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### **Picturebooks - the visual and the verbal**

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This is the second in a series of short articles written for the APPInep bulletin about picturebooks. In the last issue I focussed on the design elements of a picturebook. In this article we will look at the different ways the visual and verbal texts (the pictures and the words) work together and use the picturebook '*One is a snail, ten is a crab*' as an example.

In picturebooks the visual text is essential to the understanding of the narrative: it can clarify, complement, extend or even take the place of the verbal text and tell a very different story.

#### **Visual and verbal texts are parallel**

The simplest and most common form of visual - verbal relationships in picturebooks is that of *parallel storytelling*, (Agosto, 1999:267). This means that the pictures and the words provide us with the same information. We could read the words or look at the pictures, we don't need to do both. (Doing both is more fun though!) Ketchup on your cornflakes (Sharratt) is an excellent example of such a type. On the first double spread the verbal text on the left asks, 'Do you like ketchup on your cornflakes?', and the visual text on the right shows a ketchup bottle and a bowl of cornflakes.

Even if we accept that pictures and words could never tell us exactly the same thing - in my example the words do not tell us that the cornflakes are in a IKEA-like stripey, blue and white bowl and have milk on them - these picturebooks provide our students with a very supportive context for listening to and understanding English. In particular they allow for children of all levels to take away a shared minimum of understanding. They are typical of picturebooks selected for our primary ELT classrooms, the focus is on the verbal text, and the visual text is used to support the verbal.

Other popular titles used in ELT would be:

*The very hungry caterpillar* (Carle)  
*Brown Bear, what do you see?* - (Martin Jr & Carle)  
*Dear zoo* (Campbell)  
*Wait & see* (Heap)

If you have any of these books at hand, pick one up, look at the illustrations and think about how they 'illustrate' the words.

#### **Visual and verbal texts are interdependent**

In picturebooks of the parallel storytelling type the two texts fill each other's 'gaps' which some think leaves the reader passive in the meaning making process. Picturebooks of the *interdependent storytelling* type (Agosto, op cit) enable readers to actively make meaning: both the verbal and the visual provide the narrative, each contributing in its own way to making the whole. They are dependent upon each other for the meaning to be clear. Examples of titles used in ELT would be:

*Something Else* (Cave & Riddell)  
*The time it took Tom* (Sharratt & Tucker)

In *interdependent storytelling* there are a number of ways in which the visual and verbal come together. I'd like to look at how they *enhance*, when each extends the other (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006:12) and talk about the picturebook '*One is a snail, ten is a crab.*' (Sayre, Sayre & Cecil)

### **The visual and the verbal on the peritext**

Remember peritext? The physical features of a picturebook aside from the verbal and visual texts, which include, front and back covers, the endpapers and the title and dedication pages, which contribute to making a picturebook narrative. If we consider a picturebook to be an object and follow the advice from my first article, then we start meaning making on the front cover. Let's try together...

The front cover: it's a seaside scene, blue sky and orange sand, bold bright colours. There's a purple snail on a towel and a red crab waving at us on a lounger. The title is in bright yellow on the blue sky, '*One is a snail, ten is a crab*', and there is a sign - part of the illustration, but also part of the title - it reads, '*A counting by feet book*'. What does that mean?

If we look at the back cover, the illustration continues, in fact if you open the book out you will see that the front and back are one whole scene! Blue sky, orange sand, and a dog lying on a towel, his four legs sticking out. Two crabs are cycling on a tandem in the distance. Why is it '*A counting by feet book*'? Let's read the blurb: '*If one is a snail and two is a person ... we must be counting by feet! Join in with the mathematical mayhem, and count the feet of snails, crabs, dogs, and spiders from one to one hundred!*' So we are now a little clearer about what our book is about, or are we?

The front endpapers are the colour of the sky, or it could be the sea? The title page and copyright pages are a whole illustration, of the purple snail crawling across the sand, with the bright blue sky behind. I wonder where he's going? All of these peritextual elements have helped set the scene, a seaside scene. They've introduced the main characters, the snail and the crab and they've also given us clues as to what other creatures we may find inside.

### **The visual and verbal within**

A picturebook doesn't usually have page numbers, so it's not always easy to talk about the different pages! There are no page numbers because the illustrations often cover two pages, called double spreads. The left page is called the verso and the right page is called the recto. So to talk about '*One is a snail*' I am going to talk about double spreads, not pages, and refer to versos and rectos. I hope you stick with me!

Open the first double spread and on the verso we see the sign from the front cover: this time it says, '*To the beach*' and points to the recto, taking our gaze across the double spread, from left to right. At the same time the sign serves as both a visual and a verbal text. It points us into the book, towards the beach. The recto shows us more verbal text, '*1 is a snail*' and the visual text is the purple snail, crawling along happily minding his own business, but this time, there's a white arrow pointing to the snail's underside. Then in much smaller font we have: '(This is a snail's foot)'. Did you know that snail's had one foot? Do your children know that? Ask them!

Next double spread shows us the sea, sky and sand. In verso, the verbal text, '*2 is a person*'. The recto page shows us *the person* - so big that part of him is out of the page. His feet are brought to our attention because they also have two white arrows pointing to them. The person is looking at something which is out of the illustration.

Three! What has three feet? No idea! Quick, turn the page! The next double spread is busy, the sky, sea and sand continue. On verso we see the person is holding the snail, who's looking surprised, (you can almost hear the '*Hey!*') and there are three arrows pointing at the three feet! You can guess what the verbal text says: '*3 is a person and a snail*'. Recto shows us a big brown and white dog looking at the person, he has a large

nose and there are four arrows pointing at his feet. Do I need to tell you what the verbal text says? No! Can you guess what five is?

Next double spread. Sky and sand again, and in verso, the dog is sniffing at the snail, who's trying to get away, quick! No arrows this time, we don't need them! What does the verbal text say? *'5 is a dog and a snail.'* Recto shows us a flying insect; big and purple with... you've guessed it ... SIX legs, all with white arrows busily pointing at them! The verbal text reads, *'6 is an insect.'*

By now you will be getting the routine, and it cleverly continues, with the snail being used as the 'one' in the mathematical problems. The insect is sitting on the snail's shell in the next double spread and the snail looks well peeved! Eight is a spider, of course: hanging from a web. In nine the spider has grabbed the poor unsuspecting snail, who is suspended above the sand. Ten is a crab, and do you know why? Because the claws are also feet!

Before we continue I'd like to recap. We've counted from 1 to 10 in feet. But the children have been shown a verbal text that shamelessly counts, while the visual text has expanded our understanding of what this counting could mean, depicting the poor snail being manipulated by the other animals to make the sums fit! To use the visual text more successfully, it works best if you don't show the whole spread each time. When you show double spread n<sup>o</sup> 3, show the verso page (*'3 is a person and a snail'*), then ask, *'What's four?'* Get the children to guess and only then show the recto page, confirming some of their guesses! The suspense from predicting will get them every time!

Back to the crab ... at the bottom right corner of the recto page of the sixth double spread, we have more verbal text. *'And that means ...'* The 'that' is in a slightly bigger font and as we say it we can use emphasis. Umm... what does it mean? Are you thinking that *'11 = one crab and a snail?'* Your kids are! But turn over the page and the verso reads, *'20 is two crabs.'* What does recto show us? Two crabs cycling on a tandem! That's a surprise!

What comes after twenty when we are counting in tens, (skip counting if you want to give it a name)? Thirty! And how do we make thirty? Ask the children then turn the page! Show the whole double spread. Read the verbal text in verso... *'30 is three crabs...'* of course! But what can we see? We are under the sea, everything's blue. The three crabs are pole dancing. But our eyes are taking us to the recto, where at the top part of the illustration we can see ten people's legs, treading water, all wearing brightly coloured swimsuits... and there's a crab swimming up under them, and he's about to nip one of their toes. Can you guess what the verbal text reads? *'or ten people and a crab.'*

So what's next? Could it be forty? Yes! But only show verso: the crabs are playing beach volley. What could be on recto? Can you think of any other combinations to make forty? Ask the children, they'll give you loads, and if they don't prompt them! Show them recto, they'll see ten dogs lying on beach towels and the verbal text reads, *'or ten dogs.'*

And so it goes on, crabs have become the protagonists, dominating the verso pages, as the verbal text nonchalantly keeps counting the crabs multiply and the visual text gets wilder and wilder. It shows us the crabs having a picnic, being acrobats, doing the conga, bringing rubber rings, each time encountering the other creatures the now forgotten snail had struggled with. And we've reached one hundred ... *'100 is ten crabs...'* of course, all lying on their rubber rings in the sea the whole double spread

oozes frivolity, and then there's another lot of verbal text at the very bottom of recto. 'or, if you're really counting slowly ...'

Turn the page and there's a double spread full of snails on the sand, some on beach towels, some sitting under sun brollies. And in the centre of recto we can read the words, '*one hundred snails!*' Are there really one hundred snails? Is it possible? Count them together with your children, and you'll find there are!

And, have the children noticed? (They probably have, way before you, as children are better at using their eyes than we are!) All but one of the snails is green, for the snail we started our book with was purple, and sure enough there he is in the top left corner of verso... he finally made it, he found his friends! And we've come full circle, back to the snail we started with!

Back endpapers are all orange. Must be the sand! '*Again! Again!*' Call the children! And of course we can read it again, but this time the children know the answers and will be able to help you tell the story! In fact it's only upon re-reading, and re-reading several times, that many of the visual puns will be noticed. There's so much visual information to take in that it's impossible the first time round.

### **'One is a snail, ten is a crab' in my classroom**

So when could we use a book like this in an ELT class? Probably with children in their 3rd or 4th year of primary school: they are likely to be confident with their numbers from 1 - 20 and if they don't know their bigger numbers they soon will! It uses numbers in a very real way, getting the children to do mental arithmetic and be creative with their ideas.

Using language is the very best way to acquire it. So a picturebook like this will provide the input in terms of language and then scaffold the children's gradual use through repeated choral retelling. What's that? If we retell the picturebook over several lessons, children will remember chunks of language and then help you retell, in doing this they gradually acquire the language.

What can we do to provide opportunities for the children to exploit the language they have successfully encountered and engaged with during the readings? I would get the children to create number riddles for each other. They could use any animals they like and make pairs: Eg: *Child 1: Twenty is ten people Child 2: or two spiders and a dog.* These number pairs could be illustrated and turned into a classroom display.

But look closer at this very simple activity. To make the sums the children could first put animals into sets. What has two feet? 'A person', 'a bird', and even a 'Tyrannosaurus Rex'. Some children may know some different birds: Benfica followers will know 'eagle' for sure! What has four feet? An opportunity for children to review the animals they know. And make lists of farm animals, wild animals, pets. What has six feet? This is a great way of children looking further into insects and their characteristics, one of which is that they have six legs. So that rules out spiders and snails. So what insects do they know in English? And what other characteristics do insects have? (... oops that's a completely different way to go, but possibly something to do after the sums!)

Another natural follow up is to use the mathematical signs, *plus*, *times* and *equals*. So children could be encouraged to verbalise the sum riddles they invent. Eg: '*Twenty is ten people*' so that's '*Two times ten equals twenty*' and '*Two spiders and a dog*' is '*Two times eight plus four*'.

### **Final thoughts**

Not only have you given your children the opportunity to interact with a quality picturebook, developing their visual aesthetics, you have given them a real context for using language. All that fun together with the cognitively challenging sums would cost you no more than €6.00 at the online book shop *The Book Depository*, which delivers to Portugal for nothing! A bargain!

<http://www.bookdepository.co.uk>

*One is a snail, ten is a crab* is by April and Jeff Sayre, illustrated by Randy Cecil and published by Walker Books

### **References**

**Agosto, D.E.** (1999) One and inseparable: interdependent storytelling in picture storybooks, *Children's Literature in Education*, 30(4), pp. 267 - 280.

### Bio-data

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