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The use of authentic picture books in the development of critical visual and written literacy in English as a foreign language

Introduction

This paper offers a consideration of the role of picture books in the early years of schooling, with a particular focus on the development of critical visual literacy and a discussion of its potential contribution towards the achievement of critical written literacy. In this process, it aims to draw out those features of books published for a native speaker audience of English that might also be of value to young learners of English as a foreign language (EYL).

The term "critical", in relation to both visual and written literacy, is used in this paper to suggest those hidden values and cultural meanings that may lie behind the texts of books. These will reflect such aspects as the fact that the text has been created by a specific person, operating within a particular social context, choosing to select which information to include and which to leave out. As users of texts, it is important that we become skilled at recognising such hidden information and using that skill to understand more fully the information offered to the reader. For the foreign language learner this then can become a significant device for gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures and other ways of making meanings within, between and across cultures.

Given the steady growth and popularity of the use of picture books in introducing English to young children in recent years, the time for a consideration of the many areas in need of further research has perhaps arrived. In this discussion some central issues will be raised, in the hope that other researchers will take up the initiative to move our understanding further forward in the immediate future.

Children, classrooms and early language learning

In a discussion of why and how we might employ picture books in the teaching of English, it is important first to clarify the realities of today's practice if we are to consider what potential there might be for picture books to offer enrichment. Typically, in classroom contexts, teaching English means using some kind of published materials. Most teachers simply have neither the time, nor expertise or even perhaps inclination to continuously develop their own materials. In addition, whilst there do exist some published materials which include a story/storybook as part of the package, generally, this tends not to be an authentic picture book which has been published for the native English-speaking audience. More often, books included in these published packages could best be described as *readers*, designed to support learners by providing "practice in English", employing a vocabulary set of limited range – with the implied message that learners need to focus on learning words and phrases rather than enjoying stories.

Given such contemporary practices, it seems impractical and possibly inappropriate in many contexts to propose that picture books should be central to each and every lesson. With the restrictions of classrooms, curriculum demands and the particular enrichment qualities of a story itself, this paper argues that the use of picture books is best positioned as an important part of a lesson, but not as the *whole* lesson. Neither to replace the course book, nor as supplementary materials – an "add-on" or "filler" for when there is "time". In such a position, as an important part of the lesson, the picture book then provides the opportunity for offering children access to an authentic experience of the pleasure of story, rhymes or information, *in the foreign language (FL)*. In so doing, children may be invited to behave as readers, sharing the book as a social experience and gaining confidence in "telling" the story themselves, an important part of actually becoming a reader. Such experiences may well be as true for reading in a foreign language as they are for learning to read in the first language.

Before further discussion, clarification is needed of some essential differences between the use of oral storytelling and using picture storybooks with younger learners, in order to establish the quite different nature of their potential. As the child listens to an oral storytelling s/he has to focus entirely on guessing meanings via the scaffolding offered by already known key words (sometimes with the support of any paralinguistic features that the teacher may offer). This "guessing process" is a complex cognitive one which many young children may simply give up on when accessing the meaning becomes too difficult. In contrast, with the picture book, much of the visual information is contained (to a greater or lesser extent) in the pictures. Thus, in reading the written text aloud the teacher has the opportunity to reinforce developing understandings and introduce substantial amounts of new vocabulary *without the need for elaboration in the first language (L1)*. As a further clarification of this important point, the following two scenarios illustrate this distinction:

Scenario I

Imagine, the teacher begins an oral story with the words:

"Once upon a time, there was an old woman who lived deep in the forest".

We might surmise that, before telling this story the teacher has chosen to ensure the children's familiarity with the key words/phrases:

once upon a time
woman
live
forest

So, whilst listening, the children might then have the possibility of scaffolding their active meaning making onto their known understandings of "woman, live, forest", in addition to their likely familiarity with the conventions of story patterning the world over which would help them also to recognise the phrase "once upon a time" as a routinised introductory phrase to any story.

Scenario II

Imagine instead, the children are shown a picture book with a picture of the old woman in her house, deep in the forest, looking very sad and lonely and the teacher reads the "voice-over" story line, whilst sharing the picture with her class. No need for any guessing - the meanings are all there. The voice-over acts as an additional element of meaning – to be acquired at a range of levels by individual children within the class. In this example, the

demeanour of the old woman offers additional opportunities for extension discussion *in the LI*.

In acknowledging the power of visual representation in our lives today, it could be argued that, more than anything else, this is what a picture storybook can best offer to the child learning English – illustrations which provide a kind of scaffolding (to use the term first introduced by Wood, Bruner and Ross 1978) whereby the child is supported in their gradual progress from initial visual engagement with the story to becoming verbally literate in English. In the following sections, before discussing more fully these processes of becoming literate in the second/foreign language, I will firstly consider the broader perspective of the nature of texts and the part they play within our education systems in distinguishing routes to perceived higher educational achievement. Here, I will use the term "text" in the sense of "something which acts as a representation of a meaning". Thus, it is understood that a text might be oral, written or visual. In fact, written text is a form of visual communication, but for simplicity the term visual is used here to refer only to non-verbal means of visual communication.

Visual texts

Much has been written elsewhere about our engagement with the visual image (Barthes 1977; Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Such findings have raised awareness of the process by which complex meanings can sometimes be communicated in extremely minimalist ways, via the visual image. It seems that both concrete and the somewhat more abstract meanings even have this potential, on occasion. Barthes (1977a: 22) proposes that we do this by drawing on "a store" or "a historical grammar of iconographic connotation" [...] which equips us to read meanings of images by relating them to that previously stored knowledge. Put differently, he suggests that we have a memory of images which we employ to "read" or understand any new images that we are confronted with. This store of images that he identifies is held in the form of icons or snapshots that we can recall and relate almost simultaneously, rather as we might draw on our knowledge of the grammar of word order in one language, as a support to understanding that this grammar operates differently in another language (for example: the position of the verb in English alerts the learner of German as a foreign language to its different position at the end of the sentence in that language).

As a test of the above theory, the reader might like to experiment with the visual texts shown below. Try this out by showing each of the texts to a colleague, asking them to "tell the story" of the image. As a postscript to the reader's efforts with this task, the author offers here her own initial responses to each of these texts, though clearly these may be entirely different from the responses of others. Each response is annotated with a brief summative interpretation of the meanings given.

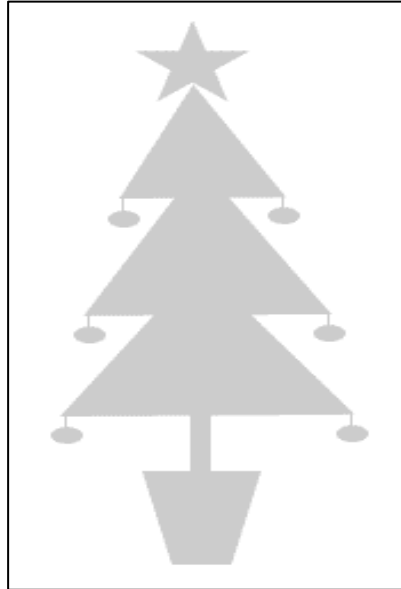


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Figure 1: Christmas tree

- celebration, family, religious festival, winter.
- fairly specific culture-related meanings

Figure 2: Marilyn Monroe

- Hollywood, glamour, the cinema, Kennedy
- global meanings, meanings 'marketed' by supra national industry

Figure 3: Nike symbol

- member of global "cool" brigade, sporty, cool teenagers, expense account!
- almost the ultimate in minimalism. A packaged, global meaning. Promoted by successful marketing from Sao Paulo to Tokyo

Moving from a broad consideration of the nature of visual texts to the narrower perspective of the iconographic texts presented and tested above, the proposal that a single sign can signify *a whole story*, perhaps becomes more convincing. This is particularly well exemplified by the Nike logo symbol. To re-phrase this conclusion with a familiar translation from an old Chinese proverb, it could be said that:

A picture tells a thousand words.

However, it is important to acknowledge very probably that this "story" was different for each reader of the image. So, it becomes evident that we bring to our reading of visual text that "store", that "historical grammar of iconographic connotation" (Barthes, op. cit.) which is personal to each of us individually. In our readings of the visual text we draw on a specific knowledge that is culturally and socially formed.

Written texts in future lives

On the basis of the evidence so far presented it might now be legitimately asked: Is there a role for written text for the next generation? Multimodal digital technology may offer a future potential of no further requirement for translation facilities even; it could be suggested that there are already indications that written text will indeed become outdated as other, more visual modes of communication and data storage become available. In support of this hypothesis, the reader might consider the following small piece of evidence.

Some ten years ago in the United Kingdom (UK) the majority of television audiences would simply not have understood the following words in German: "Vorsprung durch Technik" (extract from television advertisement for Audi cars). Today, an advertisement presented entirely in German is no longer considered problematic for UK viewers, *so long as the meaning is clearly conveyed by the pictures*. With the help of images of sophisticated lifestyles such television advertising for cars effectively communicates the message of: modern technology, progress and similar concepts (literal translation:

advancement through technology), supported by that seductive voice-over in German which further aids the consolidation of meaning.

With the increasing number of such incidences creeping surreptitiously into our various media outlets today, it could be proposed that the use of the visual to convey complex meanings is escalating, or indeed, that, in those parts of the world where post-elementary level schooling has most recently been predicated on the acquisition of written literacy, there may now be a move towards a new phase of communication, where the visual mode is to be re-positioned more equally with the written word – in a sense, allowing it to reclaim its position and acknowledging its power with a perception that has been lost since the introduction of mass education and the teaching of basic skills in reading and writing.

Written texts in education

In response to the proposal above, a brief discussion of contemporary changes in modes of delivery within school education might serve to shed further light on this issue. In the main, schooling systems globally continue to be predicated on a mastery of written text today. Whilst this statement might at first seem self-evident, the reader should reflect here for a moment on the rapidly spiralling use of computers in schools in some countries and acknowledge the debates amongst educators and parents alike that this trend has provoked. For example, each schoolchild in Iceland now works from a laptop (Myrdal 2003) and electronic whiteboards are rapidly being introduced for the teaching of many subjects in UK primary schools (Enever and Watts 2005). Whilst such adaptation of technology in facilitating school learning has been paralleled by a much greater use of visual images for transmitting information, it does not yet, however, appear to have substantially altered the principle means of communicating information via the written word. Throughout schooling systems it seems to be necessary still to communicate complex abstract meanings mainly through a written language. Indeed, it is possible that many meanings simply could not be communicated accurately via visual text. In addition, such mastery of written text now offers a new form of access to an almost infinite library of global meanings via the Web today. This factor further contributes to the likely sustainability of written texts in the immediate future.

In summary then, it appears that, whilst society - and hence schooling systems - continues to prioritise such mastery as an early requisite skill for later advancement within the schooling system, for the present there continues to exist a clear rationale for becoming a reader of written texts. It may also be argued that as multimodal forms of representation are increasingly used as a vehicle for information transfer, there may be some re-balancing of the ways in which information is communicated, moving a little away from substantial reliance on written text, towards a combination of forms. Such a balance will require the acquisition of new skills in critical literacy also. Linking together the above discussion of both visual and written texts, the following section will consider the specific contribution that picture books might make to becoming literate, as a preliminary to the more elaborated discussion on the use of picture books for the teaching of English which will follow.

Developing critical visual and verbal literacy through picture books

In this section the term picture books is used broadly to include story, poetry and information books which may contain any one of the following layout styles:

- a) pictures with no written text
- b) written text with pictures which repeat and confirm the meanings of the written text
- c) written text with pictures which may extend these meanings or even offer an alternative, parallel narrative (Pantaleo 2004: 178).

Each of these picture book formats may be valuable in the process of enculturating the young child within a specific social context, as the child moves from the early phases of enculturation within the family grouping, to the more formalised phase of schooling. However, it is important to consider what exactly the contribution of each to the development of critical visual and verbal literacy in the first language (L1) might be, before focusing on a consideration of the early literacy processes in the foreign language. Earlier in this paper Barthes' (1977a) work was cited in analysing the complex cultural meanings that might be embedded in a single image. Elsewhere, in his essay *Rhetoric of the Image* (1977b) Barthes proposes that "the meaning of images is always related to, and in a sense dependent on, a verbal text" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 16). He suggests that images alone are open to multiple meanings, and thus, language (in the form of either spoken or written text) is needed to clarify and confirm such meaning. However, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 17) claim that whilst language and visual texts are both cultural systems of meaning, each conveys this "by means of its own specific forms and independently". In making sense of this claim in relation to the example of the three types of picture books identified, the hypothesis can be formulated as:

Type (a) books draw on visual grammars which require the reader to know and understand such things as: visual design (including aspects such as line shape and direction, tone, colour, arrangement and balance); also to have the ability to analyse images in terms of the graphic elements, the arrangement, interpretation and aesthetic appreciation (Avgerinou and Ericson 1997: 286).

Type (b) books draw principally on a knowledge and experience of written grammars, the meanings of which are expected simply to be confirmed by the visual text. Here, there is a suggestion that the reader might need little skill in critical visual literacy since the written text has the potential to communicate all necessary information.

Type (c) books may offer what Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 18) describe as "contrasting encodings", whereby "in a multimodal text [...] the writing may carry one set of meanings and the images another". Kress and van Leeuwen extend this analysis further to discuss particular styles of visual texts offered in some picture books. They propose that a "less processed, more naturalistic representation" (such as the photographic images presented in some picture information books) often exerts a "form of social control over meaning" whereby the meaning is "openly and explicitly located in the text" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 26). This description seems to be closely related to the category here identified as type (b) picture books. In contrast, they propose that books with a "highly processed, highly essentialised, idealised representation (identified here as type (c)) [...] provide parents and children (and teachers) with the opportunity to talk about the images in ways which seem appropriate to them, to apply specific values, specific discourse to highly abstracted images". Thus, the book is operating "less like a text than like a language system with which to *make* texts" (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996: 26). So the reader and

interlocutor may create their own forms of social control over the texts, in the ways which they construct their shared discourses around it.

This analysis relates well to the seminal work of Margaret Meek (1988) in the area of children's engagement with text. Her work discusses the process of becoming a reader (of both visual and verbal texts) from many interesting perspectives. Of relevance to this paper is the picture book (type c in this context) which she identifies as offering the possibility of "extending the meaning begun in the written text so that even the young child is offered the opportunity to develop complex emotional and cognitive understandings normally inaccessible to the inexperienced reader" (page 35).

This device of *extending the meaning* is well represented in the pages of *Not Now Bernard* (McKee 1990), a story in which Bernard, unhappy with being ignored by his parents, turns into a monster, a transformation to which no reference whatsoever is made in the written text. Through the device of the visual text the reader is invited to speculate on Bernard's relationship with his parents, the extent to which his monster identity is real or imagined and perhaps where Bernard's new persona might lead him next. In this process of making meaning from this visual text the reader is exposed to a juxtapositioning of the visual and written text which offers the opportunity for the development of critical skills, both in interpreting and relating the meaning to their own lived experience of such events.

The many examples of this type of picture book represent an intrinsic element constant in the form of authentic picture books (in contrast to those books known as *readers* – designed to give instruction in the mastery of the reading process). This element can be identified as a prioritising of a pleasurable, thought-provoking experience, aiming to facilitate the child's engagement with the construction of meanings relevant to their world. In this attribute, it is likely that whilst the *reader* can play a valuable part in facilitating the child's access to the reading process, the authentic picture book seems to offer a different and substantially richer potential.

The contribution of authentic picture books for young learners of English

Whilst the foregoing sections have strongly argued the importance of authentic picture books in the processes of developing critical literacy in the L1, many people remain uncertain about their real value in supporting literacy development for learners of English as a foreign language (see also Arizpe, this volume, for a discussion of literacy development in English as an additional language). For learners in some countries, researchers have identified the ways in which a colourful and attractive book of a quality not normally available in locally produced publications in the child's first language can provide an additional motivation for foreign language literacy development (see Lugossy, this volume). Elsewhere, where such quality publications in the first language are readily available, this is less likely to be a factor. Nonetheless, given the very substantial L1 global market for children's picture books in English, the variety and quality of the range available is probably well beyond that available in any other language today. This resource may well therefore be highly motivating partly for its attractive presentation.

Setting aside such motivational factors, the central question to be answered here is: How can an authentic picture book contribute to the development of critical visual and written literacy *in a foreign language*? I will attempt to expose the argument more clearly by relating it to a comparison with an early pre-reading stage in the L1, where we teach the

young child to name real objects in their world, steadily building up their store of vocabulary. As Vygotsky (1978) identifies, the child's introduction to oral language progresses from key words, to phrases, then to longer stretches of utterance. These experiences provide a sound base for the later introduction of written texts. This pattern is to some extent repeated for many children in the process of learning to read, moving from key words, to phrases, to longer sections of text, all the time supported and extended by the visual text and increasing engagement in criticality, guided by a more experienced interlocutor. Much of this experience is, for most children, conducted in the schoolroom. Here, children are introduced to the concept of literacy. They come to understand how important it will be to their future progress and success in schooling and their later lives.

However, for the child already literate in their first language, the process of becoming literate in English as a foreign language is of a very different nature. Such children have already been initiated into the schooling process and may have at least an introductory level ability in reading in their first language. Many will also have become aware that progress in schooling relies on a mastery of literacy, yet will be living their lives in a strongly visual world of meanings. In such contexts there is unlikely to be a need to explore what literacy *is* or what benefits it might bring the learner. It seems almost self-evident, therefore, that authentic picture books (with a written text) will provide an invaluable resource here to speed the process of becoming literate in the foreign language. Using the powerful visual representations as tools to move beyond the initially tedious process of decoding a foreign language, into a world of images and meanings created individually, allows the child to engage immediately with the visual text, constructing theories about other languages, other cultures, themselves and their emotions and about their relationship to this sense of "otherness". Here then, is a rationale for the use of picture books in foreign language learning, using them as scaffolding in the process of acquiring written literacy in the foreign language, whilst also engaging in a meaningful, pleasurable activity.

Towards a rationale for authentic picture books

Elsewhere in this volume others give detailed empirical accounts of the many ways in varied contexts that such books have been used to support early steps towards literacy in English. As indicated in the introduction to this paper, there is still much empirical work to be done to interrogate exactly how young learners of English link visual and written text in a foreign language to their already-learned abilities in literacy in their L1. Recent work by Cameron (2003: 109) aims to move our understanding forward in the area of child foreign language learning by offering a model of the construct "language". In this, she diagrammatically separates oral skills from written skills, further sub-dividing the learning of oral skills into vocabulary and discourse. Her diagram offers no similar sub-division for the pre-reading/writing skills related to learning the written language (for this, see Cameron 2001: 135). In such a two-dimensional representation there is the inevitable consequence that the reader is offered a somewhat bi-polar concept, possibly implying that written skills are learnt separately from oral. Certainly, the diagram offers no insights into the early phases of becoming *literate* in a foreign language, for young children. This gap in

theoretical discussion may reflect the lack of valid research in this area and again emphasises the importance of developing a clearer understanding of how visual, written and oral texts interact with one another in the foreign language learning process for young children.

In this concluding section of the paper I will draw on the arguments so far presented to emphasise how crucial to the analysis it is, to position the child always as an active meaning maker in this process. Access to visual and written texts such as those offered by authentic picture books provide opportunities for the learner to engage holistically in the process of meaning making, drawing widely on previous experiences as they make sense of the text. Analysis of this holistic process is complex and multi-layered, always with so many contextual variables that, at times, it defies such analysis.

A further danger with such an analysis is the inevitably reductionist process of identifying and defining skills. To simply propose that a child develops "skills" in becoming literate is to ignore the emotional and very individual engagement that each of us experiences as we enjoy a good book. With these caveats in mind, I therefore offer here a very initial attempt at representing the young foreign language learner's experience as a meaning maker engaging with an authentic picture book and embarking on the early steps towards literacy in English (see figure 4 below). Distinctively, I will position the child at the centre of the book as an active meaning maker, in a position of control over deciding what s/he will or will not choose to engage with. The diagrammatic representation aims to describe the key understandings and abilities the child is likely to gain during the process of becoming literate in English as a foreign language. In acknowledgement of the value of pinpointing steps towards literacy, these features have been sub-divided into macro and micro skills. Such categories should not, however, be regarded as watertight, nor are they listed in any specific order. Rather, each may combine and interact with the other, in linear, cyclical or recursive patterns, as the child moves increasingly towards acquiring critical visual and written literacy. Thus, through the medium of the picture book the child may become familiar with the rhythm, intonation and stress patterns of English; with the phonic sounds and blends and will increasingly gain an understanding of how visual and written texts are laid out and interact in such books. From their first language reading abilities they may also be able to make use of previously learned abilities in grasping the gist, using scaffolding and predicting the story. This process is likely to need further support and extension from the interlocutor. From the child's more extensive (macro) experience with books in their first language they may both transfer and extend their ability to engage emotionally with the story, often relating it to their known worlds and contrasting their own experiences with those represented in the book. With the introduction of a picture book in a foreign language the interlocutor plays a crucial role in reading aloud the text lines, often linking or contrasting them with the visual representations in the process of developing criticality.

Here, finally, the picture book provides an invaluable opportunity for the reinforcement of oral skills in both the L1 and the FL as the child becomes increasingly familiar with written text and begins to take over the reading process.

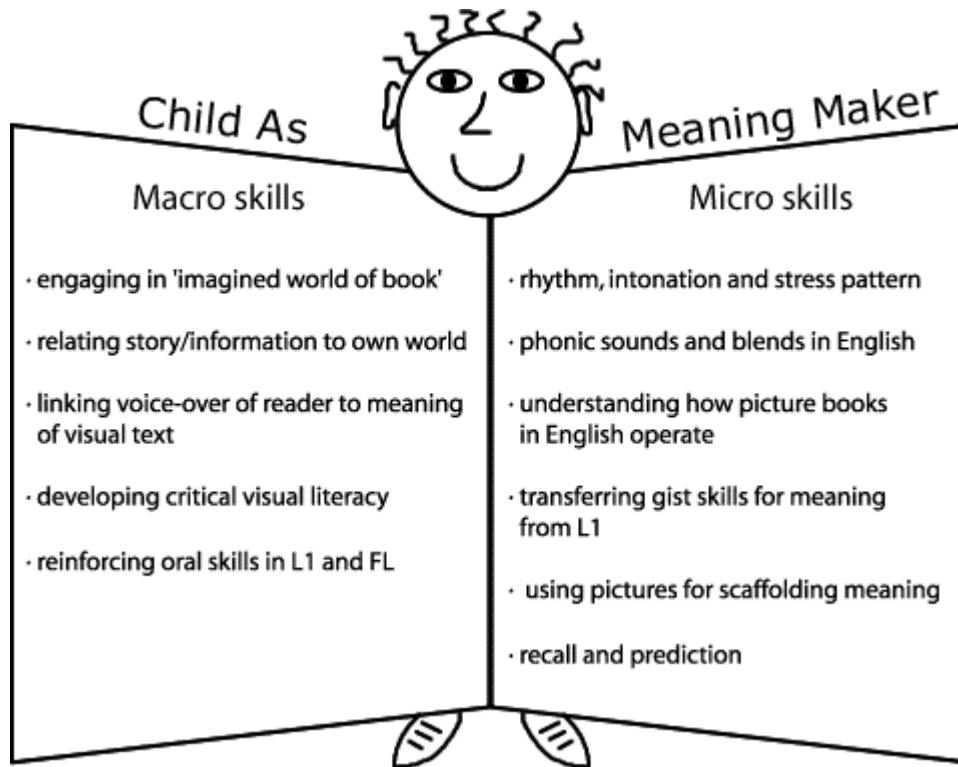


Figure 4: the foreign language learner's engagement with "real" books

As a concluding point to this paper, I would like to return here to the argument for development of critical literacy through the use of picture books published in English. Publications in English originate today from many cultures and many countries. This results in graphic styles, visual representations and varieties of English which reflect these different cultures. Such a rich medium provides both learner and interlocutor with a unique resource for a focus on critical literacy and the awareness-raising process related to varieties of English. In giving children access to such experiences from the very start of their English learning experience we can hope that they will become critical users of text, able to recognise and talk about variety and difference both authoritatively and sympathetically in the future. Hence, the picture book can be proposed as an important early contributor to the process of becoming globally literate in English(es).

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