Ingebjørg Mellegård
Østfold University College

Exploring the concept of *language awareness* in the Curriculum in English in Norway: discussing the potential of picture books for enhancing young learners' language awareness

Abstract

This exploratory article provides an introduction to language awareness and discusses the potential of picture books as a textual resource to enhance young learners' understanding of how language works. The construct of language awareness is investigated and discussed according to its three main components: the cognitive, affective and social dimensions. It is argued that language awareness represents a holistic approach to language teaching and needs to be naturally integrated into teachers' pedagogical practices. Furthermore, the article looks at how the last revision of the English subject curriculum in Norway, introduced in 2020, involves language awareness and how this concept is communicated. The curriculum seems to reflect a language learning theory that correlates strongly with the theoretical basis for a language awareness approach. It is noted that the teacher's knowledge of language and engagement with language are crucial factors for facilitating discovery-oriented learning activities, which are considered critical to scaffolding learners' engagement with language. Picture books are considered a valuable resource in this respect; the qualities that make this literary genre such a useful resource are outlined and reflected on. The article ends by presenting some selected picture books and exploring their potential for using them in the English classroom to promote learners' engagement with language and hence, contribute to cultivating their language awareness.

Keywords: engagement with language, holistic language teaching, interdisciplinary topics, language awareness, LK20 Curriculum in English, picture books

Sammendrag

Denne utforskende artikkelen gir en introduksjon til begrepet språkbevissthet og drøfter potensialet i billedbøker som ressurs i engelskopplæringen for å utvikle elevenes forståelse av språkets oppbygning og funksjon. Språkbevissthet drøftes i henhold til en kognitiv, affektiv og sosial dimensjon. Det argumenteres for at språkbevissthet er å anse som en holistisk tilnærming til språkopplæring som bør integreres på en naturlig måte i læreres pedagogiske arbeid. I 2020 ble ny revisjon av *Kunnskapsløftet* og læreplaner i fag introdusert i Norge. I artikkelen drøftes det i hvilken grad den nye læreplanen i engelsk inkluderer begrepet språkbevissthet og hvordan detter kommuniseres. Læreplanen synes å gjenspeile en språklæringsteori som er i godt samsvar med det teoretiske grunnlaget bak forståelsen av språkbevissthet. Lærerens kunnskap om språk og interesse for språkets oppbygging og funksjon er avgjørende faktorer for at hen skal kunne legge til rette for læringsaktiviteter som motiverer elevene til å utforske språket. Billedbøker kan i så måte være en svært nyttig ressurs. I artikkelen belyses kvalitetene ved denne litterære sjangeren, og deretter drøftes billedbøkers potensial som en språkressurs i engelskopplæringen for å utvikle elevenes språkbevissthet.

Nøkkelord: språklig engasjement, holistisk språkundervisning, tverrfaglighet, språkbevissthet, Læreplan i engelsk LK20, billedbøker

Introduction

This article is an exploratory paper investigating a specific topic: that of *language awareness*. The intention is to broaden the understanding of language awareness and investigate its integration in the English curriculum in Norway. Additionally, this article explores the potential of picture books as a valuable resource for enhancing young learners' language awareness. While much has been said and written about language awareness and picture books separately, there seems to be a dearth of literature that explores the combination of the two.

Language awareness is a multifaceted concept in the sense that it embraces the perspectives of both teachers and learners, as well as the interaction between the two. On the one hand, language awareness involves the teacher's language proficiency, knowledge of language and

pedagogical practices; on the other, language awareness concerns the learner's ability, motivation and readiness for working with language.

This article is written from the perspective of the teacher-educator, and it serves three purposes. In the first section, the concept of language awareness is investigated and interpreted. The middle section examines how and to what extent the latest revision of the English subject curriculum in Norway has implemented elements of language awareness. The last section explores picture books and their potential as a tool to cultivate and develop language awareness among young learners.

Language awareness

In the literature, several definitions of language awareness appear. The Association for Language Awareness (ALA) describes the concept as follows: «explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and use» (Association for Language Awareness, n.d., p. 7). At first glance, this definition may seem rather complex, but it essentially means that language awareness centres on what Svalberg (2012) calls 'engagement with language'. What does 'engagement' denote in this context? First, engagement is by no means passive; it implies active involvement and a genuine interest in and curiosity about language. Furthermore, engagement with language entails more than being purely a consumer of language; it reflects a dynamic and continuous learning process in which language is also produced and used by those involved.

In the study of language awareness, there is broad consensus that this construct includes at least three core dimensions: *cognitive, affective* and *social* (Svalberg, 2009, 2012; Van den Broek et al., 2019)*.* Thus, language awareness covers, connects and balances the central dimensions of language learning and implies the need for a holistic approach to language teaching.

The cognitive dimension involves the learner's psychological readiness for acquiring specific language features and structures. Bolitho et al. (2003) describe 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 language works» (p. 251). A key component of language awareness is *noticing*, which can serve as a

catalyst for generating learners' motivation for exploring language and prepare them cognitively ready for acquiring specific language patterns. Furthermore, Van den Broek et al. (2019) promote the importance of developing language learners' 'thinking about language', which involves such processes as interpreting, analysing, formulating thoughts and reasoning (p. 60). In sum, this implies that learners must be provided with access to a rich variety of appropriate texts, enabling them to notice and pay careful attention to different language features. Bolitho et al. (2003) accentuate the importance of the learners discovering language patterns themselves. This means that the process of noticing and identifying language features can be used as scaffolding for language acquisition, that is, converting input into intake and understanding (Widodo & Cirocki, 2013). Another aspect closely connected to noticing is that of playfulness. According to Bolitho et al. (2003), young learners' engagement with language must start from a typical experiential perspective. The playful element of language can be a powerful motivator for exploring language more systematically and analytically at a later stage.

The second dimension of language awareness concerns affective factors. Here, the teacher has a pivotal role in creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. Developing learners' language awareness requires a stimulating and friendly atmosphere in the classroom, which encourages students to experiment with language without fear of making mistakes and being ridiculed (Flognfeldt et al., 2020). Among others, Bolitho et al. (2003) believes that «most learners learn best whilst affectively engaged» (p. 252). Affective factors are diverse and include aspects such as motivation, interest and enjoyment, self-esteem and attitudes. When these factors are positive, they can spark learners' engagement with language. Therefore, teachers must take a learner-centred approach in their teaching, which means they need to facilitate an awareness-raising learning environment, introduce tasks that foster curiosity about language, and encourage learners to pose questions and talk about language. Van den Broek et al. (2019) refer to this process as 'languaging': meaning-making by exploring the features of language and verbalising one's thoughts in the analytic talk about language. Moreover, it is critical to acknowledge the emotional aspects of language learning. In the literature, anxiety appears to be a predominant emotion, which can have a negative impact on language learning (Svalberg, 2012). Anxiety may take many forms, such as fear of making mistakes, reluctance to use the target language, low self-esteem, social discomfort in

interactive language activities, and fear of being judged by fellow students. In their teaching practices, teachers must always strive to minimise the students' level of anxiety to optimise their learning potential. Learners need to be encouraged to set aside their worries about their lack of ability to experience mastery of language learning (Flognfeldt et al., 2020). Additionally, Thornbury (2002) draws attention to the importance of personal and emotional involvement in language learning; students need to experience that subject content and learning activities are relevant and meaningful for their own lives. Hence, teachers need to provide their students with activities that clearly demand that language be put into active use.

The last dimension of language awareness, the social dimension, is closely connected with the affective dimension. Naturally, learning a foreign language involves communicating with others, in writing and orally. This is clearly expressed in ALA's definition of language awareness referred to above; language in use is the goal of language learning (Association for Language Awareness, n.d.). This presupposes that the teacher builds a learning environment and provides learning activities that promote interaction with others. Borg (1994) maintains that the evolution of students' language awareness is a continuous process of investigating language, in which learners are encouraged step by step to involve themselves in more analytical discussions of language. Learners need someone to share their discoveries with and talk to about language; that can be the teacher as well as co-learners. Interaction with others can contribute to developing the learners' thinking skills about language and expanding their metalanguage, which again will help them gain deeper insights into how language works. Thus, a positive and productive learning cycle can be created; sharing and talking about their discoveries can increase learners' further engagement with language. In this way, the social dimension broadens the scope of language awareness by moving language from solely being an object of engagement to also becoming a vehicle of communication (Svalberg, 2009).

Teacher language awareness

In the previous section, the prime focus was on the learner's perspective of working with language awareness. However, the teacher's personal engagement with language is a decisive factor in creating language awareness-oriented teaching practices. According to Lindahl (2019), there are three interconnected domains that form teacher language awareness: the user domain, the analyst domain and the teacher domain. The former describes the teacher's own

language proficiency and command of the target language. The second refers to the teacher's knowledge about language, its patterns and systems. The last domain refers to the teacher's ability to provide learners with adequate instruction that motivates them to engage with language. Andrews (2003) observes that knowledge of subject content is the core component of teacher language awareness. Further, teacher language awareness demands a critical and analytical view of language; this implies that the teacher must possess a disposition for exploring language (Borg, 1994). However, knowledge about language is not sufficient on its own; having good command of the target language is also crucial to enhance a thorough understanding of its patterns and structures. Moreover, to advance students' analytic thinking about language, it is critical that teachers are sensitive to language awareness from the learner's perspective and comprehend what language patterns students struggle with (Wright, 2002). This insight forms the basis for creating a learning environment that strengthens students' motivation to take further steps in their engagement with language.

Teaching language awareness

In this paper, it is emphasised that working with language awareness is not a discipline or method in itself; it is rather a teaching approach naturally integrated into the language-aware teacher's practices. Bolitho et al. (2003) stresses that «language awareness is not taught by the teacher or by the coursebook; it is developed by the learner» (p. 252). The main idea is that learners themselves notice typical features and patterns of language. Bolitho et al. (2003) maintains that this kind of language work calls for «active engagement between learner, language data, and the learning process» (p. 256). As mentioned earlier, the dominant element in language awareness is an analytical view where learners are encouraged to notice, raise questions and participate in talk about how language works. Consequently, teachers must take a learner-centred approach in their teaching practices and present learners with tasks that are clearly discovery-oriented (Van den Broek et al., 2019) and consciousness-raising (Svalberg, 2012). The teacher must introduce learners to texts that suit their language proficiency and, further, create appropriate tasks that motivate learners to engage with language through exploration and hence, accelerating their learning process.

Language awareness in the *Curriculum in English*

This section explores and discusses the inclusion of language awareness in the present English curriculum in Norway, introduced in 2020 and referred to as the LK20 *Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). In international literature, Norway is mentioned as one of the countries where language awareness is given a central role in shaping new foreign language curricula (Bolitho et al., 2003; Van den Broek et al., 2019). This makes it even more intriguing to examine how language awareness is materialised in the *LK20 Curriculum in English*.

In presenting what is new in the *LK20 Curriculum in English*, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (2019) places heavy emphasis on the importance of having knowledge about language and an exploratory approach to language learning. This is clearly a pedagogical view of language teaching and learning that entirely agrees with the theoretical basis for language awareness discussed above (Bolitho et al., 2003; Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2009, 2012; Van den Broek et al., 2019; Wright, 2002). *Language learning* is one of three core elements in the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). In the description of this core element, we find the 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» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 2). The description of the core elements is part of the overall introduction to the subject, called *About the subject,* which includes the principal components in the *LK20 Curriculum in English*, such as *Relevance and central values, Interdisciplinary topics*, and *Basic skills*, together with *Core elements* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, pp. 2–4)*.* In total, these sections form the foundation for the more concrete part that follows: *Competence aims and assessment.*

The three core elements found in the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), namely *Communication, Language learning*, and *Working with texts in English*, cannot be regarded in isolation; they are heavily interconnected and interdependent in such a way as to mutually reinforce one another. According to the *LK20 Curriculum in English*, the overall aim of learning English is that «Through working with the subject, the pupils shall become confident users of English so that they can use English to learn,

communicate and connect with others» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 2). This statement denotes a clear, holistic approach to language teaching, which is in complete alignment with language awareness theory (Bolitho et al., 2003; Svalberg, 2009). Hence, working with language awareness can become a language learning strategy supporting students to see that «Knowledge of and an exploratory approach to language, communication patterns, lifestyles, ways of thinking and social conditions open new perspectives on the world and ourselves» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 2). Accordingly, Brevik et al. (2020) see language awareness from a broad perspective; language learning should also focus on raising students' awareness of how, when and in what context they use English, both in and outside school. This view can be linked to the focus on the relevance of learning English and students' personal interests; as such, these factors have rightly been stressed more in the new curriculum than in earlier curricula.

In the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2023), working with texts in English and reading have been given high priority. Language awareness is naturally closely interwoven with both factors as it involves providing learners with discovery-oriented text materials and tasks (Svalberg, 2012; Van den Broek et al., 2019; Wright, 2002). The *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) defines text in a broad sense: «spoken and written, printed and digital, graphic and artistic, formal and informal, fictional and factual, contemporary and historical» (p. 3). Such a wide variety of texts provides teachers and learners with ample opportunities for choosing engaging texts and exploring language. Furthermore, the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) encourages students to read self-chosen texts, which can undoubtedly strengthen learners' motivation for reading and engaging with language (Brevik et al., 2020).

The second part of the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) outlines the competence aims learners are expected to achieve according to certain years of schooling, that is, after years 2, 4, 7 and 10. Here, the term competence refers to subject content knowledge and skills combined (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2023). Although the different sets of competence aims inform teachers about the expected results of their teaching, the *LK20 Curriculum in* English (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) does not specify what tools and resources teachers should use. On the

contrary, teachers are given the freedom and responsibility to frame their pedagogical approach, choose appropriate teaching materials and select relevant subject content to match the competence aims.

Where in the competence aims can teachers find evidence to focus on working with language awareness? First, it is imperative to pay close attention to how the competence aims are expressed. The verbs used initially in the competence aims indicate distinct signs of engagement with language, for instance, «listen to, recognise, explore, find, experiment with, discover and identify» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, pp. 5–7). These are particularly found in the competence aims during years 2 and 4. At later stages, these verbs are combined with other verbs, such as «explore and use, explore and talk, follow rules, use key patterns, explore and describe and use knowledge of» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, pp. 7–9). Hence, this informative and consistent use of action verbs secures a steady progression of students' engagement with language and, thereby, their development of language awareness. Thus, the *LK20 Curriculum in English* communicates an evident holistic and exploratory approach to language learning, which resonates well with language awareness theory (Bolitho et al., 2003; Carter, 2003; Svalberg, 2012; Van den Broek et al., 2019).

Second, the competence aims encompass a rich diversity of aspects connected to language awareness: «listen to and recognise phonemes and syllables in words, listen to and explore the English alphabet and pronunciation patterns, find high frequency words, read and experiment with writing familiar words, discover and play with words and identify word classes», which are all found after years 2 and 4 (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, pp. 5–7). In the competence aims after years 7 and 10, we find expressions like «explore and use pronunciation patterns, identify sentence elements, follow the rules of spelling, word inflection and syntax and use knowledge of word classes and syntax» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, pp. 5–9). Thereby, the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) encourages teachers to offer their students consciousness raising tasks that cultivate their engagement with language, consistent with the ideas of language awareness theory (Svalberg, 2012; Van den Broek et al., 2019). Furthermore, the inclusion of Norway in international literature as a model for prioritizing language awareness in language curricula (Van den Broek et al., 2019) and for producing learner-centred

textbooks with a language awareness approach (Bolitho et al., 2003) reinforces the focus on an explorative approach to language learning in the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019).

It is also interesting to note that among the competence aims after all years, there is one aim that focuses on learners' knowledge of other languages, namely, after year 2, the learner is expected to «find words that are common to English and other languages with which the pupil is familiar» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 5). After year 7, this competence aim is broadened: «… explore and talk about some linguistic similarities between English and other languages that the pupil is familiar with and use this in their language learning» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 7). This gradual progression shows that multilingualism is recognised as a resource to be used actively as a strategy by students in their language learning and thereby enhance their language awareness (Brevik et al., 2020).

Compared to the previous curriculum which was introduced in 2006, there is an additional, new section in the present curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) called *Formative assessment*, which follows each set of competence aims in all subjects. This part serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it describes how learners can demonstrate their competence in English according to the aims, and on the other, it elaborates on how the teacher should facilitate students' learning processes (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). For instance, after years 2, 4 and 7 at primary school level, the importance of an exploratory approach to language learning is clearly expressed: «The teachers shall allow the pupils to be active, play, explore and use their senses in a variety of ways to experience language learning» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 5). This implies that teachers must continuously be reflective and critical of their teaching practices in order to motivate students. In addition, there is one crucial message consistently repeated after all stages in the *Formative assessment* section: «The pupils shall have the opportunity to experience that experimenting on their own and with others is part of learning a new language» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, pp. 5, 7, 8, 9). According to the theory section above, this statement embraces the core elements of language awareness, namely the *cognitive*, *affective* and *social* dimensions (Bolitho et al., 2003; Svalberg, 2019; Van den Broek et al., 2019). The terms *experience* and *experimenting* are key concepts for raising

teachers' awareness of the need to take an exploratory direction in their pedagogical practices to help students achieve the competence aims (Andrews, 2010; Wright, 2002).

Language awareness and picture books

This final section aims to explore the potential of picture books as a textual resource for supporting the development of young learners' language awareness. The first issue dealt with is the unique qualities of picture books as a literary genre. What makes picture books especially suitable for engaging young learners with language work?

All of us, and young children in particular, love stories. Picture books give learners access to narratives and allow young learners to enjoy stories at a manageable length with a linguistic complexity adjusted to their language capacity (Mellegård, 2018). Stories encourage readers to identify with the characters and relate to themes allowing learners to see that there are connections between their experienced personal world and the world outside their own sphere (Bradbery, 2012; Mart, 2012; Mellegård, 2023). As mentioned above, the affective dimension of language awareness comes into play here; stories can generate personal engagement and increase students' motivation for language work (Bolitho et al., 2003; Thornbury, 2002).

Another typical feature of picture books is that they combine two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Tørnby, 2019; Williams & Normann, 2021). There is a heavy interdependence between the images and the words in the way that the images describe and the words narrate, creating what Wolf (2004) refers to as a 'seamless relationship' between the two. Consequently, learners can rely on both text and images in their meaning-making; this duality works as scaffolding, supporting learners in this effort and leaving more space for exploring language (Mellegård, 2018).

Another significant point is that picture books promote a dialogical way of teaching, which correlates closely with the social dimension of language awareness (Bolitho et al., 2003; Mellegård, 2018, 2023; Svalberg, 2012). In the classroom, picture books are often read aloud in one sitting, which offers learners a wealth of language experiences and creates ample opportunities for learners and teachers to engage together in a dialogical inquiry into language (Roche, 2015). According to Roche (2015), «it is almost impossible to separate out language learning from the panoply of other kinds of learning going on» (p. 77). This supports a

holistic view of language teaching and learning (Bolitho et al., 2003; Mellegård, 2018) and reinforce Masuhara's (2003) view that language awareness approaches are predominantly inductive. Reading picture books aloud to children in the classroom within a social context promotes exploration of the language in interaction between peer learners and the teacher. Language patterns and structures used in picture books are often repetitive and prominent, which may lead to learners developing their language awareness implicitly, unaware that they are actually exploring language at the same time as enjoying an intriguing story (Mart, 2012). The way in which picture books inherently encourage language talk and offer opportunities for learners to work with language implicitly and explicitly makes picture books such a valuable resource.

The teacher can easily help learners to discover these typical patterns of authentic language. In a learner-centred approach, language awareness can become a strategy as a «means of helping learners to help themselves» in their language acquisition processes (Bolitho et al., 2003, p. 10). Additionally, book talks and the interaction between learners will promote learners' metacognitive understanding of how language works (Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2009; Van den Broek et al., 2019). Roche (2015) refers to this as being a member of a collaborative culture, which implies that «children involved in good quality discussions on a picture book with their teacher and peers are listening and improving their receptive language skills» (p. 66). Hence, picture books and their narrative, combined with dialogical inquiry, offer children to learn about language *through* language, encouraging active language production.

Another outstanding quality of picture books is the significant role of the images, which capture the readers' attention from the very first moment. Tørnby (2019) points out that we respond to pictures through our senses and emotions; in other words, our responses produce personal interpretations. Wolf (2004) claims that «emotional weight is often aligned with visual weight» (p. 230). These views point to the importance of the affective dimension of language learning, which may inspire learners to express personal statements and add new perspectives to the story (Bolitho et al., 2003; Bradbery, 2012; Mart, 2012; Mellegård, 2023; Svalberg, 2012). Therefore, it is of great importance that teachers are conscious of the aesthetic quality of the images when selecting picture books to be used in language learning.

Altogether, picture books possess the special qualities required to combine the *cognitive*, *social* and *affective* dimensions of language awareness discussed above. Bolitho et al. (2003) stress that language awareness is inseparable from text awareness. Picture books represent the prime texts young learners experience; therefore, teachers and adults need to feed young learners with a rich variety of such texts to develop text awareness. However, to foster students' language awareness and nurture their language learning using picture books, teachers need to have good knowledge of this text genre, which ones to use for what purposes, how to include them and make the most of their potential in their teaching. Picture books can of course be read aloud just for the pleasure of enjoying a delightful story; students need that, too. Including picture books as a resource demands thoughtful planning by the teacher to make picture books shine and provide students with a positive and motivating learning experience (Mart, 2012).

The *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) has a strong focus on using texts in a broad sense, as described above. The new curriculum is primarily a competence-oriented curriculum and accordingly, less content-oriented. Although one would not expect any teaching resources to be cited specifically, picture books are actually explicitly mentioned in the competence aims. After years 2 and 4, pupils are expected, respectively, to be able to «listen to, read and talk about the content of simple texts, including picture books» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 5) and «read and talk about the content of various types of texts, including picture books» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 6). After years 7 and 10, there is no specific mention of picture books, but the term «self-chosen texts» is used, which can definitely include picture books. Consequently, teachers should make picture books a mandatory part of their teaching toolbox.

Looking into some picture books

This final section presents a small selection of picture books and explores their potential for the purpose of developing young learners' language awareness connected to the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). The chosen picture books are: *Hooray for fish!* by Lucy Cousins (2006), *Crocodiles don't brush their teeth* by Colin Fancy (2005), *My world, your world* by Melanie Walsh (2004), *It's okay to be different* by

Todd Parr (2009), and *Take away the A. An alphabeast of a book* by Michaël Escoffier & Kris Di Giacomo (2015).

Hooray for fish! by Lucy Cousins (2006) has a simple but striking sentence structure: «Hello, hello, hello, fish: red, blue and yellow fish. Hello, spotty fish, stripey fish, happy fish, grumpy fish», and so on. The illustrations are colourful and humorous and attract young learners' attention and curiosity about what imaginative fishes will appear when they turn the pages. What makes *Hooray for fish!* readily applicable for a language awareness approach is the way words are chunked, in this case how adjectives describe nouns. Young learners can easily notice such patterns, preparing them for expanding their vocabulary through collocations, which are combinations of words (Flognfeldt & Lund, 2021; Hill, 1999; Mellegård, 2018). Idiomatic language operates in meaningful units and not in single words. Thus, when teaching vocabulary, teachers need to be aware of providing learners with such word combinations to aid with the understanding of how collocations are the building blocks of language and how crucial it is to acquire a repertoire of readymade language chunks, which can be retrieved later for producing language (Čeh, 2005; Flognfeldt, 2015; Mellegård, 2018). For decades, there has been an increased attention to the recognition of collocations within language learning theory. Hill (1999), for instance, claims that «collocation is the key to fluency» (p. 5). This has implications for how teachers can assist learners in developing their vocabulary productively. In *Hooray for fish!* (Cousins, 2006), learners encounter authentic language with a sharp focus on collocations. The reading of this book opens up opportunities for exploring, noticing and talking about the function of different types of words, how they combine and how they lead to expressing different meanings. Indeed, this picture book could have been subtitled *My first book of collocations.* Van den Broek et al. (2019) stress the need to include discovery-oriented tasks to help learners develop their thinking skills and connect the different aspects of language learning. *Hooray for fish!* (Cousins, 2006*)* is the kind of picture book that can help young language learners fulfil the competence aims in the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) about exploring and experimenting with language. However, this presupposes that teachers can engage learners with language work that encompasses the cognitive, affective and social dimensions (Andrews, 2010; Bolitho et al., 2003; Widodo & Cirocki, 2013).

Another picture book well suited for use with beginners is *Crocodiles don't brush their teeth* (Fancy, 2005). The sentence structure found in the title is repeated throughout the book, but associated with different animals, as in «Elephants don't blow their noses. But I do. Lions don't brush their hair. But I do. Pigs don't wash their faces. But I do». This vocabulary represents recognisable daily routines that children can relate to directly. The competence aims after years 2 and 4 in the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) expect the pupils to be able to participate in conversations about daily life (pp. 5–6). Further, this picture book centres on the *to do construction* in a simple and clear way, illustrated in the examples above. Contextualisation and personification of grammar structures are essential to engage young learners in language work; they need to see the immediate usefulness of these in communication (Flognfeldt, 2015; Hedge, 2000; Pinter, 2017). *Crocodiles don't brush their teeth* (Fancy, 2005) offers learners the chance to discover the syntax pattern of the 'to do construction' for themselves. Bolitho et al. (2003) suggests that «language awareness is a mental attribute which develops through paying motivated attention to language in use» (p. 251). To enhance learners' motivation, the teacher and learners can use this picture book as a model text for creating new sentences together. This will offer opportunities for affective engagement in language work (Bolitho et al., 2003; Carter, 2003), in addition to playing and experimenting with language, as highlighted in the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). This echoes Bolitho et al.'s (2003) outline of the principles and procedures of a language awareness approach. Paying careful attention to typical patterns of language can prepare the learner's cognitive readiness to work more explicitly with these features later. In this way, *Crocodiles don't brush their teeth* (Fancy, 2005) can serve as a scaffolding resource for noticing, dialogical inquiry, playing and experimenting with language and the production of language (Mellegård, 2018; Svalberg, 2012).

In *My world, your world* (Walsh, 2004), the author introduces the reader to children with different cultural backgrounds. Today, classrooms are indeed multicultural; this reality should be reflected in the selection of literature teachers choose to use with their learners. In the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), the close interaction between culture and language is clearly communicated in the competence aims, for instance, after year 4: «The pupil is expected to be able to learn words and phrases and

acquire cultural knowledge through English-language literature» (p. 6). Including various types of literature resonates well with the diversity of today's learners, offering them real-world relevance and channelling reading into an enjoyable experience (Tørnby, 2019). *My world, your world* (Walsh, 2004) can spur young learners to explore similarities and differences between children worldwide and relate this to their own classroom. The author presents familiar everyday situations using the following language format:

> Kavita wears a colourful sari to school. Jacob wears a warm jacket and snowboots. But… they both wear trainers in gym class […] Max lives at the top of a tall block of flats. Ben lives in a little farmhouse. But… they both love looking at the stars. (Walsh, 2004, pp. 1–6, 22–27)

The sentence structure is repetitive and easily recognisable; moreover, this language pattern serves well for modelling longer stretches of language, supporting young learners in the early stages of familiarising themselves with narration. In addition, communicating differences and similarities in such a positive way involves the affective dimension of language awareness through personalisation of the message conveyed (Carter, 2003; Van den Broek et al., 2019). This view is in agreement with Bolitho et al.'s (2003) point on the importance of «involving learners in affective interaction with a potentially engaging text» (p. 252) because this will motivate learners to express their personal responses to the text and become active language producers (Widodo & Cirocki, 2013).

The *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) contains two interdisciplinary topics. One of them is *Health and life skills*, which focuses on students' ability to «express their feelings, thoughts, experiences and opinions» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 3). In addition, this topic intends to provide students with «new perspectives on different ways of thinking and communication patterns, as well as on the pupil's own way of life and that of others» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 3). Todd Parr's (2009) *It's okay to be different* embraces individuality and acceptance, thereby laying the foundation for initiating talk about the moral values of respect, tolerance and inclusion. The illustrations in the book are colourful, have a kind of naïve expression, and are recognizable and attractive to young learners. From a language point of view, the author communicates his message through a repetitive and distinct pattern of sentence structure:

It's okay to need some help […] It's okay to be small […] medium […] large […] extra large […] It's okay to say NO to bad things […] It's okay to be proud of yourself […] It's okay to have different dads […] It's okay to have different friends. (Parr, 2009, pp. 2, 8–9, 13, 19–20, 28)

Since this picture book addresses children in a direct and personal way that they can relate to, it may contribute to involving learners in affective interaction with the text. According to Bolitho et al. (2003), providing learners with engaging texts is essential to the process of developing language awareness; this implies that learners can articulate their personal responses to the text, and as the next step in their learning process, the teacher can ask learners to look for typical features of the language used (Carter, 2003; Svalberg, 2012; Wright, 2002). Since the language patterns in Todd Parr's (2009) book are typically prominent and predictable, this book offers an excellent opportunity to enhance learners' ability to *notice*, which is at the core of language awareness (Van den Broek et al., 2019). Textually, *It's okay to be different* demonstrates convincingly Bolitho et al.'s (2003) view that language awareness and cultural awareness are indistinguishable, which requires a more holistic approach to working with texts. This picture book, with its real-life message and vivid illustrations, can be used as a model for processing the language more deeply, thereby, supporting learners in their initial phase of producing texts, both orally and in writing.

Some of the competence aims in the *LK20 Curriculum in English* (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) concern phonology. For instance, after year 4, the pupil is expected to be able to «explore and use the English alphabet and pronunciation patterns in a variety of playing, singing and language-learning activities» (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019, p. 6). *Take away the A: An alphabeast of a book!* (Escoffier & Giacomo, 2015) is an excellent resource for triggering young learners to explore and discover not only typical patterns of pronunciation and spelling but also their absence. This book takes the reader through the alphabet in a playful manner, as in «Without the A, the BEAST is BEST. Without the C, the CHAIR has HAIR. Without the S, SNOW falls NOW». Obviously, the main idea behind this picture book is simply to subtract one letter from a word and see how it changes into a completely new word. Such a transformation may also impact the pronunciation of individual sounds, like the vowel sounds in *snow* and *now*. By bringing this imaginative picture book

into the classroom, the teacher can help awaken young learners' curiosity about pronunciation patterns in English and motivate them to experiment with finding new words of the same kind. Van den Broek et al. (2019) insist on the critical need to involve learners in such discovery-oriented learning activities. Engagement with language requires input of the target language from materials of high quality (Carter, 2003; Svalberg, 2012). However, the key means of stimulating dialogical inquiry about language is the teachers' language awareness combined with a learner-centred approach to teaching (Borg, 1994; Svalberg, 2012; Wright, 2002).

Concluding remarks

My interest in picture books and how they can be used in the teaching of English was the main inspiration for writing this article. Being a teacher-educator for many years has made me increasingly conscious of the unique qualities and diversity of picture books and what a valuable resource this literary genre is in the teaching and learning of English. Further, I have come to see considerable opportunities for linking language awareness to the use of picture books. The foundation for developing students' language awareness is a safe and productive learning environment, which is an ongoing process and implies facilitating a variety of learning activities that offer learners the chance to progress at their individual rate (Bolitho et al., 2003). Fostering language awareness requires a pedagogical approach in which the learner is the agent but with qualified and adequate support from the teacher, referred to by Van den Broek et al. (2019) as inquiry-based practice. In this context, picture books appear to possess significant potential for enhancing learners' language awareness; it is tempting to indicate that picture books are indeed a goldmine for fostering language engagement.

About the author

Ingebjørg Mellegård is associate professor of English linguistics and didactics at Østfold University College in Norway. She has many years of experience as an English teacher and in-service teacher trainer. Her main interests centre on professional development of English teachers, curriculum theory, course design, theory and practice in addition to different aspects of English didactics such as oral communication, vocabulary and picture books.

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