and Terrell talk about whether or not the target language being taught is being introduced using "comprehensible input" (1983, p. 19), and its impact on the language learning of the students. In any language we understand more if we have a frame of reference on which to build our new knowledge. Using children's literature aids in building such a frame. The text and pictures provide a common point of reference and basis for discussion for those students who are struggling with the English language.

Research Questions

To answer my concerns regarding the benefits of discussing picture books with ESL students I began to systematically record, document, and study the actual discussions that were occurring. Initially I was interested in studying the kinds of talk that went on during story time. I was also concerned with what benefits to English language development were occurring as a result of the discussions. Through recorded documentation of discussions and a variety of other data, I hoped to find out if the ESL
students in my class were indeed benefiting from the time spent discussing picture books and in what ways. The first two research questions were:

1. What kind of talk occurs during the discussions of picture books during story time? and

2. How does talk held around books between ESL students and their teacher affect the English language development of the students?

A secondary focus came about as the research project evolved. That was the need to explore and document my role as the teacher in the book discussions. I was aware that as an ESL teacher I acted as an English language model, and a guide through the discussions. As a questioner my goal was to ask open-ended questions regarding the text. As a participant I knew that I brought different life experiences to the discussions, with the perspective of an adult, and that I could use my adult knowledge to aid the talk wherever necessary or appropriate. While these were ideas which I held when the study began it was necessary to use the data to analyze what actually happened as it pertained to my role during the book discussions. The third research question was:

3. In what ways does the interaction of the teacher influence the picture book discussions?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of social constructivism. Constructivism proposes that learners are active participants in the construction of their own knowledge. The social aspect of constructivism in which learning occurs in social contexts is especially evident in classrooms where students and teachers actively construct meanings through their interactions with one another. The meanings assigned to the story by the teacher and the students are frequently decided upon by the whole group as is
suggested in the following quotation from Hiebert (1991):

Learning often occurs in social contexts, and, therefore, the learner's relationships with other persons serve a vital function in the interpretation process. The social aspects of learning are especially relevant in homes and schools, where interaction between adults and children has a strong influence on what, how, and how much children learn (p. 2).

During those times that individual students don't understand the story or the pictures, it is through the interaction of the teacher and the students that understanding is developed. Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) explain the interactive nature of language development in this way:

Language, whether written or oral, is a social event of some complexity. Language did not develop because of the existence of one language user, but of two. If we are to understand language, we must see it as an orchestrated transaction between two language users which has as its intent to convey meaning in a given context of a situation (p. 28).

Children generally are able to acquire their first language naturally by communicating with the people who are around them (Halliday, 1994; Krashen & Terrell, 1983). Children who speak a language other than English as their first language explore their world of communication in the same way as English speakers, using their primary language for communication with family members, caregivers, and peers. When these second language students enter the world of English speaking schools, they must overcome difficult hurdles. Many ESL students are in mainstream classes in which the teacher has no special training to instruct these students. Some of the children are placed in ESL classes. Even though the ESL teacher has special training to assist second language students, the instruction is still done in English. Unless the teacher or classmates happen to speak the primary language of the child, ESL students will not be able to use their primary language consistently to discuss and discover their new world through talk at
school. Not only are the children using their primary language less to make sense of their world, but now they are attempting to communicate in English as well. They struggle with communication in ESL classes—trying to have their basic needs met and to make themselves understood as well.

The goal of an ESL class is to facilitate English language development. Accredited ESL teachers use a variety of methodologies with which to help these second language speakers use English with success. Krashen and Terrell (1983) and others (e.g., Asher, 1969; Brown, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1974) advocate the use of authentic language used in meaningful contexts in order to facilitate natural language development. Allowing young ESL students to talk about books which have been read to them facilitates the use of authentic language. The literature provides a meaningful framework of English language usage which can be discussed by ESL students.

Recently, a number of researchers (Allen, 1989; Au, 1980; Battle, 1993; Orzechowska & Smieja, 1993; Thomson, 1991) have advocated the use of children's literature as a vehicle for language development. Children's literature provides a shared experience and a meaningful context within which ESL students can explore English, and when teachers promote discussion of a book during its reading they provide an excellent opportunity for authentic language use. The language use occurs within a social context, is based on a shared experience and fosters the active construction of meaning with a capable English speaker as a guide.
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This review of the literature has been divided into three sections. The initial section provides a brief overview of the current research on the acquisition of primary and second languages. The second part of the chapter focuses on the benefits of discussing books which are read aloud to children, looking specifically at children's construction of meaning, language growth, and critical thinking skills. The third section highlights studies which examine the benefits of reading aloud to children and discussing what is read in three types of classrooms-- English speaking, bilingual, and English as a second language (ESL).

Language Acquisition

Primary Language Acquisition

Research on the study of children's primary language acquisition describes the stages which children move through during the acquisition. As children begin to acquire a second language they move through many of these same stages; thus, it is helpful to examine the literature on children's primary language acquisition in order to more fully understand second language acquisition.

Halliday (1980) writes that "any instance of language provides language users with an opportunity to learn language, learn about language, and learn through language" (cited in Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, p. 188). Using the model presented by the competent speaker children are able to build rules about how language works throughout their oral language acquisition, and then test those rules as they actively participate in their language development (Ruddell & Ruddell, 1994). Chomsky (1972) writes about various stages that children move through as they acquire their first language, noting the amazing similarities from child to child in structural acquisition while taking into account their different rates of acquisition. Wells (1986) also describes language stages children move
through as they acquire language. These stages detail a constant process during which children use language in more and more complex ways, therefor growing in their ability to use language effectively. The stages children move through as they acquire language would appear to corroborate Halliday's beliefs about the actual use of language aiding the growth of language.

The longitudinal study conducted by Wells (1986) focused on the language acquisition of 32 English speaking children. He notes five stages that children move through as they acquire more complex language skills. Stage I consists of short or single word utterances. The utterances contain what Wells (1986, p. 23) calls operators, like "'there,' 'look,' 'that,' 'want,' 'more,' and 'all gone,' " nouns, or a combination of an operator and a noun. Simple questions appear in the second stage which generally follow a distinct grammatical format. Stage III questions continue to be prevalent forms of communication, but children also begin to express their wants and the expressed grammar is more complex. During this stage children also are able to convey talk that discusses events which have occurred in the past, and less frequently, events that may occur in the future. In stage IV a new grammatical structure which allows "the production of both interrogative and negative sentences" develops (p. 29). In addition, the "why" question appears, signifying the child's ability to request an explanation of events. In stage V children are well into the complete grammatical intricacies of a sentence. They use their language for "giving information, asking and answering questions of various kinds, requesting (both directly and indirectly), suggesting, offering, stating intentions and asking about others, and expressing feelings and attitudes and asking about those of others" (p. 30). Children are also more capable of expressing interest or knowledge of events, both past and present. By the end of stage V, Wells notes that the child has a "basic vocabulary of several thousand words" (p. 32). When most children enter kindergarten they are capable users of their primary language, but they continue their language growth throughout elementary school.
Second Language Acquisition

Krashen and Terrell (1983) differentiated between language "acquisition" and language "learning" in their discussion of second language learners. During second language acquisition new speakers of a second language develop an ability to use the language in a subconscious way, much like we do when we are learning our primary language. Second language learning, on the other hand, tends to focus more on the knowing of a language - the conscious knowledge of grammatical rules and new vocabulary in the new target language. For young second language students the formal teaching of a second language is thought to be less effective than the authentic, natural use of the second language which can occur when a child is immersed in a safe situation which requires the use of the new language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Krashen and Terrell (1983) set forth five second language acquisition hypotheses which comprise many of the current considerations which are a part of second language acquisition theories. One of these hypotheses which parallels primary language acquisition theory is called the "natural order hypothesis" which theorizes that "grammatical structures are acquired (not necessarily learned) in a predictable order" (p. 28). The "input hypothesis" explains the notion that second language learners acquire language that is just beyond their current level of ability with the aid of context. Context can be provided for young children by "caretakers" (p. 32). Another aspect of second language acquisition can be explained through Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) theory of the zone of proximal development in which learners acquire and process information which is just beyond their current level of understanding with the help of capable others. For language acquisition, this is accomplished by taking known bits of language and assimilating new language patterns which have been introduced or modeled. The child can then try out his new language ability knowing that there is a capable other who will assist should a problem arise. Effective teachers of second language students help the new learners through the use of visual aids, and by using the new language in a comprehensible manner.
This affords the learner a meaningful base by which new language knowledge is attached and assimilated with old language knowledge.

**Benefits of Discussing Books which are Read Aloud**

Battle (1993) notes that "[b]oth qualitative and experimental research have established that reading stories aloud to children and providing opportunities to talk about the stories enhance language growth (e.g., Chomsky, 1972; Feitelson, Kita, & Goldstein, 1986; Ninio & Bruner, 1976) and can support the development of critical literate thinking (Short & Pierce, 1990; Wells, 1990)" (p. 163). The act of listening and talking about read-alouds and the impact these conversations have on the development of primary language is well-documented (e.g. Jacque, 1993; Kristo, 1993; Sheppard, 1990). Wells (1986) believes that it assists children in expanding the children's experiences beyond those areas they are already familiar with which allows them to "develop a much richer mental model of the world and a vocabulary with which to talk about it" (p. 152). When children talk about books they practice their comprehension skills by explaining, clarifying, and defining meanings and recalling the content they have heard in the stories (Hepler, 1992).

**Construction of Meaning**

Cochran-Smith (1984), Short (1990), Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and others have proposed that learners actively participate in the construction of their personal meaning of text. It is during book discussions that children are asked to take the language they know and use it "to investigate, to explore, to propose questions and seek solutions to unknown topics. The focus invariably is on meaning and making sense of things, defining problems, connecting ideas using what you know and what you know how to do" (Travers, 1988, p. 7). The classroom is a very social setting (Hiebert, 1991) in which children and teachers interact constantly by listening and speaking with each other. The oral communication fluency of children is developed when they use listening and speaking for functional and relevant reasons. "When children are actively involved in getting and giving meaning, they
learn language by using it with peers, teachers, and other adults in the classroom" (Crawford, 1993).

Children involved in book discussions interact with their teacher during read aloud time by asking questions and giving opinions. The teacher interacts with the students by checking for understanding and clarifying ideas. Rosenblatt (1982) found these unstructured interactions to aid in the development of the child's "aesthetic" understanding of a text, by providing "some linkage with the child's own experiences and concerns." Reading trade books and allowing time for discussion gives a teacher a temporary framework that allows children to practice their language skills in a comfortable, context rich environment (Crawford, 1993; Krashen, 1993). Many teachers, however, are relatively slow to accept this concept, often preferring to believe that children come to school as empty caldrons which must be filled with information disseminated by the teacher (Hiebert, 1991). The social constructivist view of language acquisition negates this belief.

**Language Growth**

Children's literature provides a common subject which all participants can relate to, therefore providing the framework for language acquisition to occur in a natural, context embedded situation. Allen (1989) notes that "English-as-a-second-language programs that emphasize skills and workbook activities can deprive these young language learners of the richly supportive context offered by good children's books " (p. 58). Reading books aloud does more than provide a correct grammatical form for the children to digest and regurgitate. Literature provides a shared experience for the young language learner to discuss and compare. Heald-Taylor (1986) finds that "the use of quality literature in language instruction gives students learning English as a second language opportunities to appreciate English in meaningful contexts, to hear the rhythm and intonation of the language, to become familiar with the syntactical structures while gradually gaining an understanding of the text" (p. 5). It is during read aloud time that children acquiring a
second language can "begin to internalize the vocabulary and structures of the language..." (Travers, 1988), and through the discussion of that book they can begin to practice using those structures which they have been internalizing.

**Critical Thinking**

An effective teacher will assist the children in making connections between books in order that they might also begin to use their critical thinking skills. Robert Ennis (1987, p. 10) defines everyday usage of the term 'critical thinking' to mean "reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do" (cited in Commeyras, 1993, p. 486). Commeyras (1993) extends this definition: "Critical thinking involves both dispositions (e.g., open-mindedness, reason seeking, and sensitivity toward other's feelings and knowledge) and abilities (e.g., engagement in argument analysis, question identification, credibility assessment, and inference)" (p. 486).

While many of the young children studied in the current literature do not engage in every aspect of critical thinking as outlined in these definitions, they are on the threshold. In a study of English speaking sixth graders, Anzul (1993) found that students were more likely to respond readily to literature when they read it from what Rosenblatt (1985, 1988) calls the "aesthetic stance." Anzul found that the English speaking students participated more in the discussions of the literature when they were personally involved with the text, and shared more of their own experiences as they related to the reading. These two factors affected the students' ability to think critically about the piece they were reading. This ability to read from the aesthetic stance would transfer to the non or semi-literate student being able to listen from the aesthetic stance. Au (1980) also found that children were more likely to be actively engaged in the discussion of a piece of literature if it reflected experiences they had had, or if the story, in some way, related to their personal lives.
Language Learning through Discussion of Read-Alouds

English Speaking Classes

Studies with native English speaking students have illustrated the literature discussion capabilities of students. While a number of researchers have discussed the value of discussing picture books with primary aged children (Cazden, 1988; Hepler, 1992; Holland & Shaw, 1993; Jacque, 1993; Sheppard, 1990), Janice Kristo's (1993) report on the ability of first grade children to critically discuss children's literature exemplifies the benefits. The English speaking first graders and their teacher studied by Kristo were involved daily in discussions of picture books. Their teacher initiated and participated in these discussions acting as facilitator, questioner, and clarifier. The fact that young children were able to participate freely in discussions about illustration techniques, author style, author motive, and personal experiences related to the text is important because it shows that young children, when encouraged and allowed to do so, are capable of using sophisticated critical thinking skills and evaluative measures when discussing a common piece of writing.

In the classroom studied by Kristo, the teacher was an integral part of the discussions. She asked open-ended questions and accepted student ideas. Wells (1986) points out that if the teacher is focusing only on her own agenda, and is unwilling, or hesitant to accept student thoughts there will be little chance for the child to carry on a meaningful conversation. The teacher in the classroom Kristo (1993) observed also used her knowledge of language to help the students further their interests. She asked questions, not to judge the "rightness" or "wrongness" of their answers, but rather to clarify, and further understanding.

Bilingual Classes

Bilingual classes also illustrate that language acquisition is aided during the course of book discussions. A study conducted with Mexican-American bilingual kindergartners (Battle, 1993), outlined the benefits of discussing shared literature. The children were
read to in both their native language (Spanish) and English, with the teacher switching back and forth between the two languages. The children responded in kind, using English and Spanish to respond to the piece of literature being read. Battle's (1993) study described the benefits of being a teacher who is fluent in the language of the students. When children are able to respond in their native language to a piece of literature, they are attending only to their thought processes, and ideas relating to the story at hand; they don't have the additional burden of attempting to communicate those ideas in English.

Orzechowska and Smieja (1994) illustrated the same point in a Canadian classroom which contained Polish speaking second language students. While they noted that often the students physically communicated their desire to participate in the discussion of a picture book (through gesture, and excited body movement) they were often hesitant to speak due to their limited knowledge of English. When a bilingual Polish speaking assistant was present to talk with the children during the reading of a picture book (the reading was done in English), the Polish students responded enthusiastically and thoughtfully using their native language primarily, but occasionally switching to English. Orzechowska and Smieja discussed the ability of the Polish students to "engage in a wide range of cognitive activities" (p. 131) when using their first language to talk about the books being read. The students were more willing to attempt answers in English when they knew they could switch to Polish as a resource for their explanations.

In a study conducted in a Puerto-Rican classroom, McCollum (1991) showed that the students engaged in a specific type of talk in which the thoughts and ideas of all participants were valued by the teacher. The students shared personal experiences which related to the topic at hand, and the teacher participated in the discussions, accepting their ideas as valid, useful additions to the topic. This discourse pattern was shown to facilitate the literacy development by allowing the students to use their language to learn.
English as a Second Language Classes

For children enrolled in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms in which the teacher is a mono-English speaker there are many hurdles to overcome. Many teachers believe that benefits to language acquisition and development occur for the ESL students when they are encouraged to respond in their second language of English to stories being read to them in English (Allen, 1989; McGee, 1995; Travers, 1988). However, the research literature outlining these benefits to language development is not as plentiful as the research literature examining the benefits to English speaking and bilingual students. Travers (1988) suggests that it is possible for book discussions to be so exciting for the second language student that they will "energize the children sufficiently so that the language is something they see as useable and companionable for their own purposes,...[making the acquisition of a second language] less something that 'has' to be done and more like something that youngsters want to do" (p. 6). He goes on to state that Krashen (1983) and Trelease (1982) provide evidence to "support the proposition that when children are read to they begin to internalize the vocabulary and structures of the language..." (p. 10). In a research study by Allen (1989), a ten year Laotian child named Pomsith was observed. For Pomsith the discussion of the picture books which were read to him provided the opportunity to have his talk supported by the text. While engaged in his everyday classroom activities, Pomsith did not appear as motivated to speak as he did when engaged with a piece of literature.

The teacher's role is also one which bears some examination. Thomson (1991) described her first grade ESL class in which initially there was too much teacher talk. Through her personal study of a videotaped reading session she discovered that her closed questions and dominance of the conversation hindered the language use of the students. She went on to make changes in her personal discourse style, allowing her agenda to be flexible, following the thoughts of the students, structuring her questions to be shorter and open-ended, and allowing a longer wait-time for answers. The result was real
conversations held cooperatively by all those involved. When children use their second
language to explore their ideas they are often at a point at which they are working at the
limits of their language ability. The teacher can act as an English model, assisting second
language children when they begin struggling in their ability to produce their thoughts in
English thereby helping children work within the zone of proximal development as
described by Vygotsky. When teachers allow students this freedom to experiment with
language while assisting them in their efforts they are supporting the acquisition of the
child's language.

Summary

The literature regarding primary language acquisition points out that children move
through a variety of stages in a relatively predictable manner while they are acquiring their
first language. Those who are acquiring a second language move through many of the
same stages. These second language learners rely on the help of the capable others who
talk with them modeling and providing examples of language. These discussions help the
children advance through language learning stages while giving them the opportunities to
use their new language.

Discussing picture books which are read aloud has been shown to be an effective
way to enhance language growth, not only for primary language speakers but for bilingual
speakers and ESL speakers as well. Discussing picture books helps students construct
their own personal meaning of the text, aids in the development of critical thinking skills,
and provides a common subject which can be discussed allowing room for language
growth.
CHAPTER III
Methodology

Setting and Participants

The participants were thirty-six (36) ESL students enrolled in second grade at Ocotillo Elementary school in Mojave City. The number of students was above the district's mandated 15 to one ratio because there were two teachers, engaged in a team-teaching situation, and because of the overcrowding of the general school population. The students were second language learners primarily from Mexico, although several students were born in the United States to families whose primary language was other than English. The school population of over 700 students represented an ethnically diverse group of children with the majority of the students being bussed from low socio-economic areas.

From this group of 36 students I chose four students—Ana, Javier, Briana and Marta—to serve as examples of the changes in language use that I wanted to investigate. The language of two of these children was representative of children who were Limited English language users while the language of the other two was indicative of children who were more orally proficient. This determination was made based on various data sources as well as classroom observations rather than relying strictly on the Language Assessment Scales (LAS) scores which all students had as a part of their cumulative records from the school district. The LAS test scores of each of these four children put them at LAS proficiency levels one and two which meant that they were considered non-

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1 The names of the students, the school, its location and district have been changed in this report.

2 The term "Limited English" is taken from the LAS test. In no way does it imply negative views held by the author regarding the potential of the students described.
English speakers. While the two less proficient students appeared to fit in with that classification, the more proficient speakers gave me reason to doubt the test results.

At the time this study was conducted I was in my fifth year teaching in the Ocotillo School District. My first year and a half were spent as a Chapter I Kindergarten teacher during which time I was responsible solely for the language development of kindergartners who came to me in the afternoon following a morning of traditional kindergarten classes. During that year and a half I began to observe a self-contained multi-age class of ESL students. As I observed over time I became interested in the possibilities of becoming an ESL teacher and began University course work which would enable me to obtain my ESL endorsement. Since the 1991/92 school year I have been teaching ESL students ranging from first through third grade.

Ms. Taylor, the teacher with whom I taught during the year of this study was in her fifteenth year of teaching. Her first seven years of teaching had been in English speaking classrooms across the United States as well as teaching abroad. After receiving her Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) endorsement she spent her next eight years as a teacher of ESL students.

Ms. Taylor and I spent the majority of the day on specific language development work with the students. Reading lessons, oral reading, social studies, science and math were all times which the students used for talking, exploring, and practicing English. The day began with approximately fifteen to twenty minutes of calendar activities designed to enhance oral language and practical math skills while at the same time observing district curriculum requirements and allowing time for general discussion of the day's events. Immediately following this calendar time I read orally with the students. Due to mandatory preparation time schedules, our oral reading time was limited to approximately

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3 The term "non-English" speaker is taken from the LAS test. In no way does it imply negative views held by the author regarding the potential of the students described.
thirty to forty minutes every morning, with my partner teacher reading every afternoon for approximately the same amount of time.

**Selection of Literature for Read-alouds**

I chose the books for reading time with several criteria in mind. It was important for me to use books with illustrations which aided the children's understandings of the text (Allen, 1989; Travers, 1988). While I often looked for colorful illustrations, I also found several books in black and white which were just as engaging. A second criterion was taken from children's literature classes I had attended at the University. It was that the book contain a good story, well told. A third criterion involved the language contained in the story. I looked for books that held a variety of language styles; conversation, descriptive language, rich literary language, and for books that explored a particular genre or theme (Allen, 1989; Kristo, 1993; Nussbaum & Puckett, 1990; Travers, 1988). The fourth criterion was to include books whose characters and stories represented not only the culture of the students enrolled in my class, but also illustrated the wide range of cultural diversity available in children's literature. Occasionally a fifth criterion was that the books fit in with the author study being conducted. On many occasions throughout the year the children and I explored books written by the same author. During these author studies we collected as many books as possible from the school library, public library, and my personal library which were authored by the same person.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This classroom based research project investigated the discussions which occurred between students and between the students and the teacher. The single case study, as described by Yin (1989), is a research strategy which allowed me to investigate "a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" in which "the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 23). The phenomenon in this case study would be the discussions about the books while the context would be the
time of the discussion. The study was designed primarily to examine the types of talk the children engaged in during story time as well as their ensuing language development. A secondary unit of focus included my role as a participant in the discussions. My research questions could best be answered by observing and recording the natural dialogue that occurred between the children and me.

**Data Sources**

In order to effectively study and document the responses of the children it was necessary to have multiple sources of data so that triangulation would be possible and credibility would be increased (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The primary source of data was transcribed audio tapes of reading sessions. The reading sessions were recorded no less than once a week throughout the 1994/1995 school year beginning in early September which gave a total of over 45 recordings of picture book discussions. From these sessions, eight were transcribed and three transcripts were selected as illustrative samples of reading discussions which took place over the school year. The three books used in this paper to illustrate the children's various types of talk were *Just Plain Fancy* by Patricia Polacco (1990), *The Art Lesson* by Tomie DePaola (1989), and *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (1991). The three books ultimately used for discussion in this paper were chosen for several reasons. They illustrated the types of talk that occurred over the span of the school year (i.e., *Just Plain Fancy* was read at the beginning of the school year, *The Art Lesson* in the middle, and *Chrysanthemum* at the end), and together they included examples of each one of the categories that were developed to explain the class discourse.

Secondary sources of data included end of the year interviews with the students, district tests measuring language proficiency, classroom observations in the form of personal journal entries (Hubbard & Power, 1993), and theoretical memos (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The end of the year student interviews were conducted with three groups of students—those who demonstrated a high degree of English proficiency, those who
were just beginning to be comfortable using English to communicate, and those who were
still struggling to communicate their ideas in English. Students were tested in January
using the LAS English and Spanish Oral Proficiency Test, and again at the end of May.
The LAS test is given to all children enrolled in the Ocotillo school district whose home
surveys indicate that a language other than English is spoken in the home. These children
are then placed in ESL or bilingual programs depending on their LAS scores and
availability of classes. The LAS test assesses student language ability by having students
name items and actions illustrated (concrete nouns and verbs), listen to a story and answer
yes/no questions (comprehension) and retell a story which they have first listened to on
cassette while looking at pictures that go along with the story. Personal journal entries
were written throughout the school year. Initially the journal entries were daily, and
highlighted thoughts that I was having following reading sessions, and things that the
students said or did during or after the discussion or during class time. By March the
journal entries were shorter, highlighting only the unusual talk or actions, rather than the
day to day occurrences. The theoretical memos were written as I read articles related to
my area of study. I frequently copied quotes from the article, and then responded to them
as I felt they related to my project.

Coding

I began to audio tape reading sessions in early September after the students and I
had settled into the school routine. When I first began taping, I explained my purposes in
recording their book conversations, showed the children the tape recorder, and answered
their questions which mainly dealt with the operation of the tape recorder.

As tapes were transcribed, they were compared using the constant comparative
method as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990). In this way as new tapes were
transcribed they were examined and compared with existing transcriptions. As I
transcribed the tapes, I discovered and noted that during the oral reading of the picture
books the students and I interacted using consistent types of talk which began to fit into specific categories. I made notes of these categories, and as new tapes were transcribed I added to and refined my list of categories. These transcribed discussions were categorized into idea units. An idea unit was a sentence or combination of sentences which conveyed a single meaning (samples of idea units are illustrated in the Appendix). Each idea unit was examined, and placed into a category. As the transcripts were further compared, the categories for each idea unit were refined leaving a total of seven categories. These were divided into student and teacher utterances, and identified as questions, information giving, statements, responding, personal experiences as they related to the story, intertextual connections, and predictions about story events. The number of idea units for each story was tabulated. The categories for each story were divided into teacher and student idea units, and these totals, as well as percentages for each individual story, were considered in the final analysis.

In order to ensure reliable coding, I enlisted the aid of an outside colleague. Once I had established initial categories I coded the transcript of Santa Cows (no longer a part of the data base) together with my colleague. The initial categories included Questions, Information Giving, Statements, Personal Experience, Intertextual Connections and Predictions. We then took individual copies of the transcript of The Art Lesson, coded them separately, and compared our results. Out of 258 idea units possible, our initial percent of agreement was 83%. Differences resulted from lack of specific knowledge about the book or its illustrations by the outside coder, and unclear definitions of categories which made it difficult to consistently put an idea unit into its respective category. Discussions of our differences led to the development of another category designated as Responding and refinement of existing categories. Through our discussions we reached 100% agreement on the designation of idea units to categories, and the remaining transcripts were then recoded.
CHAPTER IV

Results

This study was initiated to systematically examine the types of talk which occurred during the discussion of picture books, and to look at how that talk affected the language development of ESL students. Additionally, it was of interest to examine how the interaction of the teacher in these conversations influenced the conversations.

Within the section delineating the categories of talk is a discussion of how each type of talk was utilized by the participants—both students and teacher. While both students and teacher used talk which could be classified under each of the major category headings to discuss the books, each participant used the types of talk in different ways. The roles of the students and the teacher could best be illustrated in a general way by imbedding the discussion within each category.

Changes in Amount of Talk

During the course of this study there was a change in both the amount and type of language used by the students. The increase in amount is initially evident in the number of idea units generated throughout the three books which were analyzed. This quantitative information can be found in Table 1. At the beginning of the school year, during the reading of *Just Plain Fancy*, there were a total of 240 idea units. In *The Art Lesson* the number increased to 256 idea units, and at the end of the school year during the reading of *Chrysanthemum*, the idea units had grown in number to 356.

In order to examine the differences between student and teacher talk, frequencies in the amount of talk were compared for all three stories. In the story *Just Plain Fancy*, the students' comments comprised 82 of the idea units, while the teacher's comments accounted for 158. By the end of the year when *Chrysanthemum* was read, the students' comments had grown to 147 of the idea units, and the teacher's talk accounted for 209 idea units. A one-sample chi-square test was used to determine whether the frequency of
responses differed over time. The obtained $x^2 (2, n=333) = 19.7$, df = 2, was significant at the .005 level.

In and of itself this change in the amount of talk would be mildly interesting. The transcriptions showed that the students talked more as the year went on, but that the teacher's talk also increased. These increases in student talk could be indicative of a growing student comfort level in conversational English. As the students utilized their maturing language levels and increasing English vocabularies to discuss the books being read they became more equal participants in the book discussions increasing the amount of English used. The teacher's increase in talk could be attributed to the accompanying rise of student talk.

**Categories of Talk**

Examining the types of talk which occurred during the discussions of books helped to reveal the rich and complex nature of the language development of the ESL students. The coding of the idea units in the transcripts produced seven categories: Questions, Information Giving, Statements, Responding, Personal Experience, Intertextual Connections, and Predictions. As can be seen in Table 1, some of the categories contain more than one type of talk which relates to each category. In addition, each category has been organized into student and teacher talk. As the categories are discussed the role of the students and the teacher will be presented. Explanations of each category, and an example of each are provided in the Appendix. When appropriate, numbers from Table I have been incorporated into the text.

**Questions**

The first group of idea units contained the various types of questions asked during story time, and included questions about the illustrations, vocabulary, and miscellaneous book related and non-book related items. Many of the students who were less able English speakers used the book discussion time as an opportunity to receive information pertaining to the names of the items illustrated, while the more able English speakers...
tended to ask questions about the activities pictured in the illustrations. Teacher questions about illustrations tended to be searching questions aimed at asking the students to think about what was happening in a particular picture, why the illustrator had chosen to show the text in a particular way, or what media might have been used to create an illustration or a particular mood. Student book related questions and non-book related questions were generally directed to the teacher, and were often answered by the teacher with another question in order that they might develop their ability to use their critical thinking skills to explore their own queries, and learn to rely less on the teacher as the only person in the classroom with answers. Teacher book related questions were generally asked that the students might think twice about an occurrence in the book, or explore one of their own statements further thereby utilizing their critical thinking abilities.

**Information Giving**

The second group of idea units contains information giving statements made during story time. Information giving statements were coded as such because they were statements which did not directly refer to the sentence or idea that preceded them, but rather referred indirectly to the story or illustration in some way. Some information giving statements were indicative of prior knowledge that the student had which related to the story or insight into the motives of the characters. This shared knowledge became a catalyst for further discussion.

As the year progressed the students became more willing and able to share the personal knowledge they held which related to the story being read. This growth can be seen in Table I as the student's Information Giving talk grew from 4 idea units in *Just Plain Fancy* to 24 idea units in *Chrysanthemum*.

**Statements**

The third category of idea units was comprised of two types of statements. These statements were either about illustrations or about vocabulary. Both students and teacher
made statements about things they saw going on in the illustrations, and sometimes about what media they thought the illustrator had used. The statements about the illustrations far outweighed the statements made about vocabulary throughout the year. However, on occasion both teacher and students did share their information regarding the meaning of a word. The category of Statements differed from Information Giving in that the talk categorized as Statements was directly related to the story either through telling about vocabulary words or characters and situations portrayed in the illustrations.

Responding

The fourth group of idea units contains the five types of responding to others that occurred during story time. They were New Information, Additional Information, Phatic, Clarification, and Building (teacher only). As is seen in Table 1 Responding was the most frequently used type of talk, accounting for 33 student idea units and 85 teacher idea units in Just Plain Fancy at the beginning of the year. By the end of the year during Chrysanthemum the student idea units had more than doubled to 72 and the teacher idea units had grown to 116.

During the course of the discussion both students and teacher used a type of response which offered new information to the talk. Once a topic had been introduced and dialogue was used that still referred to the original topic, it was coded as Additional Information. For the teacher the most frequent type of talk was coded as Phatic speech, in which a reply was given - either a "yes", "okay", "mmhm", or a simple repeat of the student's speech. This was one way in which the student's talk was acknowledged. Students also engaged in this responsive phatic talk. One type of response which only the teacher made was used to build on the student's initial talk. If the student answered a question or made a statement which contained only one or two words the teacher built on the student's talk restating it in a complete sentence. The final type of response was made in order to clarify statements or responses made by another. Replies given during the
book discussions were not always audible or understandable, and both students and teacher would require clarification of the content of statements or questions. The teacher used clarification statements to rephrase those comments or questions of the students which were not understandable due either to language differences, quiet voices, or mumbling, and to check for understanding.

**Personal Experience**

The fifth group of idea units contained personal experience statements made during story time. During the course of the reading of a story the students were able to make links between their personal experiences and the situations occurring in the story. The teacher used this type of talk much less than the students.

**Intertextual Connection**

The sixth group of idea units included statements which formed an intertextual connection between the book being read and another which had already been read by either the teacher or the students. Both students and teacher made references to previously read stories during the book discussions.

**Predictions**

The sixth group of idea units was comprised of statements in which predictions were made about story outcome or upcoming events in the story being read. Students were quick to tell the group what they thought was going to happen in the story. Their predictions were based on their own personal experiences, situations which had occurred in other stories, and their vivid imaginations.

In summary, the seven categories which were developed to classify the dialogue occurring in the book discussions illustrate the diversity in the types of talk which occurred. Through analysis of the transcripts it is evident that the students used the common topic of the book at hand to discuss the books in English. These discussions illustrated the students' knowledge of English however broad or limited.
Individual Students

Another way to explore the benefits of discussing books which were read aloud is to look at individual students. To illustrate some of the changes that occurred over the school year I chose two groups of students--two who demonstrated a lower level of English speaking ability in the classroom, and two who demonstrated a higher degree of English language communication ability.

Not all student comments on the transcribed recordings could be identified as coming from individual students, and so the use of additional data to select the four students used in this study was necessary. These data sources included: classroom observations, LAS (Language Assessment Scales) scores, class interviews, and journal entries and transcriptions.

The two students whose language represented the kinds of talk used by other non-English proficient students were Javier and Ana. Both children were enrolled the entire year in our second grade class. Ana had not been enrolled in any type of educational setting until the last four months of first grade in the previous school year. Javier began the school year in our class having moved to the United States from Panama. According to his parents, he had been in school during the year previous to second grade. The January, 1995 LAS scores of both students designated them as non-English speakers, proficiency level one. I found, however, that both students were able to communicate not only basic needs but to share thoughts and ideas in English. This is not to imply that the talk of Javier and Ana was fluid. Both labored to express themselves at times, and their communication with me was frequently a truly negotiated act.

The two students who demonstrated a higher degree of English communication skills were Briana and Marta. Both of these students had been enrolled in school since kindergarten in the United States. The January LAS scores of both girls put them in the non-English speaking category, with LAS proficiency levels of two. Marta was two points away from being designated a Limited English speaker. Contrary to their LAS
classification both girls were quite capable of telling logical, coherent oral stories and were equally capable of translating for the less able Spanish speaking students in the class. Both girls were consistently active in the book discussions.

The interviews conducted at the end of the year were quite illuminating. The students spoke freely about their views on books, oral reading, and their future as far as reading and talking about books was concerned. In these interviews I discovered some attitudes about books and book discussions that I had not been consciously aware of.

Ana and Javier

Both Ana and Javier saw books primarily as a learning source. Ana had a set of rules for books which included "having fun with books, treating them nice, don't write in books", and "treat them good as yourself." When asked if she liked having books read to her and why Ana answered, "They're good for you so you can learn. Sometimes you hear people read to you and, um, sometimes you get to learn...like somebody reads a book, and you gotta read another book."

Javier admitted that he liked talking about the books and said "...they are for, um, the talk and the read, and looking, and more attention." For Javier this indicated that he had developed an ability (and the inclination) to pay attention to whoever was reading to him in English. At the beginning of the year Javier had exhibited very little interest in the book reading sessions. He was a constant distraction to the other children, poking, prodding, and whispering to them. He was frequently removed from the group to prevent him from harming others.

Ana was interested in telling her point of view during book discussions. When her ideas were misunderstood by those around her she was not afraid to reexplain herself until we all understood what she meant. If I were to suggest something that was a possible explanation for one of Ana's talks and was wrong in my understanding of what she had said, she was quite willing to disagree with my interpretation, and would tell me that that
is not what she had meant. Conversely, if I was correct she would agree, and go on with her thought. In the dialogue which follows Ana talks about how she found the books we read to be a source of help in learning English words.

Ana: I like to talk about the books because sometimes you can learn something from them, and hear people from them.

Teacher: Wait, - hear people from them? You mean hear people talk about them?

Ana: Yeah. And then you learn a lot because they help you. They comin' nice.

Teacher: How do they help you?

Ana: Help you with the words - saying.

Teacher: The English words?

Ana: Mhmhm.

To my knowledge I had never overtly pointed out to the students that the books were a source of English vocabulary. When asked about the upcoming year and whether or not they would be talking about books in third grade, both Ana and Javier had some interesting answers.

Teacher: What will happen if they don't let you [talk about the books]? What if they say 'Put your hands down'?

Javier: You get mad!

Ana: You thinking about it in your head. Maybe you say, 'I'll read myself,' and one time I'll get one to read a book.

Teacher: So maybe you'll think about it until you read it yourself? Do you think you'll be able to read those books soon?

All: Mhmhm.

From the beginning of the year I had been concerned with Javier's behavior during reading time, as was evidenced by my journal notes. He did not appear to be listening to the stories and did not participate in talking about the book. It was not until January, 1995 that he began to participate in the discussions. At that time he was using the book to
discover the names of things, and one day began to sit in the front so he could point to objects in the illustrations. Javier also became one of the class specialists on whether a book was fiction or non-fiction. He surprised me one day by informing us all (without any prior discussion prompts) that *Chrysanthemum* was fiction because "rats don't talk" and "they don't wear clothes."

Ana took her life at school very seriously, seeing it as an opportunity to learn English, and all about the world around her. She was eager to come to school and enjoyed her time when she was present. She particularly enjoyed story time. In February I looked over her shoulder as she wrote in her journal. For Ana "writing" meant putting groups of letters together and drawing a picture to go with her text. She would always read her text aloud, but its meaning changed from day to day. On this particular day, I mentioned to Ana that she was really taking her time with the drawing in her journal. She told me that she was doing her picture like a real illustrator would. She went on, "I'm going to be an illustrator when I grow up, so I need to practice." Ana was a very thoughtful child. In this respect her language was definitely an obstacle for her. As she discussed the books she often asked her classmates what a Spanish word or idea translated to in English. Once she had the translation she would continue talking. Sometimes her classmates were unable to help her to her satisfaction, and many of her ideas would get caught up in her translations from Spanish to English and unfortunately be lost. She continued to try throughout the year, and her attempts became more fruitful. During a reading of *The Great Kapok Tree* in March Ana theorized, "I think he's not going to cut down the tree because the tree is a friend to us." No negotiation of meaning was necessary.

**Briana and Marta**

Briana and Marta viewed books in a very different way than Ana and Javier. They did not have a set of rules which governed the use of books, rather they saw them as a
source of enjoyment and were able to articulate their enjoyment of the social aspects of talking about the books. Both girls viewed themselves as readers, and even though they both talked about going to the public library with family members, and picking out their own books to read, they also expressed a continued interest in being read aloud to by someone else. Marta mentioned that "I like being read to because it's fun when you raise your hand. And the colors - they're beautiful and they're bright. Or some author drew some funny - some stories; or happy or sad. That's why I like being read to."

Briana and Marta both shared that they enjoyed discussing books in a group as is seen in the following comments:

Briana: Sometimes I like raising my hand because people say -- like, we read a scary story ... they say funny things that they're going to happen, but it doesn't, and everybody laughs, and it's funny. Sometimes it's funny. Sometimes it's sad.

Marta: The illustrator, and the author, they do pretty pictures. And they writing the stories, and the pictures. Some of them are so bright, and some of them are so dark. That's why we have to talk about them.

In summary, it was found that all four children developed a sense of literary language. They all had ways of talking about books. They had a good sense of what media could be used to make an illustration. The children developed a sense of story, and an understanding that anything was possible in the world of fiction. They enjoyed the time during which they were read to, and looked forward to finding the books we had read as a group in the class library. In addition, Marta and Briana were excited about finding those books we had read at the public library.

While both Marta and Briana developed the ability early on in the school year to discuss books using terminology like "fiction" and "non-fiction", it was not until later in the year that Javier and Ana demonstrated this ability. Marta and Briana started the school year with an ability to fluently communicate their thoughts and ideas in English.
This was not so for Javier and Ana. Because Javier and Ana started out the school year at a lower level of English proficiency than Briana and Marta, it was easier to see the gains made by Javier and Ana in language learning. They came in with a lower English proficiency level, and left at the end of the year with an ability to communicate which closely resembled that which Marta and Briana had begun the year with. The talk of Marta and Briana became more sophisticated over time, while Javier and Ana began to talk more, and their sentences made sense in a more cohesive way.
CHAPTER V
Discussion and Implications

This study explored the effects of book discussions on the language development of second language students. By means of a categorization scheme developed from examining transcripts of read aloud time, I was able to analyze and interpret the responses of the ESL students in my classroom. In addition, to provide a more in-depth view of the benefits to language development I looked specifically at four children. The study also examined my role as the teacher in these book talks.

The major limitation of this study was that it was conducted in my own classroom. Objectivity was important for an accurate portrayal of the information I would find. However, after reviewing the pilot study which was conducted in the classroom of a colleague during the spring of 1994, I realized it would be easier and more beneficial to collect the variety of data which I was searching for in my own classroom. One of the factors that was missing in the pilot study was an intimate knowledge of the students involved, and the ability to hear the book talk that emerged during the day. The benefits of intimately observing the students being studied outweighed any difficulties which may have arisen as a result of being an insider in the classroom.

A second limitation was the possibility that my talk would be altered due to the fact I knew I was tape recording not only the childrens' talk but my own as well. It was possible that I would change my questions knowing that I should be asking open-ended questions, and fostering more student talk time during the book-talks. The taped book talks were not transcribed immediately following the discussion. In this way an analysis of my talk was not done during the collection of the recorded book talks. This allowed me to exert some control over not analyzing my part in the book talks as they were happening.

Another consideration during the research project was the amount of time spent on talking about the picture books. Often I found myself glancing at the clock, and hurrying
student's comments so that we might get to the specialist's class on time. I believe that many of our discussions would have continued had there been no cut off time.

Benefits to Students

For the students it seemed beneficial to spend time talking about books. During the course of the year I watched the students move from hesitant participants to children who were willing to use literary language to talk about books which had been read to them. The increases in the amount of talk which are illustrated in Table 1 may be indicative of the students' growing comfort level in the use of conversational English. Travers (1988) talks a great deal about the benefits to second language children of reading picture books aloud and discussing them. As a proponent of literature based curriculum he "envisions all language lessons having a center of gravity rooted in a highly informal and interactive process complete with the inevitable attendant errors and mistakes that distinguish such an undertaking" (p. 4). This view encompasses what happened on a daily basis in our ESL classroom as we read picture books and talked about them.

Book reading time was a community shared experience for the class. The book gave everyone a similar point of reference and topic for shared discussion. During this time we contributed of ourselves to the group. Those listening took what was given and applied it to their existing body of knowledge. Those who talked were able to practice English by articulating important concepts, vocabulary, and ideas. The atmosphere was safe and familiar, and all things said were acknowledged and absorbed into the conversation. A more detailed study of four students provides an added dimension to aid in further understanding the benefits of book discussions.

Ana was often swept up in her need to communicate her ideas, talking on and on until her listeners understood. She was so excited to share what she knew that she was seemingly unaware of how difficult it was for her listeners to understand her talk. Because she was such a thoughtful child, however, I wondered if she wasn't painfully aware of her
troubles with communication. What a joy it must have been for her to begin moving to a level of English proficiency in which she could share her thoughts without struggle. Javier began as a very reluctant listener and moved to a vocal participant. He seemed unwilling to use his English until he was more comfortable with it. Unlike Ana, he did not appear to have the passion for expression of ideas.

The language development of Marta and Briana was not as evident as that of Ana and Javier. The types of changes they made were not necessarily changes in volume or even a change in their ability to formulate more cohesive sentences or ideas but rather in their ability to use literary language and to develop more sophisticated ideas about literature as well as the ability to discuss the books read to them. Even though the changes made by Briana and Marta were not as obvious as those made by Ana and Javier I still believe that it was important and beneficial for both of these girls, and others with similar language abilities to talk about books. Through the books they became aware of the richness of language, developed a literary language which they could use to talk about books, and gained a wider view of the world of literature. They continued to have opportunities to use English in a contextual way. They retained their desire to read fluently on their own someday, and had just begun to realize that they could obtain that goal.

The Role of the Teacher

As I reviewed the transcripts, I saw that as the English speaking teacher involved in these discussions of picture books, I played a variety of roles: the English language model; the person who was able to read the picture books fluently; and a co-discussant. Squire (1994) mentions that:

The task of the teacher of literature...is to focus on the transaction between the book and the reader, on the literary experience itself, and on ways of extending
and deepening it.... Sound literary insight and aesthetic judgment will never be taught by imposing from above adult ideas of what a work means (p. 640).

It was this notion of what the teacher's role should be that helped guide me as I began talking about books with students.

Knowing that the children had a great deal to offer, but often had trouble expressing it due to their language abilities was problematic. It was not my intention to give the children ideas about the book, and they could not always express their own thoughts coherently in English. In my role of fluent English model I often facilitated the conversations (Kristo, 1993) by helping children who had very little English proficiency put their fragmented ideas into complete sentences - always hoping that I had not read too much into their few English words. I vacillated between not giving any help with expression to giving too much help, which then seemed to make the idea mine rather than theirs. While my original intent when I first picked a book to read may not have been to teach a particular word or phrase or concept, I discovered from listening to the transcripts that direct teaching is frequently just what happened during the discussion.

Another important role was that of being the person who was able to read the books. The majority of the picture books which we read were written at a level which was above the reading level of most of my students. Without my reading ability there would have been a great deal of literature which we could not have shared during this school year. Being able to read fluently also allowed me to read with expression which made the text more interesting to hear, and more understandable. For me this was akin to listening to Shakespeare for the first time. Without the proper vocal inflection and the acting out of the text, much of Shakespeare's work is lost to the uninitiated. With my fluency, and the illustrations to assist in meaning making, English picture books were more accessible to most of the students. I showed the children through my daily action that I was a reader, and that I enjoyed reading. As an experienced reader I was also able to explore Allen's (1989) idea that it is important for the teacher to expand the "breadth and depth of
children's knowledge by making links between books" (p. 62). As I read books to children I was able to share connections that I had made between books, which in turn provoked them to see their own connections at other times.

I participated readily in the book discussions. I enjoyed conversing with the students, and found that I looked forward to reading time as did the majority of the students. I valued and respected the ideas of the children. Just like the children, I asked many types of questions. They question type that was most curious to me was the one in which I returned the child's question with a question designed to have them answer their own questions. They were quite often able to answer their own questions but continued to direct their questions to me, showing that perhaps they were not so sure about the value of their ideas. I would have preferred that they answer each other's questions when possible, and carry on more dialogue with each other, leaving me out of the main role. Cazden (1988) offered insight into one possible value of another type of my questions—clarification. The questions I asked in order to clarify what the children had said served to help them think further about what they had said. This rephrasing or restating allowed them the time and the need to reexplain themselves in turn using more or different English phrases or words. It was this goal that I continued to work for throughout the year.

Initially I was disappointed with the amount of teacher talk discovered. I had wanted the children to be the ones doing most of the talking. Analyzing the transcripts, however, helped me realize that the talk I added to the discussions was important for my students and helped in achieving one of my goals as an ESL teacher. Through reading books aloud I was able to model English in a meaningful context. By fostering discussions about the books with my ESL students I was able to assist them in building a broader base of English language use, which they in turn had the opportunity to use without my direct assistance.
Implications for Further Study

There are limited studies regarding book discussions held by second language students, and the ensuing English language development of the students (Allen, 1989). It was in conducting this research project that more questions came up for me. Further studies are indicated in order to find out how best to help the children see that their talk is respected by the teacher, and that they should learn to trust their own answers without requiring validation from the teacher. Perhaps a study exploring the group dynamics would help in discovering how best to facilitate a group discussion about picture books with second language students in which the students were more active participants.

Another area of interest would be to examine what happens when the book discussions are held by only a few students. It may be that the sheer number of students involved in this study made some students hesitant to participate.

A third area of interest hinges on the way in which the talk of the teacher may differ from the talk of the student. In Fitzgerald's (1995) research review, she suggests that the "...discourse structure [of the teacher] may often be incompatible with home-discourse styles" (p. 126). It would be important to study what happens when an anglo teacher attempts to change her talk structure to a type of talk that might be more culturally appropriate for her students.

Conclusion

As suggested by this study, discussing picture books which are read aloud to second language students does appear to assist them in their language development. Students seemed to benefit from the exposure to English used contextually and authentically. The book discussions were meaningful exchanges orchestrated by those involved. As an ESL teacher I chose to use literature as a vehicle to explore the children's understanding of the world around them, and one of the results was that the students were exposed to the structure and sound of the English language which they in turn used to discuss the book being read. The real language presented in children's literature provides
second language learners the opportunity to hear, see and use English in an authentic manner. Frequently the text of the books was above the reading level of the students, but by having the book read to them by a fluent English speaker, the students were able to have the opportunity to make meaning of the English contextually while engaging in a variety of interactions - with the text, with each other, and with me.

**Recommendations for Instruction**

It seems clear that the ESL students in this study used English to explore the literature which they shared as a group. While it would be impossible to directly relate their changes in language use to the sole act of discussing books, it was quite likely that the book discussions had some impact on their language learning and attitudes about books.

Making recordings of book discussions, and then systematically analyzing the transcriptions is one valuable tool ESL teachers can use to study the impact that the discussions have on the language development of ESL students. With as few as three taped book discussions spread out over the course of a school year an ESL teacher could examine the growth of language over time and begin to understand the types of transactions which occur between participants. Keeping a journal which detailed the day-to-day classroom talk of the students which related to books would also help the picture become more clear.

As practitioners, we can also use these transcriptions to examine our own teaching practices. During the actual reading of a book, and the ensuing discussion it is often difficult to remember exactly what was said, and perhaps how a certain student's verbal wanderings actually relate to the topic at hand. The tapes can illuminate any hidden personal agendas we might have, the questioning techniques we use, and the types of responses that students make to our talk. The understandings that we, as ESL teachers could gain through a systematic, deliberate reflection on the transcripts would necessarily
aid us in bettering our teaching practices. The tapes could help show just how complicated a "simple" book talk can be.

Perhaps the most important recommendation following this study is to spend as much time as possible reading and discussing picture books with children. Whether the discussions be in the child's native language or second language, there appear to be benefits which cannot be ignored. Books, and the ideas that children make of them through talk can be powerful and important for all those who participate.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Just Plain Fancy</th>
<th>The Art Lesson</th>
<th>Chrysanthemum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S</td>
<td>T</td>
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Total Idea Units: 240, 256, 356
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<tr>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SQI</td>
<td>Question about name of item in illustration (question illustration)</td>
<td>from Chrysanthemum S: What's that? (pointing to book) T: This? That's a horn of some kind. A bugle - to play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Question about situation occurring in illustration (question illustration)</td>
<td>from The Art Lesson S: Why it's upside down? (ref. to the picture that Tomie has drawn on his bed sheets) T: Why do you think it's upside down? S: Because he was writing there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQI</td>
<td>Question about item or situation occurring in illustration (question illustration)</td>
<td>from Just Plain Fancy T: Now what has happened? M: It opened and the egg get out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQV</td>
<td>Question about unknown word (question vocabulary)</td>
<td>from Chrysanthemum P: What's a daisy? S: Flower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQV</td>
<td>Question about unknown word (question vocabulary)</td>
<td>from Chrysanthemum T: The author chose to say she wilted. Have you ever heard that word before? S: Jilted? T: No. Wilted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQBR</td>
<td>Question which is related to the book in some way (book related)</td>
<td>from The Art Lesson S: He is a story man? T: Yes. He writes stories. He is an author.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQBR</td>
<td>Question which is related to the book in some way (book related)</td>
<td>from Just Plain Fancy T: What do you think it means when she gets a white cap? S: Good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQNBR</td>
<td>Question which does not directly relate to the book (non-book related)</td>
<td>from The Art Lesson S: Where's that? T: I will show you where Connecticut is, and then you can tell me what continent it's on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TQNBR</td>
<td>Question which does not directly relate to the book (non-book related)</td>
<td>from The Art Lesson T: Who was born in this state? S: Patricia Polacco.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S=Student; T=Teacher; Initial=Individ. Students; Bold indicates example within dialogue.
INFO GIVING

SIG Statement which does not relate directly to the story line or any surrounding dialogue (information giving)

from Chrysanthemum
T: Laying down. Those are all good descriptions of it. We can see they're moving can't we? Lupita?
L: That looks like a poem because it has Chrysanthemum, Chrysanthemum three times.
T: And so that looks like a poem to you?

TIG Statement which does not relate directly to the story line or any surrounding dialogue (information giving)

from Chrysanthemum
T: This?
S: On the other page.
T: This? That's a bow in her hair. Her dad is reading a book called The Inner Mouse, Volume I - Childhood Anxiety.

STATEMENTS

SSI Statement about illustration (statement illustration)

from Just Plain Fancy
J: Look at the chickens.
T: Yeah. What do the chickens think?
S: (students make gulping noise)

TSI Statement about illustration (statement illustration)

from Chrysanthemum
T: Oh. The artist, Kevin Henkes, also put little lines to show the wind that's coming out of her mouth. When you do illustrations you can remember some of these tips.

SSV Statement about vocabulary (statement vocabulary)

from Chrysanthemum
T: Does anybody know what the word is when something WAS straight and now it's...
S: crooked/blowed
T: Crooked or...
S: blowing

TSV Statement about vocabulary (statement vocabulary)

from Chrysanthemum
T: The author chose to say she wilted. Have you ever heard that word before?
RESPONDING

SNI  New information added to the discussion in response to a preceding question or statement (new information)

from The Art Lesson
T: You use them! So if she's telling them not to wear down the points...
S: You can't use them.

TNI  New information added to the discussion in response to a preceding question or statement (new information)

from Just Plain Fancy
R: When the truck is gonna stop they gonna take all the eggs out and he gonna say 'Oh, no! We miss one.'
T: Yes. When the truck driver pulls out the egg carton one will be gone, and he'll never know how that one was gone. And these people - they never knew how the egg got under their chicken.

SAI  Information added to a topic already introduced (additional information)

from Chrysanthemum
S: The flowers are no more on the blanket. She has another blanket.
T: Oh. She does. Why do you think that is?
S: She grew up and her blanket was small.

TAI  Information added to a topic already introduced (additional information)

from Chrysanthemum
T: Maybe he likes mice.
S: Maybe he could do good pictures.
T: That's what I was thinking. Maybe he doesn't draw very good people. We'll find some other books of his where I think he uses humans so we can make that decision later.

SP  A response given in order to acknowledge the speaker - either a 'yes', 'no', or a repeat of the preceding speaker's phrase. (phatic)

from Just Plain Fancy
T: Okay. Marta says it opened up and the egg came out.
M: Yeah.

TP  A response given in order to acknowledge the speaker - either a 'yes', 'no', or a repeat of the preceding speaker's phrase. (phatic)

from Just Plain Fancy
S: It's a wagon.
T: Okay.

SC  A response given in order to clarify a previous statement (clarification)

from The Art Lesson
T: You think it's no fair that the paint is bad, or no fair that they only get one piece of paper?
S: One piece of paper.

S=Student; T=Teacher; Initial=Individ. Students; Bold indicates example within dialogue

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TC</th>
<th>A response given in order to clarify a previous statement (clarification)</th>
<th>from <em>The Art Lesson</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A: Maybe, when he was little...another person he looked when he was an illustrator, and he came just like the other man he saw?</td>
<td>A: When he was little he saw an illustrator and he became just like that illustrator? Is that what you're saying?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TB</td>
<td>A response made which builds on the previous student response (building)</td>
<td>from <em>Chrysanthemum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S: A banana</td>
<td>T: You think it looks like a banana? It looks...maybe like lots of bananas all together?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPE</th>
<th>A personal experience which has been brought to mind by the story (personal experience)</th>
<th>from <em>Just Plain Fancy</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>R: Once, I lived in one trailer alone... T: Okay. You lived in a trailer... R: And a lot of man lived, and when I went to his house - her house, there was a lot of horses and chickens - a lot. And my mom want to take a feather to put it flowers. T: And did he let her take a feather? R: A lot. That man, he, um, have a dog and he have a lot of those and I always go down. I always find the feathers.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TPE</th>
<th>A personal experience which has been brought to mind by the story (personal experience)</th>
<th>from <em>The Art Lesson</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T: Yup. You know, my parents and my family and my brothers and I are building a cabin in the mountains far away from here, and I had to build something and cover up some walls. But before I covered up the walls I drew a picture on them. Just like Tommy did. And then I covered them up with paneling. So the only people that know what's in there are me and my family. It's fun to draw on the walls. S: You told me. (about drawing on the walls) T: And now you guys.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIC</th>
<th>A connection made between the story being read and another story which has already been read (intertextual connections)</th>
<th>from <em>The Art Lesson</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>S: Garunga, garunga (sounds made in Tom) T: Ana? A: Those [are the people in] the story of the other [book] we read. T: That's right. He had Tom and Nana. And that was his grandfather that taught him about cutting off the chicken legs. Garunga, garunga.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S=Student; T=Teacher; Initial=Individ. Students; Bold indicates example within dialogue.
A connection made between the story being read and another story which has already been read (intertextual connections)

T: ...What are some of the other stories that had him as a little boy in it?
M: unintelligible response (probably telling name of book)
T: That's right. One Step, Then Another. That's the book when Tomie taught his grandfather how to walk again. His grandfather Bob.

**PREDICTIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPr</th>
<th>Statement which predicts an outcome in the story being read (prediction)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>from <em>Chrysanthemum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>I think at the end she gonna be a flower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>She's going to be a flower? Like this?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Mmhm.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S=Student; T=Teacher; Initial=Individ. Students; Bold indicates example within dialogue
Bibliography


**Children's Books Cited**


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