

NOT JUST FOR LITTLE KIDS: THE PICTURE BOOK IN ESL CLASSES

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Just before I went into Room X where I was to speak about picture books and ESL at a recent conference, I was stopped by a participant who was trying to decide which session to attend next. I told her the topic in Room X, and she said, "Oh, I teach immigrant women so that's no good for me. They'd be terribly insulted if I brought children's books into our classroom." That teacher was right in her concern for the feelings of her students, but I believe she *can* use picture books with them without insulting either their intelligence or their dignity. Just think for a moment what wonderful things could happen if ESL mothers had a chance in class to look at and read and talk about books that they could use with their own preschoolers.

Obviously picture books are more appropriate in some situations than in others, so this article is directed towards teachers working in parent and preschool programs or with students in the junior or intermediate grades. Several motivating activities appropriate for use with ESL students of different ages and ability levels will be described in this article. However, what must always be kept in mind is that we must make sure that we give focus and structure to the activities we ask our students to do with picture books; we must provide a legitimate context.

Giving focus and providing context are, of course, essential parts of teaching anyone anything. But before I talk about how to do that for picture books in ESL classes, I would like to talk about picture books as a genre—to answer, in fact, the question "Why bother with them at all in language classes?"

I had really forgotten "easies" until several years ago when I became a student in a children's literature course. At that time, when I came across some old favorites, I had a few fond memories shattered, but I also found that some of those books were even better than I had remembered. What surprised me most, however, was the enormous number of wonderful books published since my own "easies" days.

The more picture books I see, the more convinced I am that they are too rich a resource to be limited so stringently to young children. Many of these books can be enjoyed by anyone at any age. For example—

I went to bed with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. (*Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* by Judith Viorst)

Alexander's prediction is absolutely right, and as one misery piles onto another, almost every reader or listener remembers days like that. The voice and the problems are those of a six-year-old, but the theme is universal and ageless. I've given paperback copies of this book to at least seven friends—and none of them is six years old.

The illustrations are delightful and add extra information to the text, e.g., "My father told me not to play with the copy machine, but I forgot" accompanied by a drawing of Alexander standing by a copier that is spewing out sheets of paper. For me, though, it is the text that makes *Alexander* special.

Dinner Time (Pienkowski) is just the opposite. The text by itself could be any repetition-with-change story:

One day a Frog was sitting on a log catching flies when down came a Vulture. Vulture said to Frog: "I'm going to eat you for my dinner." And he did. Then he flapped on his way and he met a Gorilla. Gorilla said: "I'm going to eat you for my dinner"...

But when you look, you find that the animals are a sort of paper-sculpture pop-out with mouths and snouts and beaks that move. Everyone is delighted by the unexpectedness of the artwork and most children (and a lot of adults) do what can only be described as "playing" with the book. (A few more inhibited adults surreptitiously play as they pretend to figure out the mechanics of the crocodile's snapping jaws.)

Alexander and *Dinner Time* are two books which I show to almost everybody I know. There are hundreds of other books which I love to share simply because they are so beautiful or funny or interesting—but I mustn't start now. There are also books which are ugly or boring or condescending even to a three-year-old. And between these extremes there are many more books which will appeal to some people and not to others. There are a number of excellent sources of description and evaluation of picture books (see references), but the best way to find out about them is to go into the school or public library and see for yourself. You will probably enjoy them yourself immensely and want to show some of your finds to other people.

But now let's move from the idea of picture books for pleasure alone to the idea of picture books for pleasure and learning. There are hundreds of books which can be used by teachers of ESL or Language Arts/English as a vehicle for teaching and learning. What is absolutely essential, however, is what I said at the beginning of this article: that no student ever feel that he or she is being insulted or condescended to when we introduce picture books into our classrooms.

One of the underlying intended outcomes of language instruction is that students become increasingly more sensitive to and competent in

communicating in English. We want to provide learning experiences which, either directly or indirectly, will enhance the acquisition and development of receptive and productive language skills. Some of the activities I will suggest meet this intended outcome directly by focussing student attention on the language of the books; others serve it indirectly and have, as their *immediate* purpose, learning outcomes related to literature and oral interpretation skills. The difference between the two sorts of activity is merely one of *stated focus*—the difference, for example, between saying, “Let’s examine the way the author uses variety in sentence length” and saying, “Why did you choose this particular book to read to Billy?”

Any time students read or write or talk or listen they are using language—a statement which is self-evident but whose implications are immense. As work in both first and second language acquisition has shown, purposive direct instruction is not the only way by which we “get proficient” in a language. The more opportunities we have to hear, read, and produce language, the more language we *can* produce and understand. Because of their special characteristics, picture books can provide or stimulate a very large amount of such language.

Picture books have a number of advantages for use because they are usually short and written in a language which is structurally simple; considered en masse, they cover a very wide content range; many of them are presented from a young child’s perspective or are about young children; and most elementary school and public libraries have good picture book collections including the whole spectrum of quality.

For me, the potential of picture books in any language classroom derives from these characteristic features. For example,

- because the text is not particularly demanding, almost all post-primary level students will be able to handle the books easily;
- because they are short, several books can be considered at one sitting without the necessity of multiple copies;
- because they range widely in topic, they will undoubtedly touch the interests or experiences of any reader;
- because most of these experiences or issues are shown from the perspective of a younger child, they can be talked about either in their story context in an impersonal way or in the context of their universality and of how those issues relate to our own situation; and
- because of ready access to “easies” in public, school and university libraries, these books can serve as classroom materials at no extra cost.

These arguments for the use of picture books are irrelevant, however, unless we make sure our students know and accept our reasons for using picture books with them. Teenagers particularly may be trying so hard to

be grown-up that they may resist activities with picture books unless they can be assured that there is nothing childish about what is being suggested.

A) Reading Aloud and Writing Picture Books

One starting point is to team up with a primary or pre-school teacher and have one of your older students from the same school or another school read to one of the younger children. Using "easies" has at least two advantages here: Even the least proficient older reader should have no difficulty with the text, and afterwards, the younger child can look at the book and perhaps "read" it again. Teachers can use this reading aloud activity as an opportunity to talk about some of the things that go into successful oral reading—the selection of the book, the need for pre-reading for familiarity, the importance of phrasing and pacing, and, perhaps, the physical set-up for reading to one person. The readers should have the opportunity to look at a number of books while they make their read-aloud choices, and they should be encouraged to make brief notes for themselves about the books they look at—why they would or would not choose the books. When students have gone through the selection and reading-aloud process several times, they might be encouraged to suggest books to one another for the next read-aloud session. They might also begin writing the text for a picture book themselves for the younger children. Who does the illustrations is a question best determined in the actual situation: It might be the author or a classmate or the children for whom the book is intended. We do want to keep the major focus on language, however.

This writing activity has several strong points.

- For one thing, as I've just said, there is the writer's purpose of producing something which is meant to be read aloud and for which the audience is clearly defined. This means that the student has a real reason for writing—this composition is not simply a school exercise.
- Because the writer has, through previous reading, gained some awareness of what a finished product in this genre is *like*, he or she has a fairly clear idea of what to aim for.
- If the writer has been listening to what he or she has been reading aloud, some sense of how written language differs from speech begins to develop. Writers—young and old, English L₁ and ESL—often get carried away by complicated phrases which end in impossible tangles of language and ideas. But because *this* story is intended for younger children who will hear it and perhaps try to read it for themselves, the writer will have to concentrate on language which is straightforward and clear. The need for clear language may force

clearer thinking, too. Some adult writers consciously “hear” what they are writing and make many decisions on the basis of what “sounds right.” It is quite possible that those people have developed a sort of aural memory against which their language is constantly being compared. As we give our students chances to read aloud from “easies,” they too may begin to develop a sense of how language should sound. And when their writing task has as its goal the production of something intended for reading aloud, we can make a particular point of having the students read their own work aloud either to themselves or to peers as they write. Over time they may adopt the “listening” habit for all their writing.

If the students enjoy the writing activity, they might want to look at a lot more books to find out how picture books are set up or laid out, the relationship of pictures to text in different books, what makes one easier to read aloud than another, and so on. These questions might arise in the production of the students’ books or they might develop into a small activities unit on picture books as a genre.

B) Analysis and Evaluation Activities

Picture books are an excellent set of materials for teachers who want to work on their students’ skills in analysis and evaluation, too. The task might be presented simply as one of establishing a number of categories for the 30 or 40 books around at the moment. Since there can be no definitive set of labels, anyone can be right and the challenge is then to find the most satisfactory combination of categories so that no book is left out. An added payoff is, of course, that in order to classify, the students will have to do some reading, perhaps using skimming or sampling techniques rather than complete text processing. As I look at the books around me at the moment, I can see a number of possible ways of classifying them. Let me give some examples of categories and suggest some questions that could arise once the books are put into them:

- by author or illustrator (because this particular group has a number of books done by the same people)
 - Does there seem to be something characteristic about a particular person’s work? Could you pick out this person’s work from others’? Or does this writer or illustrator use a wide variety of styles or techniques?
 - Do there seem to be natural groupings of writers or illustrators?
- by subject or theme (family problems, animals, humour, folk tales, family stories, adventures, learning about something new, etc.)
 - Each category could be examined and looked at in closer detail (see below)

- by the amount of text in relation to the amount of illustration, from wordless books to those with almost no pictures
 - Are there books in which illustrations and text could exist without one another and still tell the story?
 - Were the decisions about the balance between the two elements right in every case?
- by decade of publication, publishing house, or country of origin (note: origin might be tricky because place of publication is not always where the author is writing)
 - Are there any trends or patterns evident?
 - Are there any characteristics which identify a book with a particular time, house, or place?
- by subjective evaluation of quality
 - What are the things that make student A put a book into the “excellent” category, etc.?
 - Are the criteria the same for everyone?
 - How consistent is the categorization from student to student?

There are certainly other ways books can be classified, and many subcategories within those classifications. The books themselves may be “easy,” but the possibilities of the classification activity can be quite demanding.

C) Using Folk and Fairy Tales

A rather different activity centres around folk and fairy tales told in picture book format. To find these books you may have to look in two places, the picture book shelves and the 398s (in a Dewey-system library). One interesting activity is to compare as many versions as possible of the same story. I have listed a number of editions of particular stories in the picture book list (appendix), and there are also a number of excellent articles on the use of folk and fairy tales in the reference list. Comparisons can be done in terms of language, storyline, story complexity, amount of detail, illustration, etc., and if the topic seems of more than passing interest, students might look for stories with similar themes or characters around the world.

There are tales and legends from an enormous number of countries, some of them written in English by a bilingual from the story’s country, some “collected” by folklorists and written for picture books, and some “retold” from an existing English source. With so many books available, students can read a wide variety of stories and become involved in an analysis of the common elements, a comparison of different types of tales, and an evaluation of the presentation of each one. These activities may also encourage students to collect stories from their first language group, stories which might then be told and ultimately written in English.

D) Wordless Pictures Books to Stimulate Writing

More writing and talking can be stimulated through the use of picture books that have *no* text at all. Students might find it interesting to look at a number of wordless picture books before they select one to write about. Some illustrators give only the barest plot while others give elaborate detail. An awareness of these differences in illustration can lead to a discussion of differences in telling stories with words. What details are important? What are some of the things that help a writer decide about the amount of detail to give? Will it make any difference to the students' writing whether or not the original illustrations accompany their stories?

E) Alphabet Books and Some Ideas

A number of teachers are already using alphabet books in basic literacy classes and have told me that they've had great success. The advantage of these books over alphabet cards is that you can collect such a wide variety of books and develop activities from them. The following activities are predicated on your having as many alphabet books as possible for the students to work with at one time.

- Compare the formation of particular letters across the group of books. Most alphabet book designers have something a bit different from anyone else in the details of their Ks, for instance. Recognition that these differences don't change the letter is important.
- Compare which words have been chosen to stand for a particular letter in different books. This builds vocabulary and can be extended further by making alphabet collections of related words—abcs of food, work, games, countries, etc.
- Compare the books from an artistic point of view and explain what makes one book appeal to someone more than another one does. The incredible range of styles, differences in amount of text, the choices of words or pictures, etc., will make such discussions possible.

The list of alphabet books in the appendix is not exhaustive by any means, nor are all the books on it necessarily good for every purpose. They do, however, give some indication of the range of books available and, once you have started looking at them, other activities will occur to you which will exploit them further.

F) Tracing a Theme

Again because of their length and accessibility, picture books are an excellent source of reading material when teachers want students to talk or write on single themes or topics. The journal *Language Arts* has, over

the last fifteen years, published dozens of articles which talk about children's books thematically. Besides discussing the topic, e.g. how old age is dealt with in picture books, the author usually provides an extensive bibliography.

You don't really *need* an article like that, though. An excellent way of involving students fully is to ask them to go through a library collection and find all the picture books which deal with, for example, a child running away, or eggs (there are a surprising number!), or moving to a new home. Once the books have been identified and brought back to the classroom, many sorts of analyses can be done.

Some students might be interested in examining stereotyping in picture books and later talk about the issues surrounding each topic. How are race and sex and age handled? Does the particular collection available seem to have a fair balance in the groups shown in their books? Have there been any significant changes in picture books en masse in the last decades?

Some very interesting discoveries can be made by taking the theme of humour in picture books, too. As well as being fun in itself, reading and looking at funny books seems to increase the desire of students to tell someone about what is there. Sometimes the humour is linguistic, sometimes pictorial, and sometimes a combination of both. Older students particularly seem to be interested in what makes something funny in English or in North America. These books are one way of finding out some answers.

Some Closing Remarks

I've referred to differences in the quality of picture books in passing, but I want to talk briefly about how those differences can be exploited for language learning. A lot can be learned about good and bad writing by reading and hearing the language of picture books. I said earlier that reading aloud can, I believe, help develop an ear for language and picture books are particularly useful text resources because they are short and have such a variety in their quality. Older readers can fairly quickly make critical judgments about how these books sound, and once they begin to get a feel for the written language of "easies," they may be able to find out what some of the elements are that make the texts different.

Picture books provide an almost endless beginning for language activities, and I have touched on only a few. These books can be dismissed as too "juvenile" but, obviously, I disagree. In the long run, the question is really whether or not you are comfortable with picture books yourself. If you are, then your students will be too and together you will find a whole new world of books.

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Appendix

Picture Books: A Selective List

Note: As the title says, this is a selective list of books and articles. Most of the titles should be available in public libraries across Canada and even if you can't find these particular books, there are hundreds of others that will do just as well (except for *Alexander*).

ABCs and Just Pictures

- Baskin, Leonard. (1972). *Hosie's alphabet*. New York: Viking.
- Bruna, Dick. (1967). *b is for bear: An abc*. London: Methuen.
- Burmingham, John. (1976). *ABC*. London: Cape.
- Ellis, Louise. (1976). *The alphavegetabet*. Don Mills, Ont.: Collier Macmillan.
- Emberley, Ed. (1978). *ABC*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Lobel, Arnold. (1981). *On market street*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Montresor, Beni. (1965). *A is for angel: ABC picture stories*. New York: Knopf.
- Munari, Bruno. (1960). *ABC*. Cleveland: World.
- Piatti, Celestino. (1966). *Animal ABC*. New York: Atheneum.
- Scary, Richard. (1974). *Cars and trucks and things that go*. New York: Golden.

Folk and Fairy Tales

- Aardema, Verna. (1975). *Why mosquitoes buzz in people's ears: A West African tale*. New York: Dial.
- Bishop, Claire. (1938). *The five Chinese brothers*. New York: Coward, McCann.
- Hou-tien, Cheng. (1979). *Six Chinese brothers: An ancient tale*. New York: Holt.
- Brandenburg, Aliko. (1978) *The twelve months: A Greek folktale*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Cleaver, Nancy. (1973). *How the chipmunk got its stripes*. Toronto: Clarke, Irwin.
- Galdone, Paul. (1969). *The monkey and the crocodile*. New York: Seabury.
- Grimm. (1968). *Jorinda and Joringel* (ill. Adrienne Adams). New York: Scribner's.
- Grimm. (1978). *Jorinda and Joringel* (alternative author Wanda Gag, ill. Margot Tomes). New York: Coward, McCann.
- Grimm. (1977). *The sleeping beauty* (ill. Felix Hoffmann). London: Oxford.

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- McDermott, Gerald. (1980). *Papagayo, the mischief maker*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- McDermott, Gerald. (1974). *Arrow to the sun: A Pueblo Indian tale*. New York: Viking.
- Tanaka, Beatrice. (1972). *The tortoise and the sword: a Vietnamese legend*. New York: Lothrop.
- The tiger, the Brahman, and the jackal* (ill. Mamoru Funai). (1963). New York: Holt.
- Ziner, Feenie. (1977). *Cricket boy: A Chinese folktale*. New York: Doubleday.

Realism

- Cohen, Miriam. (1977). *When will I read?* New York: Greenwillow.
- Delton, Judy. (1980). *My mother lost her job today*. Chicago: Whitman.
- Joslin, Sesyle. (1958). *What do you say, dear? A book of manners for all occasions*. New York: Young Scott.
- Harper, Anita. (1977). *How we live*. England: Penguin/Kestral.
- Hughes, Hirley. (1977). *Dogger*. London: Bodley Head.
- Step toe, John. (1980). *Daddy is a monster...sometimes*. New York: Lippincott.
- Viorst, Judith. (1977). *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day*. New York: Atheneum.

Wordless Stories

- Anno, Misumasa. (1977). *Journey*. London: Bodley Head.
- Carle, Eric. (1971). *Do you want to be my friend?* New York: Crowell.
- Kilbourne, Frances. (1977). *Overnight adventure*. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Mordillo, Guillermo. (1978). *The galleon: The rising—and sinking—fortunes of a pirate ship*. London: Hutchinson.

Odds and Ends

- Crews, Donald. (1980). *Truck*. New York: Greenwillow.
- Frasconi, Antonio. (1958). *The house that Jack built: A picture book in two languages*. New York: Harcourt.
- Hoffmann, Felix. (1965). *A boy went out to gather pears*. London: Oxford.
- Hogrogian, Nonny. (1971). *One fine day*. London: Macmillan.
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- Karsilowsky, Phyllis. (1979). *The man who tried to save time*. New York: Doubleday.
- Lionni, Leo. (1967). *Frederick*. Toronto: Pantheon.
- Pienkowski, Jan. (1980). *Dinner time*. London: Gallery Five.