

# PICTURE BOOKS IN EFL; vehicles of visual and verbal literacy

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## Abstract:

Drawing on recent developments within the teaching of foreign languages, this article discusses the potential of picture books in teaching visual and verbal reading skills in English as a foreign language (EFL). Learner motivation is considered to be of increasing importance, and the article discusses various aspects of picture books which can contribute to learner motivation for reading. Through a thorough examination of the iconotext and peritext of three picture books, this article discusses how the interaction of pictures and words work together to bring across messages. In *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* by Jon Scieszka and Lane Smith traditional fairy tales are subverted and interrogated. In *Rose Blanche* by Ian McEvan and Roberto Innocenti, a child's experience of the Second World War is explored, and in *Zoo* by Anthony Browne, the text addresses both the child and the adult reader on the serious themes of human nature and animals held in captivity. Additionally, the pedagogical potential of each text is discussed.

## Introduction

Despite the fact that picture books offer new and exciting reading for all competence levels, picture books seem to be a largely undiscovered treasure trove in English as a foreign language (EFL) today. As picture books have at least one picture on every double spread, these texts come with ample visual support that will enable learners of English to cope with more advanced texts than they usually would. By reading picture books, they are exposed to authentic stories and authentic English offering a wider vocabulary than course books or graded readers do.

Another highly important benefit of introducing EFL learners to picture books is that they help develop visual literacy. The term literacy traditionally refers to the ability to read and write verbal text, yet, due to the massive exposure to visual stimuli in today's society, literacy

has also come to include the ability to read images. Seeing is not just passive reception of stimuli but an active process of meaning making (Rimmereide, 2013:134). Most children and young adults today read and produce multilayered texts in their spare time, for example on social media. Picture books, ranging from very simple to quite complex stories and catering for different reader preferences and reading skills, are ideal texts for training the new literacy.

The Norwegian national curriculum, LK06, includes competence aims pertaining to visual literacy as well as ability to read and understand different types of texts and use different reading strategies. Visual literacy is inherent in the competence aims after year 2, requiring that the learners shall be able to "participate in and experience children's culture from English-speaking countries through words, pictures, music and movement" and after year 7 stating that they shall be able to "express own reactions to English literary texts, films, internet culture, pictures and music". The ability to use reading and writing strategies is required both after year 4 and after year 10. The ability to read and understand different types of texts is a central aim in LK06. Thus after year 7, the pupils shall be able to "read and understand different types of texts of varying length from different sources" and "read children's and youth literature in English and converse about persons and content", and after year 10, they shall be able to "read, understand and evaluate different types of texts of varying length about different topics". The icon texts of picture books enable learners to read for detail as well as extensively and meet these important goals in LK06.

Traditionally, picture books have been conceived of as books for the very young, yet this is no longer so. Today, picture books exist for all ages, and they are an art form that challenges readers on all competence levels. Some of them, such as for example Anthony Browne's picture books, are for *dual* audiences. Barbara Wall (1991) established this term to refer to books that are written for both children and adults. The children will understand the texts at their level whereas the alert adult reader will perceive a deeper meaning to the stories. Readers who are interested in modern visual art forms are likely to find picture books particularly appealing.

As discussed by Birketveit (2013), there are also a number of other reasons why they are excellent material for the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Firstly, due to the pictures assisting the reader in the decoding of the story, they give the reader access to authentic language that is often more complex than course book texts. Schmitt (2010:32) claims that the reader needs to understand 98-99% of the words to be motivated to continue reading a story. However, in a picture book the verbal text and the pictures are equally important in conveying the meaning of the story. Picture books provide an exciting offer of reader involvement, and the picture-text interaction provides endless possibilities for interpretation. Secondly, picture books are ideal texts for EFL because they have short texts. Generally, they are 32 pages long. Thus, they offer the reader the pleasure of reading whole stories instead of extracts of stories much used in course books. There is something deeply satisfying about having read a whole book, and it is likely to give children a sense of accomplishment. According to Penne (2010), the reading process is carried forward by the narrative desire where the reader anticipates and seeks a resolution to the story. Since picture books also come with texts for different competence levels and tastes, they are likely to

appeal to inexperienced readers who find long texts daunting. They can be a gateway to extensive reading as well as bridging the gap into longer canonical texts. Thirdly, learners like using picture books because they are often witty and amusing and defy reader expectations. Moreover, the pictures exaggerate and enhance the verbal text. Anthony Browne's *Zoo* discussed later in this article, is an example of this. For all these reasons, there is a need to revise the EFL curricula in teacher training at colleges and universities to include more texts which draw on visual modes of representation.

## Theoretical background

### *Visual literacy*

Picture books rely on two modes of representation, the visual and the verbal. These modes can interact in many ways in telling the stories offering multiple possibilities of interpretation. While decoding the text, the reader moves back and forth between images and verbal text. Some readers rely mostly on the images whereas others may have their main focus on the verbal text. Both images and verbal text may have “gaps” (Iser, 1974) the reader needs to fill through a careful examination of the two modes of representation. As previously discussed, picture books are often amusing, and the humor is often brought about by a rather neutral verbal text accompanied by pictures that exaggerate and thus add to the meaning of the text. According to Moss, using *Ancient Rome* by Dorling Kindersley as an example, the double-spread is the starting point for meaning making and the reader has “the freedom to roam the text” (2003: 83), Multimodal texts thus allow for *play* as opposed to *work* in the classroom. Different from a verbal text where reading takes place from left to right, top to bottom, in multimodal texts guide the reader’s attention to the “salient” features of the text (Moss, 2003:81). Reading images means spatial reading, and picture books help develop visual literacy.

[Non linear] composition sets up particular hierarchies of the movement of the hypothetical reader within and across the different elements. [In these texts] reading paths begin with the most salient element, from there move to the next most salient element, and so on. Their trajectories are not necessarily similar to that of the densely printed page, left-right and top-bottom, but may move in a circle....from the most salient element...to the text, and from the text back....again, in a circular fashion. Whether the reader only “reads” the (image) and the headline, or also part or all of the verbal text, a complementary, a to-and-fro between text and image, is guaranteed.

(Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996: 218-219)

The hermeneutic circle, stating that we understand parts in terms of the whole and the whole in terms of the different parts and where each new reading adds another layer of understanding to the text, can be applied to reading a picture book. In the reading process, the reader’s focus will alternate between the details and the whole double-spreads and back and forth between images and texts.

Nikolajeva and Scott (2006:1) use semiotic terminology to discuss the unique quality of the Picture book. In a Picture book there are two types of signs: the iconic and the conventional. "Iconic, or representational, signs are those in which the signifier and the signified are related by common qualities; that is where the sign is a direct representation of its signified...Conventional signs have no direct relationship with the object signified". To be able to access the meaning of conventional signs, the reader needs to know the code, embodied in the language and the cultural context. According to Nikolajeva and Scott (2006:1), the primary function of the pictures is to describe whereas the primary function of the verbal text is to narrate. Images are superior in describing settings and characters whereas words are best at conveying relationships and emotions. Space is best conveyed by pictures whereas temporal aspects are best conveyed by words.

### *Iconotext*

In a Picture book, pictures and verbal text are equally important in conveying meaning. A Picture book is defined as ...

text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical 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.

(Bader 1976:1)

The various ways in which pictures and verbal text can interact in a picture book have been an object of study for scholars. Barthes' (1977) distinguishes between *anchorage* and *relay*. Images can have multiple meanings and interpretations, and *anchorage* occurs when the text is used to support one of these meanings. *Relay* occurs when the text adds meaning, and both text and image work together to elicit meaning.

Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) discuss various types of picture-text interaction in *How Picture books Work*. When the pictures and the verbal text more or less tell the same story and no meaning is added through one or the other of the two, the relationship is symmetrical. Books for toddlers (type peek-a book) are often symmetrical. When the interaction is complementary, picture and text fill each other's gaps so little is left to the reader's imagination. An example of complementary interaction can be found in the Picture book *Rose Blanche* discussed below. Figure 9 showing spring triumphing at the spot where Rose was shot and where the concentration camp used to be can serve as an example. The verbal text reads "Rose Blanche's mother never found her little girl. As the week went by another, gentler invasion began." Only through the verbal text do we learn that Rose was killed since she was never found. Only through the illustration do we understand that this is the same spot she died on. Thus, there are gaps in both modes filled by each other without changing the story.

However, with the development of the modern Picture book, new and exciting types of interaction occurred. The word – picture interaction was now characterized by enhancement

and even counterpoint. Usually, it is the pictures that expand the meaning of the text, but occasionally it can be the other way around. The interaction is enhancing when picture and verbal text are together more than the sum of the two. *Zoo* by Anthony Browne discussed below is a clear example of enhancing interaction. The interaction is counterpointing when picture and text tell quite diverging stories. Pat Hutchins's *Rosie's Walk*, which came out in 1968, is commonly considered the beginning of the modern Picture book in the UK as this book is the first to explore and truly make use of the interaction of pictures and text to tell the story. In fact, the two modes contradict or counterpoint each other (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006: 17). The verbal text tells the story of a hen going pleasantly about the farm and coming back in time for dinner. When looking at the pictures, however, the true story shows that the hen is in mortal danger of a fox who lays in pray on every double-spread. Fortunately for the ignorant hen, various farm accidents happen to the fox which save the hen. A Picture book often employs a combination of these types of picture-text interaction.

Often intertextuality is a feature of picture books. The term was originally coined by Julia Kristeva in 1966 and refers to hints and allusions to other verbal or visual texts in a given text. The text's meaning is thus shaped by other texts referred to. In a Picture book for example, there may be references to well know fairy tales such as we can find in some of Anthony Browne's books.

### *Paratext*

The term paratext was coined by Genette(1997) and refers to the epitext (everything that has been said or written about the text or the author or spin off products such as film and various commercial gadgets) and peritext which is the threshold to the story including cover, endpapers, title page, prefaces, types of paper, fonts, layout, illustrations. According to Nikolajeva, the front cover can be considered "the door into the narrative"(2006:109). The endpapers in picture books are often of significance to the narrative so one can say that the narrative starts with the endpapers before the actual beginning of the story. According to Sipe and McGuire, they can be said to function much like a theatre curtain before and after a play, and "plain colored endpapers are often used to indicate the overall mood or tone of the story to follow" (2006: 299). The title page in picture books often has a picture of particular importance to the story and thus creates reader expectations. It also matters what kind of paper is used in the book, for example whether it is glossy or plain. Moreover, varying sizes or boldness of fonts carry meaning as do layout and types or colour of illustrations. They all contribute to the expectations and subsequent meaning-making of the story. In the following, meaning making through a close examination of three picture books will be discussed. The focus will be on analyzing the icon texts and the peritexts of the stories. Additionally, the pedagogical potential of each text will be discussed.

### **Language learning**

The positive effect of extensive reading on foreign or second language learning has been documented in many studies (e.g. Al-Homoud & Schmitt 2009; Bell, 2001; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Elley, 1991; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993; Robb & Susser, 1989). There are also studies on children's reading of picture books in L1 (Arizipe, E. and M. Styles. 2003). However, there appears to be very little research conducted

on using picture books as reading material in EFL. A study by Birketveit and Rimmereide (2013) in *The Language Learning Journal* shows the impact of extensive reading of picture books and illustrated books on Norwegian 11- year old learners' motivation and writing skills. The study shows that the learners were able to write longer and more sophisticated narratives and used more adverbials after a five-week extensive reading project. Children's understanding of the peritext in EFL has been investigated by Sandie Mourao (2013). Through repeated read-alouds of three picture books, the children were exposed to English. They were allowed to share their responses to the peritext in their L1. In her study, she concludes that the children expanded their L2 language and enhanced their cognitive and aesthetic development.

Reading high-interest stories and texts is a pleasurable way of increasing learner motivation and learning language in a meaningful context. Instead of focusing on language in isolation, the target language becomes the medium in which content knowledge and cultural understanding can be learned. In the introduction to *Children's Literature in Second Language Education*, Janice Bland states that "[t]he English language as the object and sole focus of study is gradually diminishing, and content-based EFL classrooms are becoming the norm in many types of school" (2013:1). Children's literature provides an excellent vehicle for this aspect of EFL as literary texts offer holistic learning as well as teaching language in context. Bland emphasises the importance of EFL courses for young learners containing children's literature and not just having a focus on communicative learning. It will also help to bridge the gap into adult canonical literature (2013: 3). According to Meltzer (2013:6), it should be a central aim to teach *literary literacy*, which means to "connect reading to our students' lives and worlds and make them lifelong readers in their mother tongue as well as in L2".