Digital Picture Books in the Primary EFL Classroom: Changing the Role of the Teacher

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Storytelling and reading picture books are widespread activities in the primary EFL classroom. Usually it is the teacher who reads or tells the story to the children supporting their understanding with pictures, mime and gestures. While children mostly enjoy this activity, they are hardly ever given the chance to explore a picture book “on their own”. Many primary teachers are concerned that the inconsistent sound-letter relation of the English language would overtax their students and independent reading would lead to wrong pronunciation.

However, studies investigating the use of written language (e.g. Rymarczyk & Diehr 2010; Frisch 2013) and extensive reading in the primary EFL classroom (e.g. Kolb 2013) show that this teacher-centred approach to reading picture books does not fully exploit their language learning potential. In this context, digital picture books offer new opportunities for reading in a foreign language: the combination of visual and auditory information facilitates the reading process. Digital picture books also offer extra features (e.g. animation and sound) that can scaffold the learning of unknown vocabulary as well as innovative possibilities of reader-text interaction that could support the understanding of the story and enhance the development of reading strategies. Due to these supportive features digital picture books are an ideal tool for extensive reading activities.

Compared to traditional storytelling lessons, the use of digital picture books in an extensive reading setting changes the role of the teacher. Instead of presenting the story to the children, teachers have to choose a variety of appropriate reading material, develop materials that support the individual reading process, design tasks that check and extend understanding, provide opportunities for subjective reactions to the texts and keep track of individual reading processes.

The poster presents a research project that explores the benefits of digital picture books for the primary EFL classroom. Following an action research approach, the study uses classroom videos and student interviews to look into the potential of digital picture books for language learning and criteria for selecting appropriate digital picture books. It further explores the role of the teacher in an extensive reading setting and develops task scenarios for the use of digital picture books in the primary EFL classroom.
