

Demystifying the read-aloud



Gail Ellis and Sandie Mourão discuss the role of reading picturebooks in early English language learning.

As Edie Garvie pointed out, back in 1991, stories carry life's messages and afford 'meaning potential without which the learning of language is rigid', and the linguistic and broader educational benefits of stories for children in pre-primary and primary education have been recognised in ELT since the 1980s. However, in many ELT handbooks, 'storytelling' is often used as a generic term to refer to 'telling' stories *without* a book, or to 'reading' stories aloud *from* a book (see Figure 1) and these verbs are often used interchangeably. This can be misleading and can result in misunderstanding, as *telling* and *reading* stories are two different activities which require different competences.

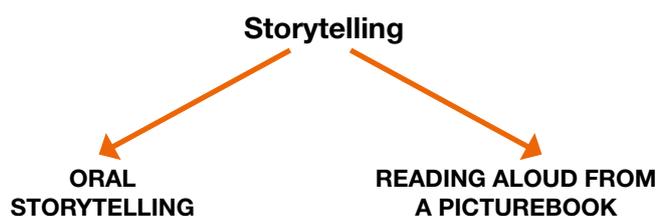


Figure 1 'Storytelling' as a generic term

Oral storytelling

Oral storytelling is the telling of a story learnt by heart. This can put great demands on memory and language skills for teachers, especially for those who are not proficient speakers of English. As a result, the language used may vary on each retelling, which does not facilitate the acquisition of formulaic sequences or chunks, as children need exposure to consistent repetition and recycling to be able to transfer these to other situations. In addition, limited visual support makes greater demands on a child's ability to concentrate and listen, in order to access meaning. Without the effective use of mime and gesture to support understanding, children may lose motivation.

Reading aloud

Reading aloud is linked to a physical object, the picturebook, which is permanent – the words and pictures have been carefully crafted by their creator(s) and remain constant. The teacher has access to the words, which enables them to read the story aloud more confidently. The pictures can support the children's understanding – or challenge them to interpret meaning if they do not always synchronise with the words.

During each re-reading, or when the child browses through the book, the words and pictures are always the same, a consistency which enables the child to match and rematch meaning to the verbal and visual texts to identify, repeat and eventually use or adapt formulaic sequences, patterns or chunks of language to situations of their own choice.

Both telling and reading activities offer valid teaching and learning opportunities, but they involve the development of different teacher competences and offer different affordances for the child. In this article, we look at the picturebook *read-aloud* – first defining the picturebook as an aesthetic object, and then discussing the teacher competences necessary for an effective picturebook read-aloud.

What is a picturebook?

Barbara Bader provided a widely-used definition of a picturebook: *'A picturebook is text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historic document; and foremost, an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing pages, and on the drama of the turning of the page. On its own terms, its possibilities are limitless.'*

In this definition, Bader helps us see that picturebooks are *compound* in nature because they are dependent upon pictures and words to create meaning: it is the *interdependence* of what the pictures show and the words tell that makes these books so special, for both modalities are part of the meaning-making process. Bader's definition includes reference to design, as the picturebook is, as Uri Shulevitz puts it, *'integrated into a single organic entity whose parts are in harmony with each other and the whole'*, producing a unified aesthetic object incorporating all the peritextual features (ie the format, front and back covers, endpapers, title pages, copyright and dedication pages). Skipping or omitting these parts in order to get on with the story results in overlooking vital information that contributes to the meaning-making process.

What is storytelling?

As Gail Ellis and Jean Brewster point out, the term 'storytelling' is also used to refer to a pedagogical approach to language teaching which involves the planning of a learning sequence in the form of a mini-syllabus around a picturebook. It incorporates the before, during and after stages that are associated with any skills-based activity. Picturebook read-alouds may or may not be part of a storytelling approach as, according to Sandie Mourão with Gail Ellis, these books can be read aloud in class for different reasons:

- for 'storytime', where the focus is on enjoyment and the shared social experience which contributes naturally to children's language and literacy development;
- as one of the many resources integrated into a scheme of work, exposing children to the target language in a meaningful way, supporting and extending their acquisition of topic-related language and reaching their learning objectives;

- as the source of planning and embodying the story-based methodology, where all activities and learning outcomes are structured around the concepts, themes, language or even illustrative style of the picturebook.

When a picturebook is first presented in an English class, for whatever purpose, it will be as a picturebook read-aloud.

What is a picturebook read-aloud?

A read-aloud is when an adult reads a book aloud to a child or a group of children. Children may experience picturebook read-alouds in their own languages, and may have already begun their journey into literacy. For very young children, a picturebook read-aloud, in any language, initiates their understanding of how print functions, its directionality and how it is used. For all ages, a picturebook read-aloud provides exposure to rich, authentic language and illustrations, which play an important role in the meaning-making process.

In the early EFL classroom, the focus is on developing the children's listening and comprehension skills, as well as the skills of prediction, anticipation and inferencing, based on the illustrations. Picturebook read-alouds can be very motivating for children, as they experience a strong sense of achievement in having listened to, enjoyed and understood the gist of an authentic piece of children's literature in English. However, this understanding is dependent upon the teacher's careful mediation. A mere reading out aloud of the verbal text would deny the children the opportunity to fully experience the read-aloud 'event' and to connect with the whole picturebook. The challenge is for a teacher to mediate the read-aloud effectively, so that the children's interest and attention is maintained and that, at the end of the read-aloud, they feel accomplished and positive about the experience.

What is picturebook mediation?

We define 'mediation' in relation to picturebook read-alouds as the support or assistance, often referred to as 'scaffolding', given by the teacher when sharing a picturebook with a group of children. It begins with the picturebook selection, continues during the read-aloud itself and extends into the follow-up activities. Mediation is dependent upon the teacher using a combination of competences effectively to plan and manage an inclusive and effective read-aloud experience where the children interact in a language-rich environment and share their personal responses to the picturebook.

Mediation stages

Figure 2 shows how mediation can be broken down into three stages:

Mediating a picturebook read-aloud		
Stage 1: Before	Stage 2: During	Stage 3: After
Selection and preparation	Use of expressive techniques: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Body, eyes and voice ■ Reading aloud ■ Read-aloud talk 	Follow-up and reflection

Figure 2 Mediating a picturebook read-aloud

Stage 1: Before the read-aloud

The event begins with the selection of a picturebook which reads aloud well. It also needs to meet a range of criteria, such as its suitability and interest in terms of content, linguistic, conceptual and cultural accessibility and appropriacy, aesthetic appeal and its educational affordances for a particular group of children. It may also involve the setting up of a picturebook read-aloud space, such as moving to a story corner, to prepare the children psychologically and affectively and establish readiness to listen to the read-aloud. The next step is to find a point of entry to ignite interest and curiosity and to stimulate prior knowledge which will enable the children to connect the information in the story to their own lived experiences. The teacher may also need to pre-teach some key language items and explain any unfamiliar cultural or contextual details.

Stage 2: During the picturebook read-aloud

The mediator's read-aloud 'performance' is a combination of techniques which bring into being a multimodal, language-rich event, and depends upon the systematic interaction of three situational factors:

- 1 The picturebook as aesthetic object – how the peritextual features and the pictures and words interanimate (ie act upon each other and work together) and contribute to meaning.
- 2 The children – their age, their knowledge of English, the languages they speak, their knowledge of the world, their interests, their individual and collective personalities, etc.
- 3 The teacher – the expressive techniques used during the read-aloud.

Figure 3 highlights the potential interaction that can occur during a read-aloud event as each factor influences the other. The children will also influence each other through their responses to what they see and hear, as shown in the additional circle. These factors are generalised across all picturebook read-alouds. The words and pictures will remain constant, but the



interaction around a picturebook read-aloud will never be the same, even if you are sharing the same picturebook with the same group of children. Our performance as a teacher-mediator begins as a one-person show, but soon becomes collaborative as the children play an increasingly active part in the construction of meaning that is constantly changing.

Expressive techniques

The teacher needs to maintain the children's interest and concentration, and support them throughout the read-aloud event by making use of expressive techniques. These include use of the body, eyes and voice, the skill of reading aloud and the integration of teacher talk or 'read-aloud talk'.

1 Body, eyes and voice

According to Mem Fox, *'there is no exact right way of reading aloud, other than to try to be as expressive as possible [and] each of us will have our own special way of doing it'*. We can bring a picturebook alive by being aware of:

- our **body** and the way we use gestures, facial expressions, actions, positioning and posture;
- our **eyes** and gaze and the way we make eye contact with the children, showing expression, meaning or emotion;
- our **voice** and vocal variety and the way we use stress, intonation, tone, volume, pace and pause.

Through practice and rehearsal, Fox asserts, reading aloud becomes an 'art form'.

2 Reading aloud

Edie Gardie points out that reading aloud well is an acquired art, as the teacher needs to be able to decode the verbal text and use the punctuation as a guide to know when to pause or give emphasis and to differentiate between dialogue and narrative, statement and question, etc. To read aloud fluently and meaningfully, the teacher should assimilate chunks of the verbal text by scanning ahead. This

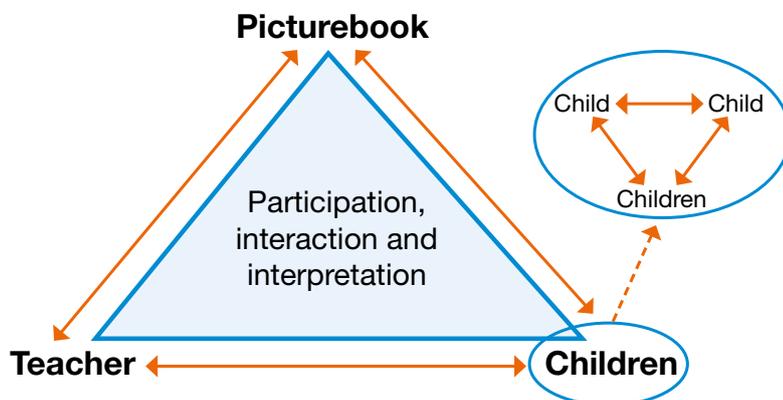


Figure 3 The read-aloud triangle model

combines with the way the teacher interprets how the pictures and words interanimate, so that the children experience the drama of the turning of the page at the appropriate moment.

3 Read-aloud talk

The final expressive technique is read-aloud talk: teacher talk which takes place during the read-aloud and goes beyond reading the picturebook verbal text. Read-aloud talk enables meaningful interaction, participation and interpretation between the teacher and the children and between the children themselves. It provides access to rich, contextualised language and resembles 'child-directed speech' which supports and scaffolds the children's understanding. Read-aloud talk occurs in a variety of forms and is effective for different purposes during the read-aloud event. We have identified five different categories of read-aloud talk which contribute to a holistic picturebook read-aloud experience:

- **General:** managing the read-aloud and familiar routines, setting up and closing the read-aloud, and inviting the children to join in with repeated words, phrases or refrains.
- **Picturebook as object:** giving information about the picturebook creators, the picturebook peritext and using its metalanguage (eg the author, the illustrator, the front cover, the endpapers, the title page, etc).
- **Asking questions:** activating background or prior knowledge, stimulating the children to notice, predict and think, and to reflect on the similarities and differences between their own lives and what they are discovering in the picturebook.
- **Clarifying:** repeating key words or phrases or expanding on some of the verbal text and saying something in a different way, as well as recasting use of shared classroom language.
- **Commentating:** describing what is happening in the illustrations (eg *Look! Freddie has his hand over his mouth*), modelling being a thoughtful reader (eg giving personal interpretations, thinking aloud, hypothesising, pondering, speculating) and sharing personal information.

Using read-aloud talk contributes to ensuring an enabling, multimodal environment where the children will remain engaged throughout a picturebook read-aloud experience. The children are stimulated to reflect on their interpretations, and the collaborative and supportive nature of read-aloud talk also accords social and emotional affordances.

Stage 3: After the read-aloud

Depending on the purpose of the read-aloud, the teacher may plan a variety of multi-sensory follow-up activities which can stimulate the children to think and reflect, and to give personal responses and reasons. These activities extend their learning by making links with other areas of the curriculum and by making personal choices according to their own interests and needs. This should include providing access to the picturebook in a class library or story corner for book browsing and through repeated read-alouds.

Underpinning all three stages is the key competence of creating and maintaining rapport, in order to establish a bond with the group of children, which conveys enthusiasm and fosters engagement and motivation so that learning takes place.



It is important that teachers are able to differentiate between the performances of oral storytelling and reading aloud from a picturebook, in order to apply the necessary competences and techniques required for each and to recognise the different affordances for the children. As we have pointed out, effective reading aloud requires practice and rehearsal to achieve appropriate spontaneity and fluency.

Recognition of the differences between oral storytelling and picturebook read-alouds is not always addressed in a systematic and principled way in pre- and in-service teacher education. Neither is it allocated the time needed for teachers to practise and acquire the competences we have described, to enable them to become knowledgeable and to feel confident to incorporate picturebook read-alouds into their teaching repertoires, thereby providing their students with an authentic, enriching and holistic learning experience. ■

Bader, B *American Picturebooks from Noah's Ark to The Beast Within* Macmillan 1976

Ellis, G and Brewster, J *Tell it Again! The Storytelling Handbook for Primary English Language Teachers* British Council 2014

Fox, M *Reading Magic: Why Reading Aloud to Our Children Will Change Their Lives Forever* Harcourt Publishing 2001

Garvie, E *Story as Vehicle: Teaching English to Young Children* Multilingual Matters 1990

Garvie, E 'Teaching English through story' In Kennedy, C and Jarvis, J (Eds) *Ideas and Issues in Primary ELT* Nelson 1991

Mourão, S with Ellis, G *Teaching English to Pre-Primary Children: Educating Very Young Children* Ernst Klett Sprachen 2020

Shulevitz, U *Writing with Pictures: How to Write and Illustrate Children's Books* Watson-Guptill Publications 1985



Gail Ellis is based in Paris, France, and is an independent teacher educator and adviser. She has been working with picturebooks since 1989, and her main interests include children's rights, picturebooks in primary ELT, young learner ELT management and inclusive practices. gail.ellis75@gmail.com



Sandie Mourão is a research fellow at Nova University, Lisbon, Portugal, where she investigates early language learning, picturebooks in language education and intercultural citizenship. She is coordinator of the ERASMUS Plus project, ICEPELL (<https://icepell.eu>). sjmourao@gmail.com

Gail and Sandie are co-founders, along with Tatia Gruenbaum and Anneta Sadowska, of Picture Books in European Primary English Language Teaching, PEPELT (<https://pepelt21.com>), which was a finalist in the 2020 British Council ELTons awards.