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**Understanding multimodal texts through picture books in the
EFL classroom**

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UNDERSTANDING MULTIMODAL TEXTS THROUGH PICTURE BOOKS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

Abstract

New technologies have changed the way in which texts are produced, creating new genres and requiring new skills from the readers. Most texts have become multimodal, which means that they make use of different verbal and visual semiotic systems to create meaning. This paper attempts to show that in the EFL classroom multimodality can be addressed through the picture book, a genre whose characteristics will be explained in this paper. Apart from providing a theoretical framework to understand the concepts of multimodality and how to approach picture books, this research presents the new roles that teachers and students will have to adopt to benefit from the storytelling process and possible classroom uses of such books.

Introduction

Reading comprehension is considered a fundamental skill in the learning of a second language. There is a great diversity of texts to present to students that come in different forms: textbooks, multimedia, audio. Engaging with these types of texts implies an understanding of new literacies.

As Michèle Anstey (2002) states in her article “It’s not all white and black”:

The term *literacy* is no longer appropriate, as it focuses on language alone. Multiliteracies focus on the many modes of representation and forms of text that have been made available through multimedia and technological change. Therefore, being multiliterate requires not only the mastery of communication, but an ability to critically analyse, deconstruct, and reconstruct a range of texts and other representational forms. It also requires the ability to engage in the social responsibilities and interactions associated with these texts. (p. 446)

As teachers we have to acknowledge this change and prepare students to decode these new literacies. One way of doing this is by exposing children to picture books. A picture book combines illustrations and verbal narrative. It shows that the understanding of a text is not only analysing the written language, but analysing different semiotic systems and the relationships between them. Several studies (Arizpe y Styles, 2004; Silva-Díaz, 2005) have pointed to the value these books have for education.

Why using stories with children in the EFL classroom?

Stories are part of the nature of the human being. As educators we want our students to learn the second language in a natural and entertaining way. Many teachers use stories in the classroom since they build literacy skills, pass down traditions, and provide an authentic input of language to the students. According to an article in the British Council website (2003), stories:

- allow children to explore their own cultural roots
- allow children to experience diverse cultures
- enable children to empathise with unfamiliar people/places/situations
- offer insights into different traditions and values
- help children understand how wisdom is common to all peoples/all cultures
- offer insights into universal life experiences
- help children consider new ideas
- reveal differences and commonalities of cultures around the world
- promote a feeling of well-being and relaxation
- increase children's willingness to communicate thoughts and feelings
- encourage active participation
- increase verbal proficiency
- encourage use of imagination and creativity
- encourage cooperation between students
- enhance listening skills

Furthermore, Andrew Wright (1995) in *Storytelling with Children* provides reasons why stories should play a central role in teaching a foreign language to children. Among them he proposes:

- Motivation: Children have a constant need for stories and they will always be willing to listen or read.
- Meaning: Children want to find meaning in stories, so they listen with a purpose.
- Fluency: Listening and reading fluency based on a positive attitude to not understanding everything and the skills of searching for meaning, predicting, and guessing; and Speaking and writing fluency based on a positive attitude to “having a go” with the language one knows and not being afraid of making mistakes. It is also based on the skills of constructing meaning with limited language.
- Language awareness: Stories help children become aware of the general “feel” and sound of the foreign language. Stories also introduce children to language items and sentence constructions without their necessarily having to use them productively.
- Stimulus for speaking and writing: The experience of the story encourages responses through speaking and writing.
- Communication: Listening and reading stories and responding to them through speaking and writing, drama, music, and art develop a sense of being and having an audience and of sharing and collaborating.

Choosing stories for the EFL classroom

¹Odette Michel says in an interview in the book *Ver para leer* (2009) that every book offer different possibilities. That is why, she says, we do not choose a book taking into account the recipient, but we choose a book taking into account the objectives we have. Odette Michel also states that children like topics that are related to their immediate reality. Therefore, when we have to choose a book for our students we have to consider our objectives and the reality of our students.

In *The Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers* Brewster and Ellis (1991) propose criteria to take into account when we have to choose a story although they claim that since “storybooks are not specifically written for foreign language learners, it is difficult to give definitive indications for the level of each book” (p.16). In their criteria they include: level, literary devices, content/subject matter, illustrations/layout, educational potential, motivation, values, global issues, language content and potential for follow-up work.

Besides, they express that there is no one more appropriate than the teacher of the class to judge and select a suitable and accessible story for the students. Furthermore, as teachers we have the option to adapt the story to make it suitable for our learners.

¹ My translation

What is a picture book?

Picture books can now be considered a genre with special characteristics. They present narrations that draw on the linguistic and visual semiotic systems through the use of text and image.

In picture books we find two languages: the written and the visual one. The meaning is conveyed by the convergence of these two languages. It is different from an illustrated book in which we have a story accompanied by pictures or the picture reflecting the story. In the case of picture books we need both to make sense of the story. The story told in these books depends on the interaction between the text and the image. The reader is constantly challenged to respond to the elements in the book. The interpretation and meaning is given by the reader who interprets the relationship between these two modes.

According to Nodelman & Reimer (as cited in *Young children and picture books*, 2004) we can find at least three stories in this type of books: “the one told by the words, the one implied by the pictures, and the one that results from the combination of the other two” (p.12).

Anthony Browne is an internationally acclaimed author and illustrator of children's books, with nearly 40 titles to his name. In 2009 Anthony Browne was appointed the sixth Children's Laureate. One good definition of picture books is given by him in his book, written together with his son Joe Browne, *Jugar el juego de las formas* (2011).² He says:

There should be a space between the illustration and the text. Instead of treating the illustration as a mere visual representation of the events described in the text, there could be something in the images that the text does not reveal; in the same way, the

² My translation

text can say things that we do not see in the illustration and sometimes they can be omitted in both. The spaces are left so that the readers can fill them with their imagination. (p. 62)

At present, many picture books are considered postmodern story books. The two most relevant characteristics are that they have a non-linear narrative form and the inclusion of self-referential elements. The postmodern version of picture books emerged in the sixties in Europe and in the United States. In Argentina, and in Latin-America in general, they have become popular with some emerging authors such as Isol, (winner of Astrid Lindgren prize), and Pablo Bernasconi, among others. It is important to say that in the majority of these books the author and the illustrator are the same person. And although the picture book is considered children literature, it also attracts teenagers and adults. Children are very good readers of images, so it is not necessary that they know how to read words in order to read a picture book.

Characteristics of Picture Books

According to Michèle Anstey (2002) the characteristics of a picture book are:

- Nontraditional ways of using plot, character, and setting, which challenge reader expectations and require different ways of reading and viewing;
- unusual uses of the narrator's voice to position the reader to read the book in particular ways and through a particular character's eyes
- indeterminacy in written or illustrative text, plot, character, or setting, which requires the reader to construct some of the text and meanings;

- a pastiche of illustrative styles, which require the reader to employ a range of knowledge and grammars to read;
- new and unusual design and layout, which challenge the reader's perception of how to read a book;
- contesting discourses (between illustrative and written text), which require the reader to consider alternate readings and meaning;
- intertextuality, which requires the reader to use background knowledge in order to access the available meanings; and
- the availability of multiple readings and meanings for a variety of audiences.

Some of these characteristics make picture books very interesting for the EFL class. When learning a foreign language interaction is important. These books offer a new form of interaction, which is picture-text interaction. A skill needed in the XXI century is precisely the ability to read multimodally, to develop visual and verbal literacy. Another important feature is intertextuality. The reading of such texts allows students to draw upon their resources as readers and encourage the development and interpretation of knowledge from different fields.

Reading an image

As teachers we should promote the reading of texts, but as we live in a world packed with images we should also promote the reading of images. Students well know that in order to read a text they should read from left to right, top to bottom, and line by line. In

picture books apart from following this conventional way of reading the text, students should learn how to read the image and consider it as a kind of text that has to be read in order to understand the book. Images have been carefully designed by the authors and everything in them has a meaning. Anthony Browne in his book *Jugar el juego de las formas* (2011) tells us that he has asked several children about the significance of an image in one of his books. The result, for him, was delightful because he says that with the image he is able to inspire different interpretations, all of them valid, imaginative and relevant.

Every element in an image has a purpose. Not only the images have a purpose in picture books, but the book as an object in itself: the cover, the design and the font play a very important role.

In the book *Ver para leer* (2009) it is stated that some authors distinguish two types of signs in an image: iconic visual signs and plastic visual signs. The iconic visual signs have a recognizable referent. The plastic visual signs refer to the elements that conform the image without a referent related to it. These elements are: colour, figure, light, perspective, frame, etc. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) also propose elements that interact between the reader and the image. They propose: mood, perspective, social distance, lightening, colour, modality, salience, the reading path, vectors, the compositional axes, and centre and margin.

All these elements create meaning in the stories. One distinctive element that catches children's attention is colour. Different colours can transmit feelings, for example, yellow can evoke a feeling of happiness and white, feelings of purity. It is important here the culture of each country since the meanings evoked by colours may change from culture to culture.

Multimodality

Multimodality means that meaning does not depend only on the written text, but on reading the different modes proposed by the author and the relationship between them to make sense of a story. Reading implies a multiplicity of modes. Kress (2010) defined a mode as a “socially and culturally shaped resource for meaning making” and he adds that “Different modes offer different potentials for making meaning” (p. 79).

In picture books, these resources for making meaning can be the font, the colour of the images, the different elements included in the image, among others.

The role of the teacher

According to the theoretical background proposed we can say that picture books are suitable for teaching learners how to read multimodally. In picture books we can find plenty of modes to analyse with students. Besides, since we are being exposed to images everyday it is important for children to acquire the necessary skills to understand multimodal texts.

Therefore, the teacher has to be a guide for students posing questions that foster analysis and debate, while students should have an active role to decode the meanings from these texts.

Analysing a postmodern picture book

In the following section of this paper I will analyse the postmodern picture book *Voices in the Park* (2001), by Anthony Browne following a series of understandings proposed by Anstey (2002). Due to space constraints, I cannot analyse all the features of the book, but I will analyse the ones that best demonstrate these understandings. The picture book under analysis was published in 1999 and the story of the book is about a walk to the park told from four different perspectives.

Methodology

I will analyse the picture book following these understandings and propose tips to work with students in the form of teacher's guidance. The understandings I will use are the following:

Understandings about text required in order to be multiliterate in the 21st century (Anstey, 2002):

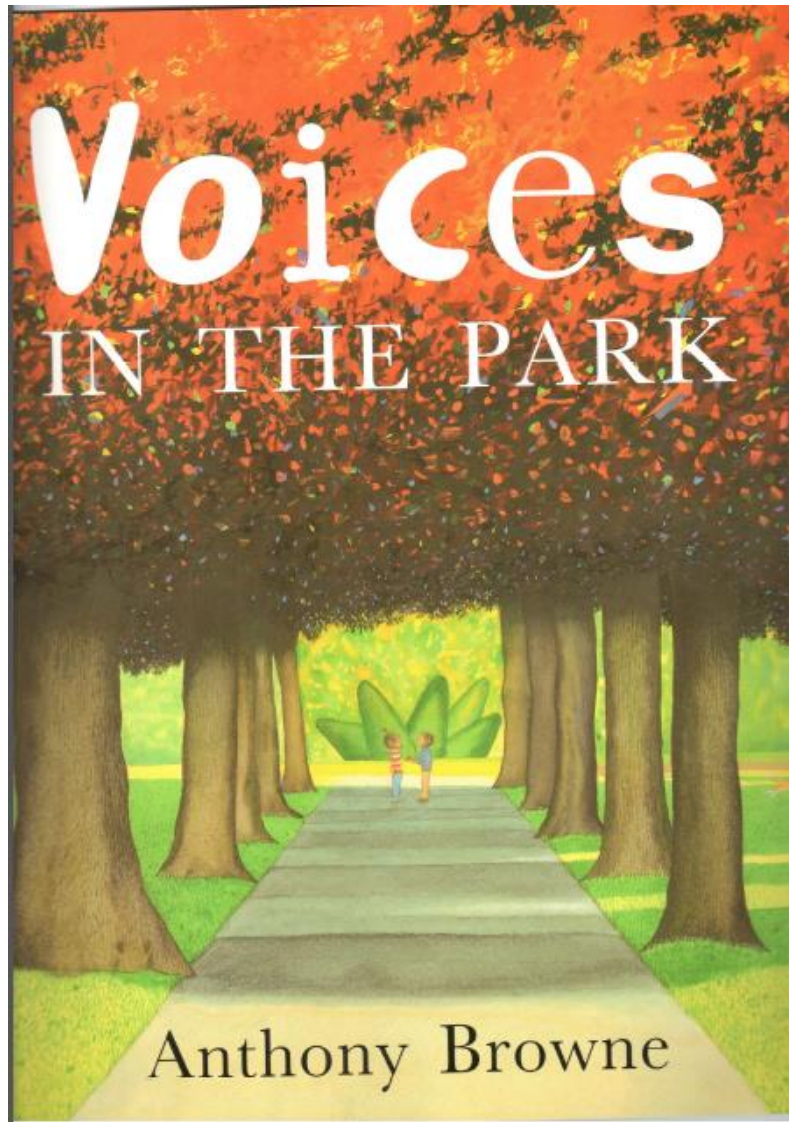
- 1) All texts are consciously constructed and have particular social, cultural, political, and economic purposes.
- 2) Text comes in a variety of representational forms, incorporating a range of grammars and semiotic systems.
- 3) Changes in society and technology will continue to challenge and change texts and their representational forms.
- 4) There may be more than one way of reading or viewing a text depending on a range of contextual and other factors.

5) There is a need to consider the possible meanings of a text, how they are constructing the reader and the world around him or her in particular ways, and why this construction is being made.

Understanding 1

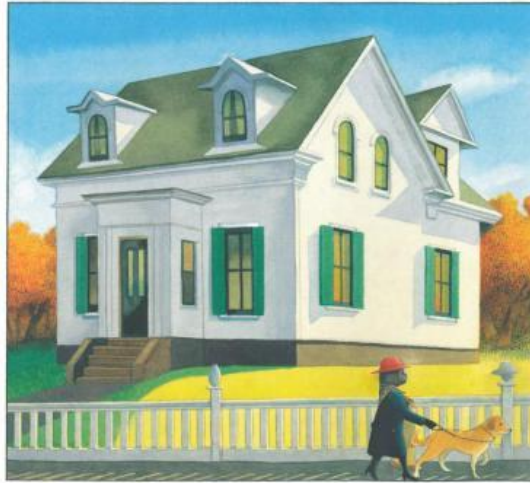
All texts are consciously constructed and have particular social, cultural, political, and economic purposes.

Every single detail in *Voices in the Park* (2001) has been planned and the author has a specific purpose with them. Starting from the title and the cover of the book it is full of particular features. We can see two anthropomorphic gorillas talking in the background of the picture in the cover of the book. Gorillas are a very common resource in Anthony Browne's books, but why using gorillas instead of people in this book? Besides, the title, *Voices in the Park*, implies that the gorillas have a voice. Therefore, there are gorillas with human characteristics. Another feature to distinguish is the colours used for the landscape and what season of the year they may evoke.



Another feature that we can mention here is that when we open the book we find ourselves with another title, what is more, another three more titles. And each of these titles are written with a different font.

FIRST VOICE



It was time to take Victoria, our pedigree Labrador, and Charles, our son, for a walk.

SECOND VOICE



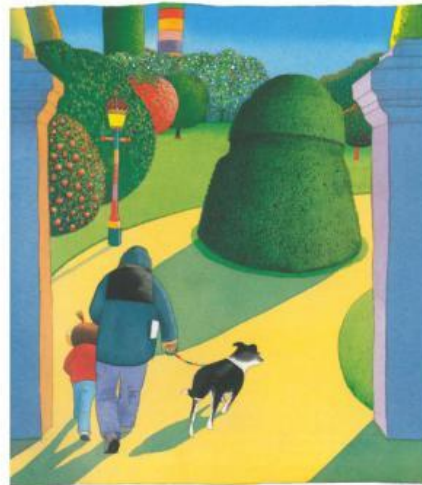
I needed to get out of the house, so me and Smudge took the dog to the park.

THIRD VOICE



I was at home on my own again. It's so boring. Then Mummy said that it was time for our walk.

FOURTH VOICE



Dad had been really fed up, so I was pleased when he said we could take Albert to the park.

The different fonts are used by the author to depict the different personalities of the book. The first voice, the voice of the mother, has a classical and formal style that represents the upper-society of the mother in the story. The voice used for the father is thick

and bold and less formal than the mother's one. Maybe trying to suggest that he is from another social class. The voice used for Charles, the son of the upper-class lady, is very thin and delicate portraying a little insecure and disturbed boy. And the fourth voice, the one of Smudge, the daughter of the low-class man, is fun and childish reflecting the voice of a cheerful girl.

These features prove the reader that they have been carefully selected by the author and challenge the reader to understand the reasons.

Furthermore, the book is packed with cultural references alluding to different works of art or movies from the western world. To mention some of them: the appearance of the painting *The Scream* from Edward Munch in the newspaper that the father is reading; the references to Magritte's hats, in this case symbolising the presence of Charles' mum everywhere; the imitation of Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* in the picture of the Albert during the second voice; the appearance of Merry Popping and King Kong.



Teacher's guidance:

It is important that students understand that the author has a purpose in choosing all these elements. A discussion about the cover and the different fonts can foster this understanding.

Before reading the book, children may be encouraged to answer questions about the layout of the front cover, the colours, and the title. They may predict whose voices they are going to read in the story. After that, we can make students notice the different titles and fonts and ask them a reason for these. What do they represent? Why are they different?

Students may be also encouraged to discover the cultural references in the text. Although they may not be able to find them all, they will notice the ones that are familiar to them. We can also show them the original paintings and make students compare them.

Understanding 2

Text comes in a variety of representational forms, incorporating a range of grammars and semiotic systems.

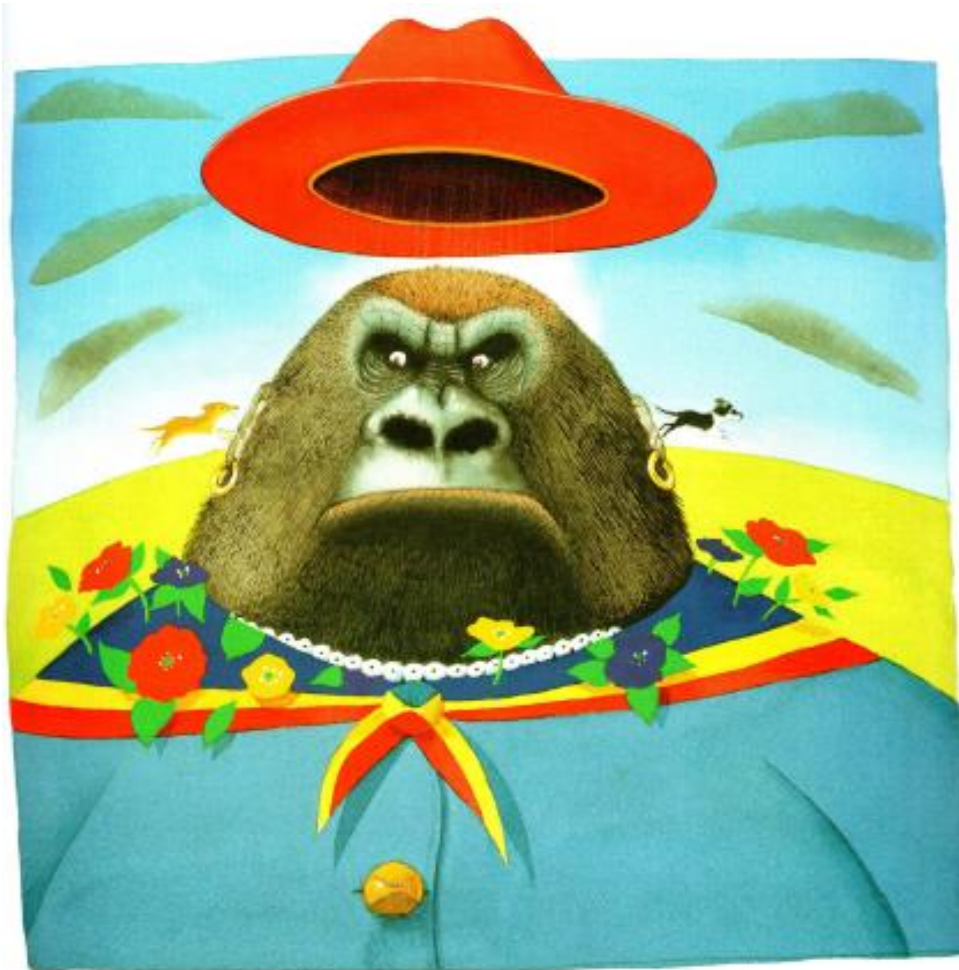
Each voice, as I have already stated, is represented with a different visual pattern. However, there is something else that characterizes each of these voices. Each perspective is shown in a different season. To convey this idea the use of colour and light has been used by the illustrator/author.



The perspective of the mother represents autumn with colours red, golden and yellow. These colours may represent her fortune and her security, as Anthony Browne proposes in his book *Jugar el juego de las formas* (2011). Besides the point of view of the mother is illustrated in a very realistic way and the writing style is very formal and correct, showing a type of life under control. Furthermore, the details of the background are of great significance. For example, in the following image we can see the straight lines of the buildings, the lamp post, and fence and we can notice a tree that is burning that may represent the bad mood of the lady.



Conversely, the point of view of Smudge is in summer with colours that evoke happiness. In this image we have an example of how perspective is used by the author to create meaning. This is how she sees Charles' mum. She was angry and in a superior position as we can tell from this picture.

**Teacher's guidance:**

In this case we should focus on the different representational forms that the book has. As Anstey (2002) indicates in her article: “The unusual formatting and layout combined with the pastiche of illustrative styles, fonts, and colours require the reader to draw on knowledge of a range of semiotic systems and grammars to read the text” (p. 450). We can guide students with questions that they can debate in groups about the significance of perspective, colours, the use of straight or curved lines. It would be a good idea to give different groups different images and ask them to describe the image and try to analyse the

different styles used. Furthermore, we can ask students how the text relate to the images. Does the grammar also reflect the different points of view? What about the vocabulary?

Understanding 3

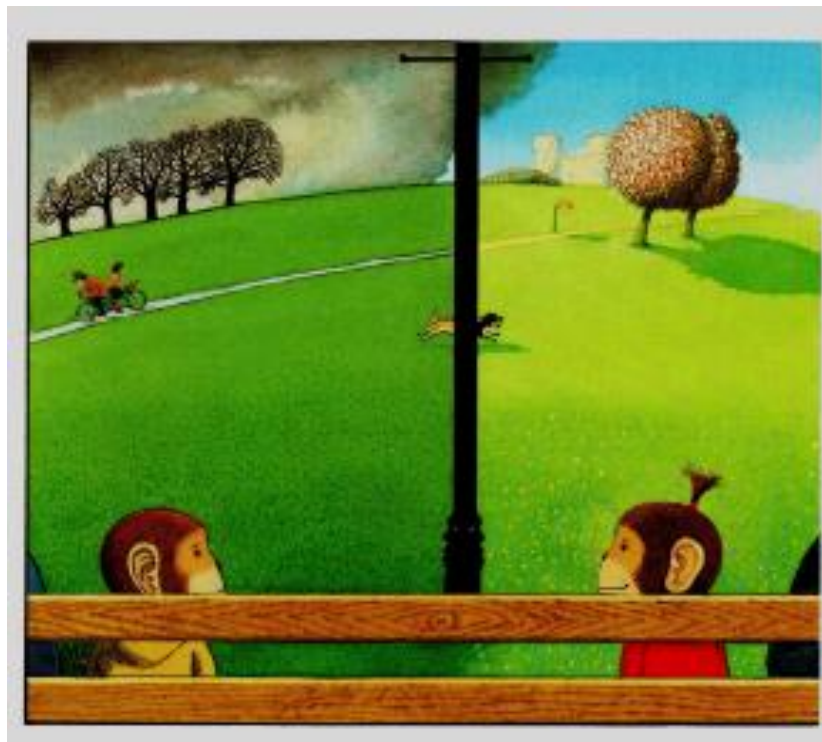
Changes in society and technology will continue to challenge and change texts and their representational forms.

First of all, in this book it happens the same as in the one analysed by Anstey (2002), *Black and White*. Her words can easily be adapted for *Voices in the park*:

Prior to the 1970s printing techniques would not have been sophisticated enough to achieve the fine reproduction and colour definition of the different styles of illustration represented in this book. Early typesetting techniques would not have allowed the unusual type layouts or the mix of fonts. (p.451)

Furthermore, this book deals with social changes. The book tries to demonstrate that social classes create barriers. In the story, the mother is shown with an aristocrat style and even in her grammar we can notice this. Her sentences are correct sentences, while the father uses colloquial expressions, the same as his daughter. The dogs play together since they do not recognise the social division, and the children find in each other someone to play with and have fun. Another resource to differentiate the social classes used by the author is the names of the dogs: Victoria and Albert.

There are two images that clearly exemplify this and in both images there is a lamp post that represent the social barrier.



Teacher's guidance:

We can discuss the technological advances that lead to this kind of books comparing old types of books and this one or different picture books.

Furthermore, this book can be used to talk about topics such as social and cultural diversity and how society may or may not accept it. We can ask students to write how the adults in the story and the children feel about social classes, or if they feel that there is a difference among them.

Understanding 4

There may be more than one way of reading or viewing a text depending on a range of contextual and other factors.

The book can be seen as having only one story or as having four different stories. The fact of having four narrators gives the reader the idea that there are four different stories. Furthermore, when the reader opens the book and finds four different titles, all written with a different font, that is a clue that there is no one central story. In this case, they are all parts of the same story but told from a different point of view.

The book gives the reader stories within a story, multiple reading to the same story and the reader here has the central role. Should the reader read them in order? Is it the same to start from the first voice or from the fourth voice? If she or he reads only one voice, is that enough?

Teacher's guidance:

Teachers may want to focus now on the importance of having these multiple stories in one book and how each story has its own meaning.

After analysing the four voices students can provide a profile of each character. Besides, they can try to rewrite the story but this time from an omniscient narrator creating only one unified story.

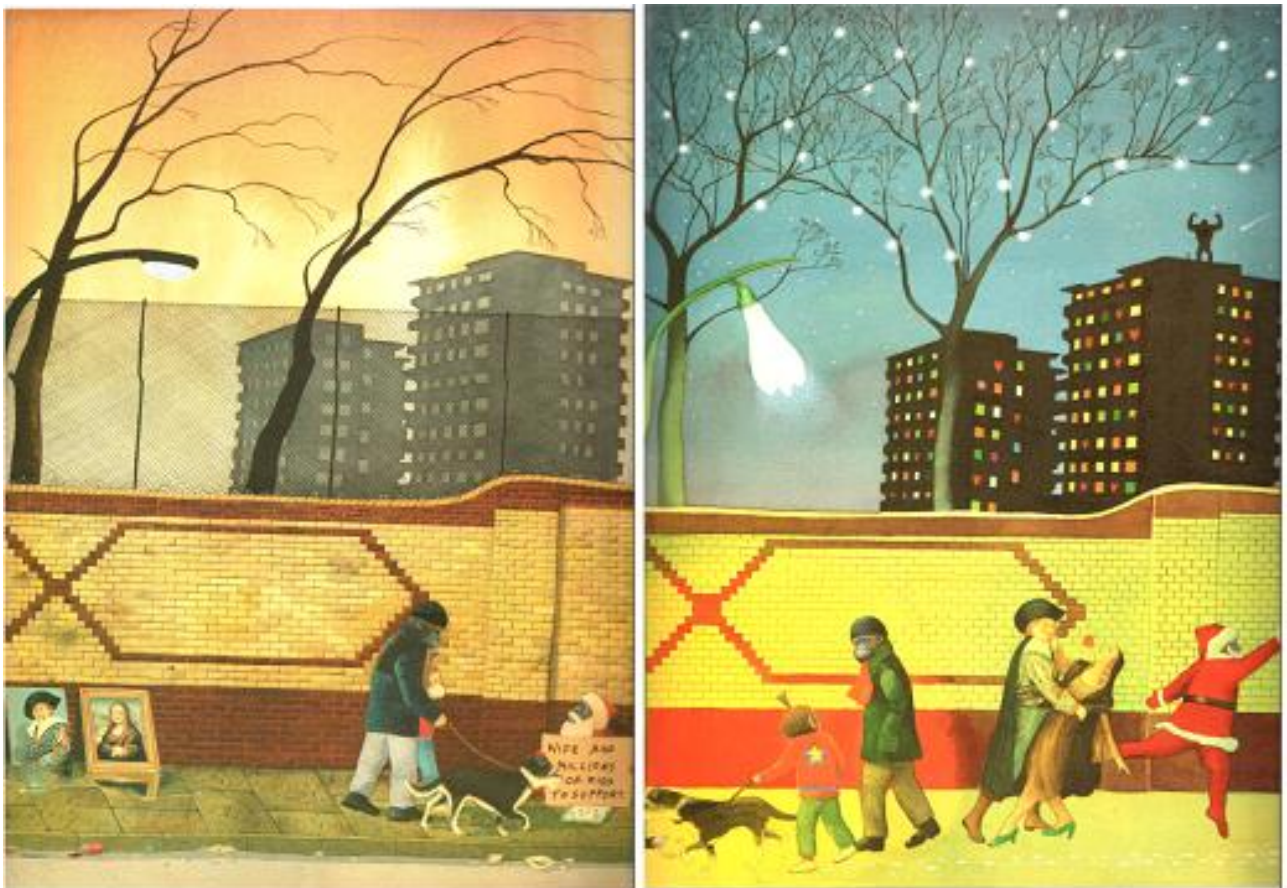


Understanding 5

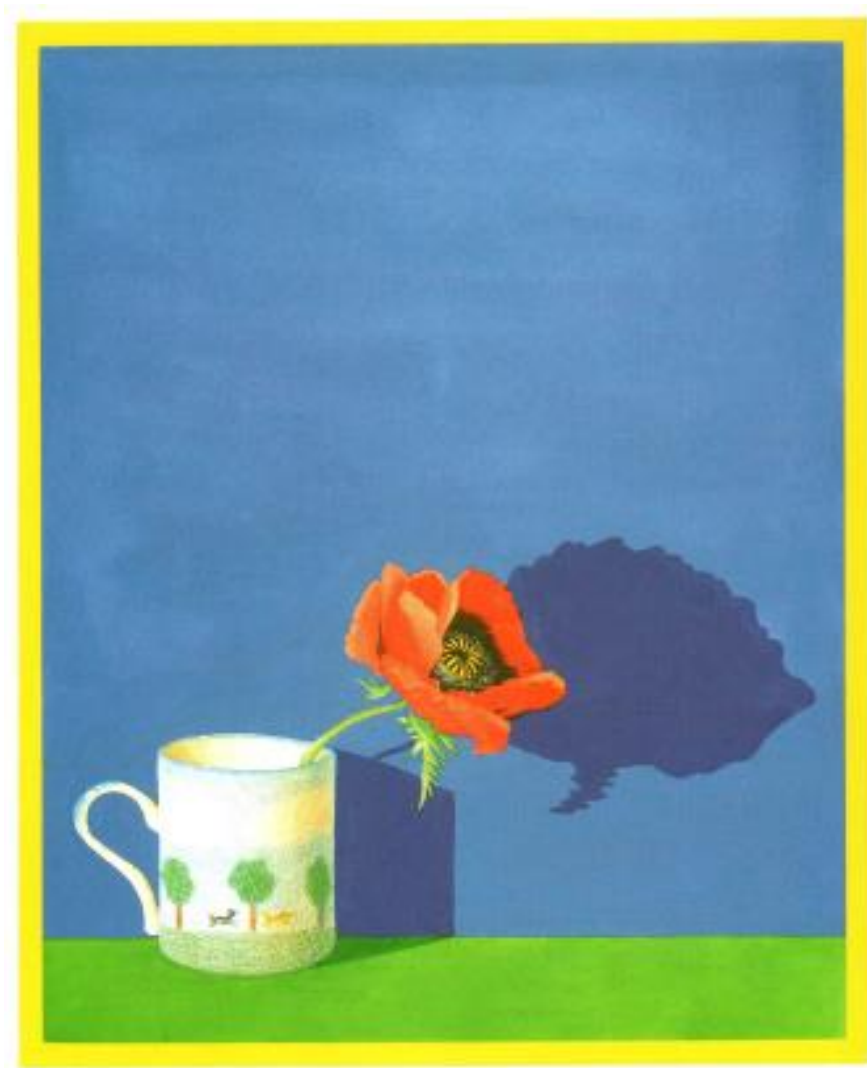
There is a need to consider the possible meanings of a text, how they are constructing the reader and the world around him or her in particular ways, and why this construction is being made.

The author has purposefully placed clues for the reader to understand and create his or her own meaning. The reader is being challenged to find these clues in the illustrations and in the text.

These two images from the father's voice are great examples for those clues given by the author. In the first image we can see a gloomy atmosphere. The curved lines in the trees and in the father position indicate sadness. The colours are sad. The Mona Lisa and the Laughing Cavalier have sad faces. We can even notice that Santa Clause is homeless there. It is a very sad portrait of the father's day. But, on the other hand, when they are coming back we can see the same place but in a totally different light. The lamp post is now a flower. Santa Claus, the Mona Lisa and the Laughing Cavalier from the paintings are dancing. The trees are shining and the windows from the buildings have hearts and stars shapes. In this case is the reader the one who has to decipher these elements to fulfil the story. These two images are presented with no text. Everything is said through the image.



Finally, another image that can provide different readings or understandings is the final one. Browne is well known for using shadows to give meaning to his illustrations. ³In fact, he states in his book *Jugar el juego de las formas* (2011): “I’ve always been attracted to work with shadows and reflects. Shadows are an excellent way of showing the hidden side of a character or they can show their real feelings” (p. 171). And this final image is a great example of this.



First of all the cup in this image has a detail: the dogs in the park evoking the walk to the park of that day. The flower is the one that Charles gives to Smudge before he leaves

³ My translation

in the park. And the shadow of this flower has the shape of a bubble of speech. It can represent different things. The interpretation is given by the reader. It may mean a fifth voice in the story or different voices that are not heard in this book.

Teacher's guidance:

Teachers here may want to make students notice that the multiple readings of an image can provide different meanings to the story. Students can be encouraged to analyse the final image. What do they think about the shadow? Does it mean anything?

Furthermore, students can write the fifth voice of the story presenting a new character and a new perspective. Maybe one of the dogs can be a good example.

Conclusion

After analysing the theoretical background underlying the picture book and analysing one of them, it can be said that picture books have a lot to offer to the EFL classroom.

Pictures, as multimodal texts, have proved to be a suitable tool to work from the perspective of new literacies. New literacies imply a new way of reading challenging the traditional role of teachers and students.

In this research, picture books are presented as a teaching/ learning tool that allows the teacher to cater for students' linguistic and cognitive needs. Besides, they allow students to become active participants in the process of reading. Students are the creators of meaning of the stories in which there is no one correct answer but many different interpretations to a story.

Picture books provide students with authentic language input and a rich visual experience. Furthermore, picture books are challenging since students can decide how to read them and they become highly motivational tools in the classroom.

It is fascinating to analyse all the modes we can find in one single book. As we have seen with the analysis of *Voices in the Park*, picture books open a lot of possibilities to work with reading comprehension.

The picture book should be a tool that makes the student think and reflect. As it has been said, in the picture book new different modes are converged; therefore, different skills are required from the students.

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