



# Children as meaning makers: interpretation and knowledge transfer prompted by the visual

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## Reference

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## Resumen

Con la intención de describir como los niños usan las ilustraciones de los libros álbum para crear significados, este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio empírico (Mourão, 2012), que investiga como niños portugueses utilizan su lengua materna, el portugués (L1), y el inglés como lengua extranjera (L2) para fomentar el desarrollo de un repertorio lingüístico especificado culturalmente (Lüdi, 2006) al interactuar con los libros álbum en inglés. En particular, se centra en experiencias individuales en L1, fijadas en la cultura visual del niño, y en experiencias de aula compartidas por los niños en la L2. Se comparan las respuestas de tres grupos de niños haciendo hincapié en cómo sus memorias icónicas individuales y colectivas mediaron en sus repertorios lingüísticos para crear distintas interpretaciones y narrativas en torno a las ilustraciones.

## Palabras clave

ilustraciones, repertorio lingüístico, interpretación, transferencia de conocimiento

## Abstract

With a view to describing how children used the illustrations in picturebooks to create significances, this paper shares the results of empirical research (Mourão, 2012), which investigated how Portuguese children used their mother tongue Portuguese (L1) and English as a foreign language (L2) to support the development of a culturally specific linguistic repertoire while interacting with English picturebooks. It focuses, in particular, on individual experiences in the L1, anchored in the child's visual culture, and the children's shared classroom experiences in the L2. It compares the responses of three groups of children emphasizing how their individual and communal iconic memories mediated their linguistic repertoires to create diverse interpretations and narratives around the illustrations.

## Keywords

illustrations, linguistic repertoire, interpretation, knowledge transfer

## Introduction

Picturebooks are multimodal objects (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) combining picture and word and when used in a classroom provide multiple affordances through these two modes for socially mediated meaning making and thus language development (Vygotsky, 1978). In classrooms where English is learned as a second or foreign language, picturebooks are considered appropriate, authentic resources for language learning. They contain rich forms of the target language and the visual text is said to stimulate imagination and develop visual literacy and art appreciation skills. However, there is little overt recognition of the use of the illustrations in picturebooks to support the development of the L2.

Bland has critically discussed the role of illustrations in picturebooks, purporting their influence in developing four different literacies, "visual literacy"; "literary literacy"; "cultural literacy" as well as "functional literacy" (2007:10-12) recognizing the language learning opportunities afforded



by the pictures therein. Mourão (2006; 2011) has consistently recommended using picturebooks with more complex picture-word dynamic to challenge learners to use both the pictures and the words in a transactional sense (Rosenblatt, 1995), thus valuing the children's individual experiences in the creation of significances, claiming that illustrations afford rich opportunities for language use, and thus development.

## 1. The study

The aim of the study was to understand how illustrations in picturebooks provided affordances for language development in a foreign language context. Following the interpretative paradigm of qualitative research, children, whose L1 was Portuguese, were observed interacting with English picturebooks of different picture-word dynamics, with or without a repetitive verbal text during English activities. The picturebooks used in the study were, *Just like Jasper* (Inkpen & Butterworth), *Good Night, Gorilla!* (Rathmann) and *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins).

The English activities took place twice a week lasting for thirty minutes each, amounting to approximately 40 hours exposure to the L2 in the classroom over one year. Three pre-schools in central Portugal were selected as convenience samples and a total of 64 children, between the ages of 56 and 79 months, participated in the project. The children had not yet been officially taught to read in their L1 or L2.

Unstructured observations occurred over a period of five months (January – May 2009) during two instances for each of the three picturebooks in the study:

- Instance 1: during seven teacher-led repeated read alouds (RRAs) with the whole class group, which occurred at a specific time during the English activity.
- Instance 2: during independent, out of class, small group retells when the children were encouraged to retell the picturebook to their class English puppet.

Each instance was filmed and the recordings were transcribed to become the corpus. During the transcription process, the unit of analysis became the “utterance” considered a unit of activity, which included speech (L1 and L2), visible bodily action or a combination of the two modalities. Once transcribed the spontaneous utterances were marked and categorized. This paper discusses results related to the RRAs only, which were analysed following a grounded theory of literary understanding (Sipe, 2000) and specific attention has been paid to the way in which individual and communal iconic memories were shown to mediate the children's responses through their linguistic repertoires in relation to language development.

## 2. Results

Sipe's (2000) grounded theory of literary understanding relates the children's responses to three literary impulses, hermeneutic, personal and aesthetic. The responses which permit a greater understanding of how children used illustrations and iconic memories fell within the hermeneutic impulse, demonstrated through the intertextual enactments, and the personal impulse, shown through a personal enactment. The personal response was calculated between 2% and 7% of all responses and the intertextual response was calculated at being under 3% of the responses. Despite being small in number, both these responses were indicative of some very interesting references which are pertinent to this paper, related to iconic representation within and around the picturebooks.

### 2.1 Personal responses related to illustrations

The personal response related to the visual text was prompted by the iconic relevance of the experience. Many of the scenes shown through the illustrations induced children's sharing of experiences, some experiences contributed to group discussions, a trip to the zoo for example (during *Good Night, Gorilla!*); others did not, but they all brought the children emotionally closer to the picturebook through the sharing and expanding of experiences. Sipe describes these seemingly trivial personal connections as “the crucial foundation” (2008:153) for later more sophisticated literary interpretation.

Figure 1 is an example of a personal iconic connection which remained an isolated comment while sharing *Good Night, Gorilla!*. It occurred while the children were looking at opening 10:



Figure1: School 01, Good Night, Gorilla!,  
opening 10, RRA7

	Original	Translation
Fernando	<i>O mouse está a dormir na gaveta</i>	<i>The mouse is sleeping in the drawer</i>
Ricardo	<i>É a gaveta das cuecas</i>	<i>It's the knicker drawer</i>

The comment from Ricardo was not really meant for anyone, he was talking to himself, confirming that in his life that drawer held his underwear - Ricardo was connecting with a visual icon in his own personal way.

Additionally, other visual elements cemented a personal understanding of certain aspects of the illustration, as well as forged links between knowledge and understanding of the world already acquired. The following example, shown in Figure 2, depicts how a group of children talked their way around an illustration which showed some signposts.

	Original	Translated
Ruben	<i>Aquilo que está ali na porta . é isto [comes to book and points to the signs]</i>	<i>That there on the door . it's this [comes to book and points to the signs]</i>
Teacher	<i>Wow. o quê isto sabes?</i>	<i>Wow. what is it do you know?</i>
Maria	<i>É uma torneira</i>	<i>It's a tap</i>
Martim	<i>É as setas onde eles estão</i>	<i>It's the signposts for where they are</i>
Júlio	<i>Se não tem não tem setas as pessoas não sabem o:</i>	<i>If there aren't there aren't signposts people don't know:</i>
Teacher	<i>:O caminho não é?</i>	<i>:The way that's right</i>
Júlio	<i>Pois não sabem onde é que estão os outros</i>	<i>Yeah they don't know where the others are</i>
	<i>(-)</i>	<i>(-)</i>
Miguel	<i>Na estrada também tem setinhas para indicar o sítio dos bombeiros o hospital</i>	<i>On the road there are also signs to show the way to the fire station the hospital</i>

Figure 2: School 02, Good Night,  
Gorilla!, opening 02, RRA 5

As we can see from this example, Ruben and Maria were not able to decipher the illustration, but once Martim had labelled the objects as signposts (setas) they became the iconic representation of all signposts in Miguel's experience and he was able to connect his prior understanding of their function with those he saw in the illustration.

In both these examples children's comments came after a number of repeated exposures to the picturebook in class, in RRA7 and RRA5, and show that repeated exposure to picturebooks not only help children pick up the verbal text (Dunn, 2012), but also enable and foster the appearance of discussion and comments which show children are both questioning and connecting via the iconic representations shown in the visual text in a number of different ways.

## 2.2 Intertextual responses related to the illustrations

The intertextual response is concerned with connections between the picturebook and another text, such as another picturebook, a film, a television programme, or a culturally recognized product like a rhyme, or a chant. Sipe describes children using an intertextual response to predict, compare and interpret a story, "the text is understood in the context of other texts, functioning as an element in a matrix of unrelated texts" (2000:268).

For the purpose of this study, the intertextual response was divided into two sub-categories: the children's L1 world, a world outside the classroom English sessions represented by the references made to other texts experienced through the L1; the children's L2 world, where references refer to texts experienced in their English activities.

### 2.2.1 Other texts in the L1 world

An example that derived directly from the illustrations in the picturebook came during *Just like Jasper*, when upon seeing Jasper the cat dancing with a doll on opening 08, a child in each of the Schools 02 and 03, compared the scene to *Cinderella*. When asked to justify her comparison, the child in School 03 said, *Porque a Cinderella está a dançar com o príncipe e vai deixar cair o o sapato* (trans: Because Cinderella is dancing with the prince and she is going to let her shoe fall).

In relation to this comment a second child made a further intertextual reference to the shoe, calling it a "*sapatinho do crystal*" (trans: little crystal shoe), after *Cinderella's* glass slipper. This particular reference appeared repeatedly in RRAs 3 to 6, however due to the teacher rephrasing



the response into the L2 by session 7, the child had begun to use the L2 label “shoe”, there was thus a move across the picturebook from the L1 world to the L2 world.

During *Good Night, Gorilla!*, children in Schools 02 and 03, recognized the toy elephant in opening 03 and made the intertextual connection to Babar. School 03 in particular commented repeatedly throughout all the RRAs, often just by pointing and saying “*Olha a Babar*” (trans: Look Babar). This particular connection was a deliberate visual ploy by Rathmann, the picturebook creator, to include a culturally iconic referent to Babar, so the children in these two schools acted as implied readers (Iser, 1978), filling the gaps created by the autor/illustrator. However, Ernie from *Sesame Street* (a popular North American children's programme) was also illuded to in the illustration in opening 06, yet remained unnoticed - evidently not part of the children's visual culture and iconic memories.

A child in School 01 gave a surprising but astute response during RRA 1 of *Rosie's Walk*, when on opening 03 he suddenly called out “*Como o Tom and Jerry*” (Trans: It's like Tom and Jerry). He recognized the slapstick humour depicted in the famous American cartoon *Tom and Jerry*. The irony in many of Tom's failed plots to catch Jerry is visible in the image of the fox in mid-air about to hit his nose on the rake.

### 2.2.2 Other texts from the L2 world

For the purposes of this paper, I shall focus solely upon the connections made through the illustrations in the picturebooks, which appeared to prompt the forging of links between the children's ability to relate new learning to old.

School 03 referred to the sun in the illustration in openings 6 and 7 of *Rosie's Walk*. The iconic representation prompted the use of a label, learned through a chant. Thus, during RRA1 a child called out, “*Sandie estou a ver o sun a desaparecer*” (trans: Sandie I can see the sun disappearing). This is an example of a child successfully establishing a link between two different contexts and using the L2 word he already knew to create a personal significance.

This second example is a little more complex: School 01 had experienced the picturebook *Brown Bear Brown Bear what do you see?* (Martin Jr. & Carle) earlier in the school year. This picturebook shows a green frog on opening 5 and the verbal text reads “Green frog, green frog, what do you see?” Upon seeing two green frogs jumping on openings 4 and 5 of *Rosie's Walk*, several children in the group took the formulaic phrase “green frog”, and, combining the iconic with the symbolic, used it to refer to the frogs from RRA 2 through to RRA 7. In addition, several children went on to make word combinations (Saxton, 2010), using the formulaic phrase “green frog” plus the verb, “jump”, which they had also been exposed to during activities in the L2. These demonstrations of language use were prompted by children making connections between the different visual texts they had experienced and indicate that they are transferring knowledge from one iconic context to another in so doing creating a web of understanding, which contributed very successfully to their L2 development.

### 2.3 Linguistic repertoires and knowledge transfer

The notion of linguistic repertoire, “the totality of linguistic resources which speakers may employ in a significant social interaction” (Blom & Gumperz, 2000:104) values the language of individuals during an authentic classroom experience, as well as recognizing a plurilingual didactics. If by accepting that practical communication and social action come together through a learner's individual linguistic repertoire we can see the function of the two worlds described above, the L1 world and the L2 world, as serving manifold purposes in relation to knowledge transfer depending on the visual. Let us therefore consider the learners' linguistic repertoire moving in multiple directions depending on how it is affected by iconic representations in and around the picturebook. When the visual within the L2 picturebook prompts a personal experience, one that serves as a powerful emotional connection between child and picturebook, a link is made in the L1 prompted by the picturebook illustration and moves from the picturebook to the L1 world. The L1 socio-cultural iconic world in which the learners sit also acts as a reference enabling children to connect previous knowledge of these icons to the picturebook they are encountering. An example would be *Babar* and *Cinderella*. Here the L1 world forges an association with the picturebook. However, the example of *Cinderella* actually



created a permanent bridge across the two worlds, for it afforded the opportunity for several children to move from the L1 reference (*sapatinho de crystal*) to an L2 referent (shoe). The children's L1 world therefore enabled a flow of knowledge transfer into the picturebook creating the possibility of moving across into the L2 world using the illustrations as a vehicle for L2 language development.

When regarding how the children's L2 world interacted with the picturebook illustrations, the movement seems to be almost solely from their L2 world into the picturebook. We saw from the examples how children's symbolic understanding of L2 words was prompted by the illustrations in the picturebook, however these L2 words came from the L2 world thus supporting knowledge transfer from one context to the other through the L2. We saw this happening in particular when children's interpretations of the illustrations were supported through their creative use of formulaic language previously encountered in other contexts.

## Conclusion

We can conclude that the children in this study successfully used the illustrations in a picturebook for interpretation and knowledge transfer. The implications for how these children successfully used their linguistic repertoires to support their interpretations of iconic representations within and around a picturebook are far reaching. For L2 educators and mediators this leads to reconsidering how the children's L1 is used during shared reading activities, as well as how often a picturebook is reread. It was evident from the results that the children's verbalized interpretations took time and could occur during any of the seven RRAs. Additionally as mediators we should be moving away from a singular focus on the verbal text of a picturebook and accept that there will be a "two-way 'transactional' relationship" (Rosenblatt, 1995:ix) between the child and the picturebook using both modes of representation, picture and word.

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