Combination of picturebooks and toys for development of children's literacy: advantages and limitations in the context of play-based pedagogy

Vaiva Schoroškienė
Vilnius University, Institute of Educational Sciences, Vilnius, Lithuania;
vaiva.schoroskiene@gmail.com

Abstract
Educators and parents are constantly searching for new ways to develop children's literacy. Playing in a rich environment enables even the youngest children to explore literacy and develop their literacy skills. With the rapid development of technologies in book publishing, picturebooks are becoming an increasingly common element of such an environment. This article analyses how a picturebook can be used in the context of play-based pedagogy and linguistic diversity. The results of the study on reading a picturebook with children under 9 years of age are presented (N68). The research data demonstrated that reading a picturebook with a toy helped to raise interest and retain the attention of preschool children and primary school pupils, stimulated their linguistic activity, and helped to better understand the book; yet in some situations it had a negative effect on teacher-child interaction, distracted from the written work, and hindered the possibilities to develop active reading skills offered by the picturebook. Reading a picturebook with a toy could be seen as a means of individualising education when working with pre-schoolers or children with learning difficulties. The research shows that reading with a toy can both foster the interaction between the teacher and the learner and hinder it; so, the integrity of all the elements of the educational situation is important: the learner's capabilities, peculiarities of the picturebook and the toy, as well as the teacher's skillfulness.

Keywords: picturebooks, play-based pedagogy, linguistic diversity, elementary education, early education.

Introduction

Educators and parents are constantly searching for new ways to develop children's literacy. Playing in a rich environment enables even the youngest children to explore literacy and develop their literacy skills. With the rapid development of technologies in book publishing, a picturebook becomes an increasingly common element of such an environment, i.e. a tool that links play and academic learning. Highly valued by professionals for its multimodality and opportunities for active reading, a picturebook is still underestimated by some parents and teachers as focusing too little on learning letters (Korsakaitė 2002, Nikolajeva 2010, Sipe 2012). Publishers' decision to combine these books with toys or new technologies, raise questions about the benefits to the child. Is it merely a commercial solution? Discussions show that in order to expand the possibilities of pre-school and primary education, it is important to analyze the use of picturebooks in the context of play-based pedagogy and linguistic diversity.

Theoretical underpinnings
Play-based pedagogy

Play-based pedagogy (PBP) is viewed as a promising approach to education, as it allows the integration of seemingly opposite things such as play and learning (Paterson 2021, Allee-Herndon et al. 2022). One of the advantages of PBP is the balance between a child's free play and teacher-led teaching, i.e. it is sought for the integration of the child's natural development and academic learning, as well as to develop communication, cooperation and self-regulation skills (Paterson 2021). Presumably, one of the most conspicuous signs of such learning is functioning in the environment of the educational institution, when play becomes the context for literacy activities, motivates and involves children in learning, and encourages reflection and application of the acquired knowledge (Paterson 2021).

Researchers recognize that educators understand PBP quite differently (Keung & Cheung 2019, Pyle et al. 2020). A typical example in the context of literacy development is reading a book with an adult and playing afterwards. During the playtime, children are usually suggested to recreate or elaborate the stories they have read. While taking part in this activity children get to know the concept of a character, explore stories, and enrich their vocabulary (Scanland 2016-2017). It is important that the child has the opportunity to act freely, unconstrained by rules when using the learning material (Keung & Cheung 2019). Cooperation between the teacher and the child in such activities helps not to deviate from the intended goals (Paterson 2021).

Educators, who already integrate play and academic learning processes, consider game-based education as an important context for developing academic skills, providing learning continuity, and developing higher-level thinking skills through child-initiated activities (Pyle et al. 2020, Scanlan 2016-2017). The role of the educator is to direct, expand and promote children's learning through play, seeking to avoid gaps in the attainment of academic goals (Pyle et al. 2020). The PBP is beneficial for the development of social and emotional skills and academic achievements; hence, the problem arises if it is perceived too narrowly as merely a free play of a child (Pyle et al. 2020). Adult-led play of a child is more effective than free play (Scanlan 2016-2017); thus, PBP becomes an effective tool to avoid a gap in academic achievements when working with children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds (Allee-Herndon et al. 2022).

The PBP is mainly used to facilitate the transition from pre-school to academic learning. However, some studies suggest that the PBP should not be perceived as a faster way to higher achievements, but rather as a prevention of early failure (McGuinness et al. 2014). In the first year, the PBP may even slow down the development of pupils' achievements compared to academic-style learning (McGuinness et al. 2014). It is important to be able to choose an educational way that is more responsive to children's readiness (McGuinness et al. 2014). As a child grows, play decreases, yet it remains important even for older students. For instance, fifth-graders admitted that playing in the library was important to them because of their sense of autonomy and their ability to break free from rigid frames in a rich environment (Crow & Robins 2012). Thus, the PBP can be a valuable tool for individualizing education. Therefore, it is important that its ideas are supported throughout the community (Keung & Cheung 2019). Some studies show that it is the parents of pre-school children who have a too narrow approach to play-based education, which puts nursery school teachers under pressure to better 'prepare children for school' (Keung & Cheung 2019, Campbell 2021). Parents lack knowledge of the PBP, so it is important to disseminate more information that teacher-led education can be combined with child-initiated play strategies, whereas reading picturebooks is an important part of such literacy programmes (Campbell 2021).

The picturebook is part of the PBP-based literacy programs. A picturebook is usually described as a children's publication in which illustrations are no less important than text (Korsakaitė 2002: 235). It is considered an example of a multimodal text, where meaning is created on at least two levels. Moreover, meaning is not just a combination of verbal text and drawings, but rather their interaction. While reading, one shifts from words to images and back, each time developing a better understanding of the written work (Nikolajeva 2010, Sipe 2012). Elements of a good picturebook prevent passive reading, encourage interactivity, making it a convenient tool for working with the youngest readers (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000). Picturebooks enable both experienced and inexperienced readers to gain an understanding of the written work in their own way, thus reaching an audience of both adults and children (Nikolajeva & Scott 2000).

Children typically apply various modes of communication, therefore, a picturebook, as one of the multimodal types of text, is highly beneficial not only for reading or writing, but also for developing critical thinking (Martens et al. 2012), learning to look at the phenomenon from different perspectives, as well as clear out unspoken or even contradictory information (Sipe 2012). In order to understand the picturebook being read, the child uses his or her experience, connects it with the information observed in the text and images, and 'plays' with it while interpreting the work (Baird et al. 2016). Picturebooks help to create situations that encourage communication and discussion, where children can not only enrich their experiences, but also learn from more capable peers and get engaged in a variety of transformational rather than reproductive activities (Lambert 2015). These books offer a rich environment for 'literary conversations' that can help even very young readers, such as 4-6-year-olds, to understand the basic concepts of storytelling (e.g., the character), the peculiarities of expression (e.g., how do we recognize a negative character?), as well as to gain a general understanding of the structure of the work. As the child grows, such conversations become more formal, whereas the experience gained is reflected relying on new knowledge (van der Pol 2012). Thus, by reading a picturebook, the child learns by actively participating in the rich environment of spoken and written language (van der Pol 2012). On the other hand, a picturebook, beyond the boundaries of a text, can encourage children to delve into things that oral language does not reach. For example, by delving into the characters' emotions and their expression in the illustrations, the child can develop empathy (Nikolajeva 2014).

Multimodality, opportunities for active action and space for social interaction between the teacher and the learner are the features that make a picturebook an attractive tool for literacy programs in the context of play-based pedagogy. It is emphasized that literacy itself in preschool and pre-primary schoolchildren is multimodal, since it combines different expressions in different social interactions (e.g., integrates images and spoken language with writing) (Taylor & Leung 2020). On the other hand, literacy is a social process, where social interaction serves as a learning context and way of learning (Taylor & Leung 2020). It is in interaction with teachers that children are motivated to develop literacy processes, and multimodality provides space for the different opportunities and experiences of all children (Taylor & Leung 2020). The context suggested by the picturebook creates situations for such activities. An educator can not only read aloud demonstrating different elements of expressive reading, gestures and facial expressions, but also offer children to engage in various ways: repeat the words, sing songs, perform certain physical actions, create picturebooks themselves, and others. It is important that children actively develop, test and improve strategies for understanding the written work through such activities (Pantaleo 2017). The role of the teacher is particularly important: in questioning, thinking aloud, and combining own leadership with children's ability to lead, the teacher shows 'how a book works', namely, how language or images are used to create meaning (Wiseman 2011, Pantaleo 2017).

However, in the context of PBP, the multimodality of the picturebook not only opens up many new possibilities, but also raises questions. There are opinions that the multimodality of a book can not only help, but also complicate the understanding of the written work, as it requires more complex cognitive skills (Altun 2021). Therefore, this small-scale exploratory study aims to look at reading a picturebook in the context of play-based education and to identify the 'most useful and dangerous' areas in multiple situations, i.e.to provide specific guidelines for further research. The combination that has become quite common not only for educators but also for parents has been chosen for the study: a picturebook and a toy.

Research methodology

The aim of the study was to analyze a wide range of educational interactions, so a qualitative research strategy was chosen. The two levels of education most associated with PBP - preschool and primary education - were also selected. The study involved 75 students (future primary school teachers and future preschool educators). They were asked to read a selected picturebook with pre-school or primary school students twice: the first time without a toy and the second time with a toy. It was recommended to take a break of at least a few days between the two activities. The research participants were asked to describe and compare the activities.

To maximize the diversity of the research data, the nature of the teacher-student interaction was not limited in this research. However, the students were asked to communicate with children individually and during both activities to try to help them understand the book being read. Furthermore, the most relevant concepts of *the toy* and *the picturebook* were defined for the research:

- *The toy* was perceived in its broadest sense: as any object useful for reading and understanding the written work. For instance, a character doll made specially for the written work, a toy or object from the child's environment adapted to the activity. The descriptions collected during the research showed that a wide variety of toys (such as soft toys, plastic or paper animal figures, dolls) and objects (such as a glove, a witch's hat, a computer mouse, a pebble) or even fruit (such as an apple) were used.
- *The picturebook* was considered to be a book in which the content is conveyed not only in written text, but also in images. The subject, the scope of the work, the amount and nature of the verbal or visual elements were not limited. E-books were not used in this research.

Research procedure

In the first stage of the study, out of all presented activity descriptions, only those that were suitable for the research were selected, i.e., activity descriptions where the working process was clearly described, the comparison of the activities was supported with arguments, supplementary observational material was included (i.e., protocols, photos, audio recordings or extracts of a child's speech, etc. provided by students). Hereby, 68 descriptions of activities were selected. Each of these acitvity descriptions represented one of the 68 children from 2 to 9 years of age, who participated in the described activities.

In the second stage of the study, the selected descriptions of activities were analyzed. Then episodes corresponding with the aims of the study were selected (i.e., parts of the activity descriptions that included comparison of the activities with children) and assigned to the groups of advantages or limitations. Each group was analyzed separately, and the episodes were grouped

into subcategories and categories (Figure 1). At the end of the research, the names of subcategories and categories were revised.

Research findings

The categories and subcategories identified during the data analysis are presented in Figure 1. The overview provides examples with a brief reference to the activity description number and the child's age.

Advantages

1. **Helped to attract and maintain attention**. The research participants noted that reading a picturebook with a toy helped to keep a child interested for a longer time. The subcategories reveal several reasons observed.

1.1. **Gave new impressions**. For children, a toy or several toys were unexpected in a reading situation; therefore, it was used as a means of raising interest during the whole activity or only at the beginning of the activity: *the figure (...) became a kind of a riddle, an intrigue, and a non-verbal element of interaction* (16; 7 years old). The teachers indicated that the children expressed an interest in such unusual reading: *Wow, I liked it so much when you read like this. And will we be able to do it again?* (36; 6 years old) Their interest was also manifested by a longer engagement and more active participation: *the girl spent more time reading, got more involved and shared her experiences* (32; 5 years old). The teachers noticed that for pre-school children, *the toy brought more vitality into the reading process and raised more impressions* (33; 4 years old). A similar effect was observed for primary school students: *(...) he was watching with interest what I was doing with it* (5; 8 years old). Reading with the toy increased the interest even in the stories already read: *It was surprising how much dolls increased the desire to listen to a fairy tale that had long been known to him* (43; 7 years old). Both pre-school and primary school children, even those having reading difficulties, often asked to repeat or continue such activities (49; 8 years old).

1.2. **Created the mood: cheered, calmed down, encouraged**. The toy helped the teachers to create the necessary atmosphere at the beginning of the activity: *he was happy to see the toy* (45; 7 years old). The teachers noted that the children often used the toy without being urged and upon their own initiative (69; 8 years old). They claimed that *the involvement of the toy brought them [the children] much closer and created a stronger connection (...) he became more and more open-minded* (25; 6 years old), *the toy helped the child to relax* (52; 8 years old).

Reading with a toy was especially effective for pre-schoolers. It appeared that seeing a toy, the child expected a more pleasant activity: *he smiled more often (...) and seemed more satisfied* (38; 3 years old). Sometimes the toy fundamentally changed the attitude towards an unreliable picturebook (38; 3 years old). It was enough to see the toy around: *the child brought the toy and wanted to listen to a fairy tale with it* (40; 4 years old).

The teachers, who worked with primary school students, also underlined the calming and encouraging effect of the toy. The school students admitted that *reading with a stone in the palm of their hand calmed them down and helped to concentrate* (46; 9 years old). The teachers also observed the changed behaviour of the school students: the girl with the witch's hat *behaved more boldly, changed the roles and improvised, and even took the lead* (64; 8 years old). The teachers maintained that the use of the toy changed the interaction between the teacher and the student: *I wouldn't say that the props encouraged reading, the*

girl was most encouraged by the attention and communion during the reading (64; 8 years old). Thus, it is probable that the measures also adjusted the teacher's behaviour.

1.3. **Provided space for active performance**. The teachers noticed that reading with a toy provided space for the child's initiative and active performance. Reading a book is usually associated with quiet sitting and silence, which can make younger or more agile children uncomfortable or troubled. The teachers believed that the toy became a kind of tool for physical activity, which the usual paper picturebook lacked*: The child does not have to be just a listener, he can participate in the process himself* (69; 8 years old). The descriptions revealed that the children's activities during the reading were diverse: while listening to the fairy tale, they had to put the toys (characters) in the right order (7; 7 years old), imitated the character's movements and performed (45; 7 years old), completed tasks for the characters, etc. Employing the methods of story reconstruction and transformation, the children were encouraged not only to remember the story, but also to act creatively. For example, they created a 'mini-theatre' on the table (20; 5 years old) from the surrounding objects, and tried to clear out the mysterious notes (48; 7 years old) by experimenting.

The possibility to interact with specific objects helped children maintain interest for a much longer time (6; 7 years old.). Even the youngest participants of the study did not shift their attention to other activities: *the girl kept her attention all the time, twice as long as reading without toys, her eyes followed the fairy tale pictures and moving dolls; she tried to repeat my movements with her fingers and facial expressions; after we finished the activity, she asked me to tell her and act the story again* (54; 2 years old). When the activity finished, the children wanted to continue it (55; 7 years old). Even those who were bored reading without a toy, after completing only part of the book, read the entire book during the second activity (49; 8 years old). The children not only willingly performed the tasks set by the teacher, but also took the initiative and came up with additional activities: *During the first activity, he was a little more distracted (...) and continued counting how many pages were left. During the second activity, he read the book faster, discovering more and more new details, did not count the remaining number of pages, and read with interest. (...) he attentively followed the read text, always reminded me (...) to start reading* (65; 7 years old). The changes were noticed by the teachers working with children of all ages and abilities. Although stronger primary school children did not experience difficulties during the first activity, (...) *a substantial difference was noted after both of them were accomplished* (69; 8 years old). The second activity caused a lot of positive emotions for the youngest children and those with learning difficulties: *The boy was fully involved in the fairy tale. (...) The reactions and sounds were very clear, loud and theatrical (...) in some places he started telling the tale himself or even trying to get around me. He was constantly moving (...) After a while, it seemed that the elephant (= toy) had become unnecessary and he had become a character himself (...), and when the tale ended, the boy screamed with joy (...)* (34; 2 years old). Their desire to act and effort grew (63; 8 years old).

2. **Encouraged children's linguistic activity**. A separate category was assigned to language. The subcategories revealed how linguistic activity was encouraged.

2.1. **Created situations for talking and motivated.** The teachers noted that the possibility to manipulate toys while reading encouraged not only the physical, but also the linguistic activity of the children: *The pupil (...) wanted to try different ways of voicing the characters, trying to read the text correctly and reproduce it visually with animal figures* (69; 8 years old).

Pre-school children were more active in repeating the words spoken by the teacher or repeated in the text: *(...) the girl's questions and language changed when using toys.* (...) *The girl got involved in reading the fairy tale, repeated my words (...), which was usually not so obvious when reading* (54; 2 years old). When reading with a toy, the children were often asked to say the words of the characters and they did so very willingly, even without being encouraged: *(...) when I read the dialogue where the dormouse says 'but ...', the girl remembered this part of the text and interrupted me by saying: 'No but ...'. This is exactly what is written in the book* (36; 6 years old).

While reading with the toy, the child more actively commented on the pictures and text, linking the toy to the main character: *What a rabbit! Like from the fairy tale! What a strange name 'Nenervink'* (En. *Don't get on my nerves*) *(...)* (45; 7 years old). Higher linguistic activity persisted even after reading the book while sharing impressions and reflections: *After reading the book, the child discussed much more confidently about what the story was about* (51; 7 years old). The teachers believed that the change was due to the child's identification with the character, empathy, and involvement in the written work: *While reading, the first-grade pupil was clinging to the toy, keeping an eye on it as if reading to the wolf-cub. (...) Finally, the girl felt so excited that at some point said to the toy (...): "Run away from the dinosaurs" (...)* (70; 7 years old). The descriptions show that reading with a toy increased children's linguistic activity, since they created more diverse speaking situations, motivated to talk and ask the teacher questions: (...) *The girl asked about the doll, who came and why they planted a turnip. She put her toys on her fingers and acted as if she pulled the turnip* (...) (41; 2 years old). Having to imitate the movements of a toy character, school students tried to figure out the meaning of the unknown words (49; 8 years old).

2.2. Reimbursed the expression. Communication between pre-school and primary school students about the books they read was limited by imperfect expression: it is more difficult for them to both express their thoughts and understand each other. The study demonstrated that the toy facilitated such communication not only with peers, but also with adults. For instance, a 2-year-old child used the toy, which was employed during the reading, as a kind of the continuation of the book, a symbol of the book that helped to express her wish to the teacher: *The girl liked the spider very much, she carried the toy around the nursery for a few days, slept with it, played, and ever drew. She kept asking me to read the booklet again* (39; 2 years old).

2.3. Encouraged peer communication. Reading with a toy also had an indirect effect on children's linguistic activity. The teachers noted that reading with a toy caught the attention of other children and encouraged peer interaction: *(...) Seeing the toys, many of the children in the group gathered around me and the girl. (...) Seeing that other children were also interested in the activity (...), she felt happy and satisfied* (41; 2 years old). Peer attention was also important for primary school students: *This time, other classmates joined in when reading the book. The toy in the student's hand caught their eye. (...)* (54; 7 years old). Such an effect of promoting the child's linguistic activity continued even after the end of the activity with the teacher. Discussions with peers continued during breaks (70; 7 years old) and sometimes evolved into longer independent peer activities: *R. entered the class carrying Mr. Kampas (*En. Corner)*, and exclaimed loudly, "Look, X made Mr. Kampas for me! This is Mr. Kampas!" R. proudly showed Mr. Kampas to many of the children who remained in the after-school group. Later, she took all the necessary materials and tried to produce another Mr. Kampas herself. (...) Two boys in the class also wanted to have Mr. Kampas and asked to have it made for them* (26; 7 years old).

The descriptions demonstrated that reading with a toy stimulated the involvement and interaction of peers, and formed a community: *Both times, several students joined E. out of curiosity. While reading the book without toys, the students did not feel obligated to listen to the tale to the end, so several children withdrew before they finished listening. Meanwhile, reading the book with the self-made characters, the involvement in the tale was very strong* (53; 7 years old). As the friends got engaged in reading with the toy, the reading became more like a role play: *All the three girls started talking to each other with imaginary animal voices (...) while I was flipping the page. (...) You could feel that they embodied the characters, as they all spoke their language (...) and moved according to the plot (...)* (53; 7 years old).

3. **Helped to understand the written work.** When assessing the text comprehension skills, the ability of children to comprehend the content and expression of a work are usually analysed. Accordingly, three subcategories were identified.

3.1. Helped to understand and memorize the content of the written work. The research showed that reading a picturebook with a toy helped children better memorize and understand the story. The teachers indicated that *the toy helped (...) to understand the meaning of the text* (45; 7 years old), *the children found it easier to remember what the characters of the book were doing, how they felt, what they were talking about* (49; 8 years old). After reading with the toys, the children performed the tasks related to the book more easily. For example, they mentioned the differences between the characters in the book (30; 4 years old) or remembered the names of the characters mentioned in the book: *(...) she understood the text better when the spider 'showed' her the knitted cobwebs. (...) This time, the girl named almost all of them (= figures)* (39; 2 years old).

The descriptions of the activities revealed a change in the behaviour of pre-school readers, leading to a better understanding of the work: a longer and greater involvement in reading, continuing of the story, or asking questions: *(...) reading with a toy was longer than reading without it (...) The boy himself initiated further narration, asked questions, showed pictures to the bunny, told if he had seen this animal in reality himself. He began to realize that the book was about emotions; he managed to remember two of the five – sadness and anger. When the bunny was sad, the boy caressed him* (35; 4 years old). The children wanted to continue reading and to develop the plot by playing: *After reading the book we continued playing (...). The girl understood the book because she offered the dormouse to sleep with both the rabbit and the squirrel, and then suggested that they all slept together* (36; 6 years old).

Reading with a toy was especially useful when reading slightly more complex picturebooks, as it helped to link the layers of the word and image, as well as to compensate for the comprehension gaps. For example, the character figures helped to capture which character was speaking (36; 6 years old), the DIY toy helped to imagine the unusual character (26; 7 years old), whereas the manipulations with the objects facilitated understanding of the directly unnamed plot elements: *While playing the fish, I wrote the same words on a sheet of paper, which written by a fish in a fairy tale (...)When we lifted the sheet in front of the light, we saw the opposite word, which was written in the book (...)* (48; 7 years old).

3.2. Helped to notice and understand the peculiarities of the expression of the picturebook. While developing the students' reading skills, the teachers should not only teach children to understand and enjoy the story, but also help them understand the peculiarities of the expression of the picturebook. The brightest elements of the plot (characters, events) are often important for the youngest readers; hence, such things like the character's mood and

its changes can remain misunderstood or unnoticed. The research revealed that the toy enabled the teacher to create a situation that encouraged active exploration. Using the toy, the teacher 'revived' the drawing in the picturebook and was able to draw the child's attention to such complex things as the expression. For instance, *by simulating a ride with a small toy bicycle, the child understood why the hair of the boy on the bicycle was blowing. The teacher discussed with the student how the artist conveyed speed in the drawing and how speed was related to the character's mood* (12; 7 years old).

Toys helped the teacher to draw the pupil's attention to the verbal layer of the work and to highlight the elements of verbal expression, such as sayings, rarer words and comparisons: *before reading we set out some 'unexpected things', which would be mentioned later in the text. The pupil was asked to relocate the items while listening. In such a way, we 'discovered' that the elephant was drinking from the bath rather than from the cup, because it was large* (30; 7 years old).

3.3. Helped to understand the connection between the written work and life. In order to understand the written work, it is important for the reader to associate the reading with personal experience and prior knowledge. The research demonstrated that the objects from the child's environment included in the reading facilitated their better understanding of the connection of the written work with everyday life. For example, *while reading a book (…), B. and I used a 50 euro note (= a picture of a historical personality), which helped a child to understand that the personality was real rather than imagined* (13; 9 years old).

Limitations

1. **Weakened the interaction between the teacher and the child.** Both pre-school and elementary school students had difficulties, since they had to distribute their attention between different activities*: the boy flounced between watching at the booklet and the doll. He watched the toy and heard less (...)* (11; 7 years old). It is noteworthy, that some students experienced such difficulties only at the beginning of the activity: *After the second reading, I realized that the girl was more focused on the toy. She kept looking at it, and it seemed that she was not listening to what was being read or said. Yet, this was only at the beginning (...)* (33; 4 years old).

   For pre-schoolers, the toy sometimes evoked too many impressions, and thus, disrupted the usual rhythm of the conversation: *(...) the child was overjoyed with the toys and could not concentrate and feel when it was time for him to talk, which resulted in a lot of simultaneous talking and interrupting* (30; 4 years old). Even for some primary school students it was more difficult to listen to the teacher reading with a toy: *while reading with the toy, the student focused his all attention on the teddy bear, so I was not sure if he heard everything (...) When I finished reading, the student did not immediately notice it* (21; 7 years old).

2. **Distracted from the written work.** In some situations, the toy hindered the comprehension, as it diverted the students' attention from reading the picturebook to other activities: *the boy wanted to play with the doll and illustrate the characters* (11; 7 years old), *he began to explore how the character doll was made* (26; 7 years old). The teachers identified some didactic aspects of the activities that had a negative impact. They noticed that not all toys were suitable: *according to the book, a dinosaur's head (...) should be used, but there is nothing to do with it* (15; 8 years old). Too many toys and their incompliance with the story also had a negative effect: *(...) I had to limit myself to two toys that would correspond to the main*

characters of the book; meanwhile, my desire to interest him resulted in distracting him (...). If the toys are not in line with the illustrations, the child forgets and keeps checking, which is also distracting (7; 4 years old). The child needs to understand what is expected of them; therefore, it is necessary to anticipate specific activities: *When I handed the toy over to him (...), he did not realize what I expected from him (...)* (5; 8 years old). Brighter school students noticed themselves that the toy was not needed or even disturbed by them (57; 8 years old).

3. **The possibilities of the picturebook were not fully exploited.** The visual presentation in the picturebook is an important support for less experienced readers: exploring illustrations becomes a very exciting and engaging activity even when reading the same book multiple times. The descriptions of the activity revealed that the misuse of the toy distracted the students from exploring the illustrations: *Comparing the two activities, I think the boy's involvement was similar, yet its determinant factors – the illustrations and the toy tiger – were different and replaced each other* (63; 8 years old). Occasionally, the toy caused unnecessary competition with the illustration for the child's attention: *When reading with toys, the boy looked more rarely at the pictures in the book* (7; 4 years old). Thus, the opportunities for more active exploration of the book's illustrations remained untapped (8; 7 years old).

Figure 1. Advantages and limitations of reading with a toy (Categories and subcategories)
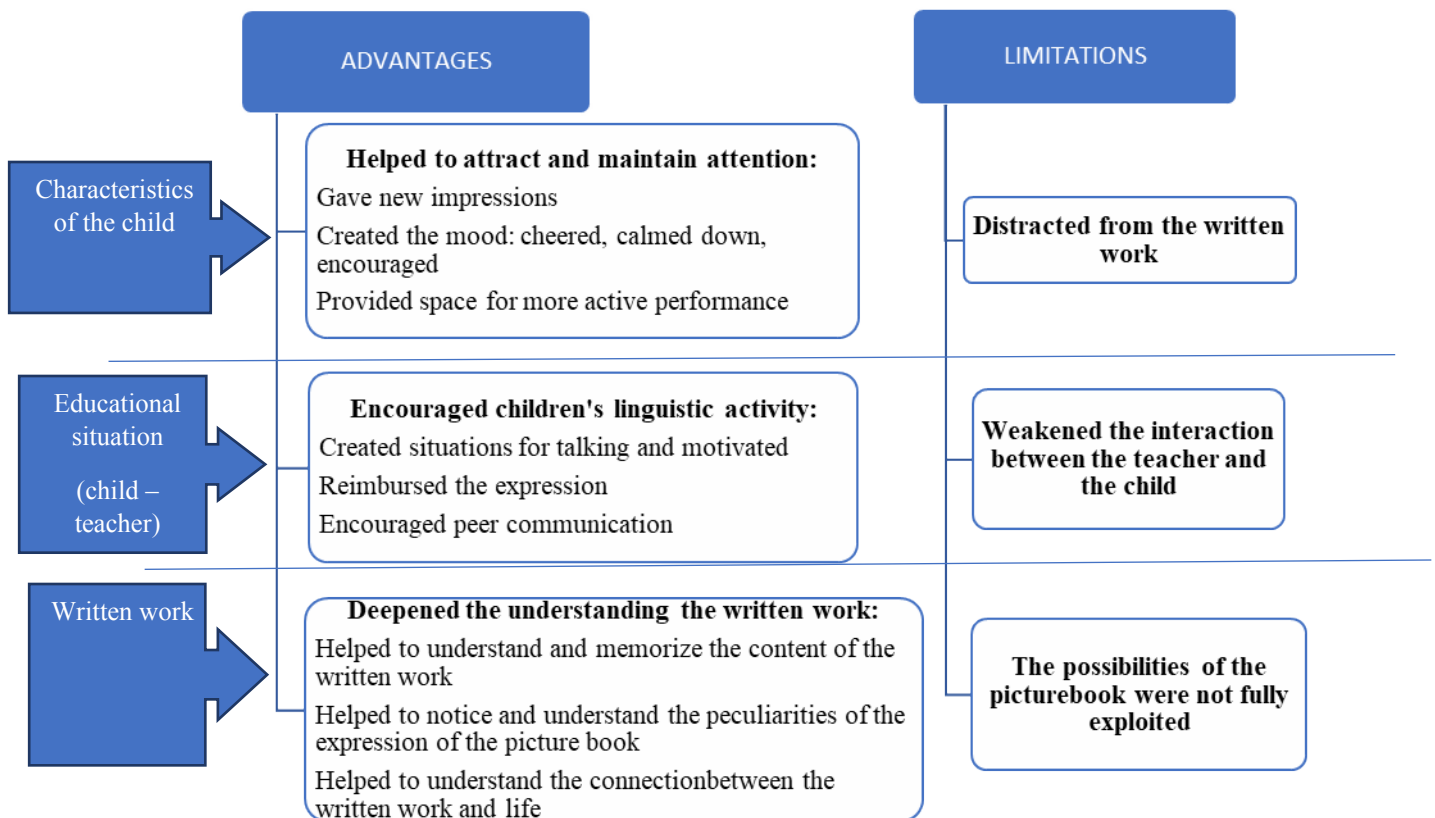
Discussion

In the context of other studies, the present one focuses on some didactic aspects of the use of the picturebook. First of all, the research data confirm the observations of other studies (Paterson 2021, Keung & Cheung 2019) about the significant role of the teacher: the combination of all the elements of a specific educational situation depends on the teacher's competencies. In successful cases, the teachers had clear strategies for reading a specific picturebook and acted purposefully, taking into account the specifics of the written work and the child's abilities, as well as predicting potential difficulties. Decisions that were not based on the peculiarities of the book caused difficulties for the students and doubts for the teachers about the benefits of the activities.

In addition, reading the picturebook appeared as a catalyst for the PBP, enabling the teacher not only to achieve specific educational goals, but also to create the necessary mood for the activity. The teachers' observation that the use of the toy affected not only the child, but also the teacher was surprising. Within the framework of this study, it is only possible to hypothesize what the toy has changed in particular: the teacher's communication style (i.e. the nature of the interaction, the child's activity) or specific didactic decisions (e.g. a slower pace of work, a more frequent feedback). Conceivably, it is the toy that helps the teacher move from academic learning to the PBP. It is also unclear whether the effect of the toy would persist in a similar way over a longer period of time. These questions should be answered by other studies.

It also seems that the right combination of a picturebook and a toy can be useful in developing the social interaction of young readers and compensating for their opportunities for expression. This would be in line with the observations of Sheryl V. Taylor and Cynthia B. Leung (2020) that multimodality in literacy activities promotes social interaction in pre-school and pre-primary school settings, and thus facilitates communication between different cultural groups. Our research suggests that even elementary school students can benefit from such situations. Yet, it is important to evaluate the quality of both the picturebook and the toy and their combination in terms of literacy goals and the child's age.

Although the study analyzed situations with children under 9 years of age, there was no intention to compare them in terms of the age. It seems that reading with a toy could be a more common method for pre-schoolers, while for primary school students, it is more appropriate as a means of solving difficulties (i.e. a complementary rather than typical activity). To draw more consistent conclusions, detailed research is required. Further research would also be relevant to analyze the various didactic aspects of reading picturebooks, especially the benefits of this tool in the context of early literacy education or support for primary school pupils with learning difficulties. Apparently, the potential of picturebooks for literacy development has not been sufficiently exploited yet.

Conclusions

Reading a picturebook with a toy helped to keep pre-school and primary school students interested in reading and to retain their attention, promoted children's language activity, facilitated understanding of the work better, but in some situations had a negative effect on teacher-child interaction, as well as competed opportunities for active reading provided in the picturebook. The research reveals that reading with a toy can help the interaction between the teacher and the learner, yet it can also hinder it; therefore, the integration of all elements of the educational situation is important: the learner's capabilities, peculiarities of the picturebook and the toy, as well as the teacher's skillfulness.

Reading a picturebook with a toy with pre-school children and primary school pupils should be seen as a means of individualizing education, since a teacher, who is aware of the child's

capabilities, can attain specific educational goals by providing the child with the help he or she needs. Such an individual interaction is particularly beneficial for children of pre-school age or with learning difficulties.

The research methodology should be taken into account, especially the fact that it was based on the descriptions of students' activities and the situation of individual interaction. Moreover, the study did not limit the duration of the activities, the choice of picturebook or toy, and therefore their quality, which is directly related to the opportunities for active reading and social interaction.

References

Allee-Herndon, K. A., Killingsworth, R., Sherron, H., BiYing, C., Stewart, M. (2022). Let's Talk Play! Exploring the Possible Benefits of Play-Based Pedagogy on Language and Literacy Learning in Two Title I Kindergarten Classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50: 119-132.

Altun, D. (2021). Twice Upon a Mind: Preschoolers' Narrative Processing of Electronic and Printed Stories. *Early Childhood Education Journal,* 49(3): 349-359.

Baird, A., Laugharne, J., Maagerø, E., Tønnessen, E. S. (2016). Child Readers and the Worlds of the Picture Book. *Children's Literature in Education,* 47(1): 1-17.

Campbell, S. (2021). Phonics and play-literacy: Parental expectations of an early childhood literacy program. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 44(3): 60-73.

Crow, S. R., Robins, J. (2012). Play in the Library Primordial Learning. *Teacher Librarian*, 39(5): 36-43.

Keung, C. P. C., Cheung, A. C. K. (2019). Towards Holistic Supporting of Play-Based Learning Implementation in Kindergartens: A Mixed Method Study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47 (5): 627-640.

Korsakaitė, I. (2002). Paveikslėlių knyga: žanro samprata ir ypatybės. *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis,* 27: 233-250.

Lambert, M. D. (2015). Children, Children, What Do You See? *The Horn Book Magazine* 27.

Martens, P., Martens, R., Doyle, M., Hassay, L., J., Aghalarov, S. (2012). Learning from Picturebooks: Reading and Writing Multimodally in First Grade. *The Reading Teacher*, 66(4): 285-294.

McGuinness, C., Sproule, L., Bojke, C., Trew, K., Walsh, G. (2014) Impact of a play-based curriculum in the first two years of primary school: literacy and numeracy outcomes over seven years. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(5): 772-795.

Nikolajeva, M. (2010). Paveikslėlių knygų interpretavimo kodai ir implikuotas skaitytojas. *Rubinaitis*, 2(54): 2-6

Nikolajeva, M. (2010). Paveikslėlių knygų interpretavimo kodai ir implikuotas skaitytojas. *Rubinaitis*, 3(55): 2-5

Nikolajeva, M., Scott, C. (2000). The Dynamics of Picturebook Communication. *Children's Literature in Education*, 31(4): 225-239.

Nikolajeva, M. (2014). Picturebooks and Emotional Literacy. *The Reading Teacher*, 67(4): 249-254.

Pantaleo, S. (2017). Learning About and Through Picturebook Artwork. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(5): 557-567.

Paterson, A. (2021). The play paradox: A systematic literature review of play-based pedagogy applied in the classroom. *Educational & Child Psychology*, 37(4): 96-114.

Pyle, A., Pyle, M. A., Prioletta, J., Alaca, B. (2020). Portrayals of Play-Based Learning: Misalignments among Public Discourse, Classroom Realities, and Research. *American Journal of Play,* 13(1): 53-86.

Scanlan, D. (2016-2017). Play-Based Author Studies in Kindergarten. *Illinois Reading Council Journal*, 45(1): 23- 31.

Sipe, L. R. (2012). Revisiting the Relationships Between Text and Pictures. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43(1): 4-21.

Taylor, S. V., Leung, C. B. (2020). Multimodal Literacy and Social Interaction: Young Children's Literacy Learning. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 48: 1-10.

van der Pol, C. (2012). Reading Picturebooks as Literature: Four-to-Six-Year-Old Children and the Development of Literary Competence. *Children's Literature in Education*, 43: 93-106.

Wiseman, A. (2011). Interactive Read Alouds: Teachers and Students Constructing Knowledge and Literacy Together. *Early Childhood Education* Journal, 38: 431-438.