The Role of Children’s Librarians in Communicating Picture Books to Users: What Can Be Learned From Linguistic Theories and Research?

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Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is one of the most important areas of child’s language development, since it is vocabulary, in particular its size and diversity, that grammar and syntax acquisition depends on. A significant portion of vocabulary is acquired through interaction in a motivating family environment which includes reading materials as well as people who read to children.

The role of reference services in library is to provide the appropriate picture book to parents and children. The adequate picture book corresponds to child’s developmental stage. The vocabulary of picture books is very important because it affects development of child’s vocabulary. Grammar and syntax development depend on vocabulary (Stolt et al., 2009; Bates and Goodman, 1997; 1999). Because of this, it is crucial that all children’s librarians possess extensive knowledge about children’s language development. Therefore, this paper examines the language development in early ages and the role of children’s librarians in communicating linguistically appropriate literature for children. The objectives of this paper were to answer whether the picture books recommended by children’s librarians are appropriate regarding the early child development, whether children’s librarians are competent for recommending children’s literature, given the fact that reference service librarians should possess some linguistic legitimacies, and how these issues affect on the library studies programmes.

Introduction

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Background

The most plausible account of language development can be found within interactionist perspective to language development. According to this perspective, the successful language acquisition requires innate predispositions for language development, development of cognition, learning, memory and generalizations and their interaction with environment which is reflected in child's interactions with
environment that is close persons and the world (Bloom, 2000).

Language acquisition is known to be a gradable process. While acquiring language, child goes through different phases, periods and processes. Many of these are universal and take place in more or less the same period, while the others, such as vocabulary spurt\(^1\) are individual. The occurrence of the first word marks a significant move in language acquisition. Many authors argue that it is possible to follow language development since the occurrence of the first word. The occurrence of the first word is also the occurrence of vocabulary acquisition, an important language component which influences grammar and syntax development. In recent psycholinguistic research close attention has been given to vocabulary acquisition. The attributes of completeness may be attached to the Intentionality Model of Language Acquisition (Bloom, 2000) which postulates that in addition to other cognitive abilities, vocabulary acquisition implies innate predispositions for language learning, different patterns and forms of child's interaction with environment, whereby child's individual activity is regarded as a very important factor in that process.

Child's interaction with environment is often explored within early literacy, the integral component of which is the process of language acquisition including vocabulary acquisition. Being the first and most important child's environment, family is supposed to be a key factor in the early literacy development (Hill-Clark, 2005). Early literacy includes all that child knows and can do within the process of reading and writing, before he/she learns to read and write independently (Stričević, 2007). In addition, accessibility and exposure to reading materials as well as different ways of parents' behaviour while reading play a significant role in the development of early literacy. Reading to children is both an important and irreplaceable factor of early literacy (Hill-Clark, 2005). Recent research (Valdez-Menchaca and Whitehurst, 1992; Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994; Bus and JIzendoorn, 1997; Lonigan and Whitehurst, 1998; Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2001) suggested that a significant part of vocabulary is acquired through mediated reading. In addition, the postulates of Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development should also be noted considering the difference between what a child already knows and can do and what he/she could learn with the adults' help from the environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

Picture book is the first reading material child gets in contact with. In addition, it is also the most often read material to children. The interaction between text and picture and other features which make picture book a specific reading material creates considerable psychological, pedagogical, artistic, and vocabulary potential which may impact child's development. This points to the fact that the quality of a picture book is a key requirement for those who create them as well as for those who mediate and choose them for mediation. Given the complexity of picture book, in order to assess its quality it is not sufficient to provide simple formal criteria such as prominent writers' and illustrators' names but also the criteria applied in the research on children's literature, art, language, and other elements.

Expert librarians work in children's libraries, i.e. children's departments of public libraries and their mission is to provide the most adequate book. In order to accomplish their mission within reference service, children's librarians must know their users, that is their development, especially language development and vocabulary, but also the literature aimed specifically for them (ALA, 2009). Building library collections for children is the basis for providing other types of services for this age group. Therefore, library collections for children must include the works of the highest quality. Picture books constitute a significant portion of book production for preschool children, and they are the only structured reading material for the youngest in this users' group. Thus, it is highly important to have knowledge about picture books as well as to be able to assess their quality.

In 2010-2011 a research was conducted in Croatia with the aim to compare the vocabulary of picture books and the vocabulary of children's speech from the Croatian Child Language Corpus (Martinović, 2011). The research findings showed that vocabulary diversity\(^2\) of most picture books written for children the ages between of two and three is not compatible with the diversity of child's vocabulary. The age of three is important because it is the period of the most intensified vocabulary development.

Furthermore, research results show that vocabulary diversity is significantly different comparing the picture books in the research corpus, while the vocabulary diversity of children's speech from the Croatian Child Language Corpus is very similar. The comparison of results regarding the diversity of child's vocabulary and vocabulary diversity of picture books shows that most picture books are not appropriate for children the ages between of two and three because the indices of their diversity are significantly higher than the indices of child's vocabulary diversity which indicates that these picture books are linguistically too demanding for the children of that age. Given the vocabulary diversity, only six\(^3\) picture books from the corpus research might be regarded as suitable for children the ages between of two and three. Also, it should be noted that research was conducted on the

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1 Sudden increase in the production of words.

2 Software programs from program package CLAN were used for language analyses. The CHILDES Project: tools for analyzing talk, 3rd ed., Lawrence Erlbaum Associate, Mahwah, NJ, http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/ accessed on 5 April 2011

3 Out of 70.
corpus of picture books which were aimed for children the ages between of two and three by both publishers and children's librarians.

Librarians serving children in public libraries need to possess specific knowledge and skills. First of all, it is important that children’s librarians understand “theories of infant, child, and adolescent learning and development and their implications for library service”\(^4\). Furthermore, they should “demonstrate a knowledge and appreciation of children’s literature, periodicals, audiovisual materials, Websites and other electronic media, and other materials that contribute to a diverse, current, and relevant children’s collection”. These competences are the basis for a provision of all other library services.

While the knowledge of materials is important for reference service in children's libraries, it raises the question of competence of children's librarians when recommending reading material to specific age groups because that knowledge implies not the content only, but also linguistic appropriateness. Although the research which follows deals with the children’s librarians’ capacities for evaluation of print picture books, some conclusions drawn from it could apply to any other material when linguistic components are in a matter.

**Research**

The scope of this research was to explore the competencies of children’s librarians in Croatia and their attitudes towards these competencies with respect to the recommendations of picture books to parents.

The goals of the research were to explore the extent to which the librarians are competent when assessing literature for children the ages between of two and three as well as to reveal the attitudes of librarians about their own competence when recommending the most appropriate picture books to parents.

The research was conducted to answer the following research questions:

What are the attitudes of librarians about their competence when it comes to the assessment of picture books and the age they are aimed for?

What are the competences of librarians with respect to the assessment of picture books and their purpose for the specific age?

What are the needs of librarians when it comes to gaining knowledge and skills for recommendations of picture books and knowledge about child's development?

The method used in the research was survey. In order to obtain responses to the above mentioned research questions a questionnaire consisting of 6 questions was designed and used. The questions were related to the following: librarians’ attitudes about their own competence regarding the recommendations of picture books to parents, their views on the importance of having knowledge about children’s literature for as well as the views on all the relevant elements to be included in curricula.

There were 20 children’s librarians who participated in the survey. They were chosen because they were the heads of the children's libraries of all counties' central libraries in Croatia. They influence the library collection building policy in children’s libraries in the regions where the central public libraries are located. They also have a significant impact on creating services and programs for users. Central libraries have an important developmental role for all libraries in a county. Additionally, most children's librarians in the central county libraries are also involved in the work of the Commission for Library Services for Children and Young Adults of the Croatian Library Association, the organisation that creates and publishes recommendations of good books for children, young and parents.\(^5\) Therefore they are expected to be very competent in recommendation of appropriate reading materials for children of all ages.

**Results and discussion**

Research on librarians’ attitudes about their knowledge of picture books as well as their own competencies when assessing them has shown that most librarians report to be able to assess well which picture book is aimed for a specific child's age, which indicates that they consider their competencies satisfactory (14 out of 20). Only five librarians responded positively to the question whether the university studies had provided the required knowledge for assessing picture books therefore the question how have they gained required competencies or assessing literature stays open. But, the other question was whether they assess picture books to be specific for a certain age group based on the knowledge they had acquired while studying. This question had basically the same content as the previous one yet it was formulated differently. It is interesting to note that the responses were different, i.e. a larger number of librarians responded that they had acquired the

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competencies during their studies (9 out of 20). The fact that the same questions were answered in two different ways indicates a certain uncertainty of librarians in that area. When these results are compared with the results of one of the previous research - the analysis of the vocabulary of picture books published in Croatia compared to the vocabulary of children the ages between of two and three (Martinović, 2011), it appears that the librarians included in this survey are not competent enough when it comes to the recommendation of picture books in practice. Namely, the findings of this previous research has shown that most often children's librarians recommend picture books which are above children's language development, which suggests their lack of competence with regard to the recommendations of linguistically appropriate picture books.

All librarians (20) who participated in the research consider the knowledge and skills for recommendations of picture books very important in their jobs and argue that they are in a position to recommend a picture book many times a day. This leads to the conclusion that librarians are aware of the importance of their daily work with parents and pre-schoolers. In addition, these data support the fact that librarians’ training should include the development of knowledge and skills which would make librarians strengthened for recommendation since it is one of the primary preconditions which enable them to accomplish their advisory role in reader's development.

Given the requirements on knowledge and skills children's librarians should possess, the attitudes of the librarians on the necessity of possessing such knowledge and competencies as well as frequent tasks met in the practical work, the following question arises: Why such competencies are not acquired during the studies? This leads to the necessity of revising the current curricula for librarians. It should be analysed in order to introduce changes in the current curricula content.

The analysis of results indicates that the librarians are aware that the studies did not provide specific knowledge relevant in their daily work, but also that they are not equipped with competences that are a primary in completing the mission of the institution in which they work (like reading advisory), and the profession they belong to. In other words, this directly points to the fact that some aspects from the field of pedagogy and psychology regarding the child development should be included in the library and information sciences curricula. Furthermore, content from the fields of linguistics and children's literature at both theoretical and practical level, such as practical analyses of literature according to different criteria should also become an integral part of the curricula. One of the possibilities would be a course on children's literature which should cover the elements of specific knowledge and skills needed for adequate recommendation and reading advisory. The results which explicitly point to the limitations of curricula raise doubts on the results about attitudes on the competencies which the librarians expressed in the first question since majority of them responded to be competent for recommendation. Indeed, further qualitative research is needed on librarians and their competencies in order to better identify the possible causes of the problems raised by this research.

**Conclusion**

The main role of the reference service in children's library is not only to recommend a book, but also to recommend a book that is appropriate for the child's developmental stage. For this reason librarians should have knowledge from the field of pedagogy and developmental psychology as well as linguistics with a particular emphasis on language development. They are also expected to have substantial knowledge of children's literature, especially vocabulary as it has a strong influence on child’s language development and further development of grammar and syntax. And it applies on all media, not just print as picture books usually are.

The research conducted has indicated a number of aspects important for daily children’s librarians’ work. Firstly, they are aware that they need knowledge on child's development and children's literature. Moreover, they believe that they possess this knowledge. However, the research findings indicated that their views on their own competencies do not match with their real competencies.

Therefore, they should be more educated with respect to the specific features of children’s literature which means that the university curricula should be redesigned to meet these needs. The already employed children’s librarians should be offered alternative ways within programs of lifelong learning to gain more knowledge and become more competent when recommending the literature for this specific target group of library users.

**REFERENCES**


Ivana Stričević is associate professor and researcher at the University of Zadar, Croatia, at the Department of Information Sciences. She holds master degrees in pedagogy and librarianship and a PhD in information sciences. She teaches the pre-graduate, graduate and postgraduate studies courses related to information systems in education, library services for youth, pedagogy of reading, information literacy, users' information needs and behaviour, and information services in educational institutions. From 2003 to 2007 she was the Chair of the IFLA Libraries for Children and Young Adults Section (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), and from 2007-2011 was the Chair of IFLA’s Literacy and Reading Section.

Curriculum Vitae

Ivana Martinović is a senior assistant at the Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities in Osijek, Department of Information Sciences since 2007. She teaches a few courses. She graduated from the Teacher Training College in Čakovec in 2002, majoring in Preschool Teaching. In 2006 she graduated from the Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities in Osijek, majoring in Librarianship and Croatian Language and Literature. In 2011 she earned her PhD degree in linguistics for the thesis Picture Book as Reading Material Fostering Lexical Development of Children Between Ages Two and Three. Her professional and research interests include library services for children and young adults, reading habits and interests of children and young adults, development of early literacy, and library users’ rights and needs. She is an author and co-author of several scientific, research and professional papers.