

**“LANGUAGE ACQUISITIONAL STORYTELLING”:
PSYCHOLINGUISTICS IN ACTION IN THE ITALIAN EFL
CLASSROOM**

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to analyse the educational activity of storytelling from an innovative perspective: storytelling as a “psycholinguistic” teaching/learning tool, which can effectively facilitate the acquisition of English as a foreign language by presenting a story through the main stages of acquisition of English as a first language. The educational context where this new teaching/learning strategy is proposed is the class of English language/culture in Italian primary schools. In particular, a new typology of storytelling will be here presented and examined, under the definition of “language acquisitional storytelling”. This teaching/learning tool can enable teachers to expose their pupils to simple stories in English, in which the language is gradually construed through the main stages of acquisition of English as a first language, and is at the same time adapted to the specific context of teaching/learning English as a foreign language.

In the course of our discussion, some examples derived from an English children’s book “There’s an Alligator under My Bed” by Mercer Meyer will be offered. Alongside, this teaching/learning proposal intends to suggest some creative activities and games which can help pupils understand, employ, internalize and re-employ the language forms and rules that are inductively introduced by the teacher in the course of the narration itself.

Parole chiave: *story telling, psicolinguistica, inglese Lingua straniera.*

“Adults do not use complex language constructions when interacting with very young children, but adjust their language to children’s ages and skills. [...] Even though children are exposed to everyday language in addition to a simplified language, the latter is more meaningful.”
(Traute Taeschner 1986, our translation)

1. Storytelling and the English Curriculum in Primary Schools

It goes without saying that nowadays storytelling has come to be universally acknowledged and exploited as a fundamental learning tool in several educational environments, especially in the context of teaching/learning English as a foreign language in primary schools.

What we wish to investigate in the present paper instead, is the great value of storytelling from a developmental psycholinguistic perspective. In the course of our analysis, the main aim will be to emphasize the strong significant link between the use of storytelling at the primary school level and the emergence of a gradual growth in English as if it were a first language. Our focus will be at the oral level: facilitating the ability to listen to and speak in English. Storytelling, then, as a useful strategy in order to prompt and implement the acquisition of English while following the main stages of English acquisition as an L1, and at the same time adapting them to the specific context of second¹ language learning and teaching. Before presenting our (psycho)linguistic study of storytelling, we cannot avoid drawing a quick outline of the present-day situation of the English language in Italian primary schools, as well as of the value of storytelling in the English curriculum.

After roughly fifteen years from its first introduction in the curriculum of Italian primary schools, the English language² is today a well-established reality in the primary educational context. Generally speaking, foreign language teaching was officially recognized in the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 as one of the main devices through which the EU intends to achieve its main aim: become an economic power relying on the most competitive and dynamic world’s knowledge (Luise 2007). Nonetheless, from a more local perspective, and with reference to English teaching in Italian primary schools, there is still much that could be done, investigated and improved at several levels: from the approaches and methodologies to be devised and experimented in the classroom, to the training courses to be designed and implemented for class and specialist teachers. In Italy, not only has the passage from teaching English from the third grade to teaching it from the very first grade auspiciously made it possible a stronger implementation of the English language in primary schools, but it has also brought with it a renewed interest in the question of the teaching methodologies to be used and in the linguistic and teaching training of teachers. Meanwhile, growing attention has been turned to the field of early foreign language teaching in general, in an attempt to concretely elaborate new teaching methodologies and techniques especially designed for very young learners. Alongside, an increasing number of theoretical studies have been underlining the importance of early foreign language teaching as a theoretical and practical science that should rest its foundations

¹ In this essay, the term *second* will be considered synonymous with *foreign*.

² Whenever we use the expression “the English language” or “English” in the present essay, we will be implicitly referring to the English culture too. Language and culture will be considered as an inseparable unit.

on the following principles: the educational and not only instrumental value of foreign language teaching; the close link between linguistic knowledge and intercultural education; the need to increase and improve CLIL experiences (integrated learning of first language, foreign/second language and other curriculum subjects, see Coonan 2002); the necessity to implement and spread researches and studies on early foreign language teaching worldwide, especially amongst foreign language teachers.

With reference to storytelling in primary schools, much has already been said and done. These days, there is no school teacher, no headmaster, no trainer, no educationalist or psychologist who is not convinced of the pedagogical value and effectiveness of this activity. However, one crucial aim we wish to achieve in this paragraph, is to show how storytelling could be successfully included in the English curriculum as a *steady* component of each Teaching Unit elaborated by the class or specialist teacher.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, by the end of the fifth grade, pupils should have achieved the A1 level. With particular reference to our specific purpose, i.e. the improvement of the listening and speaking abilities in English, the so-called “vertical curriculum” in primary schools lists the following as the expected learner’s outcomes (Serragiotto 2004: 235-236³):

receptive oral skills, global comprehension:

a1. [the learner] can understand an oral speech provided it is accurately articulated and contains long pauses allowing him/her to comprehend the meaning;

a2. can listen to and understand short monologic and dialogic texts provided they are presented throughout a variety of modulation, intentionality, communicative functions: dialogues, short stories (fairy tales, nursery rhymes, songs);

listening to instructions:

a3. can understand instructions provided they are given slowly and carefully and can carry out short and simple instructions.

interactive oral skills, global interaction and conversation:

b1. can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks or repeats slowly, directly and clearly, reformulates phrases and is prepared to help; can understand and ask simple questions; can initiate the conversation and can answer simple statements aimed at the satisfaction of concrete needs or related to familiar subjects;

guided cooperation:

b2. can understand familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type; can ask questions about personal details such as how he/she is and react appropriately to the information he/she is provided with; can introduce him/herself and use basic greeting expressions;

exchange of information:

³ The extracts from Serragiotto’s book are our translations and have been adapted to our specific needs, therefore they have not been totally translated.

b3. can ask for and give things to people; can understand questions and instructions provided they are uttered slowly and carefully and can follow short and simple directions;

interviewing and being interviewed:

b4. can answer simple direct questions about personal details, provided they are uttered slowly and clearly in a direct and unidiomatic language;

productive oral skills, global oral production, prolonged monologue:

c1. can produce simple phrases about places and people;

description of experiences:

c2. can describe him/herself and what he/she does and where he/she lives.

With reference to communicative activities, here is a list of the lexical categories included in the five-year curriculum of English (Serragiotto 2004: 235): family; school and objects in the classroom; pets and animals, rooms of the house; parts of the body; toys; clothing; modes of transportation; food; leisure; description of the city, telling time; fiction; civilization.

As it will be demonstrated in the course of the present discussion, storytelling can powerfully help students reach the above-listed goals, for instance:

- storytelling provides learners with a literary genre which can be definitely presented throughout a variety of modulation, intentionality, and communicative functions (cf. a2);

- storytelling, as suggested in this paper, is meant to be carried out through a specific approach focusing on such scaffolding devices as gestures, facial expressions, eye-contact and other body clues. In this light, phrases are in fact accurately and clearly articulated (cf. a1), and can in fact contain long pauses (cf. a1) in order to express different nuances of emotions/feelings;

- storytelling allows the teacher to purposely choose some familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases as well as some lexical categories (cf. b2) which are part of the curriculum and facilitate their comprehension by the means of pictures in books.

2. Storytelling: an Interdisciplinary Approach to Learning

In the present discussion, storytelling is first of all proposed as a teaching technique which can effectively add a *whole-school approach* to learning and education. What the teacher can concretely do in order to facilitate a whole-school approach, is carefully select stories which can be used to create *cross curricular links*, i.e. develop other subjects in the school curriculum.

For instance, a story can create links with the following subjects and areas of knowledge (Brewster, Ellis 2002: 2-4):

- *Maths*: time, numbers (counting and quantity, addition and subtraction), measuring.

- *Science*: animals and their life cycles and habitats, skeletons, healthy eating, the sense of taste, how plants grow.
- *Technology*: making a box, making books.
- *History*: prehistoric animals, understanding chronology/the passing of time.
- *Geography and the Environment*: using a map, using an atlas, the local environment, the weather/climate seasons, pollution, conservation.
- *Art and Craft*: drawing, printing, making masks, hats, cards, posters, making collages, making puppets.
- *Music and Drama*: singing songs, rhymes, chants, playing instruments, role-play, miming, acting out stories and variations pupils make up.
- *Physical education*: moving to music, moving like different animals.
- *Information communication technology*: finding out information through the Internet.

Additionally, stories can become a fundamental tool assisting the development of children's potential as autonomous learners. In this perspective, then, stories contribute to build up the crucial notion of *learning to learn*, which can in its turn help pupils start to become aware of the process of "lifelong learning" (Balboni 2002: 184-7). In the context of storytelling, learning how to learn involves developing an awareness of learning and reinforcing such conceptual strategies and high-level cognitive processes (Cummins 1984) as planning, hypothesising (predicting, guessing, inferring), reviewing, classifying, comparing, matching, making associations, checking, training the memory, self-testing, developing study skills, i.e. making, understanding and interpreting charts and graphs, learning to use dictionaries, researching, using reference books, using the Internet, organizing work (Brewster, Ellis 2002: 2-3).

Furthermore, stories can be used to reinforce *conceptual development* in children, for example colour, size, shape, quantity, time, spatial concept, cause and effect, problems and solutions (Brewster, Ellis 2002: 3)

One last essential point which can be successfully tackled through the technique of storytelling, is the notion of *citizenship and multicultural education*. Stories can help develop cultural awareness and respect for other cultures and speakers of other languages, promoting equality of the sexes and avoiding sexism, developing attitudes of democracy and harmony. Through stories, a whole range of topics can be approached, such as cultural similarities and differences, morality and moral values, helping people, old age, friendship, gender/cultural stereotyping (Brewster, Ellis 2002: 3).

In the course of our discussion, all concrete examples will be taken from a children's picture book, *There's an Alligator under My Bed* by Mercer Meyer. It is the story of a little boy and his fears. The little boy can never sleep at night, and has to be very careful getting in and out of bed, as there is an (alleged) alligator under his bed. Moreover, whenever the child manages to convince his parents to look under the bed, the alligator suddenly hides. But one day the little boy has a plan: he makes a trail of fruit and peanuts butter and other delicious treats alligators love. He thus manages to

get the reptile out of the bedroom and into the garage. He locks the door behind him, leaves a warning message on the door for his dad, and finally goes to bed worry free.

Should we now try to adapt the above discussed theoretical points to our specific book, we would propose the following chart of potential cross curricular links, including the correlated type of intelligence to be developed, according to the “Theory of Multiple Intelligences” by Gardner (1983):

<p>Maths</p>	<p><u>Numbers, counting and quantity</u>: count the number of fruit, cookies, vegetables and candies pictured in the book</p> <p>Development of logical-mathematical intelligence</p>
<p>Science</p>	<p><u>Animals and their life cycles and habitats</u>: life and habitat of alligators; other wild/marsh animals</p> <p>Development of naturalist intelligence</p> <p><u>Healthy eating, the sense of taste</u>: fruit and vegetables, sweets (cookies, candies).</p>
<p>Geography and the Environment</p>	<p><u>The environment</u>: marsh life and activities</p> <p>Development of naturalist intelligence</p> <p><u>The local environment</u>: shops where fruit, vegetables and cakes can be bought</p> <p><u>Using an atlas</u>: looking up places where alligators live</p>
<p>Art and Craft</p>	<p><u>Drawing</u>: the scenes of the stories; animals; the family; the house</p> <p><u>Painting</u>: paint with real fruit and vegetables or sponge shapes of vegetables and fruit</p> <p><u>Making puppets</u>: construct an alligator puppet</p> <p><u>Setting up scenes</u>: set up an area for a marsh in the classroom, e.g. construct a pier from wooden blocks,</p>

	<p>construct a boat from a box</p> <p>Development of bodily-kinesthetic and interpersonal intelligences</p>
Music and Drama	<p><u>Singing songs and miming</u>: sing the <i>Five Little Monkeys</i> and the <i>Alligator Song</i> and take turns being the alligator and the monkeys; sing the <i>Vegetable Soup</i> song, putting items in a pot while singing</p> <p>Development of musical intelligence</p> <p><u>Acting out</u>: the story and variations the pupils make up</p> <p>Development of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence</p>
Physical education	<p><u>Moving like animals</u>: move like an alligator and other wild animals</p> <p><u>Walking along a balance beam or line</u>: set up the scene where the little boy is balancing on the board to avoid the alligator with various objects and pretend to be the little boy</p> <p>Development of bodily-kinesthetic and interpersonal intelligences</p>
Information communication technology	<p><u>Using the Internet</u>: find out information on the life and habitat of alligators and other animals</p> <p>Development of logical-mathematical and bodily-kinesthetic intelligences</p>

As far as the process of *learning to learn* is concerned, here are some of the cognitive processes that our story told aloud could help develop and/or increase:

- auditory discrimination skills, i.e. repeat sound patterns heard from the teacher;
- preliteracy skills, i.e. increase awareness of sequencing and structure in the story;
- classification skills, ability to identify related objects, i.e. identify and categorize food (e.g. fruit and vegetables, cakes);
- rote memory skills, i.e. sing songs from memory;
- reasoning and prediction skills, i.e. predict next part of a visual pattern.

With reference to *conceptual reinforcement*, while telling the story aloud, teachers can draw the children's attention to colours in English, e.g. while pointing at the cover picture, the teacher says: "Oh look (pointing to one's eyes first and to the picture immediately after), it's a *green* alligator!" (pointing to the alligator and stressing the colour). "An alligator is under the *green* blanket!" (pointing to the alligator first and at the blanket immediately after, stressing the colour). The same can be done with the concept of time: "It's *bedtime*" (yawning), the little boy is going to sleep" (miming the act of sleeping and pointing to the little boy reaching his bed), and with the notion of size: "Oh look! (pointing to one's eyes first and to the picture immediately after), it's a *big* alligator!" (stressing "big" and gesturing the size of the animal). Finally, an *intercultural approach* to the story could be elaborated through *intercultural comparison* at various levels: for instance, at a simple, concrete level, teachers focus on the category of animals, and help pupils understand and realise that there are different types of fauna living in different parts of the globe. After analysing the geographical areas where different types of animals can be found, the teacher could show the pupils how to look up an atlas, and so how to locate different areas/cultures in the globe. At a deeper, more abstract level, pupils could be assisted in becoming aware that little boys and girls from all over the world do have fears, such as the little boy's fear of the alligator under his bed, and that it is indeed possible to overcome such fears. One more aspect that could be highlighted, is that of friendship between human beings and animals, and the notion of respect towards animals.

3. Storytelling: a Psycholinguistic Strategy

After having contextualised the technique of storytelling in the educational environment of primary schools, we now propose to investigate the following hypothesis: storytelling as a technique of English language teaching/learning in primary schools can be extremely effective if it is previously designed and later presented to children following the main stages of first language acquisition. As the science of first language acquisition is traditionally considered part of the larger branch of *developmental psycholinguistics*, our chief theoretical assumptions will be derived from such a discipline. In addition, an attempt will be made to adapt the theories on first language acquisition to the discipline of second language acquisition, which represents the specific context of teaching and learning English in primary schools. In this light, we propose to broaden the term "storytelling" and name it *language acquisitional storytelling*:

- storytelling as an activity based upon the *acquisitional* stages of English as a first language;

- storytelling as an activity enhancing and facilitating the *acquisitional* stages of English as a second language.

An important study in the interrelated area of teaching/learning English as a first and second language was carried out at the end of the 80s by Traute Taeschner, a researcher in the field of the psychology of language and bilingualism. She first elaborated a theoretical methodology derived from first language acquisition, and later experimented it in a classroom of EFL in a primary school in Rome over a period of three years (Taeschner 1986). This experience led her to the elaboration of an important English teaching program called "The adventures of Hocus and Lotus",

based on the use of the so-called *format* (Bruner in Taeschner 1986). In our essay, Taeschner's work will be taken as a starting point, and be tentatively applied to the specific technique of storytelling.

One more crucial source for our essay comes from Berman and Slobin's work *Relating Events in Narratives* (1994), where the two scholars explore uses of linguistic forms in narrative, in a developmental and crosslinguistic framework, where English and other languages are examined, but in the light of first language acquisition only. Their findings will be tentatively applied to the teaching of a second language in general and to storytelling in particular.

Another significant theoretical contribution comes from "The Natural Order Hypothesis" by Stephen Krashen (1983), where he proposes that grammatical structures are learned in a predictable order. This is based on first language acquisition research done by the American psychologist Roger Brown in the 70s. What Krashen additionally suggests in his theories is that, just as there is a natural sequence in the way children pick up their own first language, with certain grammatical morphemes being acquired before others, so there is for second languages being acquired. What he particularly remarks, is that some morphemes have the same order of acquisition in L1 and in L2.

One of the crucial reasons why we wish to investigate the stages of first language acquisition and apply them to the learning of a second language (see also Balboni's work on the Italian language, 2006), through the activity of storytelling, is that this approach can make it possible for the English teacher to elaborate a story which can be told through *graded speech forms* to the pupils. What is gradual from a *logic* perspective is not necessarily graded from an *acquisitional* perspective, though. This means that a gradual process does not always correspond to a passage from an easy speech form to a more complex one, especially on the part of the learner (Taeschner 1986: 15-16). For instance, native speakers of English tend to learn the irregular past forms of verbs before the regular ones (Krashen 1983), while it would seem more "logic" for them to learn the regular forms (traditionally considered "easy" forms) before the irregular ones. Therefore, our main assumption here is that some *acquisitional graduality* should be taken into account when exposing Italian children to a story told in English.

One essential aspect that we will constantly keep in mind, is that our addressees are not newborns or toddlers trying to master their first language, but children from 6 to 11 years of age who have already reached a high degree of linguistic, communicative and cognitive maturity in their L1. This is a fundamental aspect, as this maturity in the Italian language can become a "scaffolding element" which facilitates the transfer of children's acquired competences in Italian to the English language (see Cummins' "Linguistic Interdependence Theory", 1989). One more argument in favour of this, is Piaget's principle stating that comprehension is in fact an assimilation to an already existing schema, so that children incorporate new events into pre-existing cognitive structures (Piaget in Levorato 1983: 29-30).

With reference to the language to be used in classroom interactions, we suggest that it is English in simple speech forms from the outset. Teachers could however use Italian whenever explanation is needed for clarification or for directing group behavior. When children naturally speak in Italian, their explanations could be accepted and immediately recast in English. Attention will not be focused on classroom disposition, even though we suggest that the teacher sits on a chair and has

the pupils sit in front of him/her, in a semi-circle with several rows, so that all learners can see the images as the teacher tells the story and points to the pictures.

4. Storytelling and Story Grammars

As its first meaning in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005, 7th edition), the term "story" quotes: "a description of events and people that the writer or speaker has invented in order to entertain people" (p. 1513). But what do we exactly mean when we refer to "stories to be told aloud" in primary schools? What is the story to be told aloud made of? Is there a particular structure to be followed?

Particularly relevant to our study, is Bruner's notion (1991) that stories are primarily dealing with people and their intentions; they especially refer to the social and cultural domain rather than the physical world. Narratives mainly "describe people or other intentional mental agents, acting in a setting in a way that is relevant to their beliefs, desires, theories, values, etc., and they describe how these agents relate to each other" (Dautenhahn 2002: 107-8). In this perspective, storytelling development can be seen as a highly socio-cultural and interactive process. In our second language context, though, the physical world will be considered as relevant as the social and cultural domain. Linguistically speaking, we are convinced that the description of the physical settings and actions of the story can help children induce the socio-cultural component embedded in the English speech forms.

When considering the term "story", particular attention should be devoted to those studies in linguistics, psycholinguistics and psychology which have tried to identify the recurrent features that can be found in different typologies of narratives within different cultures (Propp 1928, Lakoff 1972, Bruner 1986, 1991). The study of the structural features of narratives has led to the notion of *story grammars*, "rule-based systems for describing regularities and formal structure in stories" (Mandler in Dautenhahn 2002: 106). Stories can be described in terms of a hierarchical network of categories and the logical relations that exist between these categories (Stein, Glenn 1979: 58-61)⁴:

Story → Setting (main character(s), social, physical, temporal context) + Episode System (entire behavioural sequence including the external/internal events influencing a character and the character's internal response to these events)

Episode System → Initiating Event (a change of state in the physical environment) + Response

Response → Internal Response (character's desires/intentions and thoughts) + Plan Sequence

Plan Sequence → Internal Plan (cognitions, subgoals) + Plan Application

Plan Application → Attempt (character's overt actions to obtain a goal) + Resolution

Linking all the above categories is a series of intra-category-connectors (Stein, Glenn 1979: 60): "and" (includes simultaneous or a temporal relation), "then"

⁴ The category descriptions have been added by the author of the essay.

(includes temporal but not direct causal relations) and “cause” (includes temporal relations which are causal in nature).

If asked to summarise the story *There's an Alligator under My Bed* by taking into account the above listed categories, an adult might reply with the following version:

“Once upon a time there was a little boy who couldn't sleep at night because there was an alligator under his bed. Each night he had to carefully jump into bed, but every time he or his parents looked for the alligator, it hid. One evening, the little boy decided that it was time to get rid of the alligator. He went to the refrigerator and took out all of the food. He then made a trail from under his bed, down the stairs, and finally into the garage. After he had made his path, he hid and waited for the alligator to come around. The alligator soon came out and ate all of the food from the bed to the garage. So the little boy was able to lock the door to the garage behind the alligator, leave a warning message on the door for his dad, and go to bed worry free.”

As it will be demonstrated in the next section, this version might not be the most appropriate in a second language context. In our opinion, Stein and Glenn's story schema is extremely helpful, as it can support and guide the pupils' listening activity and help them recognise the various sequences in the story. Pupils have generally been already exposed to storytelling in Italian, and so they are likely to expect that some specific details are introduced at the beginning of the story, e.g. the setting, and that afterwards all the above-listed categories gradually unfold (Levorato 2000: 23).

Yet, the elaboration of a story according to the above schema only is not sufficient in the EFL classroom. In fact, our assumption is that it is only *one* of the premises to be followed by the teacher in order to use storytelling as an efficient teaching strategy. One further essential step, is focus on the language forms (with specific reference to grammar, morphosyntax and lexicon) to be used when telling a story. We are convinced that the choice of the speech forms to be presented to the learners are not to be “accidental” but carefully planned in advance, according to some precise theoretical principles derived from developmental psychology.

5. Storytelling: a Gradual Pathway to English Forms and Functions

In this section, we will try to verify the following hypothesis: storytelling can be an extremely effective activity in the EFL classroom if it is elaborated as a “psycholinguistically motivated” process. Our (psycho)linguistic investigation will be carried out by carefully examining a list of the grammatical categories that in our opinion should be especially taken into account when choosing the linguistic means to connect events and syntactically “package” them into coherent structures. Included in each category are some examples of the specific linguistic structures through which our story *There's an Alligator under My Bed* could be concretely presented to the pupils⁵. Not only will the focus be at the receptive⁶ level, i.e., help children become aware of the structures of the English language by listening to stories (Slattery, Willis

⁵12 pages out of 29 have been chosen in order to show how speech forms can be gradually developed. The rest of the story can be made up by following the same pattern proposed in the discussion.

⁶ It should be kept in mind that an initial phase of listening indeed reflects language acquisition in natural contexts, both in a situation of first language acquisition and in a context of second language acquisition, where the language being learnt is the language daily spoken by the community (Taeschner 1986: 128).

2001: 96), but at the productive level too. In fact, in the course of our study, we will propose some tasks⁷ presented in the form of games and derived from the story itself which could be carried out by the pupils before, during and after the narration. These have especially been designed in order to facilitate the acquisition/reinforcement of the young learners' productive oral skills (speaking, interacting). They are additionally intended to assist pupils in the development of a "communicative competence" (Hymes 1974) by learning how to employ the *functions* of a language. We will take as a reference point the functions elaborated by Halliday (1973, instrumental, regulatory, interactional, personal, heuristic, imaginative and informative) and those later proposed by Balboni (2002, personal, interactional, regulatory, referential, poetic-imaginative, metalinguistic), who reinterpreted Halliday's functions from a language teaching perspective. The short story versions gradually elaborated and proposed should not be considered fixed and definitive, but tentative, open to new contributions, and especially *multilayered*, so that they can be adjusted according to pupils' ages, acquired competences/abilities and needs.

6. Sentence Construction and Vocabulary

One essential principle of first language acquisition, is a child's gradual passage from single words ("holophrastic utterances") through "telegraphic speech" (Brown 1973) to complete and more complex sentences (Taeschner 1986: 45). In her experimental project in a primary school in Rome, Taeschner tries to apply this theoretical principle to the English curriculum over a period of three years (from the 3rd to the 5th grade). She thus envisages a curriculum where learners are first introduced to single words, which become gradually structured in combinations of more and more words, so that by the end of the 5th grade the focus is on more complex forms like coordinate binuclear sentences (Taeschner 1986: 45-67). At the same time, Taeschner remarks, a child acquiring a first language gradually builds up his/her vocabulary, by showing a tendency to verbalize those aspects which are closer to his/her everyday environment (family and relatives), actions (to sleep, to eat, to drink...) as well as his/her sensorial and motorial development. The child is interested in the existence of people, objects and events, in their localization in space ("here", "there"), in possession ("my"), in the notion of recurrence ("still") (Taeschner 1996: 68-70). If we were to classify the first words uttered by children according to the adult system of categorization, we could say that they are chiefly nouns, full verbs, adverbs and adjectives, i.e. "content-words". When applying these principles to a context of second language learning, Taeschner decides to employ a slightly different approach: the gradation of "function-words", i.e. articles, prepositions, pronouns, is maintained in their order of appearance in first language acquisition, but the choice of the content-words to be taught is associated with the specific topics included in the curriculum of each school grade. One important aspect to be considered, is that in current Italian primary schools English teachers already tend to adopt this "single-word approach" in their classes, thus facilitating acquisition of English vocabulary (see also Lewis and his "Lexical Approach", 1993), but not simple oral production and interaction in English. Yet, the "single-word approach" proposed by Taeschner and reinterpreted in our essay is intended as a first approach to the acquisition of English as if it were a *native* language, and is thus supported by the theories of first language acquisition.

⁷ All the activities here presented imply a concrete phase of groundwork, such as the creation of various types of flashcards, which could be undertaken by the teacher and the pupils together. This might take some time, but we are convinced that the time spent together in preparing the materials for the activities and games can in the end turn out to be highly motivating for the children.

Considering Taeschner's premises and applying them to our story *There's an Alligator under My Bed*, we could develop the following stages of story presentation:

1st phase: storytelling through single *content-words* only (those referred to the immediate context and contents of the story), e.g. "little boy", "bedroom", "bed", "toy", "alligator", "mum", "dad", "kitchen", "fridge", "stairs", "car", "door", "to sleep", "to eat", "scared", "angry".

What the teacher could do as a preliminary activity, is introduce pupils to the story context and contents by pointing to the above listed content-words in the picture book, thus facilitating the recognition of semantics through the correlation of the speech form to its illustration in the book, as well as the development of the visual-spatial intelligence (Gardner 1983).

However, we are not sure this could be a sufficiently motivating introduction to the story on the part of the pupils: what could be done instead, is link these key words to some flashcards, in the following game:

FIND THE WORD! First, the students create some flashcards depicting the terms proposed by the teacher (including some that have no relation to the story, e.g. the sun, a dog, a pen). When the cards are ready, the teacher shows the cover of the book quickly, or one or more pages from the middle, then hides it. The teacher shows one card by one pronouncing the English noun aloud and then asks the pupils, who are divided into groups, to pronounce the words that they think refer to the story.

In order to make this activity more manual (and assist the development of the bodily and kinesthetic intelligence, Gardner 1983), it could be proposed as a revised version of the famous game "grab the handkerchief":

GRAB THE FLASHCARD! The pupils are lined up in two rows facing one another. The teacher shows a flashcard and pronounces a number (this activity implies the knowledge of numerals at least from 1 to 15), the two children who correspond to that number in the rows run and try to be the first to grab the flashcard. When all the cards have been taken, each group chooses the ones that refer to the story. They get one point for each card they guess right. The group who has the highest score wins.

As, according to Brown (1973) and Krashen's studies (1983), the English *plural form -s* is one of the first grammatical morphemes to be acquired both in first and second language acquisition, we suggest that on a second version the teacher stresses the quantity of some objects appearing in the story, e.g. fruit. Here the teacher could introduce both the notion of the plural form and numbers in English, e.g. "Oh look, *one* banana, *two* bananas" while pointing to the picture. One psycholinguistic motivation to the early introduction of numbers would be that the first plural forms in first language acquisition are expressed by numerals (Taeschner 1986: 94). This phase could be more effectively implemented with first graders.

2nd phase: following Brown's observed passage from single words to more complex constructions and bearing in mind Krashen's "Natural Order Hypothesis"⁸ (especially the early emergence of the category of copula and of the definite/indefinite articles in second language acquisition) and the "Comprehensible Input Hypothesis"⁹ (1983), we could propose a higher layer of story presentation: not just one single content-word but a noun preceded by a function-word "a"/"an" in the more complex construction with the expletive subjects *there* and *it*: *there + be + noun*, *it + be + noun*, e.g. "Oh, look, *there is* an alligator!", "Oh look, *there are* two bananas!", "*It is* a boy", "*It is* an alligator". Moreover, the structure "there are" can contribute to reinforce the plural form already introduced in the first phase. In their studies, Berman and Slobin remark how English children make broad use of the singular construction "there is" from age 3, and they clearly distinguish this introducing, pleonastic subject from the stressed locative use of *there* (Berman, Slobin 1994: 172). In order to introduce Italian pupils to this difference, the teacher could elaborate a series of activities, e.g. the "Fill the gap there!" game vs. the "Where is that?" game:

FILL THE GAP THERE! After the pupils have been introduced to the structures "There is/There are" applied to the book, they can be asked to look at the pages while the teacher only pronounces "*There is* _____", "*There are* _____" and fill up the gaps with the appropriate nouns. In order to make the activity more enjoyable and thus contribute to motivate the children, they can be asked, not only to fill up the gaps with the appropriate term, but to mime the word too (each of them will try to find the most effective way to mime an alligator or a banana!).

WHERE IS THAT? The teacher can point to some objects in the classroom (so that this important lexical category is introduced), ask "*Where* is the blackboard?", and immediately answer "It is *there*!". Pupils themselves would be asked to answer in a second phase.

One contribution of these two activities is that they introduce the pupils to the English interrogative construction. We would start from the interrogative pronoun "where", which is considered the most frequent in first language acquisition, together with "what" (Taeschner 1986: 121-7; 131). This construction also allows the teacher to exploit the so-called *frame*, a string of formulaic language in which interchangeable elements can be inserted (Pallotti 1998: 26-7). For instance, after focusing on "*Where* is that?", another activity could be devised concentrating on "*Where* are you?". The use of frames can especially assist those children who have a mnemonic learning style (Pallotti 1998: 233).

At a first stage, *non-contracted copula* ("I am") should be preferred to the contracted form ("I'm") as it sounds clearer and can thus be more easily distinguished

⁸ It is important to underline that Krashen's Hypothesis has been subject to criticism and is not the only possible approach to language acquisition (see for instance Lozanov's theory of "suggestopedia", 1978), yet we are convinced that Krashen's theory is the most effective in the educational context examined in this paper.

⁹ According to the "Comprehensible Input Hypothesis", if a learner is at a stage "i", then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to "Comprehensible Input" that belongs to level "i + 1".

by pupils. According to Taeschner (1986: 107), though, the contracted form is more frequently employed by very young learners having English as their L1. Yet, we are convinced that our specific context of second language acquisition requires the teacher to expose children to clearer and more distinguishable speech forms. Pupils can be exposed to contracted forms at a higher stage.

One further way of developing the copula construction could be the insertion of *descriptive adjectives*, (which happen to be among the first to be attached to the copula in first language acquisition, Taeschner 1986: 106), in our case those describing internal states: “the little boy sees the alligator: the little boy is *scared!*”, “the alligator is still under the bed: the little boy is *angry!*”. In order to facilitate the recognition of emotions, which could be not easily deduced from the pictures, the teacher could offer an “added emotional context” through such suprasegmental features as body movements, facial expressions, tone of voice. Once the teacher is sure the pupils have caught the semantics of such adjectives as “scared”, “sad”, “angry”, “happy”, some activities focusing on such primary emotions like fear, happiness, sadness, rage could be envisaged. These could also be aimed at facilitating the pupils’ development of their emotional and affective component (Goleman 1995). For instance, the “**How do you feel today?**” game:

HOW DO YOU FEEL TODAY? A set of flashcards depicting a little boy/girl expressing a certain emotion could act as a support in the activity. Each pupil receives one card with a particular emotion. The children are asked to actively produce such simple expressions as “Today I am *happy*”, “Today I am *sad*”, while at the same time facially reproducing the emotion. The teacher should constantly check if emotions are coherently associated with their facial expressions.

The *poetic-imaginative* function (Halliday 1973, Balboni 2002) can be improved when children pretend they are the characters depicted in the flashcards, whereas by expressing emotions, children can facilitate the development of the *personal* function (Halliday 1973, Balboni 2002). This activity could in fact be defined as a sort of “Emotion Total Physical Response” (see Asher 1969), where children act out emotions instead of actions.

One more step, could be having the teacher introduce polar interrogatives (which in first language acquisition are acquired at the same time as Wh-interrogatives, Taeschner 1996: 121) by asking the pupils “Are you *happy* today?”, having them reply using short answers “Yes, I am” or “No, I am not” and facially express their emotion at the same time.

At a higher level, the teacher could (receptively) introduce the notion of *lexical variation* in English by means of *geosynonyms* (Santipolo 2002: 115-6), that is terms that have the same meaning but a different structure and whose usage differ according to geographical areas (in our case American usage vs. British usage). For instance, the teacher points to the picture depicting the little boy who sees that the alligator is still there, exclaims: “The little boy is *mad!*” (trying to reproduce the same expression on his/her face) and then immediately adds: “the little boy is *angry!*” (Costenaro, 2006).

Naturally at this stage it is still too early to apply the story categories elaborated by Stein and Glenn (cf. 2.1) to our story telling, which is not being developed in terms

of chain of related events yet. This could nonetheless be considered a preliminary phase which introduces at least Stein and Glenn's setting category clearly and accurately from the very beginning.

7. Temporality

Dominant tense: one further step in our analysis, is start to link events and syntactically "package" them into coherent structures. It is essential to reflect on the choice of a consistently favoured tense throughout the narration, as a criterion for a well-formed and clear narrative. As already seen, an adult telling our story might begin with: "Once upon a time there was a little boy who couldn't sleep at night because there was an alligator under his bed" (cf. 2.1). Past tense in English (like in Italian) is usually the unmarked or most typical temporal tense for recounting chronologically sequential events in narrative (Berman, Slobin 1994: 131-4). In our particular context of EFL, however, we would choose to temporarily depart from this norm and adopt the more marked historic use of present tense, a strategy which is typical of many dialects of England too (Santipolo 2006: 77). One psycholinguistic motivation would be that very young children acquiring their L1 tend to employ a present tense even when the context of situation requires a past tense. As exemplified by Brown in his studies (in Taeschner 1996: 93-4), after a piece of cheese has fallen on the floor, an English toddler, Eve, says: "drop cheese", even though this use is often unmarked and so "generalised" (it can function as an imperative – "get cheese", as a progressive form – "the cheese is dropping", as a past form – "the cheese dropped").

This is how our story could be developed at a first stage (allowing some "distance" from the written version), including some notes between parentheses. Stressed content-words are in italics:

“¹⁰It is (It's – 2nd stage) the *story* of a *little boy* and an *alligator*. It is (It's – 2nd stage) *bedtime* (teacher yawning and pronouncing "SSS" with one's forefinger touching one's lips, miming the act of keeping silent). The *little boy* is in *his bedroom* (pointing to the picture). Oh look! (pointing to one's eyes first and to the picture immediately after), the *little boy sees* (pointing to one's eyes and to the little boy) an *alligator* under *his bed*! (pointing to the picture and especially the alligator's localization).”

This short story version seems to us even more appropriate, as it actually unfolds by following the story schema suggested by Stein and Glenn (cf. 2.1). It also allows the emergence of an important grammatical morpheme: the third person singular ("sees"). We suggest that is considered after the introduction of the progressive aspect.

Progressive Aspect: a few notes should be spent on the progressive aspect in English, mainly on the present progressive. Morphologically, it is more marked than the present simple (unmarked, typical form). One might thus assume that children prefer the simplex verb forms (present simple): on the contrary, Berman and Slobin's survey (1994: 137-138) reveals a tendency to *avoid* the unmarked simple aspect in oral narratives. For young children, progressive aspect is considered the most basic way of describing events constructed as applying to the time of speaking. The tendency of

¹⁰The first pages of the book show the little boy in his bedroom at night time, and an alligator under his bed.

children to avoid the simple present indicates their reliance on a “picture-description mode”, as they treat the events in the storybook as *ongoing*, and so describe them from the temporal perspective of immediate present rather than the generic stance of simple present (Berman, Slobin 1994: 131-4: 137-142). Additionally, the progressive is the first of Brown’s 14 grammatical morphemes to be acquired in first language acquisition in English (1973), even though initially it is used in its “primitive” form, without the requisite auxiliary, and Krashen adds that this is valid for both first and second language acquisition (1983). What we suggest then, is two different stages in the use of the progressive form:

1st phase: the teacher manipulates the story “in a durative way” by only employing the progressive:

“¹¹[...] The little boy *is going* to bed (miming the boy’s movement with one’s fingers). He *is carrying* a board (miming the action). Why? (used to connect the episodes without introducing connectors yet- spreading one’s arms and expressing uncertainty on one’s face). Oh look, an alligator *is hiding* under the bed! (pointing to the picture).”

Yet, in our opinion it is not easy to elaborate a story version which only relies on the progressive (what about the boy’s act of “suddenly seeing” the alligator which cannot be conveyed through the progressive?). Therefore, we suggest that either this phase is a very short one and does not involve the whole story or that the teacher directly follows the second phase.

2nd phase: the teacher introduces the pupils to both aspects, thus reinforcing his/her choice of one dominant tense (as they both belong to the present tense) In so doing, the teacher should find some ways of marking local contrast between durative and punctual activities, for instance, by stressing durative actions through gestures and miming:

“¹²Now this is the story of a little boy and an alligator. It is bedtime. The little boy *is going* to bed (miming the action). The little boy *is carrying* a board (miming the action). Why? The little boy *sees* an alligator in his bedroom! The alligator *is hiding* under the bed (miming the action)! The little boy is scared! Oh look, what *is* the little boy *doing* here? The little boy *is calling* his mum! (miming the action).”

At a higher stage, the teacher could introduce the third person masculine *subject pronoun* “he”, each time pointing to the little boy, and reintroduce “the little boy” whenever the pupils might not be able to catch what “he” is referring to in the context:

“[...] *The little boy* is going to bed. *He* is carrying a board. [...] *The little boy* is scared! Oh look, what is *he* doing here? *He* is calling his mum!”

¹¹ These pages show an alligator under the child’s bed. The little boy is trying to find a way to reach his bed safely, so he takes a board and walks to his bed onto the board, so that he does not touch the floor.

¹² At this stage of the story, the little boy calls his mum as he wants her to see there is an alligator under his bed.

Some specific teaching activities could be developed, in order to allow the pupils to actively produce the progressive, both the interrogative and assertive forms: the **“What is he/she doing?”** game (which can assist the development of the *referential* function, Balboni 2002).

WHAT IS HE/SHE DOING? The teacher has a set of flashcards depicting a little boy/a little girl doing some action (to eat, to drink, to sleep...), shows each of them to the pupils by explaining: “he is (“he’s” at a 2nd stage) eating”, “she is drinking”, and has the pupils repeat them several times, and at same time mime them. Once the nouns for each action seem to have been internalized, the pupils are divided into two groups and each group is given some flashcards. One child from the first group then mimes an action from his/her set of flashcards. Another pupil from the same group asks the second group “What is he/she doing?” and the second group tries to guess the action by pronouncing “He/she is ____ ing”.

This game can also assist the development of the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence – Gardner 1983.

One more important grammatical morpheme introduced in the above story version is the *third person singular –s* (“sees”), which is acquired, according to Krashen, after the progressive aspect (1983). A related activity could be elaborated starting from the verb “want” (the *regulatory* function can be developed, Halliday 1973, Balboni 2002), e.g. the **“What do you want?”** game:

WHAT DO YOU WANT? Using a set of flashcards depicting fruit and vegetables (one of the lexical categories found in our story) the teacher first introduces the interrogative structure “What do you want? + name of the pupil” and the names of fruit and vegetables, as well as the required answer with numerals (that should be already well known at this stage), e.g. “I want one banana”, “I want two apples”. The teacher then repeats the pupils’ answers: “Lucia wants one banana. *She* wants a banana. Marco wants two apples. *He* wants two apples”, focusing on the third singular –s and the difference between “he”/”she”. Secondly, the children are divided in pairs and each in turn directly asks the “What do you want” question to the other who answers. Thus doing, they exchange flashcards. After that, the teacher asks each student in each pair to present what the other classmate wants by employing the “He/she wants _____” structure.

This activity can assist the development of the *interactional* function, Halliday 1973, Balboni 2002.

8. Connectivity

Syntactic conjunction and subordination: in their research, Berman and Slobin point out that that: “a skilful narrative does not simply consist of a linear chain of successive events located in time and space. Rather, events must be packaged into hierarchical constructions” (1994: 13). This was also Stein and Glenn’s claim when they elaborated their story schema (cf. 2.1). One important aspect is that, while adults

tend to use connectivity devices in clause-medial and clause-final position, children tend to restrict them to the initial position (Berman, Slobin 1994: 180). This is how they will be presented in our story. In our educational context, we are dealing with children from 6 to 11, who show a range of different levels of linguistic and cognitive maturity and already have some competence in hierarchical organization of narratives. However, as our main concern here is to expose pupils to some *graded* structures, and as we depend on the exact sequence of the book pages for facilitating comprehension, we suggest that our story is first told by respecting the spatial ordering of the pictures. At a first level, and especially with first and second graders, no more than two events should be related to one another in a temporal chain. Narrative sequentiality in very young children is expressed by the use of temporal connectives such as “and”, “and then”, which serve to chain one event to the next in ongoing narrative sequences (Berman, Slobin 1994: 64-66; 176-7):

“[...]The little boy is going to bed. *And then* he sees an alligator. The little boy takes a board. *And then* he walks to his bed onto the board. Oh look, the alligator is still there! The little boy shouts: “Mum! Come here!” *And then* his mum comes to his room.”

Direct speech has been now introduced as a strategy to break up the (riskily monotonous) chain of uninterrupted temporal clauses and to dramatize the story, so that children can “feel” and “experience” it in a more active and involving way. Furthermore, they can be introduced to such imperative forms (“Come here!”) which are among the first ones to which they are exposed from their very birth. The teacher can elaborate an activity that can help the pupils begin to recognise one way of expressing the *regulatory* function in English (Halliday 1973, Balboni 2002), e.g. the “**Touch the colour!**” game:

TOUCH THE COLOUR! First the teacher plays with the whole class focusing on a different colour each time “Touch... blue!” and the children have to find something that is blue and touch it. This game can also be played in pairs, so that pupils can practice the imperative form and the names of colours themselves.

Coming back to connectivity, the adversative conjunction “but” could be now included in the story:

“[...]The little boy takes a board, and then he walks to his bed onto the board. He looks under his bed, *but* he alligator is still there! Oh look, the little boy is calling: “Mum! Come here!” And then his mum comes to his room, *but* she sees no alligator!”

Negation has been introduced for the first time. Our choice is to express negation through the simple fixed pre-verbal particle “no” attached to a positive noun. Considerable research and literature confirm this is the first form to be used by

children acquiring English as their L1, in order to express negation (Taeschner 1986: 113-120; Pallotti 1998: 38-9; 47-9)

In order to help the children recognize and fix the meaning of “but”, and at the same time re-employ The negation with the “no” particle, we propose the “**I have this but I have no that!**” game:

I HAVE THIS BUT I HAVE NO THAT! The teacher has a set of flashcards combined in pairs: one depicts an object, e.g. three pens, and another some objects, e.g. two rubbers, which have been crossed, meaning “lack”, “no rubbers”. In another pair of flashcards there are two rubbers and no pens, and so on, so that for each object there is a flashcard with quantity and a flashcard with lack. The teacher presents the structures to be fixed for each card several times: e.g. “I have three pens, *but* I have no rubbers!”, “I have one dog, *but* I have no cats!” The flashcards are then distributed randomly to the pupils. They walk around the classroom and address the “I have ___ but I have no _____” structure to each classmate, in order to find out who has the objects lacking in their pair of cards. “And you?” can be added after “I have ___ but I have no _____”, in order to facilitate the classmate’s answer.

Coordination: at a higher stage, narratives can be syntactically enriched by introducing the coordinating conjunction “so”:

“¹³[...]The alligator is still hiding under the bed! And *so* the little boy calls his mum: “Mum! Come here!” And then his mum comes to his room, but she sees no alligator! She says: “Where is the alligator? There is no alligator under the bed!” Now the little boy wants to trap the alligator. And *so* he gets some alligator bait.”

Older children generally use a variety of different temporal expressions, such as “when”, “after that”, “and then”, “while”, “now” (Berman, Slobin 1994: 64). The clauses maintain the order of the event phases, but some sentences are temporally subordinated to a climbing phase by the use of “when” or “while”. This means children are relying on a more narratively motivated temporal schema of one event following one another rather than the predominantly spatial framing of one picture after another:

“[...] *When* the little boy is going to bed, he sees an alligator. *Then* he takes a board. *After that* he walks to his bed onto the board. The alligator is still there! *Now* the little boy is scared!” *While* the alligator is still hiding, the little boy calls his mum.”

In order to fix the connecting use of “when”, the teacher could elaborate the “**Room dominoes!**” game:

ROOM DOMINOES! The teacher has a set of flashcards in which one half depicts a particular setting (e.g. kitchen) and the other half depicts an object that can be found there (e.g. table). The teacher shows each card and says, e.g.: “When I am in the *kitchen*, I sit on my *table*”; “When I am in the *garden*, I play *ball*”. Each student gets a flashcard. The teacher has the starting card with, for instance, a school on one half and a TV on the other. When he/she finds the sitting room card, he/she attaches it to his/hers saying “When I am in the *sitting room*, I watch *TV*”. If on the other half of

¹³ At this stage, the little boy makes a trail of fruit and vegetables and other delicious treats loved by alligators.

the sitting room card there is a ball, the pupil who has the garden card matches it to the ball and says “When I am in the *garden*, I play *ball*” and so on. If the game has been well played, the last card should be coherently matched to the first one (in our example, a desk card attached to the school card).

This game is also useful in order to fix prepositional phrases indicating stative location (“in the kitchen”, “at school”). This spatial function is typically the first to be learnt by native speakers of English (Berman, Slobin 1994: 159-160).

At this point, it can be acknowledged that the intra-category-connectors suggested by Stein and Glenn (1979: 60) in their story schema, “and” and “then” (cf. 2.2) have been fully exploited in our story, whereas the causal connector “(be)cause” has been “set apart” for a higher stage.

Organization of narrative segments can be further developed and structured by adding to the story some explicit temporal anchoring of events by such prepositional expressions as “one night”, “in the evening”: “*One night*, when the little boy is going to bed, he sees an alligator”, “*And in the middle of the night*, when the little boy [...]”, “*One day in the night*, when the little boy [...]”.

At a higher level, with 4th and 5th graders, the story could be approached from a different temporal perspective. The choice to anchor the narrative consistently in past tense could be made. This can allow the pupils to relate the events depicted in the pictures to a fictive world that is not concurrent with the time of speaking (Berman, Slobin 1994: 66). Berman and Slobin’s research (1994: 68) shows that English 4th and 5th graders often prefer past tense as a consistent temporal anchor to their narratives.

9. The Role of Repetition in Storytelling: a Neurolinguistic Perspective

“[...] a young child listening to an adult [re]telling a story loves playing the game of recognizing larger and larger parts of the narrative; [...] feeling the pleasure of a familiar context: the same words, pronounced in the same order, nearly the same music.”
(Levorato 2000: 183, our translation)

A few concluding remarks should be devoted to the notion of “retelling a story”, which, in our specific context, means exposing children to the same (pre-planned) linguistic structures several times. Repetition here is also intended as using similar structures where only one word/part of the structure changes (as in “*It is* bedtime”, “*It is* night”, or “*There is* a little boy”, “*There is* an alligator). Furthermore, as underlined by Taeschner in her research (1986: 17) children, while learning their first language, tend to select the more meaningful features within the speech forms that are employed *most frequently* by the adults interacting with them. In this sense, the English teacher plays a fundamental role in the interactive process, in that the forms that he/she consciously chooses to *repeat* more frequently are the most likely to be internalised and steadily acquired. Finally, telling stories with familiar repetitive refrains can encourage children to join in, as they feel more confident and prepared to take a risk and have a go, thus becoming storytellers themselves (Horner, Ryf 2007: 24). In this perspective, the educational value of repetition seems unquestionable. In addition, there seems to be a strictly *neurolinguistic* contribution to the importance of repetition in general and to repetition in language learning in particular. As reported by Morosin (2007), a group of Italian researches from the University of Parma was the first to

discover the so-called *mirror neurons*. Their name derives from their imitative ability to “mirror” (and thus repeat) the actions of others. More precisely, they activate and react to carrying out an action, to observing it and to hearing its sound (Théoret, Pascual-Leone, Buccino et al. in Morosin 2007: 1). It is the very imitative features of these cells that has led researchers in the field of neuroscience of language to assume that mirror neurons may play a fundamental role in the following areas: gesture acquisition, language acquisition, communication. The very fact that these cells are located in Broca’s Area, which is responsible for the production of speech, strengthens the scientists’ position (Morosin 2007: 1). It is especially on the basis of the discovery of the mirror neurons’ fundamental role played in language acquisition that Morosin proposes that this group of cells might also play a crucial role in second language acquisition. Should we support her supposition, the great value of repetition in storytelling would be once more confirmed, as repetition would come to rest on a solid neurological foundation. This would in its turn further validate the main hypothesis of our paper, being the science of neurolinguistics closely related to psycholinguistics.

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