

Picturebooks to develop empathy and respect for others

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Introduction

Picturebooks are a form of children's literature, authentic in both the pictures and the words found inside – the words, traditionally the focus of reading education, are rich and varied and the illustrations are of high quality, reflecting the culture and style of individual illustrators, who may or may not be of English speaking origin. Using picturebooks in the young learner classroom has become an accepted approach to diversifying activities in the young learner classroom and it is becoming increasingly accepted that it is both the pictures and the words in picturebooks that provide opportunities for language use as readers (for we read both words and pictures) make sense of and create meaning from what the pictures show and words tell.

The norm

Despite recognizing that it is both pictures and words that enable the creation of significance in picturebooks, teachers in a young learner context tend to select picturebooks with pictures and words that show and tell similar information, e.g. *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?* (Martin Jr & Carle, 1995). Here the illustrations show a red bird or a yellow duck and the words tell us this too, "I see a red bird", "I see a yellow duck" etc. Such picturebooks provide a scaffold to support comprehension for young learners, especially those in pre-primary and the early primary years. Learners feel confident about understanding what they see and hear, happy to predict, memorise the repetitive verbal text, recite along with the teacher during retells and even create their own predictable, repetitive stories with animals and colours. This picturebook is often chosen to reinforce the learning of colour and animal words in English as teachers select picturebooks are selected that focus primarily on lexical sets and concepts (Mourão, 2015). In so doing picturebooks like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 2002) or *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson & Scheffler, 1999), are well known in the young learner classroom as they include reference to fruit and food and body words respectively. When teachers select such picturebooks their prime concern is the acquisition or reinforcement of certain lexical sets and structures and their objective is for children to be able to understand these particular words, see them used in context and enjoy a storytelling activity using a picturebook.

Something slightly different

Despite this normalized approach to using picturebooks, which raises learner confidence, there are a number of other reasons why picturebooks can and should be used in the young learner classroom. Using picturebooks contributes to developing the whole child, in particular their cognitive, socio-emotional and aesthetic competencies together with their language and literacy skills, especially when the pictures and words show and tell different information. Learners are expected to think about what they see and what they read (or hear read to them) and fill the gaps. This encourages a more active learner who has to decipher, make sense of and create personal meaning, on many occasions through talking together with classmates about what the picturebook reveals. We also need to accept that there may be several interpretations to a picturebook and children should be encouraged to accept this too.

For the rest of this article I would like to share two picturebooks which contribute to developing an aspect of learners' emotional intelligence, in particular to empathize - that is, develop the ability to recognize and be sensitive to the emotions of others by understanding possible motives for certain feelings and behaviour and communicating this understanding. *The Fly!* (Horáček, 2011) and *No!* (Altés, 2011) both use animal protagonists to help children empathize and see another's point of view and can be shared with primary learners from around 8 years old.

The Fly

In *The Fly*, an intelligent fly (he can even write his own as we are shown on the front cover) invites readers to "... Open my book and take a look inside. There's never a dull moment." Written in the first person, we accompany the fly during a day in his hazardous life, as he wonders aloud why people and animals don't like him being around. It's a hilarious thought-provoking book which actually makes children decide if they also want to kill the fly – when we get to the end of the book, we see the fly, who has recently escaped a large fly swat, accompanied by a large speech bubble with the following message, "As you can see, my life is not an easy one. I'm just a simple creature. I mean no harm to anyone. So, if you see me, please be kind. HEY, don't shut the book ... HELP ... HELP ... Do you want to squash me?". Lots of discussion ensues here around whether or not the book should be closed! Not all children take the fly's side, but they are certainly helped to see the fly's point of view.

This picturebook is perfect for inserting into a unit about daily routines in English. Not only will students enjoy the fly's story, and the fun page-turns (SWAT!), they will enjoy continuing the fly's day, inventing all sorts of close-to-death encounters till he goes to sleep at night.

No!

This is the story of a dog, who does everything he can to help his family: at least he thinks he does. The words tell us, “I taste their food before they eat to make sure that it’s all right”, but the illustrations show us he is stealing food from the table and there is a large “No” in a speech bubble coming from an invisible owner. He continues confidently telling the reader what he does to help his owners and we see the chaos that ensues. The book’s title is *No!* for this dog is sure that’s his name! His dilemma, culminates at the end of the book, when the words say, “Why did they buy me a collar with the wrong name?” and the illustrations show us the name *Spike* on his nametag. This really is a visual experience that helps children understand the concept of seeing things from different perspectives, for the words and the illustrations do just that.

This picturebook works well if introduced into a unit that focuses on pets, instead of just describing pets and their physical attributes, why not get children to talk about what their pets do, but this time by asking them to look carefully at the pictures and the words in the picturebook. What do they each represent? They may already have realized this dual narrative, but you can talk to them about it and then ask them to write a short text in their pet’s voice, and illustrate the text from their point of view. Here is an example of a short text from another 9-year old in Portugal

I love my family.

I taste the food.

I lick João’s face.

I sleep in Ana’s bed.

My name is BolinhasNÃO!

This is the child's redrafted version, and it imitates some of the story language - we learn to write by imitating others, but he has added his own bit of humour by calling his dog "BolinhasNÃO" – the dog's name with the suffix 'NÃO' ('no' in Portuguese).

Final comments

I began by describing picturebooks which readers are probably familiar with, those that contain words and pictures which show and tell the same information. I went on to describe two picturebooks that consider children holistically, involve them in meaningful experiences and allow them to share their personal experiences and what they know about the world. These picturebooks develop a more active learner, who realizes the need to use all their senses when learning English and who also recognizes the importance of using the English they know to talk about, discuss and share ideas. Picturebooks bring a multitude of opportunities for learning if we move away from using them because they cover the language of a particular topic and instead enable children to exercise their right as individuals and to be recognized as fellow appreciators of literature by enabling affective responses through English.

Blog posts

For a blog post about *The Fly* please go to:

<http://picturebooksinelt.blogspot.pt/2013/10/the-fly-story.html>

For a blog post about *No!* please go to:

<http://picturebooksinelt.blogspot.pt/2012/02/no-thoughtful-dog.html>

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