

What's in a picture book?

Sandie Mourão
University of Aveiro, Portugal

A picture book for children as distinguished from other books with illustrations, is one that essentially provides the child with a visual experience. A picture book has a collective unity of story-line, theme, or concept, developed through the series of pictures of which the book is comprised.

(Criteria for the Caldecott Award)

What is a picture book?

Picture books, illustrated books and decorated books all contain illustrations. What makes a picture book different is the way the illustrations and the words combine in a book format. A true picture book tells the story both with words and pictures. The two narratives are important and the total format reflects the meaning of the story. An illustrated book usually includes illustrations as extensions of the words, where the pictures are not necessary for its interpretation. A decorated book includes small pictures or designs, often at the beginning or end of a chapter. These decorations do not usually enrich or extend the story, merely decorate the pages.

Pictures and words inter-animating

A picture book conveys information using two texts: a verbal text, the words, and a visual text, the pictures. These two texts have been described as inter-animating in many different ways. I shall focus on two types of inter-animation, which I feel are helpful for our context as ELT teachers: *parallel* and *interdependent* storytelling types.

a) Parallel storytelling

The simplest of visual - verbal relationships is *parallel storytelling*, 'where the reader can comprehend such stories either through the words or through the pictures' (Agosto, 1999:267). The majority of picture books fall into this category: the visual text successfully supports understanding and, where appropriate, emergent reading attempts. These picture books allow for children of all levels to take away a shared minimum of understanding and they are active in developing visual decoding skills in readers. They are typical of picture books selected for our primary ELT classrooms, the focus is on the verbal text, and the visual text is used to support the verbal.

Publications and websites which promote the use of picture books in primary ELT (Ellis & Brewster 2002, Mourão 2003 and British Council Magic Pencil website) suggest many titles which fall into this category.

- Ahlberg, J. & A. *Funnybones*. Picture Lions.
- Briggs, R. *Jim and the beanstalk* Picture Puffin.
- Blackstone, S. *Walking through the jungle* Barefoot books
- Carle, E. *The very hungry Caterpillar*. Picture Puffin.
- Child L. *I will not ever Never eat a tomato* Orchard Books
- Martin, B. *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you see?* Picture Lions.
- Mitton, T. *Down by the cool of the pool* Orchard Books
- Nicholl, H. & Pienkowski, J. *Meg & Mog*. Picture Puffin.
- Sharratt N. *Ketchup on your cornflakes?* Scholastic children's books
- Sutton E. *My Cat Likes to Hide in Boxes* Collins
- Vipont, E. & Briggs, R. *The Elephant and the Bad Baby*. Picture Puffin.

b) Interdependent storytelling

It has been argued that parallel storytelling type picture books leave children somewhat passive (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006:17), the two texts fill each other's gaps leaving no opportunities for meaning making and discussion. There exist other types of picture books, where the visual - verbal relationship is called *interdependent storytelling* - 'here the reader must consider both forms of media concurrently in order to comprehend the books' stories' (Agosto, 1999: 267).

In *interdependent storytelling* the texts can *enhance* each other's information - each extending the other (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006:12). Examples suggested in ELT publications for primary include:

- Cave K. & Riddell C. *Something Else* Picture Puffins
- Cole, B *Princess Smartypants* Picture Lions
- Sharratt, N. & Tucker, S. *The time it took Tom* Scholastic
- Waterhouse, L. & Robins, A. *Just Like*. Scholastic
- Willis, J. & Ross, T. *Susan Laughs*

Here the verbal text expands the visual and vice versa, together producing a narrative and encouraging children to look and listen or read when they encounter the book.

The verbal and visual texts can also inter-animate by telling different stories, or by *counterpointing* each other (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006:12). There are no titles suggested for primary ELT in the publications or websites I've mentioned, but you may be familiar with the following:

- Browne, E. *Handa's surprise* Walker Books
- Hutchins, P. *Rosie's walk*. Picture Puffin.
- Rathmann, P. *Goodnight Gorilla* Scholastic
- Shannon, D. *No David!* Scholastic

The classic *Rosie's walk* is an excellent example of the verbal and the visual narrating different things - the verbal text describes a hen's walk around a farmyard and the visual text describes a fox following her, getting into all sorts of trouble. Together the two texts produce an engaging narrative: alone they would be dull.

It is argued that the interdependent type picture books provide more 'intellectual benefits' for readers by challenging them to establish a real understanding (Agosto, 1999:278). These types encourage non-readers to listen *and* look, and develop their language comprehension skills - in my opinion they also promote more language use and acquisition possibilities. However they are not widely used in our primary ELT classes. The example of *Rosie's Walk*, I gave earlier encourages children to talk about the fox and his antics, even use 'going to' for prediction. This is very different language to that found in the verbal text describing the hen's walk.

Selecting picture books for the primary ELT Classroom

When selecting picture books for our primary ELT classrooms with reference to the illustrations, we are encouraged to select titles with the following questions in mind:

- Do the illustrations synchronize with the text?
- Do the illustrations support understanding?
- Do the illustrations develop artistic perception and visual decoding skills?
- Are the illustrations appropriate for the age of the students?
- Are the illustrations attractive and colourful?
- Does the book's layout support children's understanding?

(Adapted from Ellis & Brewster 2002:8-13)

The first two bullet points highlight a kind of picture book which would be considered of the parallel storytelling type. My recent research has provided me with evidence that when rereading picture books of the interdependent storytelling type in a pre-school classroom in Portugal, in particular examples demonstrating *counterpoint*, children produce a lot of language

through commenting on and discussing the visual text. Students become very successful tellers of the story using what language they know to help them create meaning.

Teachers as mediators

As teachers in primary ELT classroom, it is our role to scaffold our learners by helping them walk the bridge which links previous learning to new learning. We should be encouraging them to use English to talk about what they see and what they understand from looking and listening or reading. We can extend and refine their comments and together create meaning. With Sipe (2008: 201-202), I'd like to suggest that we actually go further than this, we need to become the following:

- Readers and facilitators
- Managers and encouragers
- Clarifiers and probers
- Fellow wonderers and speculators
- Extenders and refiners
- Translators

We are indeed multi-taskers and are responsible for a great deal when sharing picture books with our students.

Conclusion

I would like to suggest that as teachers who use picture books in our classes we need to understand better how the verbal and the visual texts inter-animate to produce a narrative. We should rethink which picture books we use in our classrooms, and attempt to move from playing safe to selecting titles that promote thinking from looking *and* listening or reading, enabling discussion and more language use.

Picture books contain a verbal and a visual text, both of which can be read – we should be using both for language purposes.

Publications / websites which promote using picture books

Ellis, G. & Brewster, J. (2002) *Tell it again! The new storytelling handbook for primary teachers*. Pearson Education Limited: Harlow

British Council Magic Pencil Exhibition: <http://magicpencil.britishcouncil.org/>

Mourão, S. (2003) *Realbooks in the Primary Classroom*. Mary Glasgow Scholastic: Southam

References

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

Nikolajeva, M. & Scott, C. (2006) *How Picturebooks Work*. Routledge: Abingdon,

Sipe, L. (2008) *Storytime: young children's literary understanding in the classroom*. Teachers College Press: New York

Bio-data

Sandie Mourão interests lie in teaching very young learners, using picture books, assessment and materials writing. She is presently enrolled on a research degree at the University of Aveiro, investigating picture books and language acquisition.

sjmourao@gmail.com