

Talking about picturebooks in libraries' language cafes

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Abstract

How might picturebooks serve as reading and conversation materials in language cafes for international immigrants aiming to learn the local language? How might these books help foster meaningful exchanges between program volunteers and participants, and what might the broader significance of this be for immigrant inclusion and integration? To gain insight into these questions, this study investigates the experiences of volunteers and participants with using picturebooks as a basis for conversation at language cafes in Norwegian public libraries. The study is based on participant observation and qualitative interviews with language café volunteers and participants. Picturebook theory on representation of emotions serves as the theoretical lens for analyzing the selected texts used at the different language cafes. The findings reveal that a broad range of picturebooks are used for reading and conversation at language cafes and their use is generally experienced as fruitful by the participants, especially for learning new words and engaging in visual narratives. The experience of using picturebooks varies for volunteers, from pure joy to discontent, depending on whether they found the selected books interesting or useful for engaging with the participants. The study concludes that picturebooks can work well for facilitating dialog at language cafes, however the successful use of them depends on the competent selection of books.

Keywords

Integration, language cafes, language learning, picturebooks, public libraries

Introduction

Language cafes are popular programs offered by many public libraries in the Nordic countries, along with a range of other social activities like reading groups and public debates (Johnston et al., 2022). Language cafes are generally based on informal conversation in which volunteers (usually native speakers) and participants (adult language learners) discuss a broad range of topics with the aim to improve participants' linguistic abilities in the new language. Research shows that language cafes and other similar conversation-based programs can be effective arenas for integration due to their ability to promote dialog and meaningful, two-way exchange between immigrants and members of the majority (Johnston, 2018, 2019). The research further indicates that such programs can contribute to the reduction of prejudice and facilitate the formation of affective ties between people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Importantly, the research suggests that the establishment of equal status contact within the context of

the language cafes contributes to the positive outcomes. While the research findings attest to the potential of language cafes as arenas for integration, further consideration is needed on how equal status contact—volunteers and participants learning, thinking, and acting together—is supported in practice. How is this achieved when participants attend the programs to learn the language from the volunteers who are native speakers, which can easily lead to a student-teacher relationship dynamic rather than one of co-participation or equal status?

Linguist Van Gilst's (2010) research on Canadian conversation circles (similar to language cafes) shows that the dynamics between volunteers and participants can vary from a hierarchical relationship to one more akin

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to co-participation; the former often characteristic of the relational dynamic formed when the participants' language skills are more limited and the latter when they have gained a higher level of competence in the language. Van Gilst concluded that while participants often expected the volunteers to operate in a hierarchical manner by facilitating turn-taking, providing feedback, and providing some guidance with topic selection, they also wanted a degree of autonomy in selecting topics and determining their own contributions. Specifically, Van Gilst concludes that

[participants'] perspectives implied that [they] were trusting volunteers with this power in the expectation that volunteers in return would help them to gain access to the language, that they would be made comfortable, and that they would be empowered to voice their stories and opinions and assisted in understanding the conversation (p. 93).

Importantly, shifting from a primarily hierarchical relationship to one of co-participation requires finding ways to support participants' ability to express their emotions and intellect. Linguist Dewaele (2010) stresses that language related to emotion is an important part of language mastering as "[i]t is hard to socialize using emotionless textbook phrases." Furthermore, author and language cafe coordinator, Salinas (2020) emphasizes that formal language courses tend to focus on the instrumental use of the language and generally neglect to promote language learning related to learners' emotional and intellectual selves. Thus, this gap in language cafe participants' formal language learning must be bridged for true co-participation and meaningful exchanges to be possible. How can this be achieved in practice? What approaches or techniques might be used at language cafes to support language learning that incorporates use of emotions and intellect?

According to the findings from a survey conducted by the Norwegian Library Association in 2018, a variety of approaches are used to facilitate language cafe conversations, the most popular being the use of preselected conversation themes (68%), games (67%), and newspaper articles (47%). The survey's findings also indicated that a little over a fourth of the language cafes use picturebooks and a little under a fourth use other kinds of literary texts (Norsk bibliotekforening, 2018: 16). Use of literature is particularly interesting pertaining to co-participation and language learning related to emotions and intellect as literature can connect us with all aspects of the human experience and allows for multiple interpretations based on each readers' prior knowledge and experiences. Yet, a particular challenge in using literature at language cafes is participants' varying levels of ability to read and understand a text in the language they are learning, some may have just started learning the language and others may have come a bit farther. Picturebooks can be potentially useful in overcoming this challenge because of their short

verbal texts which makes the content accessible to language learners at different levels. Their format also enables a language learner to read a full story—a whole book in the new language—which may contribute to feelings of accomplishment. The picturebook, as a medium of its own, has in later decades developed from being story books primarily for younger children, to be a rich category of books, including what Beckett (2011) labels "crossover picturebooks" with cognitive, visual, and literary qualities that appeals to both adults and children.

How might picturebooks support adult language learning? Bader (1976) offers an insightful definition which can be used as a starting point for reflection: "A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning page" (p. 1). Bader states that the books are for children, however, as noted above, this is changing with the relatively recent emergence of crossover picturebooks that appeal to both adults and children. In the context of a language cafe, the simultaneous play of illustrations and text may contribute to participants' understanding of the text and language learning while the social, cultural, and historical aspects of a picturebook as an art form may facilitate reflective and meaningful exchanges between volunteers and participants. Thus, picturebook stories may have the potential to facilitate conversations that go beyond the descriptive and didactic-focused and into the realm of thinking and feeling and, thereby, establish a more equal status contact through the co-construction of the stories' meaning.

Research questions

Based on a qualitative study on language cafes at public libraries in Norway, this paper analyzes language cafe participants and volunteers' experiences with picturebooks both as language learning materials and as a means for facilitating meaningful dialogs and exchanges. The research questions concern both the books, how they are used and experienced and what the conversations may bring about for the persons involved.

RQ1. What are the criteria used by language cafe organizers for selecting picturebooks, and how are these books used at language cafes?

RQ2. In what ways do these books support language learning and facilitate meaningful dialog and exchanges between volunteers and participants?

RQ3. How do participants and volunteers experience the use of picturebooks at the language cafes?

This research is of interest for researchers and educators interested in social reading practices as well as library professionals and volunteers working with language cafes.

Previous research on picturebooks in language learning

In an overview article by Mourão (2017) presenting research on picturebooks in language learning contexts, she refers mainly to classroom studies with children, and to some studies on picturebooks used in classes with teenagers. More recent studies show that picturebooks may work as effective conversation materials and as a tool for intercultural learning for teenagers (Bland, 2022; Heggernes, 2022).

Fewer empirical studies have been carried out when it comes to the use of picturebooks in adult language learning. Among the few are Lazar (2015), who in a university setting argues for the rich opportunities in using what she calls “postmodern picturebooks,” indicating picturebooks characterized by ambiguity and indeterminacy of meaning. She also challenges what she finds to be a widespread resistance to using picturebooks with learners of other age groups than children. Lazar argues that picturebooks communicate to readers at visual and verbal levels and can thus lead to playful exploration of language, images, and meaning. In Kochiyama’s (2015) study of English language learners reading picturebooks at a Japanese women’s university, she found that motivation to learn was stimulated with the use of visual art and stories. An overview of practice concerning the use of picturebooks in adult literacy learning is presented by Bloem and Padak (1996). They claim that “As picturebooks have progressed from simple to complex in storytelling and theme, from childish to sophisticated in subject matter and art, educators at all levels are gaining new respect for them” (p. 49). They conclude their overview by stating that:

Teachers who use authentic literature in their classrooms are making visible their belief that reading is for delight as well as instruction, for functional use as well as aesthetic purpose. Of course, reading is a tool for adults. But it is also an experience that feeds the soul (p. 52).

Feeding the soul thus offers the opposite of the emotionless textbooks to which Dewaele hinted, and as this study explores, may offer opportunities for language cafe volunteers and participants to engage in meaningful dialog and exchanges.

Picturebooks and emotions: Theoretical perspectives

Moving to a new country and being a linguistic outsider is naturally an emotional and cultural challenge. This is the

subject of Jean-Marc Dewaele’s book *Emotions in Multiple Languages* (2010), where emotions connected to interpersonal communication is one of the main issues studied. Dewaele’s research is concerned with the way second language learners acquire a vocabulary to express emotions and to be able to understand others in communication. Of special interest to our study concerning the reading of picturebooks is Dewaele’s point about the complicated ways in which emotions are displayed. A red face may signal anger, but this may also be indicated by a white face. Moreover, the variation in display of emotions is also linked to social and cultural factors (Dewaele, 2010: 18–19).

What exactly, then, is an emotion? Dewaele presents different and conflicting perspectives on how to understand emotions; as physical, psychological, socially constructed or cognitive phenomena, and states that his present study “is based on the assumption that a physiological link exists between basic emotions and the language that codes and expresses them” (p. 17).

Literary cognitivist Colm Hogan (2010) claims that literature presents a unique set of descriptions of emotional experience (p. 38). In a footnote, he comments on how people communicate about emotional experiences stemming from the reading of texts, which is of relevance to language cafes. He notes that when readers wish to communicate about an emotional reading experience (which they often do), both the sharer and listener derive the emotions from something to which both parts are observers, namely the text, and not primarily the emotional experiences of the sharer.

Research on picturebooks has grown considerably in recent years, both in children’s literature research and in research on reading and reader response. Several studies have shown picturebooks’ potential to mobilize emotions and help young readers cope with them (Clark et al., 2021; Nikolajeva, 2013). Children’s literature researcher Maria Nikolajeva draws on cognitive literary theory in her study of how emotions are represented in picturebooks. She refers to the representations of emotions in the books by using the concept “emotion ekphrasis.” Ekphrasis may be better known as a verbal description of a piece of art in literature, but Nikolajeva states that the emotion ekphrasis “implies a representation of an emotional state by verbal, visual or multimedial means.” (Nikolajeva, 2014: 713).

Nikolajeva elaborates on the way pictures work:

Our emotional response to emotionally charged images is possible because we have stored (albeit inaccurate and fragmented) memories of the represented emotion, either from real-life experience or from an earlier experience of fiction (Nikolajeva, 2013: 251).

Nikolajeva makes a distinction between types of picturebooks according to their relations between the two

modalities words and pictures. Three of those categories are of special interest when it comes to selection of suitable books for language cafe reading and conversation. In *symmetric* picturebooks, words and images duplicate each other; in *complementary* ones the two provide different information, thereby supplementing each other, and in *counterpointing* picturebooks words and picture contradict each other or tell different stories (Nikolajeva, 2013; Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001).

Method

The present study is a part of the DIALOG project that aims at exploring how libraries can facilitate intercultural dialog, increased participation in society and integration. The use of literature in language cafes constitutes one part of the overarching project, with a focus on how literature can facilitate meaningful dialog and exchange between language café participants and volunteers. The project was a collaboration between the organization Leser søker bok, the Stovner and Holmlia branches of the Deichman public library system in Oslo, and researchers at the Department of Archivalistics, Library and Information Science at OsloMet University. Leser søker bok (LSB) is a Norwegian association working to give everyone access to books and meaningful reading experiences. LSB develops books adapted to different categories of adult and child readers, including readers with Norwegian as a second language, in collaboration with diverse writers, cartoonists, illustrators, and publishers. Some of the books referred to in the following text were developed by LSB.

The analysis and interpretation of the findings presented in this article are solely those of the authors. Henceforth, any reference to “we” implies the authors of this article and not the research team in its entirety.

Participant observation

The data set consists of three different categories: participant observation, interviews, and picturebooks. Participant observation was the first phase of the research that took place between March and October 2020. The central aim was for the researchers to become familiar with the new online format of the language cafes and the use of literature for facilitating conversation. The two researchers attended the language cafes as participant observers, one as a native speaker of Norwegian who assumed the role of a volunteer and one as a Norwegian language learner who assumed the role of a participant. This provided insight into the different roles (volunteer vs participant) and perspectives at the language cafes (language giver vs language learner). During each session of the language cafe, the number and gender of participants, what texts were read, and the dynamics and topics of the conversations generated was noted. The participants were informed

about the researchers’ participant observer roles at the beginning of each session.

The digital language cafe meetings were organized and led by an author, herself being an immigrant, and the texts to be read and talked about were all her choices. The meetings were carried out on zoom, each meeting lasted about 1 hour. Participants got access through a link published on the homepage of the public library system in Oslo. The cafe meetings were structured as follows: Following a short presentation of all people present, the text of the day was shared on screen and each page was read by both the conversation leader and those participants who wanted to read. Questions concerning meaning and pronunciation of words were addressed before continuing to the next page. Conversations about the content alternated with the sharing of reflections or personal experiences that came to mind.

Interviews

Two interview guides were created: one for volunteers and one for participants. The guides were developed through multiple rounds of revisions in order to ensure that they were grounded in relevant theories and had professional relevancy as well as were linguistically appropriate for both non-professionals and, especially, language learners. The two interview guides mirrored each other so that the majority of questions were asked of both participants and volunteers, thereby allowing for comparisons to be made. Initially the guides were drafted by the researchers at OsloMet and based on relevant theoretical underpinnings. Language cafe organizers and librarians at the respective branch libraries then reviewed them for professional and practical relevance. Revisions and additional questions were subsequently made. For the final round, experts from Leser søker bok revised the guides to ensure that the language was appropriate for non-professionals and language learners. The final versions of the interview guides were then approved by all research partners.

Informants were recruited mainly through the established network of volunteers of library-based language cafes. Informants were also recruited via a Norwegian library listserv. Three of the participants were recruited via the observed language cafe sessions, and the others came from other cafes. Two pilot interviews with students in library and information science were conducted, one of whom had previously attended language cafes and one of whom participated as a volunteer at language cafes during a library internship. No further changes were made to the interview guides. Individual interviews were subsequently conducted with 12 participants (three men and nine women) and 13 volunteers (five men and eight women) from different language cafes in various Norwegian towns and cities. Due to covid 19-regulations, interviews were conducted via zoom and lasted from 40 to 60 minutes.

The scope of the interviews was broad; focusing on reading habits, library use, social interplay at the cafes, reasons for participation, and methods and conversation materials used in language cafes. Out of these interviews, the ones presenting experiences from the use of picturebooks in language cafes; 10 interviews with participants and eight with volunteers, were selected as the basis for the present study.

After being transcribed, the interviews were sent to the informants for acceptance, and thereafter coded and categorized. From this material, for this paper, the utterances related to the categories reading, language learning, and reactions to picturebooks were extracted and analyzed according to theoretical insights on picturebooks and emotions in literature (Colm Hogan, 2010; Nikolajeva, 2013, 2014) and also according to the dynamics between volunteers and participants (Van Gilst, 2010). Quotations from the informants are referred to with names starting with an A for participants and names starting with B for volunteers. The quoted utterances from the informants are translated from Norwegian by the authors and their levels of language are attempted to be mirrored in the translations.

The picturebooks

The picturebooks used in the language cafes or mentioned by the informants were read with consideration for their potential as learning materials concerning emotional vocabulary and for facilitating meaningful exchanges between volunteers and participants. The picturebooks used were of varying style and content. For a closer examination, four books have been selected, which were used at the sessions attended by the researchers: Shaun Tan: *Cicada* (2018), Line Renslebråten: *Under polarisen* [Under the Polar ice] (2018), Veronica Salinas and Camilla Engman: *The Voyage* (2013) and *The Shadow* (2017). The books may be classified as “crossover picturebooks” with cognitive, visual, and literary qualities that appeals to both adults and children (Beckett, 2011).

In the following, the aspects and practices are described concerning the selection and use of picturebooks in brief, thereafter the potential for emotional language learning in the books is considered, and lastly, the informants’ experiences with picturebooks in language cafes are presented. The findings are followed by a discussion concerning the benefits and challenges of using picturebooks as conversation materials.

Findings

The language cafe participants who agreed to be interviewed were all relatively fluent in Norwegian, describing their level as B2, which is required for studying at a Norwegian university. All but one had attended university-level higher education and they were between the ages of

30 and 50. While five of the participant informants were from European countries (three women, two men), two female informants were from Asian countries and one male from an African country. Most of the volunteer informants; five women and five men, were older, some of them had retired from work, while two young male informants were in their 20s. One of the retired volunteers was an immigrant, who became involved in the language café in order to help newcomers develop their Norwegian language skills and for the social aspects of attending the language cafe.

The language cafe organizers observed that many of the older participants and volunteers as well as those with lower levels of education who had attended the in-person language cafes before the pandemic did not attend the online language cafes. It was also noted that more stay-at-home parents, working professionals and Norwegian language learners currently residing outside of Norway attended the online language cafes. The online format appears to have made the programming accessible to some while possibly excluding others. Two of the interviewees were based in different European countries and took this opportunity to learn Norwegian via digital language cafes.

Picturebook selection and use

There was plenty of literature to choose from as the language cafes took place in public libraries. It was observed that contemporary poetry collections and picturebooks were frequently used. The two literary forms have in common their short texts that are loaded with meaning and designed to conjure up images of situations or acts as well as to evoke abstract emotions and moods. Thus, they have the potential to facilitate less fluent readers’ ability to follow a story and interpret its meaning. The use of poetry is out of the scope for this part of the study, though an interesting finding to be followed up.

The picturebooks used at the language cafes were selected in different ways and by different people. At some cafes, the librarians who organized and led the language cafes received assistance from children’s librarians in selecting the picturebooks. The likely reason for contacting the children’s librarians in relation to a library program for adults is that picturebooks, even the crossover ones, are most often placed in children’s departments, which is a practice that might be reassessed given the increasingly broader use of picturebooks. At other cafes, the volunteers were provided pre-selected picturebooks by the organizers and given a great degree of flexibility in how they incorporated the texts into their small group discussions. Many of the picturebooks used were developed by Leser søker bok (LSB), as the organization works in close collaboration with public libraries in Norway and provides advisory services to library professionals.

The language cafe volunteers had similar perspectives concerning the use of picturebooks. One volunteer

informant stressed the importance of finding picturebooks where “words and pictures tell the same story and support each other and contribute to interpret the story. It should not be something that is two quite different things” (Blanca), and another volunteer (Betty) expressed similar thoughts, she preferred books where the pictures support the words, and added that the quality of language as well as the story were important. Others mentioned that the books should be funny or thematically relevant to adults.

The ways picturebooks were used in the respective language cafes varied a lot. One volunteer reported that she read the book in its totality first and discussed it afterward. Other volunteers said that they usually read the book together with the participants a section at a time and talked about the meaning of the text and the pictures along the way. This was also the prominent method used in the observed digital language cafe. In the case of one language cafe, only single pictures from picturebooks were used to stimulate conversation about a given theme. An extraordinary way of using a picturebook is demonstrated by the language cafe where Klaus Hagerup and Lisa Aisato’s *Jenta som ville redde bøkene* [The girl who wanted to save the books] (2017) was read over three meetings because the participants were curious to see how the story developed. One of the participants describes the reading of this book:

It worked; it was interesting! Because we are many who think it is interesting, and we are almost the same group of people every time [. . .] We read this book over three language cafe sessions because there were many who wanted the possibility to read, and afterwards we discussed if anything was unfamiliar and the words we cannot (Ada).

Clearly, there are many ways that a picturebook might be used, which may be influenced by the characteristics of the respective books, volunteers’ mediation abilities or style, and/or the linguistic abilities of the participants.

A presentation of four picturebooks and observed responses

The books are briefly presented in the following, and the books are related to the categories specified by Nikolajeva. Each book is put in context of the way they worked in language cafe conversations.

A challenging story: Cicada. Shaun Tan’s story from a corporate office triggers the imagination by placing an insect as an employee in a human workplace, among humans. The expressive pictures dominate the story, with the green cicada in focus, surrounded by gray office walls and gray, aggressive or rejecting humans of whom the faces are not visible. The cicada is not valued for its work and is denied promotion. In the end, the cicada leaves the office, climbs

to the top of the building, unfolds its wings and joins the swarm of fellow cicadas. Last page reads: “Cicada all fly back to forest. / Sometimes thinks of human. / Can’t stop laughing.” Only a few words are written on each spread, expressing the thoughts of the cicada. The words fill in some information, but the meaning of the story is to a large extent up to the reader’s interpretation. *Cicada* could be considered a complementary picturebook.

The book caused both discussion and apparent feelings of uneasiness at the language cafe. A male participant commented that he believed the cicada would commit suicide going to the top of the building, noting that “he has lost his job and has nothing.” Appearing a little perplexed, this participant asked if *Cicada* was a children’s book. A female participant indicated that she found it to be more for adults but mentioned that the book could teach young readers about possible challenges in the future, such as those related to workplace dynamics. Several of the participants talked about the feeling of sadness for the cicada’s situation; observing that it works endless hours and noting its loneliness and social isolation. One participant said, “The human colleagues don’t like Cicada. They say things. They do things.” Another exclaimed, “Oh no! This is so sad!” Still, what was interpreted as the joyful ending caused expressions of relief and lots of laughter. The participants also noted the cicada’s strange way of speaking and appeared to identify with it. “Cicada speaks broken Norwegian!” was mentioned by one participant and “Cicada is a little like us,” said another. This led to some laughter and an aminated consensus that, as stated by the language café leader, “It is good that someone speaks broken Norwegian”; thereby positively acknowledging diversity. Overall, participants commented about the advantage of the book being short, but not too simple, and expressed appreciation for how the book mirrored difficult aspects of life. The reading of *Cicada* also demonstrates how the use of picturebooks can facilitate conversations that go beyond the descriptive and didactic-focused and into the realm of thinking and feeling and, ultimately, connecting.

Non-fiction: Under the polar ice. In addition to works of fiction, non-fiction or factual picturebooks appear to have potential for facilitating dialog and meaningful exchanges at language cafes. Line Renslebråten’s book *Under polarisen* [Under the Polar Ice] (2018) is a factual picturebook, consisting of large, colorful, and close to realistic pictures and short descriptive sentences. The pictures contribute with additional information supplementing what is written in the text and can thus be considered a complementary picturebook. This book was chosen by the language café organizer as it offers both knowledge about and a vocabulary for arctic geography, climate, and wildlife, which can be especially useful for participants coming from vastly different regions of the world.

The book offered an opportunity for participants and volunteers to talk about their environment, their observations of and feelings about it, and to learn together. One woman noted that polar ice is “very cold, old ice that does not melt” and a man responded that he “does not like winter, does not like cold.” Some others agreed and gave the appearance of shuddering. A man asked, “What is the meaning of ‘solstråle’?,” which is the Norwegian word for sunbeam or ray of light. One volunteer gave an explanation, and the language cafe organizer added that that the word could, as in English, be understood metaphorically, as a person who spreads joy. This was met with many smiling faces and a few expressions of aha. The fact that the volunteers did not know much about the Arctic made the reading an experience of sharing new knowledge for everybody. One of the volunteers explained, “We read the picturebook *Under polarisen*. There are such words as *phytoplankton* and *krill* and the words that we had to google and find pictures of - none of us really knew what these animals looked like. So, you learn new stuff.” (Blanca). The conversation in this case was on equal terms or more co-participatory as both volunteers and participants were searching for information and learning new words and, thereby, reducing the teacher-student hierarchy. Taking a broader perspective, as the climate crisis and sustainability have increasingly come into focus, this book can also be seen to provide a vocabulary for taking part in public or private debates on climate questions, both for the participants as well as the volunteers.

A shared experience: The Voyage. The third book to be presented may, at first glance, appear to be targeted at a young audience. *The Voyage*, a picturebook created by Veronica Salinas and Camilla Engman tells of a little duck traveling to a new place where no one understands its language, and it takes a while before the duck adjusts to its new surroundings and unfamiliar creatures. It is a story that is rooted in Salinas’ own migration experience from Argentina to Norway. In one sense, this picturebook can be perceived as symmetric as the text and pictures closely correspond to each other, yet in another sense it should be considered complementary as challenging questions are posed. The very small amount of verbal text leaves much of the story and especially the emotional parts, relating to both grief and happiness, to the reading of pictures.

The book is written in second person point of view, which makes it an inclusive and dialogic text on a more sophisticated level than could be imagined by first sight of the book’s naïvist pictures. Fludernik (1994) explains the possible interpretations of a second person point of view in narratives, which may shift from “you as addressee to you as protagonist, which often operates on the basis of you in the meaning of ‘one,’ ‘anyone,’ therefore: ‘possibly, me’” (p. 106). The point of view invites the reader to imagine that someday this could happen to “you”—the reader.

The story opens by stating that “Maybe one day you have to leave,” indicating that the voyage was not voluntary and continues as a tale of alienation: “And you land someplace. You think it’s strange there.” Both experiences—to leave home, and to arrive in a new and unfamiliar place—will be well known to many of the cafe participants who have felt the need to leave or have fled from difficult conditions in their countries of origin. The repeated question from the little duck: “Do you know who I am?,” is a question that opens to a manifold of interpretations and philosophical reflections alongside the straightforward story. The question includes a reflection about identity. Does moving to another country and learning a new language mean that one is no longer the same person? As one of the participant informants said when reflecting on this matter: “So I think I am in a way myself, but slightly different” (Aisha).

Observing the reading of and conversation about *The Voyage* at a language cafe, it was evident that some of the participants shared the experiences expressed in the book. One woman said “Someone is moving to a new place. You feel loss, are sad, but if you know each other – then you learn the other person’s language, and this person become glad and happy.” The leader adds: “Like someone coming to a new country, like us. You learn that change is part of our lives.” The woman nods and agrees: “Yes, lives do change all the time.” Another woman compares *The Voyage* to her own work experiences: “I am thinking about a new job where I could not understand the words they were using, and I felt like a complete outsider until somebody helped me.”

A fable on fear: The Shadow. In *The Shadow* (2017) also created by Veronica Salinas and Camilla Engman we meet the duck from *The Voyage*. In this story we find that the duck is seemingly alone in the middle of the woods walking home when, as the duck experiences, “darkness settles around the trees, around your heart, around everything” (p. 10) and a voice starts whispering to her. Terrified by the stranger she can’t see she tries to run away, but falls to the ground, sure to be consumed by the enemy. When the voice is close by, she sees that it is just a small bat who wants company. Daylight is coming, and the two walks together through the woods. Like in *The Voyage*, *The Shadow’s* text and picture complement each other. However, on some occasions the text contradicts the picture; for example, on the second spread the duck express how she enjoys being all alone in the woods, but the picture show that three other animals are present, one of them hiding behind a tree.

A reflective discussion on fear and the basis of one’s fears resulted from the reading of the book as it noted in the following excerpt from participant observers notes: After reading a couple of pages, the leader asked what was happening in the story. A male participant talked about

how it was getting cold, and the sun was going down. He noted that it looked a little dangerous. He jokingly stated, "it is a crime book." Everyone laughed. [. . .] A person asks about a sentence on the same page, "What does 'darkness around the heart' mean?" "It is rather poetic." A female participant said that it means lonely. A male participant continued by saying that when the night comes there come things that we are not familiar with, things we do not know, and that maybe we think we see things [. . .] The leader asked, "have you been scared in the forest? Heard strange sounds, voices?" Participants all indicated that they had experienced that; a shared understanding. At the end of the story, the leader asked what everyone thought of the book. Is it for all [ages]? Everyone agreed that it is for all. A female participant said that the book was great and that she was going to buy it for her child and read it. She said that the message was great, that you might be afraid, but often when you find out what it is, you find out that it is not so scary. A male participant said that it was like the writings of Chilean poet Pablo Neruda.

The two complementary picturebooks by Salinas and Engman could be considered as fables both because of their animal universe and their exploration of basic human problems; in the case of *Skyggen* how to handle our fears and in the case of *The Voyage* a personal fable that focus on identity. As fables, they are open for multiple interpretations and philosophical reflections from both participants and volunteers and, therefore, can facilitate the sharing of stories and perspectives between program attendees; thereby, fostering dialog and meaningful exchange.

Participant's experiences with picturebooks in language cafes

The eight participants who had experienced the use of picturebooks in language cafes, all had a positive attitude to their use as learning materials. They gave different reasons for their attitudes; some found that the books were easy to understand and generated interesting conversations: "I like very much children's books because they are not very difficult, they give to me a good feeling: -Ah, I could understand it. [. . .] If we see a picture, we can talk about what we see, but if there is a lot of text we can practice a little to read and pronounce" (Adeline). Even if picturebooks as medium were well received: "For one who is starting language learning maybe it is good, because it is easier for us to understand. Otherwise, I do not read books with pictures" (Ada). Two of the participants admitted that they were surprised by the choice of books: "It was the first time with [name of organizer] that we talked about a picturebook. And then I thought this was perhaps a book for children, but it was not, it was for adults. It was very exciting. One could talk a lot about the pictures in the book, and the texts, they go deep" (Astrid) and the other participant said "I was surprised because there were very nice

picturebooks in language cafe, not only for children but even for adults. It can be very good" (Aron). A fourth participant emphasized that the picturebooks used are "not for children but for adult people" (Aisha). When asked to mention some of the titles read, only some of the attendees remembered. At digital language cafes, the titles are shown in a presentation at the beginning and not necessarily repeated again.

The use of picturebooks as a shared reading material opened a space for creativity for some of the participants. One lady said she found picturebooks "very interesting because one can be creative and think differently, because everybody thinks a little differently, and why do they choose to describe something in a certain way? Is it something they take from their life?" (Aisha). Another participant (Anna) stated that by using picturebooks "one may learn to be a little more creative."

Conversations about picturebooks as well as other forms of literary fiction are perceived by participants as different from other conversations, for example compared to talking about a set theme, which is often a preferred structure for a language cafe. "Yes, is it different. Yes, I think so. It is more focused and more content. To me it is better" (Astrid). Use of literature in general is considered valuable and important: "We talk about very general matters, and maybe some special actions or emotions or situations from our lives" (Aisha). ". . .we sometimes can discuss on a higher level. So, I believe that all who read can express themselves better and get to know other things. I think it is very important" (Ada). Some participants noted that the literature provides a new and different type of vocabulary: "[W]e feed my brain with new words, and we can use new words, it is good" (Alice).

Volunteers' experiences

Ten interviewed volunteers have had some experience with using picturebooks at language cafes. While most of them expressed positive attitudes concerning the use of the books, other volunteers appeared to be less enthusiastic about being given a book to read by the cafe organizer:

I am not the one who is in charge of that part, we have other people more concerned with Norwegian as a subject or literature. The librarians are also concerned with it themselves and they have engaged in it. I cannot say the titles, but it has been a lot, or mostly children's books. That is, with drawings. (Bjarne).

A few volunteers even told of their negative experiences to varying degrees. "Now we had a book at the previous cafe, a digital cafe, and it was not very successful. We all agreed on that. Maybe it was a wrong choice of book. [. . .] We did not get much out of it, as I see it" (Berit). One claimed that reading books took too much time from the valuable free conversation (Ben). However, the majority of

volunteers indicated that they had good experiences with picturebooks and that they use them in different ways, either for reading aloud, by the volunteer or by the participants—a whole book or just parts. “I read the whole book aloud. The others listen and then we talk about it afterwards, if there is something – if it is something that can easily be talked about” (Barbro).

The use of picturebooks were by the volunteers related to the participants’ level of Norwegian language. Some cafes arrange people in groups according to language level and others do not. There seemed to be quite a disagreement on this matter, as some volunteers found it better to mix language level, as those least capable could learn from the ones more fluent in Norwegian. Others claimed that everybody would learn more by being grouped with those on a comparable level.

Emotions and language learning

Language learning as an adult may feel exhausting and challenging. The participants expressed the difficulties in making themselves understood when asking questions in shops or elsewhere. The participants’ remarks about how they have benefited from attending the language cafes suggest that their conversational abilities have increased: “Yes, I learn Norwegian. I learn new words. But it is not the same as going to Norwegian class, it is more for talking” (Alice). “[The language cafe] is very important to me, because I can feel free. And talk with other people” (Aron).

The emotional vocabulary is even more challenging than other parts of a new language. For example, learning where the limit is between expressing a strong feeling and being offensive or too intimate. This is one of the more challenging areas in language learning (Dewaele, 2010) and the picturebooks seem to offer helpful vocabulary in this respect. As a male participant says: “I may use the wrong words, I use the wrong words, I can also learn how to express myself in different situations” (Adam). One of the attendees describes her thoughts on experiencing emotional encounters with literary texts in language cafes: “. . . emotions arise in relation to some texts and something existentially. Yes, it was interesting. I think it is another way of thinking and very, very useful when you learn a language, because then I think the brain works differently. I think I may remember more words, more expressions because I have some emotions linked to those texts.” (Aisha).

Distressing emotional experiences with specific picturebooks are to a limited degree made explicit, the only exception is a lady who tells of a difficult encounter with a picturebook: “There was one I did not like, because it to me has a personal theme. [. . .] I did not talk. It was uncomfortable to me, and I could not talk about it” (Adeline). It seems that this book provoked bad memories and dark emotions, which prevented her from taking part in the conversation. Though she appreciated the other picturebooks

presented and says she borrows them from the library after the cafes.

Discussion

When picking suitable books for reading at a language cafe, two female volunteers emphasized the importance of selecting coherent picturebooks where words and pictures can be linked together, in order to support the readers to understand new words and understand the story. This will typically count for the symmetric and complementary picturebooks. Coherence is however not always the case in contemporary, sometimes challenging picturebooks. Counterpoint is sometimes employed as an esthetic and cognitive value (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2001). Counterpoint adds an extra layer of challenge, by offering food for imagination and opens to different interpretations. This is of course a gain to adult readers but was considered to be challenging in a language learning context, according to some of the volunteers. To find a balance between picturebooks of high quality which at the same time offer a word-picture-coherent story that is considered relevant and cognitively and esthetically interesting for adults, is clearly a challenge to the volunteers. In some cases, they leave the selection of books to the librarians, or they seek advice. In other cases, the volunteers do not have a choice, but are just given a book selected by the organizer.

The organization LSB has been active in offering advice and providing knowledge to volunteers about how to use literature as language learning materials. Librarians in public libraries are knowledgeable of what books may be relevant and they too can offer advice and support. Still, this knowledge has not reached volunteers everywhere. The volunteers we interviewed came from different parts of Norway, and their views differed on the relevance of reading picturebooks for language learning, as well as in ways of using these books at the cafe conversations. A better developed cooperation between librarians and volunteers in choice of books and in how to read and talk about them appears as a possible way forward.

From our participant observations and interviews, it did not appear that any of the participants felt degraded or underestimated by the choice of books. We observed from the digital language cafes how the conversation leader explained to the participants why picturebooks were chosen. She made a point about contemporary picturebooks having grown to be sophisticated, addressing a wider audience than just small children, just like Bloem and Padak (1996) concluded in their research overview. In the observed language cafe, the person who selected the books and led the conversation had specialized competence in literature, as well as experience in learning Norwegian as an adult immigrant. Several of the participant informants expressed surprise when picturebooks were presented to them, but these were nice surprises, as

they pointed out that these books were also for adults. Using picturebooks was, on the contrary, a challenge to some of the volunteers, who feared they run the risk of presenting something that could offend the participants, by underestimating them, as described by the teachers referred to by Bloem and Padak (1996: 48). The volunteers in their late 60s or 70s did not have much experience with contemporary crossover picturebooks, which may explain why some of them were hesitant to use such books as language learning materials.

The participant informants all showed a very positive attitude to language cafes and the use of picturebooks. This may not be surprising the interviewees voluntarily choose to regularly attend the cafes. Participants who dislike the use of picturebooks, or who have left the cafes for whatever reason, cannot be accounted for. However, the positive responses from the interviewees should not be discredited as politeness or a wish to please the interviewers. Participants expressed critical opinions on other issues concerning how the language cafes were run, for example frustration when other participants or the volunteers talked too much, or if the introduction round took too much time. Their frankness about these matters and the balanced account of their experiences reduces concerns of overly positive bias in the findings.

Power relations between volunteers and participants

A shared reading of a picturebook may open an arena for emotional expressions concerning the text, and not necessarily force anyone to reveal very personal emotions or experiences (Colm Hogan, 2010). Shaun Tan's book *Cicada* calls for an emotional vocabulary in order to discuss what is going on in the story, and by learning the full meaning of these words, it is possible to express even the personal experiences at the language cafe, for those who so choose. The fictional characters may act as substitutes for the readers, and a conversation about estrangement or loneliness can be had, while at the same time private matters can be withheld. As author Veronica Salinas has experienced in the language cafe she hosts; because the conversation derives from a book, one can always return to the book and the emotions and experiences that are conveyed there. She emphasizes that the cafe should be a meeting place where participants and volunteers meet as equals in reading literature (Salinas, 2020).

Picturebooks show much potential for evening out power balance, or reducing the teacher-student dynamic, between volunteers and participants as everyone can share their perspectives and reactions to the pictures. There is no right or wrong answer. As the findings indicate, the picturebooks can support the use of the emotional and intellectual language; thereby enabling language learners to move beyond emotionless textbook phrases and more fully

engage intellectually and emotionally with the other participants and volunteers.

Conclusion: Picturebooks work

Based on our informants' experiences, it is evident that picturebooks may work well as language learning material at language cafes. Learning is closely connected to engagement, and one of the participants told us that when joining in on a reading of picturebooks, she sometimes forgot that this was in fact a language learning arena: "I was thinking more about the texts we are talking about, they were very interesting and I in a way forgot that we are learning language" (Aisha). The joy and excitement which many of both the volunteers and the participants showed when talking about picturebook reading is promising for further work with this kind of material in language cafes. It appears as the cafes less successful with reading picturebooks may result from picking a book that does not generate an interesting conversation, or the result of imposing books to the volunteers, books that they do not care about or fail to elicit an emotional response. Given the rich range of contemporary picturebooks available in public libraries, the challenge is to select those books that may open to interesting and informative as well as emotionally rich dialogs—and this challenge could be met by librarians and volunteers working together.

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