Picturebooks in the Primary EFL Classroom: Authentic Literature for an Authentic Response

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Abstract

This article begins by discussing the term 'picturebook', followed by a definition which centres on the picture-word dynamic, the social and cultural implications of using picturebooks and an explanation of picturebook peritext. This is followed by a section that discusses response and its relevance to teachers who want to (re)consider picturebooks in an EFL classroom. A category of responses is then suggested as a way to support EFL teachers to understand their learners' responses to picturebooks and help them recognize the relevance of response to the storytelling experience. The final section describes two picturebooks with concrete examples of the different ways picturebooks enable and promote authentic responses through both the pictures and the words.

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Introduction

Over the years I have worked with dozens of EFL teachers in professional development sessions about storytelling and picturebooks. I have noticed a propensity for many to focus almost entirely on selecting a picturebook for the words it contains and for the purpose of contextualizing lexical items around a particular topic, such as clothes, colours, food etc. (Mourão, 2015). This is a natural tendency as we are teaching a language and the written word in particular is seen as the governing system of meaning, especially in educational contexts (Serafini, 2009). This article makes a stand for moving beyond using picturebooks to contextualize the learners' understanding of words, expressions and concepts in English, to understanding the potential of picturebooks for providing authentic reasons for language use, discussion and above all for prompting thinking through response in English.

Picturebooks in ELT: A Brief History and a Definition

According to Ghosn (2013), authentic children's literature has been used in primary ELT methodologies for over four decades. She is referring to a form of literature which in the academic field of children's literature is known as a picturebook. Nevertheless, in ELT these books can be called 'storybooks' (Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Ghosn, 2013), 'real books', (e.g. Machura, 1991) or 'real picture books' (Dunn, 2003). The use of the word 'real' aids our understanding of these very special books, for they are authentic in every way – the words (if they exist, for some picturebooks are wordless) have not been abridged or altered for language learning purposes and the illustrations are created by illustrators who use their art creatively with neither a care for, nor an interest in, the confines of language learning.

Over the last decade, there has been a gradual move in ELT towards the use of a metalanguage that demonstrates the influence of the field of children's literature. The term 'picture book' (e.g. Enever & Schmid-Schönbein, 2006) or 'picturebook' is now more prevalent, the latter written as a compound noun, which according to Lewis (2001a) reflects the 'compound nature of the artefact' (xiv).

A definition

The definition of a picturebook most often cited comes from Barbara Bader (1976):

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 [reader]. 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 page. (p. 1)

(Bold not in the original)

This definition goes a long way toward showing just how complex a picturebook is. In the following sections, I try to expand on this definition in relation to foreign language teaching.

The pictures and words

A picturebook is a multimodal text (Kress, 2003), it is dependent upon pictures *and* words together to create meaning and it is the interdependence of what the pictures show and the words tell (Lewis 2001b) that makes a picturebook so special – for example, a picturebook 'could not be read over the radio and be understood fully' (Shulevitz, 1985:15). The visual text is essential to the understanding of the message: it can clarify, complement, enhance, or even contradict the verbal text (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Nodelman, 1988). The relationship between pictures and words has been discussed at length by picturebook scholars (e.g. Doonan, 1993; Lewis, 2001a; Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006; Nodelman, 1988; Serafini, 2013; Sipe, 1998). However, in the context of English language teaching, Mourão (2012) has referred to this interdependence as ranging along a continuum from a simple showing and telling of the same information to a more complex showing and telling of different, even contradicting information. In ELT contexts, picturebooks are selected that contain a simple picture-word relationship, with illustrations that synchronize (Ellis & Brewster, 2014) with the text providing a secure, supportive learning context. These picturebooks are often concept books that contain predictable and repetitive (Linse, 2007), sometimes cumulative refrains, and pictures that please the eye but give little extra information. Children look at the illustrations and the meaning is immediately apparent: an example would be the well-used *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Marin Jr & Carle, 1995), which shows the animals in the illustrations and tells us what they are in the words. This supportive context is important in language learning, especially with very

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small children: it allows them to gain confidence in their learning experience, but they are not being encouraged to be active learners, as meaning is apparent immediately.

Titles that move towards the complex end of the picture-word dynamic leave a gap between what the illustrations show and the words tell. For example, in *Wolves (Gravett,* 2006), the words tell us, in a textbook-like fashion, about wolves, (how they live, where they live, what they look like and what they eat), but the illustrations show us the journey a little rabbit makes from the library as he reads the description – and we see the wolf in the book become a real-life wolf and the rabbit become his real-life dinner. This gap 'challenges young learners to search for, and in the classroom negotiate for, understanding and meaning' (Bland 2013, p. 32), providing what Halliwell (1992, p. 5) calls 'realistic opportunities for interaction and talk, instinctive in children at this age'. These picturebooks go beyond the typical thematic language of our primary classes, and can cover more challenging topics, or provide opportunities to approach topics from a different perspective. These picturebooks are also more suitable for older primary children and encourage a more active learner who is able to make sense of what the pictures show and the words tell.

The design

The design of a picturebook, taken for granted in most literature, is deliberately put to use in picturebooks so that it becomes an integrated whole (Shulavitz, 1985). The format of the book and its peritextual features – those parts of a text which 'surround it and extend it, precisely in order to present it' (Genette, 1997, p. 1) are often part of the visual narrative, this includes the front and back covers, the endpapers, title pages, and copyright and dedication pages. Endpapers have been analysed for their narrative significance (e.g. Bosch & Duran, 2011; Sipe & McGuire, 2009) and more recently so have title pages (Sotto Mayor, 2016); and in an ELT context, Mourão (2013a; 2013b) has discussed the importance of different peritextual features in the foreign language classroom. Two picturebooks widely known in ELT have very prominent and useful peritextual features: for pre-primary learners the endpapers in *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin Jr & Carle, 1995), provide visual information that supports retelling the picturebook, as they are strips of coloured tissue paper depicting the sequence of the

animals as they appear in the story. When retelling this picturebook, it is impossible to leave out these pages, as children want to chant the colours and together recall which animals they represent.

For older primary learners in an EFL context, the endpapers in picturebooks can be used as prompts for discussion, 'What colour are they?' 'What do they show?' 'Why do you think this is?' This results in children taking notice of what they see and being critical about it. The endpapers in *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson & Scheffler, 1999) show a forest. It is possible to ask, 'Why is that?', and discuss the importance of setting for the story, for the endpapers show the forest where the story takes place. In the same picturebook, the title page has an illustration of the main character, the mouse, walking through the wood. If we look carefully we will see that this is actually the beginning of the narrative, for the opening spread reads, 'A mouse took a stroll through a deep dark wood.' These examples afford fairly easy connections, but some picturebooks leave readers wondering, and learners can make a number of suggestions, all of which are valid, for there is no right answer.

Revisiting a picturebook, browsing through it in a book corner or hearing it read several times, provides opportunities for making these connections between the different parts. Thus, by disregarding picturebook peritext in our classes, we may be omitting information that contributes to the meaning-making process we engage in while reading and sharing a picturebook. This in turn will lead to ignoring the metalanguage for talking about and discussing these parts (Mourão, 2013a). EFL teachers should comment and model noticing as they share a picturebook, with the objective of developing students' curiosity to look and then use the metalanguage to talk about the connections they are making. While developing the learners' ability to look, understand and be critical about visuals they encounter, by 'deepening understanding and critical appreciation through [their] active engagement in the interpretive process' (Arizpe, Colomer & Martínez-Roldán, 2014, p. 13), we are developing their visual literacy skills.

A social, cultural, historic document
Picturebooks reflect the times as well as their author's and illustrator's cultures. This can be evident through both the illustrations and the language that is used, bringing the cultures

of many Englishes into our classrooms. *Silly Billy* (Browne, 2006), for example, is the story of a boy who worries; his grandma gives him some worry dolls and this, in a round-about way, solves his problem. This is a beautifully illustrated story, which incorporates the bright colours of Central America where worry dolls originated, and brings a different culture to the children through English, as well as simultaneously enabling them to talk about their own worries and concerns in life.

Yo! Yes? (Raschka, 2007) is a story of two boys who meet and eventually make friends. The verbal text is minimal, but contains the colloquial American greeting 'Yo!' The illustrations show us two very different-looking boys, an African American in his sneakers, shorts and loose T-shirt, and a Caucasian child with long trousers, lace-up shoes and a formally collared shirt. These two boys represent different cultural groups, so that the discussion round the story can help children understand what friendship is. These thought-provoking picturebooks are for older primary children learning EFL and have been referenced to encourage readers to consider picturebooks with slightly older learners as well (see Lazar, 2015; Mourão, 2011; 2013c).

Overall, picturebooks are not *just* authentic texts because of the words they contain, for they enable language use through the learners' interpretation of the pictures, words *and* design, as these elements come together to produce a visual-verbal narrative which is disregarded when there is a focus on the words only. Taking the stance that picturebooks provide authentic opportunities for learners to interpret and respond to in English, it is important to acknowledge the different responses to be encouraged in EFL classes with pre-primary and primary children. The next section looks at response with a view to situating its role in an EFL context.

Response to Picturebooks: A Definition and Response Categories

Approaches to response

For the last 50 years, literary theory has recognized the reader as a meaning maker, constructing meaning from texts, and theories of reader response are numerous, while 'embracing a wide range of attitudes toward, and assumptions about, the roles of the reader, the text and the social cultural context shaping the transaction between reader and text' (Beach, 1993, p. 2). I would like to touch on three theorists associated with reader

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response theory. The first is Wolfgang Iser (1978), who describes an 'implied reader', one that is expected to have the knowledge and background to fill the gaps or indeterminacies left by an author. Communication begins between reader and text when the former starts to fill the gaps. The gaps left between pictures and words at the complex end of the picture-word dynamic within picturebooks can be seen as examples of this. Another seminal theorist is Louise Rosenblatt, who referred to a transactional approach, wishing to 'emphasize the reciprocal importance of both reader and text' (Karolides & Rosenblatt, 1999, p. 167). As such, Rosenblatt focuses on the reader's engagement and involvement in meaning making through the text and her notion of 'aesthetic reading' (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 31) requires that readers direct their attention towards the affective aspects of the reading experience, coming to a book 'from life' (1995, p. 34), creating a 'two-way "transactional" relationship' (1995, p. ix). The result is a third text, which emerges from the reader's personal reactions and experiences in relation to the original. Finally, Stanley Fish, influenced by the socio-constructivist theories of Vygotsky, proposes the creation of 'interpretative communities' incorporating Rosenblatt's idea of aesthetic reading. In his view, it is the context, the interpretive community, which is responsible 'both for the shape of the reader's activities and for the texts those activities produce' (Fish, 1980, p. 322).

These three approaches to responding to literary texts can direct our understanding of how to use picturebooks in the classroom with language learners. They provide suggestions for teachers to encourage learners to think about what the pictures show and the words tell, and actively fill the gaps, when they exist, with their personal interpretations. These interpretations can be co-created with their peers, through discussion and sharing of personal experiences, as such creating their own texts – ones that reflect their community of learning. In so doing, the very act of interpretation with others creates a real reason for the learners to use English in the classroom.

Response and picturebooks

Response to picturebooks has been the focus of researchers since the 1990s (e.g. Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Evans, 1998; Kiefer, 1993; Pantaleo, 2008; Sipe 2000; 2008) and there have been a number of attempts to categorize responses to picturebooks, (e.g. Arizpe, et al., 2014; Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Kiefer, 1995; Sipe, 2000; 2008). In relation to FL learning,

there are no such typologies and response is rarely considered, due to a focus on the verbal text of the picturebook and the learners' low level of L2 competence. Nevertheless, Mourão (2012) has adapted Sipe's categories and shown they are useful for teachers to take into consideration as they share picturebooks with groups of children. Children respond spontaneously to the words and the pictures and it is this spontaneity that these categories cater for and enable teachers to consider when sharing a picturebook. In addition, it is the children's responses that we should be encouraging as they are personalized and therefore meaningful to them as learners.

According to Sipe (2000; 2008), there are five response categories: an analytical response, an intertextual response, a personal response, a transparent response and a performative response. All responses are oral and spontaneous and younger children learning a FL are likely to use the L1 in their spontaneity; however, teachers can rephrase their L1 comments into English when suitable. As children get older, they will have more English with which to comment or respond in, so they should be able to respond more spontaneously in English.

A slightly adapted version of Sipe's five response categories follows, summarized from empirical research in a FL context (see Mourão, 2012). These responses have been highlighted for their pertinence to the FL context when sharing a picturebook with pre-primary and primary FL learners.

1. Analytical response

a) An analytical response – narrative meaning
- Making predictions usually based on what children see in the illustrations during their first exposure to the picturebook.
- Describing plots during subsequent exposures to the picturebook. Children know what will happen and enjoy retelling parts in their own words, this is often prompted by an illustration.
- Making inferences about the characters seen in the illustrations.

b) An analytical response – the illustrations

- Identifying and labelling illustrations, especially younger children, as they are not reading yet. Older children may do this when book browsing as individuals.
- Describing the action in illustrations involves describing something in the illustrations that is meaningful, children of all ages may do this.

c) An analytical response – the words

- Savouring the words involves children '[savouring] the language of the story by repeating words and phrases after the teacher had read them aloud, or chanting during familiar and repetitive parts of the story' (Sipe & Bauer, 2001, p. 336). This is something that is encouraged in an ELT classroom, as it supports memorization of the verbal text (Bland, 2013; Linse, 2007).
- Recognizing and responding to the graphic features of the verbal text on the pages. Small children begin to notice that speech bubbles represent speech; older children may notice punctuation or different spelling. All children recognize that a small typeface represents a quiet noise and a bigger typeface represents a loud noise.

d) An analytical response – the book as object

Talking about parts of the picturebook, e.g. the peritextual features, the picturebook creators, the publishers etc. This happens to an increasing degree when the teachers begin to include references to these parts of the book in their shared story reading and it becomes more complex as children get older and are able to make narrative connections and verbalise them.

e) An analytical response – linguistic codes

This response is not part of Sipe's original typology, for his learners were mostly L1 English learners, however it has been noted by Mourão (2013d, p. 107) that 'children are actively considering one or other, or both of the codes at their disposal' as they listen to a picturebook read aloud in English. This demonstrates a developing metalinguistic

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awareness as children begin to make connections within their linguistic repertoire and involves such things as:

- Spontaneously translating an English word or expression into the L1, thus showing understanding.

- Spontaneously translating a peer's L1 comment into English.

- Correcting peers when they mispronounce or use a wrong English word.

- Recognizing that words sound or look similar to others, either English to L1 or English to English.

- Having opinions about how difficult or easy an English word or expression is to say or remember.

2. An intertextual response

This response shows children making connections between other texts, such as another picturebook, a film or DVD, a television programme, or another culturally recognized product like a rhyme, or a chant in their L1 world or their English world, which may expand beyond the classroom. The most common intertextual response with younger EFL learners has been an associative one, 'characterised by an unelaborated statement of likeness' (Sipe, 2008, p. 131), e.g. 'This is like …' said in the L1. However, older learners may make analytical links, which will go on to 'describe similarities of differences' (Sipe, 2008, p. 132) between the two texts.

3. A personal response

Personal responses are clearly evidence of engagement for, as Rosenblatt (1995) suggests, the child brings their whole self to the text, through their 'personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition' (p. 30), as well as acquired knowledge of the world which they naturally want to share. The personal response involved:

- Making personal connections based on a response to an illustration, an event in the picturebook or the theme of the picturebook.

- Giving opinions based on personal preferences as a response to an event in a

picturebook, sometimes agreeing or disagreeing with characters' choices or actions.

4. A transparent response

This response involves children 'becoming one' (Sipe, 2008, p. 182) with the picturebook, as though they were living the story for real and can include:

- A genuinely emotional response like an intake of breath, a squeal, a laugh, or shocked silence.

- A physical response imitating something in the illustrations.

- Interacting with story characters, for example by calling to them, warning them or reprimanding them.

- Reliving the experience by requesting repetitions of parts of a story that are particularly engaging or funny.

5. A performative response

This response also involves engagement, but it is premeditated and thought through. It involves a child using the story illustrations or words for a personal creative response, often by making a joke or doing something they think might entertain their peers. Sipe refers to this as the picturebook '[functioning] as a platform for children's creativity, becoming a playground for a carnivalesque romp' (2008, p. 182).

These two latter responses are often chastised by teachers and considered inappropriate, but in fact they demonstrate that a child is completely engaged through unconstrained behaviour. If these responses are made in English, which may eventually be the case with older primary learners, it shows that children are very skilfully manipulating English for their own personal enjoyment. What more could we want from a learner?

Two Picturebooks and Examples of Response

The intention of this article is to highlight the importance of response and provide some brief examples from pre-primary and primary EFL classrooms in Portugal.[1] It is suggested that the response teachers feel most confident about accepting is the analytical response, in particular around the words in the picturebook, for the focus in a FL class is invariably on

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picking up the language chunks within the picturebook (Linse, 2007). Picturebooks at the simple end of the picture-word continuum, especially those containing repeated refrains and cumulative language, prompt this response. However, if it is recognized that the five response categories exist, and that they will occur when sharing English-language picturebooks, then EFL teachers should ensure that their selection of picturebooks enables children to respond in different ways, and that they are prepared to incorporate children's responses into the shared reading activity. With the aid of two picturebooks, I would like to demonstrate how this is possible. The examples are taken from my experience with different groups of children responding during storytelling sessions over several years, either as the storyteller or as an observer. In all cases the context is one of low exposure, with mainly monolingual Portuguese children in groups of between 18 to 26 children.

I'm the best!

I'm the Best (Lucy Cousins, 2010) is a picturebook for five- to six-year olds in an EFL context, where the illustrations expand on the words and provide additional visual information to support the development of emotional intelligence through the depiction of different characters' emotions. The story is about Dog, and his four best friends. Upon showing the front cover, children want to tell the teacher if they have a dog (a personal response), 'Yes? You've got a dog', the teacher says. Dog introduces his friends and tells them he's the best. The children respond to the illustrations, commenting on the donkey's funny jumper (an analytical response – the illustrations) using a mix of L1 and English, and the teacher replies, 'Yes, Donkey's wearing a jumper'. Upon hearing one of Dog's friends is a ladybird, one child reminds everyone in the L1 that he might not remember 'ladybird' in English but he can say 'butterfly' (an analytical response – linguistic codes), showing he is aware that one word is more difficult than the other to remember in English.

Dog boasts he can run faster than Mole, 'I win, I'm the best' he says. This refrain is repeated throughout the book and the children quickly pick it up and chant along with the teacher as she tells the story (an analytical response – the words). Dog digs holes better than Goose, he's bigger than Ladybird – here the children laugh at Dog's size in comparison to tiny Ladybird in the illustration (a transparent response). He can swim better than Donkey, and we see poor donkey paddling awkwardly, splashing profusely,

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prompting a child to comment on the water illustrations in L1 (an analytical response – the illustrations).

The illustrations are naïve-like, and clearly support children's understanding of Dog's delight as he outdoes his friends, but they also extend the children's understanding of the situation by showing the friends' emotional responses to Dog's boasting. Eventually, the friends show Dog that in fact Mole can dig deeper, Goose can swim faster, Donkey is bigger and Ladybird can fly. 'In fact you don't even have wings', she says. Dog's surprise, dismay and finally his tears clearly connect with small children and the response from most groups of children is one of quiet empathy (a transparent response). Some use the L1 to say they think Dog has been taught a lesson, others agree the friends were right, still others think Dog might lose his friends (all personal responses), but smiles return to their faces (a transparent response) when they see the friends hugging and telling Dog not to worry, 'You are the best at being our best friend'. Dog learns his lesson and the children want to talk about how silly Dog was, so the session often ends with a little reflection, mostly in the L1, with the word 'Dog' inserted every now and then (personal responses).

The children featured here had English just for one hour a week, so they produced sentences in their L1 and inserted English nouns, adjectives or formulas as they responded spontaneously to a picturebook on these occasions. This particular school and their approach to learning English is one that values the children's linguistic repertoire, for the children all speak a common classroom language which is also understood by the English teacher, so the children happily code-switch within sentences to communicate their intentions. Children in higher exposure contexts will be more confident to use English in their responses and are more likely to do so, especially if the teacher prompts and encourages this.

No!

No! (Marta Altés, 2011) is a picturebook which sits at the complex end of the picture-word dynamic, for the pictures and words come together to create an ironic story in which the words provide the dog's point of view and the pictures the owners' point of view. It is a picturebook for children in an EFL context of around eight or nine years old and also features a dog. This dog does everything he can to help his family: at least he thinks he

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does! The words tell us, 'I taste their food before they eat to make sure that it's all right', but the illustrations show us he is stealing food from the table and there is a large 'No' in a speech bubble coming from an invisible owner. The dog continues confidently telling the reader what he does to help his owners, and as readers we see the chaos that ensues – the words tell the dog's story and the illustrations show the owners' story. The book is entitled *No!* as the dog is sure that this is his name! His confusion culminates at the end of the book, when the words say, 'Why did they buy me a collar with the wrong name?' and the illustrations show us the name *Spike* on his nametag. This really is a visual experience that helps children understand the concept of seeing things from different perspectives. There is a gap to be filled by the reader to get the visual-verbal puns and the story is funny because the children realise very quickly there are two stories being told.

The children this picturebook was shared with were nine years old, had been learning English for three years, and with two lessons a week for 45 minutes. Being slightly older, they are more restrained, but there is a lot of transparent response in the form of laughing, gasping, groaning and covering of eyes. One boy even imitates wiping his face after being licked by a wet tongue. The title page (a part of the picturebook peritext) shows the dog smelling a shoe with the speech bubble 'No!' above his head, which is depicting the title of the book. A girl comments in the L1 that she thinks he is going to eat the shoe, an analytical response about narrative meaning, for she is predicting. The teacher responds in English 'You think he's going to eat the shoe? Let's see!'

There are some analytical responses in relation to the illustrations: a child calls out 'Chicken!' on the page where Spike is tasting the food, the teacher nods her head, 'A chicken leg!' Children spontaneously label some of the clothes on the line and the food strewn around the kitchen bin, using English words they know. There are some personal responses too, 'Ai, my dog!' a girl laments, and others talk of a dug up flower, a stolen pizza, and a ruined book as these appear in the illustrations, using a mix of L1 and English. Each time the teacher confirms and rephrases into English, e.g. 'Your dog chewed your school book? Oh no!' As we come to the end of the book, and Spike is seen looking at his collar with a puzzled expression, a boy calls out, 'My dog *Bolinhasnão*!'– the boy's response is a performative one, he has skilfully manipulated English for his own personal

enjoyment. Playing with his dog's name and the suffix 'Não' ('No!' in Portuguese) and the result is a burst of laughter – just what he wanted.

Conclusion

In this article I have described and defined the picturebook and encouraged teachers to select picturebooks at the more complex end of the picture-word dynamic, so that learners are challenged to think and fill the gaps between the pictures and the words. I have presented a categorization of response to picturebooks adapted from Sipe (2000; 2008) and then shared two picturebooks with a view to focusing on the storytelling act itself to demonstrate how response, even if in L1, can be valued and will show that children are engaging in a transactional sense and using their linguistic repertoire as a bridge to English, especially when sharing picturebooks that show and tell different things.

I have not described the pre-, while-telling or post-story activities. Teachers using or wanting to use picturebooks have online resources to help them learn about this (see Ellis & Brewster, 2014). Instead I have focused on the storytelling event and recommended that children's response be taken seriously. This is especially important when a picturebook goes beyond requiring a repetition of the words only and the teacher values the picturebook as a compound object where both pictures and words afford opportunities for interpretation.

The picturebooks I selected to share are appropriate for children in different learning contexts, ranging from around five to ten years old, and demonstrate how, through authentic responses in English and the L1, picturebooks can promote affective, sociocultural, aesthetic and cognitive development as well as develop language and literary skills. This I believe is especially the case if response is better understood and valued by the teacher sharing the picturebook. The examples have also shown how valuing response can contribute to the affective aspects of the shared storytelling experience, for it allows for a personally meaningful involvement, due to the recognition that the reader comes to a book 'from life' (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 34).

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[1] For reports on a detailed study of response, please refer to Mourão 2012 and 2013d

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