The picturebook and EFL teaching. A pilot study of teachers' beliefs

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ABSTRACT

Numerous research studies have addressed the usefulness of authentic children's literature in foreign language teaching, but few have explored teachers' opinions on the viability of applying a particular type of illustrated literature—the picturebook—to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The aim of this qualitative study was to analyse the beliefs of four teachers about selecting literary works for the EFL classroom and the suitability of the picturebook in this context. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and examined through inductive categorical analysis. The results showed that the possibility of working on specific language content was one of the main criteria applied to the selection and use of children's literature in the EFL classroom. Furthermore, the participants assessed the cognitive difficulty associated with certain literary features of the contemporary picturebook as an obstacle to its use in the EFL classroom. The exploration of the teachers' beliefs revealed that they favoured the use of children's literature to promote functional literacy in English but not to improve literary literacy or the students' cognitive skills in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: picturebook, English as a foreign language, teacher beliefs, literary literacy, challenging literature.

Libro álbum y enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. Un estudio piloto sobre creencias docentes

RESUMEN

Numerosas investigaciones han estudiado la utilidad de la literatura auténtica para la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, pero pocas han investigado el pensamiento docente sobre la viabilidad de la aplicación del género concreto del libro álbum para la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. El objetivo de este estudio de corte cualitativo era analizar las creencias de cuatro docentes en relación con la selección de obras literarias para el aula de inglés y con la viabilidad del libro álbum para tal fin. Se realizó un análisis categorial inductivo de la información recogida mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas. Los resultados mostraron que la posibilidad de trabajar sobre contenidos lingüísticos concretos era uno de los principales criterios que orientaban la selección y el uso de libros en el aula. Además, las participantes valoraron la dificultad cognitiva asociada a ciertos rasgos literarios del álbum contemporáneo como un obstáculo para su implementación en el aula de inglés. Así, la indagación sobre las creencias de las docentes participantes demostró que privilegiaban el uso de literatura infantil para la promoción de la alfabetización funcional en inglés, pero no contemplaban usarla para trabajar la alfabetización literaria o las habilidades cognitivas de los alumnos en el aula de inglés.

Palabras clave: álbum ilustrado, inglés (lengua extranjera), creencias docentes, alfabetización literaria, literatura desafiante.

1. Introduction

The selection of teaching materials is one of the cornerstones in the field of foreign language teaching and research. Language teachers have traditionally been identified as active agents who may make instructional choices based on their beliefs (Borg, 2003). In relation to this, several studies have shown that teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) usually opt for the textbook as the main teaching material in their classrooms (Bakken & Lund, 2018; Bergström et al., 2021; Zhang, 2020). Other works have reported that some teachers deem authentic literature to be a useful tool for foreign language learning, but many lack the confidence or preparation to use it in the classroom (Torrano-Guillamón et al., 2019). However, research has found that working with literature is very effective in foreign language teaching contexts (Bland, 2022; Kim, 2022; Sun, 2020a, 2020b).

Among the different types of children's literature that can be used in the classroom, the picturebook differs from conventional illustrated books and presents certain characteristics that actively involve readers and subvert traditional reading (Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008). Research has established the usefulness of this kind of illustrated literature in foreign language learning (Bland, 2022; Mourão, 2022; Reyes-Torres & Portalés, 2020), but educators are still wary of its complexity and divergence from the norm (Daugaard & Johansen, 2014). In this sense, teachers' experiences of and beliefs about children's literature and foreign language teaching play a fundamental role in their assessment of the appropriate literature for the classroom.

2. Literature review. Picturebooks as authentic literature in EFL learning contexts

Literary texts have traditionally been regarded as suitable sources of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982) that may help learners to acquire a foreign language in a natural way (Chang & Renandya, 2021; Reynolds, 2020). Although some authors have discussed the linguistic difficulties that authentic literature may pose for foreign language learners (Macalister & Webb, 2019), others have stated that such difficulties can be mitigated by using pictures in books (Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018), the role of the storyteller as mediator (Sun, 2020b) or the students' L1 (Mourão, 2022), among other elements, as scaffolding strategies.

However, the decoding of foreign language texts is not the only challenge that children may face when reading authentic literature in EFL contexts. The picturebook is a form of illustrated literature in which pictures and text interrelate to create meaning (Sipe, 2012) and this makes it a potentially demanding type of literature as its formal characteristics may pose a cognitive challenge to readers (Farrar et al., 2022; Ommundsen, 2022). Contemporary picturebooks commonly include features such as sophisticated and complex picture-text relationships (contradiction, complementarity, counterpoint, etc.), subversion of literary conventions, polyphonic narration, self-referentiality, overtly parodic forms of intertextuality, or meaning-conveying paratexts (Bland, 2019; Nikolajeva, 2008; Sipe & Pantaleo, 2008; Tabernero, 2013; Van der Linden, 2015).

The challenge implicit in reading this multimodal and subversive type of literature may promote children's literacy skills in a foreign language (Hestetræet, 2019; Mourão, 2015; Sun, 2020a, 2020b), their literary competence (Bland, 2013, 2019, 2022; Farrar et al., 2022) and their cognitive development (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2022). Furthermore, the need for multimodal approaches to EFL teaching (Alcalde-Peñalver & Santamaría-Urbieta, 2021; Huertas-Abril, 2021) makes the multimodal nature of picturebooks justifiably appealing for use in EFL learning contexts (Reyes-Torres & Portalés, 2020).

However, educators have often rejected contemporary picturebooks because this cognitively demanding kind of literature does not conform to established traditions and expectations (Tabernero, 2013; Ommundsen et al., 2022). Teacher cognition is understood as the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching that impacts teachers' professional lives (Bakken & Lund, 2018; Borg, 2003). Among the elements constituting teacher cognition, teacher beliefs refer to the personal cognitive propositions of teachers that are not necessarily structured and may have a strong influence on their professional decisions (Cambra et al., 2000). Research on teachers' beliefs regarding the use of unconventional children's literature has revealed that educators' beliefs may pose more of an obstacle to its use than children's competence (Hamilton, 2014).

Even though there is scarce research on teachers' beliefs about the appropriateness of using cognitively demanding picturebooks in second or foreign language contexts, Daugaard and Johansen (2014) reported that the educators participating in their study considered the complexity inherent in this type of literature unsuitable for their L2 students. However, their beliefs were challenged when their students demonstrated the ability to interact with a markedly metafictional picturebook in a foreign language. This experience is consistent with the argument of Reyes and Villacañas (2020) regarding the mismatch between the linguistic and cognitive levels of foreign language learners, which very often makes teachers reduce the linguistic complexity of classroom tasks and, consequently, their cognitive complexity. In line with Daugaard and Johansen (2014), Reyes and Villacañas (2020) find that teachers' beliefs weigh heavily in their acceptance or rejection of cognitively challenging tasks for the foreign language classroom. Consequently, although the picturebook offers a wide range of possibilities for foreign language education, teachers' beliefs play a fundamental role in the processes of selecting and using literature for the classroom and, therefore, should be taken into account.

3. The present study

In the light of the above, teachers' beliefs about children's literature and the possibilities and difficulties it presents for foreign language education are key factors that affect the use of this type of literature in EFL contexts. Previous studies specifically involving picturebooks have investigated their effectiveness for foreign language learning (Hestetræet, 2019; Sun, 2020a), but few have addressed the topic of teachers' beliefs about the suitability of this potentially challenging literature for non-native language contexts (Daugaard & Johansen, 2014). Therefore, the present study is based on two research questions: "What are teachers' beliefs regarding the selection of children's literature for the EFL classroom?" and "What are their beliefs about the appropriateness of the cognitively challenging features present in many contemporary picturebooks?". Thus, this study aims to explore EFL teachers' beliefs regarding their criteria for selecting reading materials, and to analyse how these criteria coincide with or differ from contemporary picturebook features.

In this respect, two main research objectives were established:

1. To analyse EFL teachers' beliefs about the selection criteria of children's literature for the classroom.

2. To analyse EFL teachers' beliefs about the suitability of the features of contemporary picturebooks for the classroom.

4. Method

4.1. Research design and participants

This study follows a qualitative approach as this method helps to understand and explore the participants' subjectivity—in this case, their beliefs—from their own perspective (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2010). More specifically, this work used a multiple case study design (Stake, 1999) to examine the beliefs of several primary EFL teachers. Given the difficulty of finding EFL teachers who base their teaching on authentic literature rather than on textbooks or graded readings (Torrano-Guillamón et al., 2019), a preliminary analysis was conducted in the Spanish province of Huesca to find participants for this study. The researchers contacted 18 bilingual state schools to find potential participants. The main requirement for participation in the study was using children's literature as the main material in the EFL classroom. Participants also needed sufficient teaching experience to have developed teaching beliefs based on years of using children's literature in the classroom.

The schools acted as intermediaries between the researchers and the teachers who agreed to participate in the study. Once the researchers had located teachers who were interested, they contacted each one personally to ensure they met the participation criteria. After the screening process, four teachers were selected to participate in the study; all four of them used illustrated children's literature—instead of textbooks—as the main teaching material in their EFL classroom and had over 10 years' teaching experience. The small number of participants and the qualitative approach employed enabled a deeper exploration of the subjectivity of the four teachers as regards their beliefs about the selection and use of literature in the EFL classroom. This was a pilot study to collect information on the subject from a small number of participants and can be the basis of a more extensive study in the future.

4.2. Procedure and data analysis

Individual semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2011) were used to access and analyse the beliefs of these four EFL teachers. This method of data collection led to several guiding questions while the informants were free to direct the interview according to their personal experience on the subject. Thus, they were asked general questions about authentic literature in the EFL classroom, how they usually handle it and which books do they regularly use. Subsequently, they stated their beliefs about which characteristics of children's literature were appropriate for EFL teaching. Each teacher who agreed to participate in this study attended an interview of about one hour's duration after giving consent to be recorded. In order to facilitate data analysis, the interviews were then transcribed using naturalised transcription (Bucholtz, 2000).

Inductive categorial analysis was used to refer to patterns and common elements and also to note the singularity of each of the four cases studied. This categorical analysis was based on the "grounded theory" developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) by applying the "constant comparative method". This approach was chosen as it enables the generation of knowledge about a specific reality by linking common points from the data collected. Following this method, the content of the interviews was coded under different categories, which were gradually modified, readjusted and finally rearranged under two core categories. This analysis used NVivo 11 software, which specialises in processing qualitative data.

5. Findings

The inductive analysis of the data collected led to two core categories: "teachers' beliefs about criteria for literature selection" and "teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of picturebooks for EFL teaching".

5.1. Teachers' beliefs about criteria for literature selection

The first core category includes four subcategories corresponding to different dimensions of the teachers' beliefs about literature selection (see table 1). These beliefs were their personal cognitive propositions (Cambra et al., 2000) based on their opinions and experiences, with an influence on their professional activity (Borg, 2003) regarding the selection of children's literature for the EFL classroom.

Table 1.
Teachers' beliefs about criteria for literature selection. Source: compiled by the author

SYLLABUS	- Usefulness of a syllabus that determines most of the literature to be used
	- The syllabus allows teachers to focus on the linguistic elements to be worked on with each book
	- The syllabus promotes connections between the contents of different subjects
LINGUISTIC CRITERIA	- Children's literature should allow working on specific language content
	- Books with a repetitive structure facilitate work on language content
	- The books selected should provide exposure to the English language, as well as language production and interaction.
AGE OF THE STUDENTS	- The text to picture ratio should be lighter on books for younger pupils
	- A repetitive book structure is better for younger learners
	- Shorter books are more suitable for younger pupils
	- The topic of the book should be related to the age group's interests
COMPLEXITY OF AUTHENTIC LITERATURE	- Authentic literature can be difficult for EFL learners
	- It provides specific learning opportunities
	- The linguistic difficulty involved requires scaffolding strategies

Regarding the first subcategory, three teachers acknowledged the existence of a syllabus established by the school that determined the book (in all cases, authentic illustrated children's literature in English) for every work unit throughout the school year. They believed that the syllabus is necessary as it selects books according to their suitability for practising the specific vocabulary and grammar associated with each work unit.

Teacher#4: *Tenemos una programación […] Cada unidad está organizada alrededor de un libro y a partir de ese libro se organiza todo. […] Esta organización es muy importante […] porque así te aseguras de poder trabajar el vocabulario de la unidad con un libro adecuado.*

Teacher#1: *Si vemos la familia, pues usamos* Goldilocks and the Three Bears, *que te permite ver vocabulario como mayor, pequeño, mediano…*

Teacher#2: *La Unidad 2 es con el álbum ilustrado* Cat on the Mat *[…] ahí se trabaja vocabulario de los animales, de emociones […] y las preposiciones: in, on, under…*

Although the teachers were free to select literature for classroom use, many of the books had already been determined by the syllabus, based mainly on the possibility of working on pre-established linguistic content. The second subcategory shows that the four teachers had internalised this linguistic criterion for their own literature selection for the classroom, as revealed by their agreement that books should allow them to work on pre-established linguistic content or review the students' previous linguistic knowledge. According to the teachers, books with repetitive structures facilitate this work.

Teacher#1: *Al elegir el libro, tienes que tener claro qué vocabulario quieres trabajar […]. Porque la verdad es que, con los cuentos, el vocabulario se introduce solo […]. Hay que trabajar el vocabulario que estás viendo en ese momento, que tienen que reconocer, estructuras sencillitas. […] Un libro que uso es* Monkey Puzzle, *porque permite ir viendo los animales […] o* Elmer, *que trata los colores.*

Teacher#3: *[…] el de* The Very Hungry Caterpillar *lo uso porque trabaja los alimentos.*

The informants argued that shared reading should lead to opportunities for language exposure, production and interaction in the classroom, although most of the examples they gave concerned working on specific language content rather than using English to comment on the story and discuss it.

Teacher#2: *Durante la lectura, se suele parar bastante para que los críos interactúen […] por ejemplo les digo "let's count the animals". […] nos sirve también para revisar alguna cosa de las que se ha visto en otras unidades.*

Teacher#4: *les hago preguntas durante la lectura […] y así insistimos en el vocabulario del libro.*

The third subcategory indicates that the teachers believed that student age may influence the selection criteria at different levels (see table 1). Finally, the fourth subcategory reveals that all four teachers found that authentic children's literature should be used in the EFL classroom as they considered that its value as a foreign literary object was higher when read in the original version and that EFL learners should have the opportunity to read "the books that English children read".

Teacher#1: *lo bueno de estos libros es que son los que leen los niños ingleses.*

Teacher#4 *[…] uso cuentos reales en inglés […] Leerlos traducidos no sería lo mismo. […] esos libros tan poéticos, yo no sé cómo los traducirán… lo harán muy bien, pero… en inglés son muy bonitos.*

The teachers were aware of the difficulties that authentic literature poses in terms of comprehension in the EFL classroom—as it is originally intended for native English-speaking children. However, they insisted on its appropriateness for this learning context and had developed several strategies to help students to overcome the linguistic complexity of authentic literature, such as the use of L1, gestures, the tone of voice or the pictures in the book.

Teacher#3: *Mientras cuento el cuento, acompaño lo que digo de lo que ven en la imagen. Y hay que hacer muchos gestos, ellos se guían por los gestos y por los dibujos. […] Es útil para apoyar lo que estás contando en inglés. También la voz, el tono que pongas tú de voz.*

Teacher#2: *ellos responden en español, pero no pasa nada. Lo importante es que interactúen y luego yo puedo contestarles en inglés, reformular lo que ellos han dicho, pero diciéndolo en inglés […] así vamos entrando en el vocabulario del libro y les resulta menos difícil.*

Teacher#4: *las ilustraciones y la gesticulación son fundamentales para que comprendan lo que dice el libro […] porque no siempre es fácil.*

5.2. Teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of picturebooks for EFL teaching

The second core category that emerged from the analysis concerns the teachers' beliefs (Cambra et al., 2000) about the suitability of contemporary picturebook features for EFL teaching contexts. This second category is also divided into several subcategories (see table 2), each referring to a different feature that may be present in contemporary picturebooks.

Table 2.
Teachers' beliefs about the characteristics of picturebooks for EFL teaching. Source: compiled by the author

PICTURE-TEXT RELATIONSHIP	- Pictures should favour understanding of the text - Symmetrical picture-text relationships are favoured - Picture and text work together to create meaning - Pictures can convey meaning by themselves - Pictures can promote language use and interaction
INTERTEXTUALITY	- Intertextuality with a story known in L1 can favour comprehension - Importance of becoming familiar with classic stories - Classic stories read in the classroom should match the original version - Parodic forms of intertextuality are interesting to use in L1 but too complicated for the EFL classroom
PRESENCE OF HUMOUR	- Ludic or humorous elements in the books increase pupils' motivation - Playing games during storytelling increase pupils' motivation
FORMAT AND PARATEXTS	- Large-sized books are required for shared reading - Meaning can be conveyed through font type or size - Meaning can be conveyed through format and layout
SUBVERSION OF LITERARY CONVENTIONS	- Interesting to use in L1 but too complicated for the EFL classroom
WORDLESS PICTUREBOOKS	- They might be useful for EFL teaching - Their use might require more preparation and mediation

Regarding the relevance of pictures and the several ways they can relate to text, the teachers acknowledged the power of illustrations to convey meaning on their own. Pictures were considered essential for reading comprehension and the teachers seemed to agree on the appeal of using them as a springboard for interaction during shared reading. However, most of the examples they gave concerned working on specific vocabulary and only a few referred to predicting or commenting on the story.

Teacher#1: *A través de la imagen también se trabaja mucho […], hay un montón de vocabulario para trabajar que además no aparece en el mismo texto del cuento.*

Teacher#2: *Las ilustraciones tienen un peso al contar la historia. A la imagen le puedes sacar muchísimo partido porque te sirve para reciclar vocabulario anterior y para que hagan hipótesis, también […] te dan mucho juego para revisar contenidos, para ampliar vocabulario […]. Yo sobre todo las uso para insistir en el vocabulario, sí.*

Furthermore, the teachers' beliefs about the role of pictures as facilitators of text comprehension were related to their insistence on the idea that pictures and texts should convey similar information. They considered that any kind of text-picture relationship other than symmetry (contradiction, counterpoint, etc.) might be too complicated for EFL contexts, since students would be required "to think too much".

Teacher#2: *Sobre todo la imagen, que sea clara, que ellos la puedan llegar a entender. Que a lo mejor estés contando una cosa y que corresponda con la imagen. Yo creo que es lo más importante para ellos, que la imagen muestre lo que dice el texto. […] Yo, por ejemplo, no usaría en la clase de inglés estos cuentos en los que la ilustración y el texto te cuentan cosas diferentes. Creo que no lo llegan a entender, hay que pensar demasiado.*

Teacher #3: *Sí, creo que es lo más importante, a la hora de elegir el libro […] que la imagen te diga lo que vayas a decir, lo que quieras contar. Es que, si no, no te van a entender, no van a entender el texto.*

Teacher#4: *Pero desde luego, mientras lees el libro, las ilustraciones tienen que ayudar a entenderlo. Procuro que las ilustraciones… o me gustaría que las ilustraciones nos ayudaran a clarificar la historia, esto es fundamental. […] Claro, si las imágenes no ayudan o despistan, pues aún peor.*

According to the teachers, intertextuality could be a useful tool for reading comprehension by establishing intertextual connections with stories pupils are familiar with in their L1. However, they considered that the parodic or playful treatment of familiar stories based on establishing humorous or subversive intertextual connections between picturebooks and other texts (Nikolajeva, 2008) was appropriate for L1 reading but too cognitively challenging for EFL learning.

Teacher#1: *En clase de inglés, no he trabajado los cuentos que rompen con la historia tradicional de cuentos clásicos, pero sí lo he hecho en español, con* Cuentos en verso para niños perversos *[Revolting Rhymes]. Cuenta los cuentos clásicos pero los cambia. […] Leyendo en español, todo esto es interesante y les hace pensar: cambiar finales, coger un personaje de un cuento y ponerlo en otro, o hacerlo protagonista de otra historia […]pero, para la clase de inglés, es muy complicado […] no tienen que pensar tanto.*

Teacher#4: El Lobo hace huelga *es un álbum que obliga a los niños a reflexionar y a entender que el Lobo puede cansarse de ser siempre el malo […] ven las historias desde otra perspectiva. […] Les gusta mucho cuando lo leemos en español, pero en inglés no lo usaría […] es mejor utilizar historias más sencillas, historias que conozcan.*

The teachers made a similar distinction regarding picturebooks that subvert literary conventions. Among other examples,

they explicitly identified the metaleptic nature of some picturebooks or the presence of narrative polyphony as suitable for L1 but not for EFL learning. They deemed the cognitive complexity of picturebooks with such features to be unsuitable for foreign language teaching contexts and favoured, instead, simpler picturebooks.

Teacer#3: *Hay uno de un autor, Hervé Tullet, que lo he utilizado mucho, pero no en inglés […] se llama* Sin título. *[…] el cuento habla a los niños y se quedan así como sorprendidos […] y les encanta. Esta clase de cuentos son más apropiados para su propio idioma, pero en inglés se busca que los puedan llegar a seguir o que simplemente se enteren un poquito de la historia […] no estos tan "de pensar".*

Teacher#2: *Me encanta* Voces en el parque *[Voices in the Park] […] la misma historia está contada por 4 voces […]. Lo leería en español con ellos, pero no en inglés […] porque es mejor que haya una sola historia […] en inglés no hay que hacerles razonar tanto ni dar tantas vueltas, no.*

As shown in table 2, the teachers also stated that ludic or humorous features in children's literature are crucial for EFL teaching. However, as discussed above, they did not deem parodic intertextuality and the subversion of literary conventions to be appropriate for the EFL classroom. Finally, they agreed that several paratextual elements of picturebooks can convey meaning (see table 2), and three of them believed that wordless picturebooks, which they had never used in the EFL classroom, might be of interest for EFL teaching, but would probably require more effort from the teacher-storyteller.

6. Discussion

This article examined four EFL teachers' beliefs about literature selection and picturebooks use in EFL teaching. The results of the analysis are consistent with scholars' observations regarding the potential influence of teachers' beliefs—their personal cognitive propositions—on their professional action (Borg, 2003; Cambra et al., 2000), since the participants' beliefs about EFL teaching, children's literature and the picturebook genre seem to have an impact on the way they select and use books for the classroom.

Overall, the four teachers emphasised the usefulness of authentic children's literature for EFL teaching and the importance of selecting books carefully in order to maximise the pedagogical opportunities offered by the use of literature in the classroom. During the interviews, the four teachers expressed a number of beliefs relating to the selection of literature for the classroom, but three of them acknowledged that most of the picturebooks they use are already determined by a syllabus that uses the linguistic content of each work unit as a basis for book selection. The teachers also applied this linguistic criterion to their personal selection of children's literature for the classroom and emphasised the importance of focusing on specific, pre-established linguistic content during shared reading. This is consistent with the results of previous research revealing that EFL teachers tend to devote the largest amount of classroom time to specific language content, such as vocabulary (Vaisman & Kahn-Horwitz, 2019).

The four teachers participating in our study belong to a minority who use authentic literature as the central element in their EFL classroom rather than textbooks (Bergström et al., 2021; Torrano-Guillamón et al., 2019). This literature, originally intended for native English-speaking children, may pose linguistic difficulties for non-native readers (Macalister & Webb, 2019); however, these teachers demonstrated in the interviews that they had developed several strategies to assist their students in overcom-

ing such linguistic difficulties, since their main aim was to work on specific linguistic content that is present in the books. Some of these strategies, previously highlighted by other researchers (Hu et al., 2016; Larragueta & Ceballos-Viro, 2018; Mourão, 2022; Sun, 2020b) helped the teachers to optimise picturebooks as foreign language learning tools in their EFL classrooms.

However, they had not developed equivalent strategies to deal with the cognitive complexity that children's literature may involve. Regarding the four participants' beliefs about the suitability of certain features of contemporary picturebooks for EFL teaching, the findings of this study indicate that some of these features—such as the presence of humour and certain types of intertextuality or the capacity of paratexts and illustrations to generate meaning—were considered of interest and potentially useful in EFL teaching. In contrast, other characteristics that may be present in picturebooks—such as parodic or ironic intertextuality, subversion of certain literary conventions or non-symmetrical picture-text relationships—were deemed too complicated for foreign language learners. The teachers believed that these features pose a cognitive challenge for the students that is appropriate for L1 picturebook reading, but not suitable for the EFL classroom. This rejection of the cognitive challenge inherent in certain contemporary picturebooks (Daugaard & Johansen, 2014; Ommundsen et al., 2022) implies a preference for cognitively undemanding materials for the EFL classroom (Reyes & Villacañas, 2020). This preference may actually hinder foreign language teaching and learning, since the development of thinking skills is closely related to foreign language development and has traditionally been relegated to a secondary level in this field (Li, 2016).

The teachers interviewed used picturebooks as teaching tools for foreign language acquisition, but seemed uninterested in choosing cognitively challenging picturebooks that could foster not only the literacy skills of their students, but also their literary competence (Bland, 2013, 2019, 2022; Farrar et al., 2022) and cognitive development (Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2022). Furthermore, the teachers' rejection of picturebooks with non-symmetrical picture-text relationships suggests a lack of interest in exploiting the multimodal nature of this type of book, even though the multimodality of picturebooks has been deemed fundamental in modern foreign language teaching (Reyes-Torres & Portalés, 2020).

Thus, the teachers interviewed seemed to approach picturebooks primarily as sources of language input rather than as literary objects. They prioritised functional literacy—comprehension of the text or its essence—and focused on specific, pre-established language items. In this regard, Bland (2013) states that conventional approaches to the use of picturebooks in EFL tend to ignore their multimodal nature, the "dynamics of pictures combined with words" (p. 37) and the presence of literary devices (such as irony or different kinds of experimentation), which are key for training EFL students in both functional and literary literacy.

This approach to literary and functional literacy through the use of picturebooks in EFL contexts does not imply a rejection of simpler picturebooks, but is rather, as Daugaard and Johansen (2014) have remarked, a preference for using both simpler and more challenging picturebooks to develop learners' linguistic and literary competence and cognitive skills. In this regard, the influence of teachers' backgrounds and training on their selection and use of reading materials in the classroom (Bakken & Lund, 2018; Borg, 2003), along with the results of the present study, suggest that, in order to maximise the teaching opportunities offered by picturebooks, teacher training should provide EFL teachers with the necessary tools to value and exploit this essentially multimodal children's literature in their classrooms.

7. Conclusions

The two objectives of the present study concerned the analysis of four EFL teachers' beliefs about the selection of children's literature for the classroom and about the suitability of some features of contemporary picturebooks for EFL teaching. Regarding the first objective, the teachers' beliefs about the selection of books and their use in the classroom were primarily influenced by their intention to use them to work on specific, pre-established linguistic content. Although authentic picturebooks may pose linguistic decoding difficulties for non-native readers, the teachers interviewed demonstrated their knowledge of a variety of scaffolding strategies enabling them to exploit picturebooks as sources of linguistic content and practice for their students.

Regarding the second objective, the teachers' beliefs about accepting or rejecting certain features of contemporary picturebooks seemed to depend largely on the cognitive complexity associated with them. The teachers considered that certain features would require more cognitive effort from the students and, therefore, deemed them suitable for reading in L1 but not in L2. Thus, the teachers' intention of controlling the linguistic complexity of classroom tasks seemed to have led to a reduction of the cognitive complexity of the tasks as well, which might hinder the development of the students' cognitive skills (Reyes & Villacañas, 2020). In addition, the cognitively challenging nature of some picturebooks has been identified as one of the keys to developing students' literary competence and cognitive ability in language learning contexts (Bland, 2022; Kümmerling-Meibauer & Meibauer, 2022); thus, teacher training should be adapted to help teachers to combine both simple and cognitively complex picturebooks so they are equipped to work on both functional and literary literacy (Bland, 2013) in the EFL classroom.

One of the limitations of the present study was the small number of participants interviewed. However, as previously mentioned, this was a pilot study intended to be used as the basis for further research involving a larger number of participants. This future, larger study will probably help to further explore the opportunities and obstacles related to the use of picturebooks as linguistic and literary products in the classroom. Thus, the present study may provide a springboard for future research related to teachers' opinions on picturebooks for EFL teaching, the specific processes of EFL pupils' reading responses during shared picturebook readings or the approach to picturebooks as cultural products in the classroom.

Teachers' beliefs, training and background may have a major impact on the selection and rejection of picturebooks for the EFL classroom, but this field is still underexplored and would be worth investigating further.

Funding

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