

Using Picturebooks in the English Language Classroom

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Language can be taught in any number of different ways. Both method and material depend very much on the context, the teacher, the purpose and the duration. An interesting and effective resource that English language teachers have at their disposal is the picturebook. This is an ideal and effective resource because it enables the teacher to teach not just the language but also the multiple skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening and the much needed critical and creative thinking skills. In the context of the 21st century, the picturebook brings the world into the classroom by providing the English Language teacher with a rich resource for teaching learners the skills needed to unlock a visually saturated world. At no other point in the history of man has visual literacy played such a dominant role. Technology has added a further dimension by making access to this highly visual world faster and easier. The demands that this easy access and availability makes are complex. A visual text conceptualized in one part of the world, encoded in another and transported to multiple destinations takes on a million interpretations depending on the cultural, social and historical contexts, expectations and experiences of the end user. Do we all see a picture in the same way? What are the possible multiple interpretations? Does it matter if the interpretations are varied? What specific skills must the recipient of a visual possess in order to engage with it?

The point is that visual literacy with the huge 'technological paraphernalia', is today's lived reality whether in the slums of Bombay, the villages in China and Thailand or in the metropolis of underdeveloped countries. When David Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* won the Oscars in *Los Angeles*, the residents of the slums where the child actors lived saw the awards in real time. The proliferation of advertisement bill boards and television commercials attest to the increasing importance of visual literacy for all learners.

The student of English today thus has to engage the world at several levels - the linguistic, the visual and the socio-cultural. The English language teacher then has to teach students the language needed to understand the world, as well as the skills with which to negotiate the levels of layered meaning that are culturally embedded in texts. And while teaching English the teacher has to walk a cultural tightrope to ensure that learners' cultural and social worlds are not compromised. Learners must be taught the socio-cultural underpinnings of the English language to gain access to the world of English and communicate with other speakers of English. Picturebooks make this process authentic, interesting and enjoyable.

Reading and Culture

A word of caution is perhaps necessary before we proceed to look at the use of picturebooks to teach English. In many Asian cultures, learning (and reading) is a revered and serious engagement. Pleasure and fun are not the learners' or teachers' cultural expectations in many Asian classrooms. In addition to this, print is revered and non-print material is seen as distraction from learning (the proliferation of worksheets vouch this). It is for this reason that there is a dearth of books for children in their respective ethnic languages. Children's books in Tamil, Malay and Chinese (the official languages spoken in Singapore and Malaysia) are a very recent phenomenon. Of what is published, the focus is on teaching children values. Hence, many of the stories carry a moral. Picturebooks are few and far between. The most popular picturebook series in the Indian languages is the *Amar Chitra Kathas* - a series which presents the stories of great Indian kings and historical and religious figures in comic strip format. Many of the published children's story books in Asian languages do not carry pictures and where they do, many are of

such a poor quality that young learners shun them for the more attractive and well presented books in English (Sripathy, 1994, 1998).

The above socio-cultural knowledge is important for the English language teacher in the Asian context. To ensure success in using picturebooks to teach English, teachers might find it useful to inform students of the role of pictures (illustrations) in telling a story and how to engage with picturebooks. The cultural differences in storytelling and the purpose(s) of a story (beyond the moralizing) must be explained and discussed with students.

What do illustrations / pictures do to a story?

Pictures open a whole new world of emotions and ideas to the keen reader. If language enables readers to make meaning at three different levels - the ideational, interpersonal and the textual (Halliday 1985), pictures help us realize representations of material, social and semiotic reality. They construct the nature of events, objects, participants and the circumstances in which they occur. This construction is emotionally weighted. In composing the world that we are invited to enter into, the illustrator 'takes us away from our current world to a level of understanding deeper and wider than our limited lives, maybe to a world uglier or more beautiful, more humorous or more somber, more simple or more complex. And like the best of any art form, it forces us to confront the depths of our secret selves' (Lukens, 1990:212). The picturebook thus kindles our imagination and probes our ideas and thinking in new and unimaginable ways. Because they are unpredictable and challenge expectations and experiences, they beckon the reader to adventure and new experience.

In transporting us to new worlds, enriching our experiences or in making us confront our lived realities, picturebooks add to, comment and extend the ideas conveyed by the words that accompany them. In Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, the illustrations convey much more about Max and his circumstance than the words do. Max enters the fantasy world of forests and strange characters conveyed not through the words but through the illustrations as Max's bedroom walls dissolve and a forest appears. As Max goes on his adventure we are taken along with him. Three double pages of Max's wild adventure with his new friends are conveyed through the powerful illustrations and less through the text. When Max returns to reality, the illustration shows a hot dinner waiting for him - conveying to us the love of the unseen mother, who had earlier sent him off to bed without dinner as punishment for his rudeness. All this is not encoded in the words but in the illustrations, which provide the unexpected.

In Pat Hutchins *You'll Soon Grow into Them, Titch*, we see how the extent of the detail in the background develops and tells another story. Titch's mother is about to have a baby. This is conveyed in the illustration of the bird and the nest outside, the blooming of the plants and the way the clothes that the mother is knitting for the baby as it gets bigger. There is also the cat, which engages in different actions and this is followed closely. Despite the numerous other stories that the illustrations convey, all are linked to the main story, the text is focused only on Titch - the title of the story. Here the illustrations say a lot more than the words do on each page.

In Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*, we see the important role the illustrations play in telling us about the relationship between Charles and his mother, their social standing, their prejudices and that of Smudge and her father. It is the illustrations which convey the class divisions in society, which are bridged by the children and the dogs. Neither Charles nor Smudge harbour any notion of class as they play together (although Charles takes a while to open up to Smudge's natural friendliness). Their dogs, Victoria and Albert, have great fun chasing around the park. It is the adults, who in looking the other way, fail to enjoy the park or learn anything. The setting is the same but it is the participants who respond to it differently.

We learn a great deal more about societal prejudices and the happiness, or the lack thereof, experienced by the characters through the powerful illustrations. The text tells one story, while the illustrations narrate another parallel story that both adds to and extends the story conveyed by the words. The words (text) rely on the illustrations to convey ideas that they themselves do not carry. We see a similar unfolding of a story within a story in Browne's *ZOO* and *Gorilla*.

The illustrations in Browne's and Sendak's books take the reader to another world, different from that conjured by the words. They demonstrate the demands made by illustrations on the readers to understand, negotiate and interpret both the verbal and visual codes contained in picturebooks.

In some picturebooks, the text and illustrations work together. This is seen in Eric Carle's *Papa please get the moon for me*, Shel Silversteins *The Giving Tree*, Mem Fox's *Possum Magic* and Christobel Mattingly's *The Race*. In *Willy the Wimp*, Browne shows the gorilla coming to understand that aspirations alone are not enough and that they must be tempered with wisdom to achieve results. The text and the illustrations work together, to convey the powerful image of the macho male, while at the same time mocking it. The emotive weight of the words is carried by the illustrations in subtle yet poignant ways. The words thus become dependent on the illustrations and vice versa.

If there is an unstated partnership between words and visuals, Burningham's *Granpa* conveys this astutely. Burningham captures the child's inner world and sends the reader on a journey of fantasy and hope. The little girl corrects her grandfather's assumption on the double page spread that the brown soil he is 'eating' is chocolate ice-cream. She tells him 'It's not chocolate, it's strawberry.' To understand and enter this discourse, the reader has to know the world of children, for whom a toy bear's gender and a worm's after-life are real and important. To understand the little girl's shared experience with the grandfather and to enter their world, the reader has to know how imagination, fantasy and make-believe merge with real life for many children.

Picturebooks thus increasingly capture society with all its differences, beauty, ugliness, prejudices and disabilities. With the huge technological strides, illustrators enjoy unlimited creative opportunities in experimenting with subject matter, colour, format, design and other devices. All this means an enriching and unique experience for the reader. Thus, whether as a complement, as an extension, as an add on, as a commentary or as a combination of all these and more, illustrations play a significant role in helping readers make meaning of the reality that surrounds them, as well as learn English - because the illustrations encourage learners to frame the visual in words, new words.

How can Picturebooks be used in the English Language Classroom?

The role of the picturebook in the language classroom has been underestimated for a long time. Pictures tend to be dismissed as entertaining and having little value beyond the initial power of attraction. The picturebook is also relegated to little children, and dismissed as being simplistic and childish for older children. Yet as informed readers, we know that picturebooks have a major role to play in the literacy and literary development of readers, regardless of age. Let us take a look at Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park*. With young and beginning readers, the teacher can use the illustrations to generate talk, an important prelude to reading and writing - focusing on descriptive language. The talk that precedes the reading familiarizes children with the language that they are about to encounter and helps them decode the printed text. The 3 lines on each page can be used to introduce children to the world of print and to teach decoding skills. The minimal sentences per page ensures that the child is not intimidated or overwhelmed by the text. With children in the upper primary grades, the teacher can use the illustrations and the text to teach particular aspects of language - adjectives and verbs (focusing students on the words used to describe the characters and their actions). Students can be invited to think about the picture that is created in the mind and the meaning that is conveyed if the words used to describe the characters and their actions were changed. Besides expanding their vocabulary, it also helps students learn about the semantic load that words carry and the nuances of language. This is teaching grammar and language in context.

With secondary and junior college students the teacher can direct students to the implied suggestions conveyed by the illustrations, which the text does not carry. A link then can be made to the construction of advertisements and this can be developed into a lesson on media literacy and the positioning of readers and viewers through language and visuals. The book is also ideal for teaching students about voice and perspectives in writing - skills necessary for their English essay and the General Paper essay. It also equips them with the skills needed to interpret the comprehension texts and questions and to answer the affective question (AQ) in the General Paper at 'A' Level.

Picturebooks therefore can be used to help learners at different levels of competencies. They are great literacy resources for beginning readers, interesting tools for initiating developing readers into critical and creative thinking and effective in engaging competent older readers in challenging and sophisticated ways of reading and interpretation. In fact, this view of picturebooks allows English language teachers to bring together all three critical discourse perspectives in the teaching of English - the pedagogic, the aesthetic and the literary.

Reading is an active process that requires semantic, syntactic and lexical knowledge. In addition, a good reader must also possess social and cultural knowledge to process what is being read. Meaning making through reading is thus a complex process. Add to this the knowledge of narrative conventions and visualization and the competencies needed to become an effective reader become apparent. It is in facilitating these competencies that picturebooks play a significantly effective role for all learners.

Given that picturebooks invite the reader to interpret and negotiate the verbal as well as the visual, both of which exist within a cultural framework, the use of picturebooks requires that the teacher first equips the learners with the appropriate tools to understand the coded systems within which they exist.

Ways of using Picturebooks

Picturebooks are excellent resources in the English language and literacy classroom across grade levels because they allow the implementation of Cambourne's (1999) eight conditions for effective learning - Immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectation, use, approximation, response and responsibility.

- Immerse children in a flood of picturebooks. The classroom must be filled with picturebooks, which children can access easily.
- Read a picturebook for pleasure with children daily. Focus on enjoyment and allow children the opportunity to talk about them.
- Use picturebooks to develop your lessons and teach specific language and skills. This provides students much needed context to make meaning.
- Picturebooks are ideal for developing students' bank of words (vocabulary). New words can be introduced this way. The context helps students learn the new vocabulary easily. This can be extended by using the core words used to talk about the illustration/s to teach synonyms and antonyms. In EFL situations this can be developed into a pronunciation/ speaking lesson as well, where learners are invited to talk about the new word in their cultural context. This will help activate their schema as well as help them personalize their learning.
- All language learners benefit from opportunities to talk. Talking develops the ability to frame ideas and to use the language that has been/ is being learned. Picturebooks are ideal resources to trigger shared talk in the English Language classroom across grade levels. By providing a common base, picturebooks can generate a great deal of focused talk and give students opportunities for much needed reflective engagement (upper primary, secondary and junior college levels) and conversational practice (at primary and secondary levels). Such talk can also be used as a monitoring tool by English Language

teachers to gather information about students' language ability and the extent to which learning outcomes have been met. The shared talk based on illustrations also facilitates peer learning - a powerful pedagogic strategy in learning.

- Picturebooks can be used to initiate students into the conventions of narrative. Pictures provide ideal starting points for talking about the distinctive features of a story - Where is the setting? What in the illustration shows us this? Who are the characters in the story? What has happened? What followed as a result of the main action? What does the picture show to be the consequence? How does the picture show us the resolution? Knowledge of story grammars helps students with their comprehension of texts as well as in writing their own stories. The questions in themselves cannot teach narrative conventions as presented in illustrations. What the use of illustrations does is help the teacher unpack the layered information and the multiple ideas compacted within and link this to the written text. The link that is being made must be taught explicitly.
- The teacher can focus on books with minimal or no print to show students the skeletons of narratives. As the quantity of print on the page increases, students can be taught that illustrations are used to guide their understanding of tone, mood and key ideas. Anthony Browne's *Hansel and Gretel* and *Gorilla* and Oliver Jeffers' *Way Back Home* are good for teaching students how the text and the illustrations can take turns to tell the story.
- Illustrations in picturebooks can be used effectively to teach students to deconstruct a text (beyond the narrative conventions). Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* can be used effectively for this purpose. Use the illustrations to deconstruct the story by asking students to describe the events captured on each page. This not only activates students' story schema but also helps them build up their language repertoire. Follow this up with a reading of the print. The teacher-led discussion based on the illustrations will have introduced the students to some of the specific vocabulary/ words they will need to read the print. Knowledge of the story will also assist in their reading. At higher grade levels, the students can be invited to deal with the issues the illustrations present and connect them to their own lives. Anthony Browne's *Zoo* serves this purpose well. Students can also be taught about intertextuality and the role this plays in facilitating comprehension.
- Aspects of grammar can be taught in a contextualized manner using picturebooks. This will depend on the picturebook chosen and the learning outcome that is in focus. With younger learners, picturebooks can be used effectively to teach tenses, parts of speech and sequential markers. At higher grade levels the teacher can sensitize students to language and make them aware of how language can be used to empower as well as to marginalize particular groups and foreground specific issues.
- Illustrations also make good resources for storytelling and retelling. It develops students understanding of plot structure and their language. For in retelling with illustrations, their only support is what they see in front of them. It also gives children the opportunity to put into use language they have learned, engage with the story and receive feedback - factors important for successful learning. Storytelling based on illustrations is an effective prelude to descriptive and narrative writing - what we see, we can talk about. What we talk about can be written and what is written can be read and discussed. This also helps children see the link between visual, speaking, reading, writing and thinking skills.
- The picturebook is ideal to teach students the craft of writing by extending their imagination and showing them the power of words. Students' initiation into picturebooks through talk can be followed by focused writing lessons. Here the teacher can use the illustrations to demonstrate the crafting of a story - How does the illustration complement / extend the text and vice-versa? The teacher can demonstrate the author's choice of language to describe characters, events and ideas and development of the story. How does the story begin? Does the text match the illustration? Is this effective? Why/Why not? These questions probe students' thinking about language, stories, visuals and writing. The

students could then be invited to write their own stories and these can then be compared with the author's text and language and stylistic features can be taught. Students could be given the illustrations from selected books and asked to write their own texts or craft parallel texts. This not only contextualizes their writing but also provides them with the opportunity to apply the language they have learned.

- Tolkien (1964) showed us the importance of a reader entering, understanding and interpreting another world, a secondary world and the desire to be mesmerized by it. The emotions / information that illustrations can garner must be demonstrated and explicitly taught to students. The ways in which illustrators present information about the setting or the background of a story can be used constructively to enter the writer's secondary world. Illustrators use different ways to make readers focus on relevant detail or omit details deliberately so that the reader has to fill the gaps. In *You'll Soon Grow into Them, Titch*, Pat Hutchins gives the older child a minimalist setting in order to engage the reader in discovering the secondary stories. In *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, on each page as the wolf blows down each pig's house, the illustrator focuses on aspects of the house and positions the wolf at specific points so that the reader enters the secondary world, which the print does not capture. Students who are taught how to analyze and interpret illustrator's background / information setting will be better equipped to assign meaning to an author's use of words to convey information in longer and more complex texts.
- In many picturebooks, the print or text conveys one world and the illustrations convey another or multiple worlds. The teacher has to show students how this is presented and why it is presented thus. *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein is useful in making students see the existence of two worlds, one which the text presents and the other as conveyed through the illustration. It also allows students to engage emotionally with the text (James Britton, 1970), a quality crucial to the reading process and an absolute necessity for critical thinking at higher levels of text comprehension.
- Illustrations are excellent resources to develop students' aesthetic abilities. The ability to appreciate nuances of colour, size, frame and shapes are important as students move from the literal to the symbolic and metaphorical, which characterizes much of the reading at higher levels. These aspects conveyed through and in illustrations play an important role in the construction of textual and visual meaning. Shapes affect viewers' perceptions. For example rounded shapes are used to get a sense of warmth and security while squares evoke a sense of dullness and a lack of imagination. Anthony Browne's *Voices in the Park, ZOO and Gorilla* are texts which can be used for this purpose. The ability to interpret these aesthetic aspects is also a critical life skill.
- Picturebooks make great resources for teaching visual literacy. Pictures present events and characters in many different ways. By equipping students with a visual grammar, where they are taught to attend to the details in the picture, or the objects or characters that are in the background or fore ground, they learn to infer information which is crucial to meaning making. This ability to infer information, to read between the lines, to detect irony, pun and pathos characterizes much of the reading that they will encounter in the higher grades.

In *The Race*, by Christobel Mattingley, the new teacher notices Greg's attempts to fit in. Her understanding of Greg's problem is captured in the illustrations - which move from displaying the puzzle Greg poses to her conveyed by the delicate and gentle facial features and her attempt at understanding his difficulty. This is then followed by her knowing smile, which leads the reader to infer that she has found a way to help Greg overcome his difficulty, confirmed by the print that follows on the next page. The reader is drawn to the unstated comment on the first teacher who reminds Greg to "pay attention". The boy's relieve at having found an answer to his difficulty is captured in his turned face at the end of the book.

Similarly, in Eric Carle's *Papa Please Get the Moon for Me*, the moon's distance from the earth and the doting father's determination to get the moon for his daughter is conveyed on the page, which opens out and up to reveal a very long ladder. The father is shown climbing the ladder to reach a very high mountain to get the moon. With beginning readers, this page can be used to talk about distance and space and what the long ladder symbolizes. Questions such as "Why does the page open up to show a very long ladder?"; "Why does the father need a ladder?"; "Where is the moon?"; "How far away is the moon?"; "What is the distance between the earth and the moon?"; "What is the illustrator trying to show us through this picture?". These questions will help students understand the role of visuals and how they are used to convey meaning. The different phases of the moon can be used as a basis for a science lesson, thus incorporating language across the curriculum. Through a discussion of the composition, texture, scale and dimensions presented in illustrations, teachers can help students acquire the visual literacy and interpretative skills that will be needed later for higher level engagement with print.

- Picturebooks can help nurture students' creative thinking capabilities, which depend on their ability to visualize. In fact, successful and effective reading is highly dependent on the ability to engage in the act of picturing. Higher levels of textual comprehension depend on the readers' ability to deconstruct and reconstruct meaning through visualization. This ability can be developed from a very young age through the use of picturebooks. In Pat Hutchins' *Rosie's Walk* and Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* and *The Outsiders*, the pictures are very much weaved in with the text that it is impossible to construct meaning from the text alone. Both the print and the illustrations require readers to use their imagination to interpret the unfolding story.
- Picturebooks are valuable for teaching literary skills. Many of the texts that students will encounter in the higher grades and in real life require an understanding of a more sophisticated use of language, where meaning or intent is not explicitly stated. Picturebooks provide a way into this fairly easily. In John Burningham's *Come Away from the Water, Shirley* and *Time to get out of the bath, Shirley*, the text and the illustration seem to be in conflict with each other. In interpreting the texts, students learn not only from what is not presented in the text but also from what is left out in the illustration. The pages on the left show Shirley's parents in different settings (like the beach and bathroom). The pages on the right show us Shirley taking off into her imaginative world, which is colourful, exciting and vibrant. In one setting, Shirley's mother promises her that her father would play a game with her after his sleep. Shirley goes off and starts playing her own game-digging for buried treasure. The illustration conveys the irony to the discerning reader. Teachers can teach literary skills by showing students how to examine closely picture and print to discover the literary devices that abound in texts.
- In responding to any text, the critical skills of analysis, evaluation and synthesis are essential. The picturebook provides the teacher an avenue through which to develop critical pedagogy of knowledge about offers, demands, social distance, perspectives and notions of power. Who are those represented in the text? Who is marginalized and who has been left out? What is fore grounded? How are relationships constructed? What information is being presented? What has been left out? What is the ideological basis of the text? Students can be initiated into these skills and ways of reading and responding to texts through picturebooks. In showing students how to look at illustrations critically, teachers equip them with the important life skill of reflective and critical engagement with the variety of texts that they will encounter in and out of school. Picturebooks, through their illustrations, allow the teaching of the evaluative and analytical skills required at the higher levels of textual engagement.
- Many of the picturebooks today are postmodernist in nature. They use postmodernist devices such as metafiction and metapicture. Waugh (1993) explains metafiction as "a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to

its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship of fiction and reality". For example in *The Stinky Cheese Man*, book conventions are turned around. Format, typography and print orientation all challenge established and familiar understanding and expectations. Before the title page the Little Red Hen asks who is going to help her plant her wheat. The illustration draws the reader to look at the intrusiveness into the expected book format and the metafictional presentation of the book. The narrator tells her "You can't tell your story right here. This is the endpaper. The book hasn't even begun yet".

Two other books which challenge established conventions and the readers' notion of fact and fiction are Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree* and *Rabbits*. The artful manipulation of space, colour, materiality, variation of font size and positioning of print, which is unpredictable, all challenge the reader to view reality / historical reality from a different perspective. In *The Jolly Postman*, Ahlberg presents the letters of different people in envelopes that form the structure of the story and engage the reader in an illicit reading of 'other people's letters'. Each of these books challenges our idea of story and the way/s we relate to them. They call for a unique reading engagement which demands language and literacy skills of an interpretative and critical nature. In using these books in the classroom the English language teacher has to go beyond the teaching of language (this will be the starting point for many students) and focus on teaching meaning-making strategies.

There are thus multiple uses for picturebooks in the English Language classroom. Whether it is working with beginning EFL readers, intermediate learners of English or advanced students at higher grades who already have a commendable proficiency in the language, the picturebook opens doors to a world of challenges. Correctly used, picturebooks enable readers to become visually literate, to be able to interpret the thoughts, ideas and emotions that first the illustrations and then the texts convey. It develops and grounds metacognitive and metalinguistic skills so that students are able to comprehend the nuances of language and the multiple layered meanings embedded in texts.

Reading involves the ability to "follow and construct narrative and expository sequences, recognize causes, anticipate consequences and consider the motives and emotions that are inextricably bound up with all human actions and endeavours" (Wells, 1985). In using picturebooks in the English Language classroom, teachers can assist students to develop these skills and build background information, activate relevant schema, facilitate vocabulary building, introduce new knowledge, influence attitudes, excite them to explore new frontiers, develop their creative and critical thinking skills and more importantly, empower them to challenge the discourses presented to them in different ways by a variety of texts. Hence to develop students' competency in the English Language as well as to equip them with the necessary critical literacy skills, picturebooks provide an invaluable and interesting resource for English Language teachers.

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