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Cultivating teacher language awareness using picturebooks in the English language classroom

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Abstract
Language awareness is a multidimensional concept centring on *engagement with language*. It involves three core dimensions: cognitive, affective and social. Teacher language awareness (TLA) encompasses these dimensions but additionally involves: the language user, the language analyst and the language teacher. In Norway, language awareness is seamlessly integrated into the national English subject curriculum. Moreover, the latest revision in 2020 explicitly demands the use of authentic English picturebooks with young learners. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the ways in which English teachers can enhance their TLA by using picturebooks as a teaching resource in language work. This study employs the methodology of action research, including two action cycles. Four teachers, two at beginner level and two in upper primary, collaborated in pairs to carry out a teaching scheme focusing on vocabulary and collocations. The data were primarily collected from interviews, which were coded and analysed in line with qualitative content analysis. This study reveals three notable areas in which teachers experience enhancement of their TLA: *Exploring the potential of picturebooks, Creating consciousness-raising tasks* and *Identifying opportunities for language talk.* The teachers participating in the study state that using picturebooks as the main textual resource for language work has enriched their understanding of language awareness and motivated them to adopt a more holistic approach to teaching English.

Keywords: *Language awareness, teacher language awareness, engagement with language, picturebooks*

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a marked increase of interest in research on language awareness in general, as well as on teacher language awareness (TLA). Naturally, the two are inherently interconnected and overlap to some extent; however, TLA encompasses additional and wider dimensions than those of the learner. According to Andrews and Svalberg (2017; Svalberg, 2009), the term TLA reflects "teacher development activity that focuses on the interface between what teachers know, or need to know, about language and their pedagogical practice" (p. 220). This implies that, for teachers to facilitate the development of learners' language awareness successfully, they need to possess subject-specific knowledge about language and be "language aware" (Andrews & Lin, 2018), as well as have a deep understanding of how languages are learnt and what teaching materials are suitable for this purpose.

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This study focuses on language awareness and TLA in the context of teaching English in primary school in Norway. However, it is important to note that these concepts apply to the teaching of all languages. Therefore, the theory used in the present study can be transferred to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in general.

In Norway, the concept of language awareness has been given a central role in learners' language acquisition, as described in the latest English curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). This makes it even more intriguing to contemplate language awareness through the lens of teachers' practices. Years of serving as a teacher trainer within the continuing education of English teachers have shown the researcher that teachers often find the concept of language awareness to be vague and ambiguous.

It should also be pointed out that today, English is not categorised as *a foreign language* in Norway. In educational terms, English is often considered *an additional language*, indicating that English holds a unique position in the Norwegian society compared to other languages taught in school, such as German, Spanish, French and others, which are labelled *foreign languages*. In this study, English as *an additional language* is the preferred term, along with referring to English as *the target language*.

In the realm of TLA, there has been meagre attention paid to ways teachers can enhance their language awareness themselves through their teaching practices. The present study aims to investigate how the use of picturebooks can nurture English teachers' comprehension and development of TLA. However, TLA cannot be studied in isolation. Therefore, this study explored the synergy between the learner's and the teacher's language awareness to reveal the potential impact of the use of picturebooks on teachers' language awareness and their teaching practices.

2. Context of the study

The current English curriculum in Norway, known as the LK20 *Curriculum in English*, was introduced in 2020 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). This new curriculum has a considerably stronger focus than its predecessor on two closely interconnected areas, namely *reading* and *language learning* (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). Reading is one of the basic skills in the English subject and is inextricably linked with one of the core elements in the subject, *Working with texts*. Texts are defined in a broad sense covering a wide range of formats and styles, such as spoken or written, formal or informal and fictional or factual, and more (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Regarding *language learning*, it is clear that this should be explicitly oriented towards an exploratory approach to language work (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). This can be interpreted as a stronger focus on a more holistic pedagogic view aimed at developing learners' language awareness (Brevik et al., 2020). In the LK20 *Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), there is one sole mention of the term *language awareness*: "Language learning refers to developing language awareness and knowledge of English as a system and the ability to use language learning strategies" (p. 2). However, what language awareness involves is clearly outlined to the users in the competence aims in the LK20 *Curriculum in English*. Here, we find expressions such as "explore and use the language, discover and play with words and expressions, identify word classes and sentence elements and explore and describe some linguistic similarities and differences between English and other languages that the pupil is familiar with" (pp. 5-9). Hence, the English curriculum communicates a clear inductive and exploratory approach to language teaching and learning. There is also a consistent mention of teachers' responsibility to engage learners in language work: "The pupils shall be given the opportunity to experience that experimenting on their own and with others is part of learning a new language" (pp. 5-9). Consequently, for English teachers to help learners

achieve the competence aims, they need to understand how to make language awareness become an integrated part of their teaching practices.

3. Theoretical background

Language awareness includes several competencies that are interconnected as well as interdependent. The Association for Language Awareness (ALA) elucidates the main domains involved: "explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and use" (Association for Language Awareness, n.d.). The definition embraces the perspectives of both teachers and learners as well as the interaction between the two.

In the literature, language awareness is often closely connected to the notion of *engagement with language* (Broek et al., 2019; Svalberg, 2007; 2009). Svalberg (2009) strongly emphasises that engagement denotes an active process; it is not seen "merely as a state of conscious awareness and sensitivity" (p. 242). The concept of *engagement* denotes elements of interest, commitment, reflection and involvement, which may nurture active participation in the learning process of student and teacher alike. Furthermore, Svalberg (2009) identifies engagement with language as "some force driving things forward or pushing in a direction" (p. 242). This means that engagement with language can be understood both as a process, in which language awareness is constructed, and a product (Dooly, 2018; Svalberg, 2012).

Within this field of study, there seems to be a consensus that the concept of language awareness involves at least three major dimensions: *cognitive, affective* and *social* (Broek et al., 2019; Svalberg, 2012). However, the literature shows that there are strong interrelationships between the three dimensions, which means they cannot properly be discussed in isolation.

The cognitive dimension encompasses the learner's psychological readiness to understand specific language features and structures (Mellegård, 2024). Bolitho et al. (2003) define language awareness as "a mental attribute which develops through paying motivated attention to language in use, and which enables language learners to gradually gain insights into how languages work" (p. 251). The cognitive dimension centres on learners' abilities to pay attention to how language works and notice particular patterns of the target language (Svalberg, 2012; Widodo & Cirocki, 2013). Such consciousness raising is a mental activity, where *noticing* can serve as a strategy for collecting information. At a later point, this discovery of language patterns can become an object of reflection and encourage language enquiry and metalinguistic talk (Bolitho et al., 2003; Schmidt, 1990; Widodo & Cirocki, 2013). Widodo & Cirocki (2013) describe this process as "to convert input into intake" (p. 17), which indicates that what is noticed must be further processed to develop and optimise learners' cognitive potential. Bolitho et al. (2003) stress the different procedures of noticing; in the early stages, noticing is typically experiential and incidental, whereas later, it gradually becomes more analytical as learners develop their skills of recognising nuances of language. With young learners, the playful aspects of language can serve as a strong motivator to work more explicitly and exploratory with specific language features later on (Bolitho et al., 2003; Mellegård, 2024). Moreover, Broek et al. (2019) highlight the importance of developing language learners' thinking skills, their "thinking about language" (p. 60). These skills concern processes such as interpreting, analysing, formulating thoughts, reasoning, evaluating and making decisions (Broek et al., 2019). For these processes to occur, learners need access to a rich variety of suitable texts, allowing them to notice and carefully attend to different language features (Mellegård, 2024).

The affective and social dimensions are deeply intertwined and closely connected to the production of language. Among others, Borg (1994) and Bolitho et al. (2003) believe that engaging learners affectively will make them more cognitively receptive, and hence, increase their readiness and motivation for learning. Such personal involvement can increase their motivation for investigating

language structures and talking about language (Thornbury, 2002). Affective factors are manifold and encompass elements such as motivation, interest, enjoyment, self-esteem and attitudes. These factors can accumulate on the positive side and strengthen an individual's learning process or the opposite: they can accumulate on the negative side and become a hindrance to progress. According to Svalberg (2012), anxiety can have a profound impact on learners' language acquisition. The teacher plays a crucial role in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment in which learners feel safe to experiment with language and communicate with others without fear of making errors and being laughed at (Flognfeldt et al., 2020). Furthermore, Thornbury (2002) emphasises the significance of emotional and personal engagement in language learning. Students need to perceive that the subject content is meaningful to their own lives in order to become motivated for proceeding to language work (Mellegård, 2024).

The social dimension relates closely to *language use*; the main purpose of learning a foreign language is naturally communication. In the literature, theorists stress that enhancing language awareness implies not only exploring language but also talking about language (Bolitho et al., 2003; Borg, 1994; Broek et al., 2019; Svalberg, 2012). As described above, language awareness aims at enhancing learners' thinking skills about language (Broek et al., 2019). This process-oriented sequence of developing language awareness presupposes a learning environment where interactive work among learners plays a prominent role. In the opinion of Borg (1994), the development of students' language awareness is an ongoing process of exploring language, where learners are gradually encouraged to engage in more analytical discussions about language. Such analytical language talk aims to foster learners' engagement with language, extend their understanding and knowledge about language use and advance their metalinguistic talk (Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2007; 2009). Interaction with others enhances learners' critical thinking skills about language and expands their metalanguage, which, in turn, provides deeper insights into the workings of language. Consequently, a positive and productive learning cycle is established; sharing and discussing their discoveries with the teacher and co-learners can foster increased engagement with language. Hence, the social dimension broadens the scope of language awareness by transforming language from merely an object of study to also being a medium of communication (Svalberg, 2009).

Research found in the literature identifies three major characteristics of TLA: *the language user*, *the language analyst* and *the language teacher* (Andrews, 2003; Andrews & Svalberg, 2017; Broek et al., 2019; Lindahl, 2019). As was the case with language awareness above, these components cannot be seen in isolation; it is the interrelationships between these three which form the core of TLA (Andrews & Svalberg, 2017). Although the context of this study concerns the teaching of English as an additional language in Norway, it is worth emphasising that these characteristics of TLA apply to the teaching of languages in general.

As a language teacher, having a good command of the target language is crucial, meaning an adequate level of language proficiency though not necessarily mastery of the language equivalent to that of native speakers (Andrews, 2003). However, knowledge *of* language, is not enough; the language teacher also needs to have thorough knowledge *about* language. Andrews (2003) draws attention to the close connection between subject-content knowledge and TLA. Additionally, Borg (1994) speaks of the linguistically informed language teacher and refers to knowledge and awareness of "grammar, phonology and lexis, and their function in discourse" (p. 65). Thus, competent language teachers must have deep knowledge of the typical patterns found in the target language, which, according to Wright (2002), will contribute to developing their "sensitivity to language – their linguistic radar" (p. 115).

The language analyst forms the second domain of TLA. According to Andrews (2003), "TLA involves an extra cognitive dimension of reflections upon both knowledge of subject matter and language proficiency" (p. 86), which he refers to as metacognition. This signifies that there is a distinct difference between teachers' and learners' language awareness in that language teachers

need to possess a higher degree of language cognition than learners do; in other words, TLA is metacognitive in nature (Andrews, 2003). Bolitho et al. (2003) highlight that working with language awareness allows teachers and learners to "get beneath the surface of a language" (p. 257); a language awareness approach can foster enquiry about language and result in analytical talk about language. Borg (1994) maintains that TLA involves an investigative and analytical view of language, which is open-ended and sees language learning as a continuous process.

The third domain of TLA concerns the teacher's pedagogical practices. Developing learners' language awareness requires a classroom environment focused on student-centred learning that takes a holistic approach to language teaching and learning being inductive and discovery-oriented (Bolitho et al., 2003; Borg, 1994; Broek et al., 2019; Carter, 2003). Thus, the teacher, as facilitator, has a weighty responsibility for providing the learners with tasks that are typically exploratory, discovery-oriented and consciousness-raising (Borg, 1994; Broek et al., 2019; Svalberg, 2007). Moreover, in a language awareness approach, it is the learner who is the agent. Bolitho et al. (2003) underscore the importance of allowing learners to notice for themselves how language works: "Language awareness is not taught by the teacher or by the coursebook; it is developed by the learner" (p. 252). Thus, to engage learners with language presupposes that the language teacher creates tasks that arouse learners' curiosity about language and motivate them to experiment with language production.

Another important aspect of language learning and language awareness included in TLA is the interrelation between students' implicit and explicit knowledge of language (Ellis, 2017; llanes, 2018). Ellis (2017) elucidates that children acquire knowledge about complex structures of their first language (L1) but are not capable of describing this knowledge. The acquisition of L1 is implicit and occurs through exposure and usage experiences of the language; language is acquired through input in authentic social settings. This means that young language learners have years of experience from using their L1 from communicative contexts before they start learning a second or third language, but without being conscious of their knowledge (Ellis, 2017). Andrews (2003) accentuates that TLA also entails the teacher's "awareness of language from the learner's perspective" (p. 86). This implies that the teacher should assist the learners in transforming their subconscious knowledge of language into a conscious resource, thereby enhancing their language awareness.

4. Picturebooks and language awareness

Language awareness and text awareness are inseparably connected (Bolitho et al., 2003). Exposing learners to a rich variety of texts gives them opportunities to explore language and notice typical linguistic patterns. In the teaching of English as an additional language, picturebooks have long been used primarily with young learners. However, picturebooks nowadays encompass a wide array of topics that are appropriate for learners of all ages (Lado, 2012; Mellegård, 2023).

Picturebooks are inherently uniquely suited for engaging learners with language work. First, picturebooks offer narratives; we all love reading and listening to stories, irrespective of our age. In picturebooks, children are exposed to stories in which they meet other children, families and cultures that may resemble as well as differ from their own (Bradbery, 2012; Mart, 2012). Such relatable narratives can involve learners emotionally and thus accelerate their interest in language work (Bolitho et al., 2003). Furthermore, Finkbeiner and Schluer (2018) mention an affective side of reading, which involves the emotional side of texts in addition to factors such as "learners' attention, interests and attitudes with respect to certain topics represented through texts" (p. 115). Therefore, teachers need to be mindful of their students' cultural background, interests and intellectual abilities when selecting picturebooks for the classroom in order to motivate reading and thereby, encourage engagement with language.

Another outstanding characteristic of picturebooks is that they communicate with the reader by combining two mutually interdependent levels of communication, the visual and the verbal (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006): the visual describes, and the verbal narrates. This duality of meaning-making provides learners with opportunities to spend less energy on interpreting the content of the story and thereby creates more room to explore language.

Finally, picturebooks necessitate a dialogic approach to teaching (Mellegård, 2018, 2023). In accordance with Roche (2015), dialogue is interactive and authentic and involves relationship, curiosity, thinking, speaking, listening, reflecting and responding. The kind of language structures found in many picturebooks are often repetitive and exhibit a distinct rhythm, which in itself can encourage learners to engage with language implicitly and prompt the noticing of typical language patterns (Mart, 2012). Providing opportunities for constructive dialogues is the principal means by which engagement with language and language enquiry occur (Borg, 1994; Broek et al., 2019; Svalberg, 2009).

Although picturebooks as a literary genre have their unique qualities, it cannot be concluded that all picturebooks are well suited for working with language awareness. However, due to their linguistic properties mentioned above, they may be better suited than other types of texts to motivate young learners for language work. Thus, as Lado (2012) maintains, it is of utmost importance that teachers choose texts with appropriate difficulty of content and language adjusted to the cognitive and linguistic level of their students.

5. Methods and procedures

This qualitative study utilised action research methodology. As defined by Kemmis (2009), action research is a "practice-changing practice" (p. 464). However, the notion of practice does not solely refer to what people *do* in their practices. Practice also involves "people's understanding of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice" (p. 464). This implies that there is a strong element of self-reflection and critical enquiry into one's own practices in action research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). In the present study, the main focus was on enhancing English teachers' understanding of language awareness by exploring certain learning activities used to develop learners' language awareness. This essentially means improving TLA requiring that teachers exhibit a willingness and receptiveness to change. In literature, action research is often referred to as transformational research (Kemmis, 2010; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), which clearly indicates a major element of professional development.

Action research typically facilitates collaborative investigation (McKay, 2010): participants can work together in small groups for mutual support, critical examination of their practices and reflection. In the present investigation, the participants were in-service teachers in primary school, and they were recruited by purposeful sampling (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The researcher approached four teachers directly, described the framework of the research project and asked if they were interested in participating. These teachers were former students of the researcher and had recently completed a continuing education course in English, meaning they were formally qualified English teachers. They all accepted the invitation and expressed enthusiasm about being given the opportunity to further continue developing their competence. Two of the teachers were teaching at the beginner level, grades 2 and 3, and the other two were teaching upper primary, grades 6 and 7. The teachers were divided into pairs, one pair working with the youngest students and the other with older students. They all worked at different schools, but, since the distances between the schools were relatively short, it was possible for the teachers to meet in person during the research project. All the participants had extensive years of teaching experience, not only at their current grade level but also within the entire spectrum of primary school.

Action research is typically a cyclical process in which the researcher and the participants together define a field of study that can be naturally connected to and incorporated into the participants' daily work. During the initial stage of this study, the participants and the researcher met to review action research procedures to establish a shared understanding; in addition, the participants were provided with supplementary literature relevant to action research (Bolitho et al., 2003; Ulvik et al., 2021). Together, the researcher and the participants agreed on conducting two cycles of action; the researcher decided these should be carried out in accordance with the cyclical stages outlined by Savin-Baden and Major (2013).

The data were collected at different points in the action cycles and comprised multiple sources, including reflection notes, teaching schemes, interviews, and learners' materials, yielding a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (McKay, 2010). The interviews made up the major bulk of the data; two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted, the first after the initial action cycle and the second following the last action cycle, marking the end of the research project. The first interview focused on experiences from and reflection on the first action cycle and what changes needed to be done before the second cycle. The last interview centred primarily on the teachers' understanding of language awareness and learners' engagement with language and their potential development of language awareness. The interview protocol was sent to the participants some days before the interviews giving them time to prepare and reflect individually before meeting in pairs with the researcher. Since the interviews were not conducted individually but in pairs and contained open-ended questions, they bore some similarities to focus group interviews in which the researcher typically acts as the moderator encouraging interaction between the group members (Wilkinson, 2004).

The primary method used for analysing the interviews was qualitative content analysis. Because the interviews were extensive; it was decided not to transcribe them completely (Silverman, 2008). Instead, the researcher listened to the recordings and noted segments of interest to the research question; this sifting of the data reduced the amount of information that would be subject to close examination (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The procedure was carried out a second time to ensure that no valuable information was overlooked, thus enhancing the validity of the study. The next step taken was coding the segments; descriptive coding was used assigning terms that captured the essence of content in each data segment (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). These codes were categorised and converted into themes that constituted the major findings and provided the basis for the interpretation and understanding of the wider meaning of the data (Creswell, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013; Wilkinson, 2004). The other sources of data mentioned, reflection notes, teaching schemes, and learners' materials, were considered as supplementary sources alongside the interviews. These data were analysed in a manner similar to the interviews, using the same themes. However, they will not be commented on separately since these data were incorporated into the interviews.

6. Findings and discussion

In qualitative research, the analysis and interpretation of data are closely intertwined (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Therefore, the findings are presented here alongside the discussion. This construct contextualises the findings and permits a more comprehensive and coherent interpretation. The findings are presented in the form of representative condensed quotations that line up with the emerged themes. In the data, the following themes stand out prominently: *Exploring the potential of picturebooks, Creating language awareness tasks* and *Identifying opportunities for language talk*. The participants have been assigned fictitious names to ensure their anonymity. The two teachers responsible for teaching the youngest learners are here called Erik and Maria, teaching year 2 and year 3, respectively. Sandra and Birgitte are the upper primary teachers, Sandra teaching year 6 and

Birgitte year 7. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian; hence, the quotes have been translated into English by the researcher.

6.1 Exploring the potential of picturebooks

As part of the study framework, the participants were required to use picturebooks as the main source for their teaching schemes. The focus area of language work was teaching vocabulary, with special attention to collocations. The researcher presented the participants with a small selection of picturebooks suitable for this focus. In pairs, the participants decided what books to use: *Hooray for fish!* (Cousins, 2006) appealed to the teachers teaching at the beginner level; the teachers in upper primary chose two books: *My name is BOB* (Bowen, 2014) and *Snow White in New York* (French, 1989). Integrating picturebooks in their teaching was not new to these teachers; in the English teaching course they had taken the previous year, children's literature and the use of picturebooks had received considerable emphasis.

During the initial phase of the research project, the teachers primarily focused on creating tasks related to vocabulary, collocations and class management, as set out in our agreement. Although the picturebook was at the centre of their planning, the teachers did not comment on the qualities of picturebooks for this specific purpose. After completing the first action cycle and experiencing the learners' engagement, the teachers shared their thoughts about the many possible learning activities picturebooks could offer. The two teachers of the youngest learners decided to proceed with the same picturebook for the second action cycle; neither the students nor the teachers felt they had fully explored *Hooray for fish!* (Cousins, 2006). By contrast, the two teachers in upper primary chose to switch to a different picturebook for the next action cycle, substituting *Snow White in New York* (Bowen, 2014) for *My name is BOB* (Bowen, 2014) .

In the interviews after the second action cycle, both pairs of teachers communicated an increased awareness in the nature of picturebooks related to language awareness:

Maria: *In picturebooks, you get support from both images and text, which makes facilitating the students' learning easier. It is motivating to work with picturebooks. They generate engagement, and that is indeed a good starting point.*

Erik: *With picturebooks, the students can use their imagination a lot because you have the visual expression, which says far more than just plain text. You can find a million more opportunities for dialogue than what is actually written in the book, like Hooray for fish! The young students still have a rich imagination.*

Maria: *I found the students' engagement is enormous. I can see from the results that picturebooks captivate their interest. I also believe that the support of the images offers a deeper understanding of the language as well as the narrative.*

Erik: *I agree; the learners' engagement has been great. When it comes to understanding the structure and function of language, which is an important part of language awareness, I believe there is significant potential in using picturebooks, although we have only scratched the surface so far. I am sure I will use picturebooks a lot more.*

Maria and Erik express genuine enthusiasm about using picturebooks for motivating language work. Both teachers emphasise the duality of images and text, which generates engagement and fires the learners' imagination and creativity. Erik stresses that this particular picturebook, *Hooray for fish!*, acts as a catalyst for the students to create their own dialogues. Picturebooks are in many ways "unfinished"; they allow room for the readers to contribute and become co-authors (Mellegård, 2018). The firm emphasis that Erik and Maria place on learners' engagement resonates

well with language awareness theory and its three dimensions: *cognitive*, *affective* and *social* (Broek et al., 2019; Svalberg, 2012). It appears that all three dimensions were present in the learning activity carried out by these two teachers. They saw their students become emotionally involved, start experimenting with language and create personal dialogues. In the LK20 *Curriculum in English*, (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), it is communicated that the pupils "shall experience, use and explore the language from the very start" (p. 2). Further, in the competence aims, the importance of experimenting and playing with language is explicitly pointed out (pp. 5-14). Young learners' desire to play with language and communicate enables them to process and comprehend the language more deeply.

In the data, the teachers highlight another significant quality of picturebooks relevant to engagement with language. Sandra and Birgitte, the two upper primary teachers, appear much taken with the flexibility and adaptability that picturebooks offer in facilitating learning activities for diverse groups of students:

Sandra: *I think picturebooks are absolutely fantastic because they are highly adaptable; in a way, they appear harmless. When we bring out a picturebook in the classroom, we allow the students to be small children. But the picturebook can be used across all levels, regardless of the learners' understanding and whether they have learning difficulties.*

Birgitte: *Yes, they are inherently well adapted to be used with different groups of students. I think it is immensely exciting to use picturebooks. The students get so inspired. The thing is that with picturebooks, it is possible to finish a book, and many students have never experienced that feeling of completing reading a book. I think the students don't feel so much pressure with picturebooks. Picturebooks offer that completeness, which I believe is very important.*

Sandra: *Absolutely, the fact that the students experience an ending and not just extracts from books is critical. Most textbooks provide only excerpts from books.*

Birgitte: *With picturebooks, you can enjoy a complete story. Besides, reading picturebooks are low-threshold.*

Sandra: *Indeed, low-threshold both for us and the students.*

Birgitte: *Also, it is the effect that pictures have on your imagination; they allow individual interpretations.*

Sandra: *Right, picturebooks contain little text but are packed with meaning. This can inspire the students and make them think, "This is something I could have done".*

Learning is a shared enterprise; creating a safe learning environment where all students can participate in the same activities, but at different levels, can be challenging for the teacher to coordinate. Birgitte and Sandra seem to have discovered that picturebooks in their nature are inherently tailored for differentiation. They specifically point out the importance of allowing students to enjoy a complete narrative, which they rarely encounter with ordinary textbooks. According to Borg (1994) and Bolitho et al. (2003), providing learners with texts that engage them affectively increases their cognitive receptiveness for analytical language work. Further, Birgitte and Sandra discuss the idea that picturebooks represent low-threshold literature evoking a feeling of childhood in the students, which can reduce the pressure of mastering reading a book in the target language. They link this to the open-ended quality of picturebooks, which allows learners to express individual interpretations. This is consistent with Flognfeldt et al.'s (2020) viewpoint that a safe and inclusive learning environment is fundamental for students to dare to experiment with and use the target language. Birgitte and Sandra appear to be convinced that picturebooks have the potential to

reduce negative affective factors in the students' learning processes, which fully aligns with Svalberg's (2012) viewpoint that anxiety can profoundly influence learners' language acquisition.

From their experiences, it is evident that Maria's and Erik's teacher language awareness (TLA) has developed significantly through the use of their chosen picturebook. As text providers for their students, they see how the combination of the visual and the verbal in picturebooks encourages the students' engagement with language and meaning-making of the story. This is in line with Nikolajeva and Scott (2006), who highlight the advantages of two levels of communication in picturebooks. Erik asserts that this is just the beginning of using picturebooks as a resource in his practice because of the strong engagement among his students. With Birgitte and Sandra, their increased TLA centres on differentiation. The fact that all students, irrespective of their language proficiency, can share the enjoyment of the same text together makes picturebooks a valuable teaching resource. Birgitte and Sandra also point to the uniqueness of picturebooks offering dual levels of communication as the core element for adaptability. Consequently, this text genre is highly appropriate as a teaching resource to meet the needs of different learners. Even more, this will give teachers more space for language-focused work in the classroom. This is supported by Lado (2012) who accentuates the significance of selecting literature that aligns with the language and cognitive levels of the students. Further, the data indicate that Birgitte's and Sandra's TLA has expanded in that the use of picturebooks has revealed the learners' enjoyment of reading full stories. Thornbury (2002) highlights learners' personal involvement with texts as a key factor for motivating learners to explore language. Birgitte and Sandra recognise the importance of the teacher's text awareness for enabling learners to enhance their language awareness, an insight strongly emphasised by Bolitho et al. (2003).

6.2 Creating language awareness tasks

In the present research project, the teachers collaborated in pairs to plan their teaching schemes. Since the tasks designed by the two pairs had much in common, only one of them is reported here. The two beginner-level teachers, Erik and Maria, used the picturebook *Hooray for fish!*, and their focus of language attention was the pattern of noun - adjective collocations:

Erik: *I read the book Hooray for fish! aloud to the students, taking time to pause and talk about the adjectives, but I was careful not to interrupt the narrative. I stressed the adjectives when reading, and the students echoed some words and sentences. It was a very productive session.*

Maria: *I presented the cover of the book to the students and asked them to guess the content. They had lots of ideas. Then I read the book aloud to them, we talked about the adjectives and how they described the different fishes. Suddenly, one student exclaimed, "There are so many adjectives here". Since we had previously worked with adjectives, it felt natural to delve deeper into the descriptive words.*

In this initial stage, Erik and Maria introduced *Hooray for fish!* to their students, allowing them primarily to enjoy the narrative and, thereby, generate motivation for further work. However, they both appeared highly conscious of the purpose of using this picturebook; during the read-aloud session, they pointed out the function of adjectives to their students, raising their awareness of a typical language pattern. Picturebooks suitable for young learners often feature a repetitive language structure (Mart, 2012; Mellegård, 2018); Erik and Maria were evidently fully aware of this distinctive characteristic of *Hooray for fish!* and therefore integrated language focus into their read-aloud. According to Borg (1994), TLA relies on the teacher being linguistically informed; Erik and Maria clearly possess solid knowledge about language and can effectively apply this insight to the picturebook.

After the introductory phase, Erik and Maria proceeded to the second part of their teaching scheme:

Erik: *Next, it was the students' turn to create their own character and write a personal text inspired by the picturebook. They were highly enthusiastic about this task. We talked about adjectives, and we made a list of such words taken from the picturebook. Each student started working on creating their book; I was there to guide and support them during the process.*

Maria: *Before the students started creating their own book, I was very concerned to model the text to provide support for them.*

Erik: *The most remarkable thing was how easy it was to motivate the students. I observed their joy and enthusiasm for writing a story.*

At this stage, the students were to write a text using the language structure learnt from *Hooray for fish!*, that is adjective - noun collocations. The teachers were concerned about providing scaffolding support to their students during the writing process, aligning with Bolitho et al. (2003), who underscore that teachers need to be attuned to learners' challenges and struggles in language production. For both teachers, the students' outputs show considerable diversity; while some students had written complete sentences, others tended to generate fragments. Erik and Maria commented that these differences actually demonstrate the ability of picturebooks to facilitate natural differentiation and thus allow learners to progress at their individual paces.

For the second action cycle, Erik and Maria continued working with the same picturebook, transitioning to slightly more advanced tasks, but the language focus remained unchanged:

Maria: *The students worked in pairs; their task was to compose a distinct story using an app and later to record their narratives. I observed how they supported each other correcting their partner's pronunciation. They learn from each other; this makes the learning environment more relaxed.*

Erik: *This time, the students were allowed to select their favourite fish from the picturebook and create paper puppets on sticks. The idea was to let them perform dialogues as a theatre play. We discussed possible dialogues inspired by the book and using the adjective list from the previous activity. They practised in groups and then performed for the class. I believe it's important that students also have fun while learning. We must integrate play into learning to a larger extent, allowing everyone to participate.*

Both Erik and Maria granted their students more autonomy in the second action cycle. The learners were allowed collaboration with peers, and oral language production was integrated. Language awareness is considered an active process in which the learner is the agent, experimenting with language production (Bolitho et al., 2003; Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2009). In this task, Erik and Maria encouraged their students to play and experiment with language, aligning with the competence aims in the *Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). Experimenting and playing with language requires a safe learning environment where negative affective factors are minimised (Flognfeldt et al., 2020); Erik and Maria demonstrated a strong commitment to organising the task in such a way that learners' participation was not negatively affected and reduced. The social dimension of language awareness extends beyond talking *about* language; it also includes applying acquired language patterns in authentic communication situations. Involving learners affectively in a learner-centred approach, as Erik and Maria did in the last segment of their task, is considered essential for cultivating receptiveness and readiness for language learning (Bolitho et al., 2003; Carter, 2003; Thornbury, 2002).

6.3 Identifying opportunities for language talk

At the core of language awareness is the learner's exploratory attribute and noticing of language patterns, but, as discussed above, it also includes language inquiry and talk about language (Bolitho et al., 2003; Borg, 1994; Broek et al., 2019). The data reveal a few occurrences of such analytical language discussions:

Erik: *I haven't explicitly used the term language awareness in the classroom, but we talked about the importance of adjectives to increase the excitement of a story and how their drawings reflected the adjectives. It was I who initiated this discussion. However, the students also joined in, acknowledging that adjectives are important to add more colour to the language. They even created their own collocations. I consider this to be a high level of language awareness.*

Maria: *We had previously worked with adjectives, so this project was perfect timing, letting the students see the usage of adjectives in practice. I have thought a lot about language awareness; I believe they are a bit young, but I think they understand the concept of descriptive words. Once, in the lunchbreak, I played a YouTube clip with relaxing music and a coral reef. One student exclaimed, "Oh, stripey fish". This led us to recapitulate the entire story of Hooray for fish! using different collocations to describe the fishes. When a description was missing, they suggested new ones, like "black and white fish". We had a very enriching discussion, and it was all in English. However, as a teacher, these opportunities to talk about language occur quite randomly.*

In Erik's situation, the language talk appeared to be well planned and seamlessly integrated into the students' work. The focus of attention was adjectives and their descriptive function in narratives. As the students collaborated on their dialogues in groups, Erik steered the discussion to scaffold the learners' exploration of this linguistic aspect. This is consistent with Bolitho et al.'s (2003) perspective that successful language discussions require relevance to students' existing language experiences. Further, Erik drew on the students' situated language production and promoted language talk directly connected to their personalised expressions. Svalberg (2007) and Borg (1994) underscore that such analytical discussions contribute to enhancing learners' cognition and their ability to engage in metalinguistic talk.

For Maria, the situation was somewhat different; by chance, she encountered an unplanned opportunity for language talk, but she was astute enough to take advantage of that situation. It was the students who initiated the discussion, as they identified the chance to apply recently acquired language patterns to a new language situation resembling the setting in the picturebook. Widodo & Cirocki (2013) acknowledge this learning strategy as a means for transforming input into intake and thereby, enhancing learners' cognitive potential. The success of this language talk scenario lay in Maria's own language awareness combined with her attentiveness to the students' engagement with language, allowing them to act as agents and explore for themselves how language works (Bolitho et al., 2003).

In the interviews following the second action cycle, the teachers were asked about the extent to which they actually employed the term *language awareness* in the classroom:

Birgitte: *In the classroom, I have used the term language awareness as a means to explain and reason our methods, especially when students ask why they can't do things differently. Then I clarify the reasons for working in a certain way.*

Sandra: *The other day, I gave the instruction to "listen and read the text". The students objected; they wanted to simply read. This disagreement opened the way for a discussion about the benefits of combining listening and reading. We talked about how this approach can help us*

pronounce new words correctly and how letters are pronounced differently in English compared to Norwegian. I felt that our talk helped them understand the purpose behind our activities.

Birgitte: *I use the term language awareness more frequently now. I'm unsure whether it is to clarify it for myself or to familiarise my students with the phrase. Nonetheless, I constantly think about language awareness and use the term regularly.*

Birgitte and Sandra emphasise that language awareness is a resource in itself for explaining the rationale behind the learning activities they use in class. This assumes that the teacher possesses solid subject content knowledge along with an analytical language approach, both of which are central domains of TLA (Andrews, 2003; Broek et al., 2019). Birgitte's and Sandra's students questioned the tasks assigned to them; once it was explained how these tasks could scaffold their language learning, the students appeared willing to proceed with their work. This suggests that Birgitte's and Sandra's TLA enhanced gradually along with their students' language work. Birgitte mentions being preoccupied with language awareness, admitting that this could be profitable for her own development as well as for the students'. This duality of language awareness and classroom methodology is supported by Wright (2002); adept language teachers must comprehend the difficulties and struggles learners face with language to motivate them to engage with language. Both Birgitte and Sandra communicate an eagerness to assist their learners in gaining deeper understanding of different learning strategies suitable for their language work.

7. Concluding remarks and reflections

The present study has investigated the impact of using picturebooks on English teachers' understanding and enhancement of their language awareness, that is their *teacher language awareness* (TLA). However, since this study demonstrates clear interconnections between the development of language awareness in both teachers and learners, the teachers' perspective cannot be entirely separated from the learners' perspective. It should also be noted that the data collected were from English teachers, but it is reasonable to believe that the results can be applicable to the teaching of languages in general.

In a qualitative research project of this kind using a particular device, namely picturebooks, to promote specific knowledge, it can be challenging to identify the evidence of such enhancement, given that the participants may not speak explicitly of the concept themselves. It is through their pedagogical practices and subsequent critical reflections that the teachers reveal their growth of understanding.

To encourage language work, learners must be given access to texts that are engaging and involve them affectively (Bolitho et al., 2003; Bradbery, 2012; Thornbury, 2002). There is no doubt that these teachers' use of picturebooks in facilitating learners' engagement with language has contributed to raising their own consciousness of this text genre as a valuable resource. Their pedagogical practices have made them see the typical characteristics and qualities of picturebooks as well suited for this purpose. To foster learners' language awareness, teachers themselves should have the sensitivity to notice language patterns and structures (Wright, 2002). This investigation reveals that picturebooks enable both instructors and learners to explore language, thereby developing their language awareness together, albeit at different levels.

Creating effective language awareness tasks requires that teachers have solid knowledge of the subject content (Bolitho et al., 2003; Svalberg, 2009). As the project progressed, it became apparent that the two teachers at beginner-level were deeply inspired by their selected picturebook, *Hooray for fish!*. This was evident in their planning of tasks, which in the first action cycle focused on exploration and discovery of language patterns, transitioning to experimentation and creative language production in the second action cycle. This finding suggests that the picturebook has had

an impact on their TLA, strengthening their consciousness of designing tasks that foster language engagement. The importance of noticing-oriented activities is considered the cornerstone of enhancing language awareness. Bolitho et al. (2003) also emphasise the significance of language in use within a social context; this is clearly demonstrated in the final part of Erik's and Maria's project.

Within the field of language awareness, inquiry into and analytical talk about language constitute key factors (Bolitho et al., 2003; Borg, 1994; Broek et al., 2019). In this study, several such discussions occurred, whether planned by the teacher or spontaneously initiated by students, directly or indirectly related to the picturebooks. The teachers very much approved of these discussions, recognising their value in developing their students' understanding of language. Thus, their TLA expanded in alignment with the diverse opportunities for engagement with language that picturebooks offer.

Another intriguing aspect that emerges from this study is that the teachers did not always seem to be aware of their own TLA and the rationale behind their pedagogical practices. This became particularly apparent in the first action cycle, when their prime focus was on vocabulary and collocations without explicitly verbalising the relation to language awareness. However, their approach to task planning steered them obviously towards engagement with language. This finding is in line with Broek et al.'s (2019) study, in which the participants could not always explain the reasons for their teaching practice but acted according to what they considered helpful for their students. TLA also involves raising consciousness of one's non-verbalised knowledge and existing practices (Andrews, 2003); such metacognition emerged in the final interviews after the second action cycle:

Erik: *I believe that I have become more conscious about what language awareness actually involves and the importance of focusing on it in class, taking care to shed light on all those elements of language use. The project has definitely expanded my awareness of language work.*

Maria: *I find that concept so vast, and it is difficult to fully grasp it. Sometimes, my confidence falters: "Is it really language awareness that I'm thinking about now?" It embraces so much. But I have become more conscious of it myself.*

The fact that these teachers now use the term language awareness indicates that their TLA has been strengthened during this project. However, they still seem to struggle with comprehending the concept entirely. They consider it exceptionally broad, and it is therefore challenging to define what the concept includes or excludes. This dialogue between Erik and Maria provides clear evidence that enhancement of their TLA is in progress as a direct result of using picturebooks. Further, it convincingly reflects Borg's (1994) assertion that the thought and discussion processes inherent in language awareness must be evident in teachers' own work.

Incorporating picturebooks as a teaching tool in the present study has, on the evidence, contributed to cultivating and strengthening the participant teachers' understanding of language awareness and thereby impacted on their teaching practices. However, they find themselves continually in the process of exploring language awareness, consequently processing their TLA. All four teachers report, either explicitly or implicitly, that this project has broadened their insights into language work through picturebooks as a source for providing learners with broader understanding of how language works and promoting language production. Wright (2002) underscores that fostering language awareness depends on teachers creating connections between linguistic knowledge and classroom activities, which the participants engaged in during this action research project. They all highlight the benefits of using picturebooks as such and indicate that picturebooks will become a more prominent resource in their future teaching practices. This aligns with Svalberg's (2012) statement that contextualisation of language work is essential. The present study confirms beyond

doubt that picturebooks provide a rich and productive context for fostering language engagement and reflection on language, for both teachers and learners.

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