“Surprised!” Telling the pictures. Can the illustrations in picture books promote language acquisition?

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Abstract
The following article presents the findings of a re-analysis of data from two action research projects investigating the use of English picture books in Pre-school English classes in Portugal. Two picture books were used, each representing parallel and interdependent storytelling models. Audio tapescripts of the picture book read alouds were categorised according to the utterances prompted by the verbal and visual texts. Results show that foreign language acquisition is extended when both the verbal and visual texts of a picture book are used for language input and that children are more actively involved in meaning making. Implications are discussed.

Keywords
picture books, illustrations, pre-school, vocabulary

1. Picture books and the first language
Readers will be familiar with the object Anglo-Saxons call the picture book, and the Portuguese call ‘um álbum’ or ‘um livro ilustrado’ (Gomes 2003). There are many definitions of what a picture book is but my favourite is from the illustrator Uri Schulevitz (1985:15): a picture book ‘could not for example be read over the radio and be understood fully. In a picture book the pictures extend, clarify, complement, or take the place of words. Both the words and the pictures are “read”. It is this inter-animation between picture and word (Lewis 2001) which makes a picture book such a special thing.

This ability to tell a story through pictures and words, has led to picture books playing an important role in early literacy programmes. Research into first language (L1) acquisition, shows that the single most important activity for developing a basic understanding of literacy and its functions is by reading aloud to children using picture books (NAEYC. 1998). Research has highlighted how important this is at home (Ninio, 1983, Wells 1986), and at school during ‘read-alouds’ (Robins & Ehri 1994, McGee & Schickedanz 2007), stressing in particular, positive developments in vocabulary acquisition and story narrative (Elley 1989, Dickenson & Smith 1994, Neuman 1999). Research into their role in supporting second language acquisition, in particular vocabulary development is also available, (Collins 2005, Coledge 2005).
Quality illustrations in picture books allow children, who are still not reading words, to 'read' the story: the illustrations support their understanding through the visual representation of the words they are listening to. However illustrations in picture books inter-animate with the words in complex ways. The most simple of picture–word relationships, that of telling the same story is labelled 'parallel storytelling' by Agosto (1999: 267): the majority of picture books fall into this category. When pictures and words work together to tell the same narrative, parallel storytelling, they provide a very supportive learning platform, in particular for younger children. Golden (1990: 112) states ‘... when there is equality to the emphasis given to both text and illustration, when they support and reinforce each other, the reader has the opportunity to focus on the story as a whole and not become distracted by additional commentary’. Furnish (2002:11) adds that this ‘provides readers of any level with the opportunity to take away a shared minimum of understanding.’

The opposing type of picture–word inter-animation, makes the reader use both the pictures and words together to make meaning, each providing only part of the story, often filling in each other’s ‘gaps’. These picture books fall into the ‘interdependent storytelling’ category (Agosto, 1999: 267) and have become more and more common in modern day picture books. Agosto argues that interdependent storytelling provides more intellectual benefits for readers (1999: 278). Non-readers in particular are encouraged to listen and look to construct meaning, developing their language comprehension skills.

Research into how children use picture book illustrations to make meaning has become more extensive. Hughes (1998: 118) reports children being more perceptive than adults at ‘reading pictures’ and research by Arzipe & Styles (2003) documents how children make sense of very complex illustrations on many levels: their research looked in particular at illustrator styles. Sipe (2008) has recently outlined five categories for children’s response to picture books and several of these categories are dependent upon the children’s understanding of the illustrations.

2. Picture books and English as a foreign language

‘Storytelling’ is an accepted and widely used approach in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), ‘representing a holistic approach to language teaching and learning that places a high premium on children’s involvement with rich authentic uses of the foreign language’, (Cameron 2001:154). According to Garvie (1991:4-5) the communicative approach made it possible to bring story into the classroom. Wright (1995) and Garvie (1991), both focus on the use of storytelling per se, where as Ellis & Brewster (2002) and Mourão (2003) focus on storytelling with picture books, which in EFL literature are sometimes called ‘realbooks’ or ‘real picture books’, (Dunn, 2003:106).

The importance of illustrations in picture books in the EFL classroom is mentioned briefly by Cameron (2001:40) who describes children constructing meaning in their minds through the pictures, using a mental processing which she says ‘can be carried out in the first language, or some language-independent way, using what psychologists call ‘mentalese’”. Hsiu-Chih (2008:48) also stresses that illustrations stimulate the students’ imagination, and help them learn how to read pictures. Dunn (2008: 7) confirms that illustrations in picture books are not just for supporting understanding of language, but that they are instrumental in developing visual decoding skills. Mourão (2003: 5) encourages teachers to let children interact with a picture book, during the storytelling activity, using the illustrations to prompt language use.

Research by Read (2006:18) focuses on the teacher’s scaffolding techniques during read FL read alouds and describes the teacher interacting with the children, linking ‘the familiar with the new’, allowing them to use their previous knowledge, often in their L1 to their support their FL learning. Some of these comments are related to the illustrations, though Read’s discussion does not focus on this aspect in particular. Mourão (2006a:54-55) outlines how children use the illustrations in two different picture books to help either retell or actively make meaning. In a picture book with a simple repetitive narrative the children use the illustrations as ‘signs’ to predict what was coming next, and were successful in retelling the story using these signs. In a picture book with little repetition in the narrative, the children were unable to retell the story, but the illustrations helped them create meaning, often extending the picture book narrative based on the illustrations. Elster (1995) calls these extensions ‘importations’, often producing language which has nothing to do with the verbal text.
Concern with inter-animation of picture and word, which has gripped academics in the world of picture books for the last twenty years, has hardly touched the EFL world. References to visual text in picture books remain directed towards supporting understanding of the verbal text. Miyahara (2005: 23) makes a brief reference to the ‘interplay of words and pictures’. Linse identifies and discusses criterion for selecting picture books and includes reference to ‘context-embedded content’ and ‘context-reduced content’ (2006: 77), though she is more concerned with illustration details which do not match the verbal text. Bland on the other hand has written several articles, for teachers of primary aged children in EFL contexts, which highlight the importance of taking illustrations into consideration. She describes ‘multi-layered’ picture books promoting language use (2007a:35), and makes reference to using symbolic and iconic features together to make meaning, referring to picture books in the interdependent category (2007b:307). There is no empirical research in this area at all.

3. Parallel and interdependent picture books in pre-school EFL classrooms - a research project

From the literature review we can conclude that in L1 contexts, reading picture books to young children promotes, among other things, vocabulary development; with a greater possibility for talk and therefore further vocabulary development if there is inter-animation between pictures and words. In FL contexts storytelling is an accepted approach, but there is little research to confirm that picture books actually provide for vocabulary development, and no research to date of how the relationship between the pictures and words affects the FL learner.

With this in mind, data from action research projects, using a parallel and an interdependent model of picture book, was revisited with a view to discovering if FL acquisition is extended when both verbal and visual texts of a picture book are used for language input and which kinds of word - picture dynamics within a picture book are more successful for promoting this acquisition.

The picture books used were 'Peekaboo Friends!' (Su 2001), which demonstrates parallel storytelling, and 'Goodnight Gorilla' (Rathman 1994) which demonstrates interdependent storytelling. These picture books had been used in previous small-scale action research projects: 'Peekaboo Friends!' in 2004, resulting in published research (Mourão 2006a and Mourão 2006b), and 'Goodnight Gorilla' in 2006, which was used as a basis for an oral presentation only.

For these action research projects the picture books were integrated into 10 minute read aloud sessions, at the end of twice-weekly 30 minute long English lessons, with two different groups of 25 pre-school children, ages ranging from 52 – 63 months. Each book was reread over a period of two to three weeks, and each of these re-readings was audio recorded. The recordings were transcribed. 'Peekaboo Friends!' was reread a total of 14 times, ten by the Portuguese pre-school teacher, and four by the English teacher - the recordings were made during the English teacher's re-readings only. 'Goodnight Gorilla' was reread a total of five times by the English teacher only. Each book was left in the classroom for the children to browse through between English lessons.

The resulting tape-scripts were re-analysed, with a view to categorising the children's verbal utterances, considered natural units of speech by Crystal (1991:405), prompted by the visual texts (illustrations) and the verbal texts (words) in the picture books.

The picture books were fairly similar in theme and language: both included animals familiar to the children and both used a repeated expression. A brief description of each picture book follows:

**Peekaboo Friends!**
This is a typical sixteen-page picture book, which falls within the category of a 'lift the flap book'. It has brightly coloured, child friendly illustrations of a baby, Robbie, and his stuffed toys playing a game of hide and seek, and each of the toys is to be found under a flap. It is verbally and visually cumulative, repeating the toys found in the previous pages with a simple refrain “Robbie and giraffe are looking for their friends.” And the reply: “Peekaboo, it’s penguin!” etc. The animals being searched for are: giraffe, penguin, puppy, rabbit and donkey. A kitten appears in all the visual texts, but goes unmentioned in the verbal text, until the last double page spread, when the verbal text changes to incorporate her looking for Robbie and the toys, “Kitten is looking for everyone. Peek a boo - here we are!” The unmentioned kitten brings a very slight sniff of interdependent storytelling into the picture book!
**Good Night Gorilla**

Atypical of a picture book, this has 40 pages, and won several awards shortly after its publication in the early 90’s. Horn Book Magazine (1995) gave it a starred review describing it thus, “The many amusing, small details...as well as the tranquil tone of the story make this an outstanding picture book.”

Of the seventeen double page spreads, seven are wordless. The text appears in speech bubbles, and consists of the following exclamation and eight nouns, Good Night, gorilla, elephant, lion, hyena, giraffe, armadillo, dear and zoo. The verbal text takes us on the evening rounds with the zookeeper, who calmly says “Good Night” to his animals, and makes his way home, gets into bed, says a final “Good night” to his wife, rolls over and goes to sleep. The visual text shows us a gorilla taking the zookeeper’s keys and opening all the cages. The zoo animals follow the zookeeper home, walk into his house and settle down to sleep in his bedroom, much to his wife’s dislike. When she realises they are in her bedroom, she takes them all back to the zoo. The twist to the story is the gorilla, who appears to be allowed to return home, snuggle into bed and sleep between the zookeeper and his wife! There are dozens of extra details to see in the illustrations, including a mouse and a banana, miniature stuffed toys of all the animals in their cages, keys which match the colours of the cages, photographs on walls, a and floating pink balloon.

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**4. Results**

Both picture books enabled the children to successfully acquire language and use it to retell the story as a group, chanting the verbal text with the English teacher. Both picture books gave the children a good deal of pleasure. But there were visible differences between the amount of language that was generated by the children in both Portuguese and English in relation to the visual texts.

**4.1 Verbal utterances and the visual text in English and in Portuguese**

The overall number of verbal utterances, prompted in English and Portuguese, was calculated per reading. As you can see from the results (Table 1), the children reacted verbally in both English and Portuguese to the picture book illustrations. Despite the difference in length the verbal utterances in rereads continue to be fairly substantial in ‘Goodnight Gorilla’, where as they drop dramatically in ‘Peekaboo Friends!’. We can also see an increase in English utterances in comparison to Portuguese utterances in ‘Goodnight Gorilla’.

It should be noted here that many of these utterances would be considered single word utterances, used to label parts of the illustration, the majority being nouns. This is consistent with research in L1 picture book reading contexts and language acquisition in very young children, where labelling, in particular of nouns, is considered to be more frequent than that of verbs (Ard & Beverly 2004).

**Table 1**

Verbal utterances prompted from the visual text  
Eng=English; Port=Portuguese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>(Parallel) Peekaboo Friends!</th>
<th>(Interdependent) Good Night Gorilla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Port</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº1</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Verbal Utterances in English from the verbal text

The verbal utterances in English are fairly even (Table 2), despite appearing substantially higher for ‘Goodnight Gorilla’, which is understandable as the book is longer. ‘Peekaboo Friends!’ peeked in reread n° 3, and maintained this number in the fourth reread, by which time the children were chanting the verbal text very easily as a group. This could also be due to the fact this picture book was read and number of times by the pre-school teacher, so the children had heard it a total of 14 times.

In contrast to the visual text, the verbal utterances prompted by the verbal text tended to be chunks of unanalysed language, formulaic expressions (Lightbown & Spada 1999), which have been heard so often that the children acquire and use them in context, “Peekabook, it’s Teddy” being a typical example.

### Table 2

Verbal utterances prompted from the visual text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>(Parallel) Peekaboo Friends!</th>
<th>(Interdependent) Good Night Gorilla</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nº1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº2</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.3 Verbal Utterances in English from the visual and verbal texts

When comparing the total number of verbal utterances in English to both visual and verbal texts (Table 3), we can clearly see that ‘Goodnight Gorilla’ prompted a superior or equal amount of English in all re-readings, the visual text providing a considerable amount of these English utterances.

4.4 Known and new language

If we were to go one step further and look at the kind of language prompted through the two picture book texts, we would see that ‘Goodnight Gorilla’ enabled children to use English words they already knew, in context, which is one of the reasons picture books are used in EFL classes. Both visual and verbal texts prompted the use of new words or chunks, although because the verbal text was mirrored by the visual text, it is difficult to know whether the children were prompted by the visual or the verbal.
Table 3
Total of all verbal utterances prompted in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>(Parallel)</th>
<th>(Parallel)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peekaboo</td>
<td>Good Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends!</td>
<td>Gorilla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Visual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº4</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nº5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If we look at the table 4 below, using data from ‘Goodnight Gorilla’, we can see that in all but one case, that of the chunk “black and white”, the visual text prompted children to use nouns which bore no relation to the verbal text. These were words the children used either spontaneously, or after talking about the visual text as a group. The utterances labelled as Known are the words/chunks the children already knew from previous stories or English activities during the English classes. Those labelled New are the words/chunks generated from the verbal or visual story texts after they had been discussed in Portuguese and recast in English by the English teacher. The verbal text was chanted and chorused by most children with little difficulty.

Table 4
“Goodnight Gorilla” utterances from visual text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Known</th>
<th>New</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Black, white, banana, one, two, three, four, five, monkey</td>
<td>Mouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Black, pink, ball, bananas, rat, black and white</td>
<td>Zookeeper, mouse, key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ball, surprised</td>
<td>Zookeeper, balloon, mouse, zoo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ball, banana, surprised, six</td>
<td>Balloon, zookeeper, house, wife, ballon, mouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Green, seven, surprised</td>
<td>Zookeeper, escaped, balloon, mouse</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In comparison, ‘Peekaboo Friends!’ prompted just ‘socks’ and ‘cat’ from the illustrations, both known words. Once again, for the verbal text itself, it is not possible to identify whether the children were prompted by the visual or the verbal texts. But many of them were able to chant the chunk “… looking for their friends”, which undoubtedly came from the repetition of the verbal text.
4.5 Creating meaning

Finally, if we were to look at how the ‘Goodnight Gorilla’ group created meaning from one of the wordless double page spreads. Pages 24 – 25 are both completely black, except for a small pair of round eyes to the top of page 25. By bringing all their knowledge and understanding of storytelling and language, which included inter-textual references to previously read picture books, the children were able to arrive at their own verbal text for this spread.

**Key**
EngT = English teacher; C = child; CC = children; Ed = Pre-school teacher.

**Session 1**
Turn the page
Silence

EngT: São de quem?
C: Olha! Aqui há branco.
C: Giraffe?
EngT: Do you think they belong to the giraffe?
C: White!
C: Elefante?
EngT: The elephant? No, no! (Turning page)... the wife!

Note that the child in line 02 prompts the child in line 05 to use the word ‘white’. Line 03 and 06 show children thinking about which animal the eyes belong to, they have chosen giraffe and elephant, both big animals, as the eyes are high up on the page.

**Session 2**
Turn the page

CC: Ha, ha, ha, ha!
C: A rapariga!
EngT: Oh, ho! É a mulher, não é? A mulher dele!
C: Yeah! Black and white!
C: Ela vai ver por causa do gorila!.
C: Ela está com medo!
EngT: Ela vai ver quem é que diz boa noite, não é? Achas que ela está com medo?
CC: Sim!
Ed: Ela está frightened!
EngT: Frightened. Yeah? Is she frightened?

Line 09 and 12 show different children successfully predicting who the eyes belong to and why they are on the page, and typical of children in pre-school. Line 11 is a perfect example of inter-textuality - the children had just finished a book called ‘Black and White’, and so a page in black and white only prompted this response. Line 13 begins the journey to creating the eventual verbal text, a response to the wide eyes being afraid. The children had recently been playing with emotion words and knew the word for frightened in English hence the reason the pre-school teacher prompted them in line 16.

**Session 3**
Turn the page (Page 24 – 25)

C: Eh, he, he!
C: É a mulher!
C: ... a mulher!
EngT: That’s’ right it’s his wife! The zookeeper’s wife. She’s surprised!
C: Ela está com medo!
EngT: Do you think she’s frightened?
C: Sim!
EngT: Yeah! She’s not surprised, she’s frightened?

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Turn the page (page 26 – 27)

EngT: Oh!
C: Surprised!
EngT: Surprised!
Ed: Um olho surprised!
C: Onde está o balloon?

Lines 19 and 20 demonstrate children again confidently predicting, with line 21 from the English teacher recasting the utterances into English. The English teacher also brought in the word surprised, which was actually a mistake, as she had meant to say frightened, reminding the children of what they had discussed during the previous reading session. However when the page is turned, and the children see the woman looking at the gorilla, with his cheeky smile, they spontaneously call out surprised (line 27). Line 30 reminds us of one child’s obsession with the floating balloon, which appears in all but five of the double page spreads!

**Session 4**
Turn the page

C: Surprised!
EngT: Surprised! That’s’ right she’s surprised! After all those goodnights!
C: O sorriso!
Line 31 brings the previous reading session’s surprised to the page. And line 33 demonstrates a child predicting why she is surprised - because she sees the gorilla’s cheeky smile when she turns on the lights!

**Session 5**
Turn the page
CC: Surprised!

The verbal text for that double page spread, became the single word surprised! But it’s enough as the children are eager to see the gorilla’s cheeky grin on the next page.

Language acquisition is defined as a process of natural assimilation, Krashen (1981) described it as involving intuition and subconscious learning, and is the result of real interactions in which the learner is an active participant. Through meaningful interactions, using both the children’s L1 and the FL, the children have successfully acquired and used English words they are familiar with in several natural contexts, one of these being during story telling, demonstrated here. Bruner describes negotiable transactions (1986:76), with support from Vygotsky’s ideas on language acquisition he writes, ‘it is in the nature of things that the aspirant speaker must “borrow” the knowledge and consciousness of the tutor to enter (and develop) a language.” He refers to the ‘book reading routines’ he investigated, concluding that through these meaningful parent-child interactions children are taken to the ‘growing edge of their competence’ (1986:77). Cosy parent-child read alouds are nothing like classroom read alouds, but we can make comparisons and learn from the way a caring parent scaffolds a child. With the help of the teacher, and more able peers, the children have created meaning, using language they already knew and language they encountered through the picture book text.

5. Conclusion
The results give language teachers something to think about. From a look at the kind of language that emerged from the two picture books, it does appear that an interdependent picture book model provides a richer context for language learning and use. From a look at the triadic interaction, child – book – teacher, there are obvious implications for the way children can create meaning together, with the help of the teacher and their peers.
This research highlights the need to look more closely at how we approach using picture books in the EFL classroom. Firstly, in relation to the kinds of picture books we select. At present teachers tend to select a parallel model, providing for a possibly safer learning environment, to the detriment of a richer learning one. Secondly, in relation to how we use these picture books to make meaning through discussion around the illustrations. The tape-scripts show that both the children and the teachers involved used L1 and the FL to reach a meaning consensus. We need to understand better how the two languages can scaffold each other in this meaning making process. Finally, in relation to how often we reread picture books to a group of children. It took the ‘Goodnight Gorilla’ group five sessions to create their meaning for a wordless double page spread.

I would like to suggest that as teachers who use picture books in our classes we need to understand better how the verbal and the visual texts inter-animate to produce a narrative. We should rethink which picture books we use in our classrooms, and attempt to move from playing safe to selecting titles that promote thinking from looking and listening or reading, enabling discussion and more language use. Finally we should be retelling the same picture book over a short period of time allowing children numerous opportunities to engage with the visual and verbal texts.

References


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