

## The Power of the Picture Book

by LAURA LODER BUECHEL

There's nothing better than a good picture book to get started on a new topic, to get children involved in other worlds—and to teach language in a low-pressure, relaxed setting. Trained teachers know how to tell a good tale by using acting, their voice, and appropriate pacing. And this is often enough to get learners engaged in the tale and in the language.

Yet sometimes we want more interaction and involvement from our learners—we want to really get them producing language based on the pictures and the text and showing their comprehension visibly. Thus, the aim of this article is to provide simple techniques that can be used with almost any picture book. The techniques applied here are appropriate for younger learners—children in elementary school—but many of these techniques can be used with older learners; in my experience, even older learners appreciate a good picture book now and again, and there are many such books with meaningful messages aimed at teens and adults.

I have found *The Sandwich Swap* (2010), written by Rania Al Abdullah and Kelly DiPucchio, and illustrated by Tricia Tusa, to be a story I am able to use every technique described below with—although with any story I tell, I can use most of these techniques. The classroom setting can be simple—ideally, you will be able to sit with your learners in a circle where they can all see the pages. (With

a document projector, many of the techniques can work with other seating arrangements.)

### THE COVER

Before you tell a story, you want to pique your learners' interest. This can be done in many ways. With the following ideas, it is important that you don't provide the title right away—although options are to write the title on the board in scrambled letters for learners to unscramble or to show the title and have learners guess what the story will be about. These activities generate language use and can be applied to any other pages in the story, not just the cover. However, with the ideas below, you should *not* show the cover before you start the activity.

- Take a blank piece of paper the size of the book cover. Cut a “peephole” or the shape of a magnifying glass into the sheet of paper. Place the paper over the book cover. Move the hole around so that different parts of the cover can be seen by the students. Each time you reveal a bit of the cover, elicit language from the learners by asking questions such as these: “What do you see?” ... “Can you guess the title?” ... “Who are the characters?”
- Have the learners sit back to back—one faces you, and the other faces the back of the room. Put up a poster or use a blackboard in the back of the room for language support that helps learners ask

questions (e.g., “Who is on the cover?” ... “Are there people on the cover?” ... “What are they doing?” ... “Do you see a specific place?”). The learner facing you can see the cover. The learner facing the back of the room can see only the supporting language. After a few minutes of asking and answering questions, the learners facing the back of the room should have a picture in mind about what is on the cover. You can then ask those learners to turn around and look at the picture (the cover of the book). You might hear an “Oh!” as what the learners had pictured in their minds might not correspond with what they actually see. This—what they imagined and expected, and what they actually see—is a discussion point in and of itself. I have also used this technique with the book trailer if it is available online. One learner watches but plugs their ears so they can’t hear, and the other learner faces the back of the room and only listens (but doesn’t see the trailer). Taking away one sense is a great way to get learners to compare notes and ask/answer basic Wh– questions.

## POST-ITS

I prepare in advance by going through the book and covering up certain pictures with post-its. When I start telling the story, I say, “Oh, my little daughter went through and stuck post-its all through my book! I wonder what’s under them!” Generally, I will have a post-it covering something on every other page or so, and I work with the post-its in the following ways:

- I first read the text or tell a particular part of the story. Then, to see who was listening or picked up on a specific word (for example, if I say, “She ate a hummus sandwich,” then a picture of a hummus sandwich will be covered), I will say, “My, what could be under this post-it?” after having read the text out loud. I say, “Think about what is under the post-it. At the count of 3, everybody shout what they think it is.” That way, every child says something (be it right or wrong), and I

don’t get stuck in the habit of calling only on specific volunteers. An alternative is to read the text without showing *any* of the pictures and, afterwards, elicit what learners imagine in relation to what they heard. You can then ask for their ideas about what is under the post-it.

- I don’t read the text—but I ask the learners what they think could be under the post-it. Everyone has a chance to speak. I tend to turn this into a pair listing activity: “With your partner, list ten things you think could be under this post-it. You have one minute. Go!” Pairs can write these things down or just tell them to another pair after the minute is up. An option, if learners write the words, is to have one pair say one word, and if another pair has that word, both pairs cross it off their lists. After this, I reveal what’s under the post-it, and we all say what it is in unison: “It’s a hummus sandwich!” Then, I read the corresponding part of the story to see if we were right!
- I also use post-its simply to remind myself what I want to do with that particular page. Maybe there is a specific question to be asked? A word to be repeated? A listing/predicting/summarizing activity? Occasionally, I pass the post-it note to a learner who reads the question out loud to the class.

## EMBODIMENT

Total physical response (commonly referred to as “TPR”) activities are a way of embodying language. In this approach, the usual options of acting out words or lines and showing comprehension through movement can be used. However, it can go a bit deeper. For instance, with *The Sandwich Swap*, but also other stories such as Lauren Child’s *I Will Not Ever Never Eat a Tomato* (2007), you can do the following:

- If there’s food or a food fight in the story, write a food item (e.g., “grapes”) on a piece of paper. Show it to half the class,

on one side of the circle or room. Those students then pretend to “throw” the food item at the students on the other side. The other half of the class has to guess what is being thrown. This gets really funny for some kinds of food, such as Nutella or spaghetti. I have used this technique even when there is not a food fight in the book, but when food is simply mentioned.

- There are often short dialogues in the story. Here, a little improvisation can work well on the sentence or word level. For instance, you might have such a dialogue:

Charlie: I don't like fish fingers!

Lola: Why not? What about peas?

In pairs, one learner reads the excerpt out loud, and the other has to act it out, word by word—like an interpreter. Alternatively, let the learners read the dialogue quietly and act it out in pairs; you can then read it to them so they hear the appropriate pronunciation. After that, the learners read it out loud in pairs together again.

- Saying one thing and *showing something else* helps strengthen learners' listening skills. For instance, *The Sandwich Swap* starts, “It all began with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.” You read those lines, but you *show* eating spaghetti. Then wait a minute, make a funny face, and see who can say, “*Not* spaghetti—peanut butter and jelly!” The learners can then do this in pairs with short lines from the text or at given moments in the story.

This last idea can be done by acting, but also by having learners listen and look at the pictures. For instance, in the story, you might have a character who is clearly a woman. Instead of reading “she,” you can read “he.” Or when the picture shows a girl wearing a yellow sweater, you can say, “This story is about a girl who is wearing a green sweater.”

## ROLE PLAYS AND INNER VOICE

Role playing can be straightforward: you dictate the lines of a short dialogue from the story for the learners to write down, or you write the lines on the blackboard. Then, in pairs, learners read the lines out loud and make appropriate actions and gestures. If you have the learners do this a few times, you can erase or cover words each time. Once the learners “own” the role play, if there is space in the classroom, have them do mingles and change partners and lines. I also like to have them experiment with voices—for example, as a robot, as a pirate, as a pirate talking to a robot, and so on. With learners who are more advanced, you can have them adapt the role play and make it more or less formal (e.g., learners pretend they are talking to an elderly person they know or to their best friend).

Inner-voice activities can work as role plays, but the learners create more of the text themselves. For instance, in *The Sandwich Swap*, you have, “She thought of her beautiful, smiling mother as she carefully cut Salma’s sandwich into two neat halves that morning.” The learners can say what the character is thinking—for example, “I love my sandwich. My mother made it.” This technique works as well with the pictures: if you take two of the food items in the food fight, pairs can write a dialogue about what the food items are thinking. The Nutella might be thinking, “Oh, I am so sticky. Don't throw me! I want to be spread on bread!” And the grapes might be thinking, “Ha! I am easy to throw! And I bounce everywhere!”

## QUESTIONS

With any story, it's important to ask questions that elicit a lot of language and thought. For this, Bloom's Taxonomy question stems can be useful and are easy to find online. I tend to avoid questions that have only Yes/No answers, although I do try to mix simple, one-word-answer questions with those that require more language. Figure 1 gives examples, in order of complexity, that can provide a basis for your own questioning. The

| Questions about <i>The Sandwich Swap</i>   | What is elicited   |
|--|--|
| <b>How many</b> girls is the story about?<br><b>How many</b> children <b>do you think</b> are in the cafeteria?  | A precise number that can be counted or any number that makes sense, and the answer is not right or wrong.   |
| <b>How do you spell</b> “you’re” in “you’re great”?<br>Write it in the air/on your partner’s back/<br>with your elbow.   | A specific target word   |
| <b>What’s your favorite</b> sandwich?  | Short utterances, different for everyone   |
| <b>What do you see</b> that begins with an A?<br>With a B?   | An alphabetical list of objects (apples) or chunks (bubbly teachers) in which there are multiple answers   |
| <b>What did I just say?</b> (After you read the text, learners try to say it themselves. This is especially useful—and fun—if you read with a lot of emotion.) | A structure or paraphrase, depending on the complexity of the language or whether you ask learners to say it in their own words  |
| <b>What do you think</b> the principal said/did after the girls left her office?   | If you ask what happened afterwards, you will get a lot of variation in structure and in answers (e.g., “She laughed” and “She rolled her eyes”).  |
| <b>What do you think will happen next?</b> What was their great idea?  | Answers will range from single words to short conversations. This can be treated as a “think-pair-share.”  |
| The girls started a food fight. <b>How did they feel?</b> <b>How would you feel?</b> Would you have handled the situation differently?                         | This is complex in thought and can be broken down into simpler parts. Yet it acts as a prompt to reflect on one’s decisions and actions in retrospect, which can be complex and requires learners to think about the situation. The answer starting with “I would have . . .” can be the basis for a lot of language work. |

**Figure 1. Story-related questions and what they elicit**

main part of the question is in bold and can be applied to almost any book.

### ONLINE TEACHING

Many of these ideas are also possible to use when you are telling the story synchronously online. Typically, the teacher reads, pauses, and asks questions, and then perhaps uses breakout rooms with Zoom or Microsoft Teams or other video-conferencing tools for further work by pairs or small groups. The screen-sharing functions on any of these tools work well for telling the story if it is found as a PDF or other document type; they also work for showing sentence starters and providing language support. When you are reading the story to a group in this setting, learners’ sound should be off unless they are speaking, and you can insist on their

engagement by choosing students at random or by making sure their cameras are on so you can see them and react to their reactions as you go.

Enjoy!

### REFERENCES

- Al Abdullah, R., DiPucchio, K., and Tusa, T. 2010. *The sandwich swap*. Los Angeles: Disney Hyperion.  
Child, L. 2007. *I will not ever never eat a tomato*. London: Orchard Books.

**Laura Loder Buechel** is a teacher-trainer at Zurich University of Teacher Education in Switzerland. Her main passions are practicing what she preaches in the elementary-school classroom and convincing university students to think outside the box.

To illustrate the power of pictures, the picture books we hold dear, and the comfort they provide us even as adults, HERE Benjamin Schwartz from The New Yorker, touches us deeply, through Madeleine, a picture book many of us have read to our children, and which we had read to us at one point in our lives. Thinking of the Paris tragedy, through a beloved picture book character, he speaks to us in volumes. Feel free to share your thoughts on picture books and your favorite titles. Filed Under: Featured Tagged With: Close Reading, Common Core, high-stakes testing, Learning to Read, Picture Books, Reading picture books to them thus has a double effect: It removes the negative of extra screen time while adding a terrific positive in the form of skill- and brain-building effects. It's a perfect way to ensure that babies and young children get what their eyes so benefit from seeing: wonderful pictures in books and the wonderful human face. Ms. Gurdon writes The Journal's "Children's Books" column. This essay is adapted from her new book "The Enchanted Hour: The Miraculous Power of Reading Aloud in the Age of Distraction," published by Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins (which, like The W Picture books appeal to students of all readiness levels, interests, and learning styles. Featuring descriptions and activities for fifty exceptional titles, Mary Jo Fresch and Peggy Harkins offer a wealth of ideas for harnessing the power of picture books to improve reading and writing in the content areas. The authors provide a synopsis of each title along with discipline-specific and cross-curricular activities that illustrate how picture books can be used to supplement—and sometimes even replace—traditional textbooks. They also offer title suggestions that create a "text set" of supporting A pile of picture books tottered on the floor nearby. We would, in the course of our time sitting there, work our way through all of them. A mere twenty-one months apart, my reading buddies were pre-schoolers. That's when I understood the power of a picture book. With words and images, the best of picture books draw you into to the story. They lead you into new rooms. Once there, you join the community of children gathering around Miss Rumphuis. And while you listen to her "stories of faraway places," you help yourself to a cookie. Picture books are tricky to write. They must be spare, like poems. They must team up with images to tell your story. A picture book combines visual and verbal narratives in a book format, most often aimed at young children. With the narrative told primarily through text, they are distinct from comics, which do so primarily through sequential images. The images in picture books are commonly produced in a range of media, such as oil paints, acrylics, watercolor, and pencil, among others.

Picture books strengthen visual thinking skills. Picture books help children connect what they observe with how they reason, linking concepts with words. Picture books plant the seed for writing skills. "It is the joyous power of picture books that turns young listeners into readers and readers into writers," says Charles Ghigna. Picture books help show children that reading is important. Especially in a world where everything moves so quickly and adults are always rushing around and busy, the fact that a grown-up will take the time to read a book aloud to a child sends a positive message about reading as well as about the relationship. Not Too Old For Picture Books - Heart Of The Matter. Basic Literacy Through Picture Books (video) - by Keith Schoch. As a kid, I loved picture books. Eric Carle's The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Mem Fox's Possum Magic, Marcus Pfister's Rainbow Fish; I have so many wonderful memories of story times, the characters and Not only are these books super fun, they have the power to educate children on important social issues while also improving their theories of mind. There's no need for me to highlight why these issues are important in modern society, but if we can educate children in fun and creative ways such as these books, we can hope for a more socially aware generation. The power of a picture book extends beyond illustration and story, each one can be used as a platform to encourage children to talk, play, read and write, when combined with exciting ideas and activities. Read more. Article The degree of myopia ranged from -0.25 D to -3.25 D, average -1.8  $\pm$  0.9 D. The power of refraction under cycloplegia was identical between the two methods. Combined instillation induced prolonged cycloplegia [Show full abstract] for 5.9 days and considerable ocular pain. Picture books have the secret power to teach children life lessons through storytelling while setting the foundation for literacy habits. The impact of these books can be profound so it is incredibly important for parents to introduce picture books from an early age. The Different Types of Picture Books. Not all picture books are created equal. As is the case with any other type of book, there are different genres which appeal to different kinds of people. The situation is no different with these: Picture Book Biographies: Picture book biographies are exactly what they sound like; they take the lives of historical and inspirational people and turn them into a story for children to understand. They are great at presenting role models to young children.