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## **Response to the *The Lost Thing*: Notes from a Secondary Classroom**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses students' responses to the picturebook *The Lost Thing* (Tan, 2000) and its film (2010). It describes a small-scale project in a secondary school in Portugal, which involved 16-18 year-old students, learning English as a foreign language. Following a socio-constructivist approach to language learning and the basic tenets of reader response theory, discussion and an interpretative stance to meaning making were encouraged. The aim was to foster students' appreciation of the visual during their interpretative discussions as well as developing their English language skills. This paper demonstrates how the picturebook in particular afforded the students with opportunities for language development through talk. It closes with notes on the implications of using picturebooks and their films in the classroom.

**Key words:** picturebooks, film, *The Lost Thing*, Shaun Tan, older learners, response, interpretations, interthinking

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### **Picturebooks in the English Language Classroom**

According to Amos Paran (2012) the educational value of using authentic literature in English language classes is thought to be making a comeback, in particular for teaching reading. Nevertheless, there is also recognition that through talking about and discussing what we read, literature can contribute to general language development. In the young learner classroom, picturebooks have been valued by Bland (2007), Cameron (2001), Dunn (1997-2005; 2012), Ellis & Brewster (2002), Enever & Schmid-Shonbein (2006), Ghosn, (2002; 2010) and Mourão (2003) and latterly in chapters edited by Bland & Lütge (2013).

The premise for using picturebooks with older learners (over 12 years old) in a language-learning context is that it is the pictures *and* the words that provide affordances for language development through their interanimation, 'the words and images mutually influence one another so that the meaning of the words is understood in light of what the pictures show, and vice versa' (Lewis, 2001, p. 169). Picturebooks that show more through the pictures than the words leave gaps for personal interpretations and these kinds of picturebooks often stimulate more questions than answers as well as involving our students in a critical and questioning approach to learning. In addition these picturebooks can cover challenging topics, for example chauvinism, bullying, equality, drug abuse and disability, to mention but a few (Mourão, 2011). These are topics that are often absent in many educational settings, in the main due to publisher censorships (Gray, 2000). It is often through the pictures in picturebooks that students access other interpretations of what they take for granted and by using more challenging picturebooks we can provide our English language students with opportunities to question social constructs and to be critical readers (Leland, Lewison & Harste, 2012). Ghosn refers to literature functioning 'as a change agent' (2002, p. 173) but laments that 'socially beneficial themes have not yet been exploited in EFL programmes' (p. 176).

### **Socio-cultural Theories of Language Development Through Interaction**

Vygotsky's socio-constructivist theories emphasize the dialogical character of development where knowledge and ability are fostered through interaction with others

using language as a 'tool' of thought (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 216). If we consider language to be embedded within a context and part of a process it can be seen to develop through use in a particular context. Classroom contexts are considered authentic and thus propitious to learning (van Lier, 1988) thus language and learning is seen as 'a relationship among learners and between learners and the environment [connecting] cognitive processes with social processes' (van Lier 2004, p. 258). Language emerges from interaction within a semiotic experience, and van Lier uses the term affordance to define the learning opportunities that arise from an active engagement with one's surroundings. Learning affordances are present in a classroom full of students sharing a picturebook, through the pictures and the words on the page and the voices of the students and their teacher. Mercer (2000) has termed 'the joint, coordinated intellectual activity which people regularly accomplish using language', 'interthinking' (p. 16). We can hope that active engagement with a picturebook will result in language development through participation with and use of language as well as a good dose of interthinking: the use of talk to think collectively (Pantaleo, 2007).

### **The Picturebook and the Film, *The Lost Thing***

*The Lost Thing*, a multi-awarded picturebook by Shaun Tan, is typical of a multimodal narrative, created from a weave of visual and verbal modes, both contributing significance (Nodelman, 1988). The interanimation of pictures and words not only fosters a unique reading experience, but new and different meanings are found by each reader and upon repeated encounters with the double-page spreads. Tan himself has described his work as 'both simple and complex - depending upon how the reader chooses to understand it' (Tan, 2002, unpaginated).

Tan's unique illustrative style was transported to the screen in 2010 resulting in an award winning film of the same name, *The Lost Thing*. The film adaptation widens the narrative strength of the original picturebook, with Tan stating that he liked 'the idea of being able to expand upon certain areas which he felt were frustratingly concise' (Tan, interview, 2010) due to the constraints of a 32-page picturebook, and continues to feel the film is 'intriguing (...) and open to interpretation' (Tan, commentary, 2010).



Figure 1: Front cover and back cover

*The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan, Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2000.

*The Lost Thing* has an often-unnoticed subtitle, 'A tale [film] for those who have more important things to pay attention to'. It is a story told in the first person by a boy who discovers a creature while out collecting bottle-tops. The creature is never physically described, and there is very little said about the environment in which the story unfolds; the pictures reveal a strange teapot-like creature with tentacles, in a surreal, treeless world covered in plumbing, concrete and machinery. The boy guesses the creature is lost and tries to find out where it belongs. We follow his journey against indifference, shown in complex illustrations, which reveal 'the real philosophical questions' (Tan, 2010, unpaginated) and told as if giving a matter-of-fact description of his summer holiday. The boy does eventually find a place where the creature appears happy to stay. They part and the boy returns to his life of collecting, insisting his story was not particularly profound. He is never quite sure the creature did belong where he left him,

I mean, I can't say that the thing actually belonged in the place where it ended up. In fact, none of the things there really belonged. They all seemed happy enough though, so maybe that didn't matter. I don't know ...

Tan, 2000, opening 14.

It is possibly the final sequence that could be considered the moral of the story. As the narrator blends into a world of people returning to work he says to himself, 'I see that kind of thing less and less these days though. Maybe there aren't many lost things around any more. Or maybe I've just stopped noticing them. Too busy doing other stuff, I guess' (Tan, 2000, opening 15).

Stephens (2008) describes *The Lost Thing* as dealing 'with immigrant displacement in a postcolonial multicultural state' (p. 94). Dudek (2006) confirms this analysis stating that it 'critically engages with multiculturalism by demonstrating how the narrator internalizes mainstream ideologies of race and multiculturalism' (p. 13-15). Stephens also highlights Tan's attack on consumerism through his 'futurist interpretation of a destroyed environment' (2008, p. 94). Rudd (2008), on the other hand, describes the picturebook on a more social level, as a book that 'functions as an indictment of a society that has lost its soul, that is bland, grey, uncaring, and unobservant' (p. 145). However, Rudd's other interpretation, evident in his title 'Sense of (be)longing in Shaun Tan's *The Lost Thing*', determines that *The Lost Thing* makes us 'hark back to a sense of being, of belonging, that we imagined we once possessed (Paradisical, Edenic, oceanic, womb-like, and so on) ...' (p. 145). Tan (interview, 2010) states that *The Lost Thing* reinforces the fact that adults have a tendency to overlook important details because of the frameworks they have created to filter experiences.

To the best of my knowledge response to the picturebook *The Lost Thing*, has not been the focus of research, certainly not in a foreign or second language-learning context. Student responses to other titles by Tan have been published, for example response to *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006) has been discussed at length (see Farrell, Arizpe & McAdam, 2010; Bellorin & Silva-Díaz, 2011, Pantaleo & Bomphray, 2011), as well as student response to *The Red Tree* (Tan, 2001) (see Pantaleo, 2012).

### **The Small-scale Research Project**

#### **The purpose**

The backdrop to this project was the belief that picturebooks could afford language-learning opportunities for older EFL students, a belief until this time I had been unable to confirm in practice as I usually work with pre-school and primary-aged learners. The

purpose of this small piece of research was therefore to discern whether a picturebook could indeed provide the language learning affordances which were theoretically described above for older learners, and how the film of the picturebook might support, or not, the students' interpretations and thus provide further opportunities for discussion. The objectives of the study were:

- To confirm, or not, that a picturebook could be used beneficially in the language classroom with older learners;
- To encourage students to value the visual;
- To create opportunities for language use and 'interthinking' through the picturebook and later the film of *The Lost Thing*;
- To observe how the two media supported different interpretations.

### **The context and the students**

The study took place during the month of April 2012, when I visited an *escola secundária* in Portugal, a school which caters for the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> years of the Portuguese education system (ages 16-18 years). The class I visited was an 11<sup>th</sup> year Languages and Humanities course. The students' first language was Portuguese but during English lessons the teachers endeavoured to use English and encouraged their students to do so too. English lessons took place twice a week, with each session lasting 90 minutes. The English curriculum involves units of work developed around areas of reference, and in preparation for my visit the students had worked with the topic 'Youth and consumerism' and appropriately a unit around publicity focusing on how image and word influenced their lives. These students were used to following a coursebook, which contains abridged versions of narrative literature. Their teacher had been with them since the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> year and confirmed she used other materials including full-length feature films however, she had never used a picturebook, even though comic strips and graphic novels were included in the list of text types recommended in the English programme.

The group was made up of twenty-four 16-18 year-olds (21 girls and 3 boys), who all spoke Portuguese as a first language. They had highly differentiated levels of English ranging from between A2 to C1 (Common European Framework, 2001). They were a dynamic group of students, very chatty, interested and eager to participate in the proposed

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project. The teacher was also very motivated by the project and worked alongside me during my visit. I was in their classroom for three sessions of 90 minutes.

### **The procedures**

The visit began with a short introduction to the project, explaining who I was, and reminding students of the importance of listening to each other during discussion. The class was set up in a 'u' formation, which the students associated with discussion-related activities. First the students listened to the picturebook being read to them, listening with the objective of discovering how people reacted to the the Lost Thing and if they thought there was a moral. The reason for focusing on the verbal text first was to provide a valid reason to later look at the illustrations with the objective of thinking about how they affected the meaning of the words. Thus, after the reading and a discussion about their ideas, pairs of students were given the picturebook and asked to take their time looking at the illustrations and reading the words. Their next task was to think about how the illustrations developed the narrative and possibly changed their understanding of the words. They were then asked to select a double-page spread (two facing pages) and share their thoughts on this development with the rest of the class. As discussion evolved, the students were given the meta-language to help them refer to the different parts of the picturebook (for example: front and back covers, flap, endpapers, title page, dedication, spread and opening, as well as any specific terms used to describe colours, shapes and forms in the illustrations).

With the objective of generating real discussion around the picturebook I attempted to enable student-led discussion (Chambers, 1983) and encouraged an aesthetic stance (Rosenblatt, 1995) by following their questions and queries. The focus was not on language per se, but on interpretation through language, and students were encouraged to actively comment on each other's ideas and not just assume their teacher and I had the answers. This led to everyone publicly acknowledging that we did not know the answers – we engaged in what Miller has referred to as 'supportive interpretive questioning' (2003, p. 296). Thus I would say that during these discussions the students were challenged to think for real and to speak for real.

The activities also included some short writing tasks (written reflections between lessons and writing a short dialogue) and finally watching the film and discussing how it supported, or not, the students' interpretations of the picturebook. The students were asked to think about what was different and what was given more emphasis in the film and whether it changed their interpretation of the story. Finally, they were asked to justify which medium they preferred. As part of the regular procedure at the end of a unit of work, the students were given a written test by their teacher, which included short texts about the picturebook taken from the internet, a series of activities which focused on language and a short composition, which followed the themes discussed during class time.

### **The data**

Data was generated from transcribed audio recordings of the classroom interaction, the students' written responses and reflections, the short written dialogues and the short composition that was part of the test given at the end of a unit of work. The data referred to here comes from the transcriptions, the students' reflections and their compositions.

## **Results**

### **Valuing the visual**

Comments from many students showed they had, until now, underestimated the strength of the visual in a narrative. Listening to the words and only later seeing the pictures and words together gave them the opportunity to imagine as they listened first. Some already had a mental image of the Lost Thing, based on the clues in the verbal text, and were surprised at the large teapot-like creature they later saw in Tan's illustrations. Tan has noted that, 'if read by itself the text would sound as though it is about a lost dog in a quite familiar suburb or city, but the pictures reveal a freakish, tentacled animal in a surreal a treeless world ...' (Tan, website). One student wrote in her reflections after we had discussed their thoughts (original wording and spelling has been kept):

Reading the story with the pictures change a lot the view of the story and the moral as well. It changes the narrative development for example by knowing what the lost



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thing is. If we read the story without the pictures we imagine it is a pet because the main character looks for pet notices in the local paper. We can see it isn't a pet, it is a machine. This fact can make us increasing in our mind about how people don't realize what is around them. Who knows if the boy hasn't think that the machine was a dog? We just see what we want to. It changed my opinion about what is the moral of the story as I started to think that this book represents society critical about how our future seems to be.

(Student reflection)

We can see from this student's comments that she has recognized how the illustrations create irony: the size and colour of the Lost Thing make it impossible for people to ignore, yet they do, and this caused her to rethink her initial ideas about a moral when she just heard the words. This reaction was fairly widespread through the group. This student however goes on to share her reflection, describing how she believes Tan wants us to reconsider the importance of communication with others and to notice what goes on around us otherwise we will end up with a world that is depicted in the illustrations.

The non-linear narrative structure of the picturebook posed a significant challenge for many of the students. One student wrote in a reflection, 'I didn't like the mathematical physical expressions and the words written above and under the images which related to them. These kind of creep me out and I can't explain why.' But, once the initial impact was overcome, most enjoyed the experience of this multimodal form of literature and they realized the importance of the visual and its contribution to the narrative. Many of their comments focused on the power of the illustrations. Their reflections included comments like: 'I didn't know about picturebooks, so this interested me, I liked the thousands of details very much.' Or 'What I liked about this book was the fact that the pictures tell the story in a way that make us dream and understand it in a different way.' We can see that they are valuing what the illustrations do as standalone illustrations, but also when seen in relation to the words. One student wrote,

I liked the book very much because I think the colours the characters and the pictures are amazing and different. I also liked it because it can transmit a lot of

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ideas that make us think and in each page we turn we have something new and unique to discover.

(Student reflection)

This student highlights how important it was that the illustrations made her think, and support her interpretation of the narrative. Another student wrote,

In the beginning I thought this was a very messed up book written by a crazy guy. I read it twice before it began to make sense. I particularly enjoyed the drawings, they were unique and different from others.

(Student reflection)

This comment reveals that this student was surprised at the complexity of the picturebook. She also highlights that she had to read it more than once to get a better idea of what was happening. Her comment about the illustrations is significant because she had recently moved from the Art and Design course, and although she was verbally participative during the sessions, she also spent most of the time copying Tan's illustrations into her notebook. Finally, another student wrote,

All the images have a hidden meaning. It's really hard to think of what was going on inside the author's mind when he illustrated the book and I guess that that sort of mysterious factor pleased me. That's why I was so excited when we were making an analysis of the book.

(Student reflection)

This last student mentions the 'hidden meaning' of the illustrations, something that became clearer to her as she listened to the different interpretations her peers were making of the same spreads. She also refers to 'an analysis of the book', which is their usual approach to literature in their English classes: they 'analyse texts'. I did not use this term during our time together.

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## Interthinking

There were many examples of using talk to think collectively in the transcribed corpus. The class teacher was positively surprised at the students' responses and highlighted how a number of them were more talkative and used English far more than normal. Together, by looking at the picturebook and talking about what we all thought, the students, their teacher and I, created group significances – significances that were meaningful to us as individuals and as a collection of beings in a particular context.

During the discussion that evolved as the pairs discussed their thoughts about the way the pictures acted upon the words, it was evident that through talk different students were able to clarify doubts and misunderstandings they had had about different spreads. One particular discussion occurred around opening 13 (see Figure 2), the spread showing Utopia, the place the boy eventually left the Lost Thing.



Figure 2: Opening 13

*The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan, Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2000.

Several pairs chose this spread to talk about, as it diverged visually from the other spreads, yet each had a different interpretation of its significance. One student summarized the discussion with her partner as follows:

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... in this opening the colourful place a lot of movement and happiness and we see that all of the things are really different from what we saw from the other openings (...) we thought that it might represent our imagination because when we are kids we have our imagination really alive but when we start to grow up we tend to lock it in a place and we don't actually use it so we end up being like all the people that we saw in the book because we start being boring.

Transcribed classroom interaction (lesson 2)

Here we can see reference to the idea that with age we lose the ability to be creative, something Tan (interview, 2010) also affirms to be evident in his work. This continued as a theme throughout the sessions and this particular pair made reference to this notion frequently. Another group, three students this time, presented a different interpretation:

[All names are pseudonyms]

**Dina:** ... it is different from the other ones and it has more colour but we chose it because it has more different things and they are happy here because they all different and they accept them all for what they really are ...

**Luisa:** All of these things are also lost things

**Sandie:** Like the other was a lost thing yeah. All these lost things around all in one place/

**Luisa:** /Together

**Teresa:** And together they aren't lost.

Transcribed classroom interaction (lesson 2)

This group saw the illustration as being evidence of inclusion. They assume that all these creatures are lost, but as they come together in one place, they are no longer lost, for they belong together. Tan has talked about belonging being one of the common themes running through his picturebooks (Tan, 2012), and these students picked up on the theme and returned to it several times during the sessions.

During talk around these interpretations, sharing thoughts and understandings, the following interaction took place, providing evidence of how these students together used

what Mercer has described as the 'resources of past experiences to make new joint knowledge and understanding' (2000: p. 46):

[All students' names are pseudonyms]

**Carlos:** [Pointing to the verso of opening 13] (...) Here, it says Utopia and the P is the other way and I learned that Utopia was the perfect place where everything and anything can live in harmony.

**Sandie:** (...) Maybe Shaun Tan is trying to give us a message that this is the perfect place. (...) [showing the back cover] the post card on the back says greetings from Suburbia (...)

**Maria:** Suburbia does this exist?

**Carla:** No

**Maria:** Ahh. It could be the name of the place.

**Bea:** It was the boy in Suburbia who opened the door into Utopia.

Transcribed classroom interaction (lesson 2)

Here we can see how Carlos is using his previous knowledge of Utopia (see Figure 3) to support an assumption that this must be a perfect place where things live in harmony.



Figure 3: Close up of opening 13 showing the word 'Utopia'.  
*The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan, Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2000.

I am also highlighting this particular interaction because it shows an important feature of the picturebook: the motivations it provides for moving back and forth between the covers and spreads. This exchange makes reference to opening 13, but also to the back cover (see Figure 1), and by doing this individuals are able to make connections and come to personal conclusions about meaning. In addition the final line by Bea was crucial for many of the students who hadn't picked up on the visual relationship between the worlds, and that they were connected by this door (see Figure 2). They had all come to the agreement that it was a door in an earlier conversation.

Another nice example of interthinking came on opening 11 (see Figure 4), at the top of the recto page. Again it was as a result of comments by one particular student that the group came to some interesting conclusions.

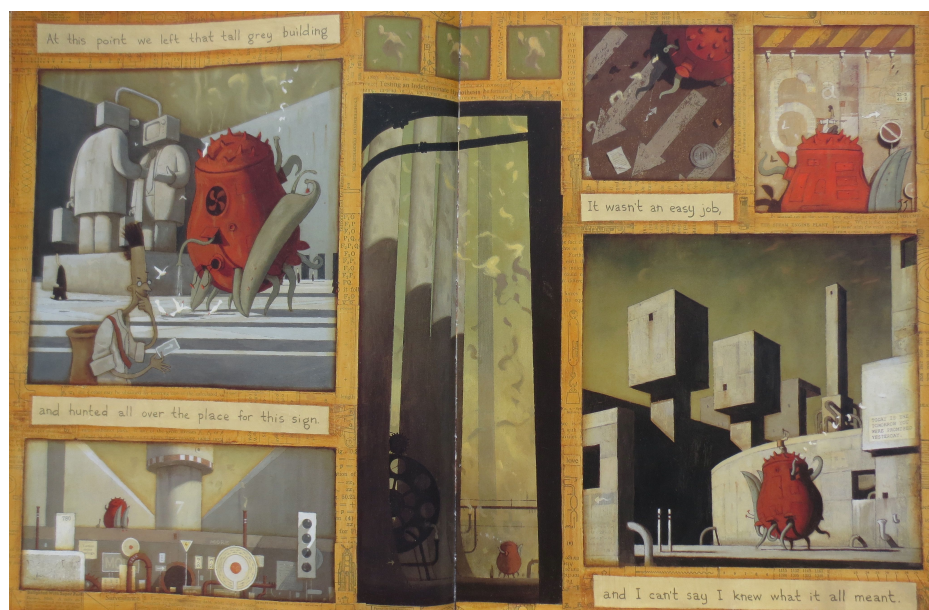


Figure 4: Opening 11.

*The Lost Thing* by Shaun Tan, Lothian Children's Books, an imprint of Hachette Australia, 2000.

The following excerpt focuses on one of the students talking about arrows, a repeated feature in the visual of this picturebook. In addition we are once again moving back and forth through the picturebook, as the card Alice refers to is on opening 10, but discussion is taking place on opening 11.

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**Alice:** [...] the card had a sign and when you read the text we didn't know what the sign was and I was curious. Now I know it's an arrow. There are several arrows spread around the city and the boy starts following them because they lead to Utopia, now we know. And there's an interesting image at the top with a cross

**Sandie:** Ok yeah, a zebra crossing kind of thing

**Alice:** Yeah and did you know the arrow they are following is pointing one way and the other arrows are pointing the other way and I think it means the boy and the lost thing are doing what they weren't supposed to so, in a way they are ... how can I say

**Sandie:** Going against the flow

**Alice:** Exactly [...]

**Carlos:** And the text at the bottom says it wasn't an easy job. (...)

**Ana:** Yeah! We grow up and we compromise we get a job and we have a house and a family and kids.

**Fatima:** And get boring!

Transcribed classroom interaction (lesson 2)

Alice's interpretation of the meaning of the different directions shown by the arrows was intriguing, and continued as a thread in later discussion. The class liked the expression 'going against the flow' and they inserted it into their talk, as well as into their written work. Going back to Alice's discovery, we can see clearly how she is connecting the pieces of the puzzle, first she makes the discovery that there are lots of arrows in the illustrations, then she discovers that these arrows are leading the boy and the Lost Thing to Utopia, and then she realizes that these arrows actually go in a different direction to other arrows and this could be seen as a visual metaphor. She excitedly shares this discovery with the group, who favour the interpretation. Carlos even confirms that the verbal text below the illustration supports her interpretations and the group returns to the idea of growing up and becoming boring adults.

For some students the need to have a right answer was initially overpowering, and they struggled with the inevitable recognition that there was no right answer. One student asked, 'Are you going to give us the answers at the end?' Others almost took delight in

knowing that any interpretation was acceptable. One student's reflection shows this nicely, '... but some of the images had pretty weird stuff going on [laughs]. We were all trying to Figure out the meaning of all those things, but we'll never know if our interpretations are the correct ones.' Others realized how positive this was, 'Sometimes it was annoying not knowing but that's challenging. It's not bad in my opinion, it pulls us to think.' By the end of the three sessions all students seemed to have acknowledged that their personal interpretation was indeed acceptable, and they were willing to write about their thoughts and interpretations creatively during the follow up written activities suggested by their teacher.

### **Reflecting on the film and the book**

After seeing the film, *The Lost Thing*, the students all agreed that they understood the story better. One student said, 'The film made things so much clearer, the sounds, the songs, the images moving helped me a lot finding the meaning of the story'. But in addition to being clearer, they considered the film to be more emotional, 'the way the narrator tells the story gets into our mind'. Not only did the narrator's voice bring emotion to the film but so did the longer scenes, which expanded on the single spreads in the picturebook, along with the different lighting effects and accompanying soundtrack. The students felt the relationship between the creature and the narrator was stronger in the film, reinforced by these longer scenes, which emphasized the boy's efforts to find where the Lost Thing actually belonged in more detail. The scenes they highlighted in particular were the opening beach scene, the shed scene, where the Lost Thing eats Christmas decorations, and the farewell scene.

The longer scenes also helped clarify who some of the characters in the book are. A couple of students thought that Pete, the narrator's friend, was a drug addict from the illustrations in the picturebook. After seeing the film they agreed that his goatie beard, not present in the book illustration, made him look studious and less alternative as did the lengthy scene where he tested the Lost Thing in a number of different ways.

There was some discussion about the Federal Government scene, which was felt to be much more frightening, due to the use of light effects, distancing and extreme camera shot angles. This was reinforced by the appearance of the janitor-like creature, whose voice was clearly recorded. Students commented on their misunderstanding of what the tape



recorder on his back actually was in the book, they thought it looked like a pair of eyes. The repeated message of salvation was noted as being significant and the students related it to their interpretation of his role as that of a possible gatekeeper, helping lost creatures to find Utopia, which had emerged from discussion around the last page in the picturebook.

Utopia was named by all as the most different: the length of the scene, the brighter colours, the accompanying sound track, as well as showing the many different creatures apparently living together in harmony. The students referred to it as the place 'where the lost things live their lives'. It was decided that Utopia was definitely a peaceful and happy place, which for some students actually changed their understanding of the story, 'in the illustration in the book I thought the place was not friendly and cosy, but it really is'. One student believed the focus on the key instead of a buzzer at the entrance to Utopia was central to her understanding the narrative, she wrote in her reflections: 'when Shaun [narrator] is leaving the lost thing and instead of a buzzer there's a key, which I qualify as the key to happiness'. This fits nicely with the expanded, lengthy scene showing Utopia in the film. You will notice the student refers to 'Shaun' as the main character – the group had agreed the character's name was Shaun after reading and discussing the post card on the back cover (see Figure 1), which is signed by 'Shaun'. There was also some discussion about whether the story was autobiographical. Tan has written, 'I wanted to tell the story from the point of view of a character that would represent how I might personally respond to this, so the unnamed narrator is essentially me' (Tan, webpage).

The goodbye scene at the door to Utopia was also considered very moving. A student reflected:

The part where they say goodbye to each other I saw as the most moving part, when they move both hands to each other in a gesture of love and affection, and that affection and love were not well expressed in the book.

(Student reflection)

In the picturebook the static Figure of the boy does not convey the true emotion he feels. The film, on the other hand, draws out the goodbye, has the boy turning back and bending down as the door closes. Watching a world beyond his reach disappearing forever.

Finally, the ending in the film was felt to be significantly different and more explicit. One student insisted I replay the final sequence several times, so that the class could all see her point. Indeed, contrary to the final spreads in the picturebook which show the boy returning in the tram, in the film the boy is a man, his hair is combed and he is just like everyone else. A lost thing looks at him as he passes in the tram, and he turns away, looking instead at the viewers implying, the girl insisted, that he has not noticed it. This student felt the scene confirmed significantly the point the group had discussed in detail over the previous lessons 'that when we grow up and become adults we get distracted with all the responsibilities we have and we stop noticing all the magical things around us...' Tan writes:

Such stories open the possibility of grafting childhood curiosity back into an adult consciousness, as much as it encourages young readers to hold on to those things that fascinate them, and never let them go. Things in darkness are pushed back into the light.

Tan, 2011, p. 5.

### **The book or the film?**

When asked outright which they preferred, the film or the book, most students indicated they preferred the film. They justified their decision by saying it gave them the answers to many of the queries and misunderstandings the picturebook had generated, '... because in the film it is less confused than the book and the film is funny'. Several, however, were unable to decide which they preferred. Their reflections were:

I think the book was more interesting, because it makes us think about what the real meaning is, while the movie is a little bit easier to understand, I guess I can say they complement each other.

(Student reflection)

What I really liked in the book was the message of how adults forget about imagining and always trying to know 'why'. [...] but in the film we can understand better what the characters are feeling [...]

(Student reflection)

Finally one student wrote the following in her test composition:

It is true that without the book we wouldn't use our imagination and that is not what the narrator wants, what I mean is that if the moral of this tale is to be different from others, we shouldn't go for what is told for us to see, we should look with our own eyes. Following the moral, I think we should prefer the book.

(Excerpt from test composition)

The ability of these few students to see that taking the easy option of sitting back and being spoon fed by the film was not as enjoyable as the challenge of a picturebook is to be praised. Not only were these students encountering a literary form they were unfamiliar with, but they were responding positively to the challenge it afforded them through the gaps left between the pictures and the words, which in the film were filled almost entirely, with little space for interpretation.

### Notes on language use and student evaluation

According to the 11<sup>th</sup> year programme of learning (Moreira et al, 2001), teachers are encouraged to follow certain 'areas of reference'. Figure 1 summarizes the areas, text types, macro functions and communicative intentions, which I believe were touched upon during the three sessions with *The Lost Thing*.

<b>'Areas of reference'</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The world around us;</li> <li>• Youth and consumerism;</li> <li>• The world of work;</li> <li>• The world and its cultures.</li> </ul>	<b>Communicative intention</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Look for and share information;</li> <li>• Relate events and issues;</li> <li>• Counter-argue and confront opinions;</li> <li>• Give an opinion about issues / events;</li> <li>• Analyse and be critical;</li> <li>• Persuade using logical or rhetoric means;</li> <li>• Ask for and give advice;</li> <li>• Warn or explain;</li> <li>• Express emotions and values;</li> <li>• Discuss logically;</li> <li>• Entertain / have fun.</li> </ul>
<b>Type of text</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feature film;</li> <li>• Comic strip / graphic novels.</li> </ul>	
<b>Macro function</b> Narration	

Figure 1: Summary of the areas, text types, macro functions and communicative intentions referred to in the 11<sup>th</sup> year programme and touched upon while using *The Lost Thing* in the classroom.

The list of communicative intentions is exceptionally rich and I think shows that this picturebook was successful in affording opportunities for language use and thus development. The teacher's anecdotal comments also suggested that students demonstrated an unusually high level of motivation to talk in English and made a concerted effort to get their ideas across to the rest of the class. She said that it was usual for certain students to speak in Portuguese, or remain silent, yet this was not the case during my visit. Naturally having a native-speaker in the class will have affected the students' responses, but their motivation was evident over the three sessions while interacting with the picturebook and its film.

### **Conclusions**

The use of the picturebook contributed to a recognition by the students that the visual is to be taken seriously: we saw how they were able to value the visual and what it does to the words when they are seen together. The talk around the different modes within the picturebook in turn fostered the development of a literary literacy, as students activated their interpretation skills and responded to what they saw and read, in a transactional sense (Rosenblatt, 1995). They engaged in a semiotic experience with and around the picturebook and its film, interacting with their peers and teachers, socially negotiating their individual explications.

When the picturebook and its film adaptation were compared, it became clear that the students found understanding the film far easier. The answers to many of their questions were provided in the film and they did not have to be actively involved in meaning making. The picturebook was more propitious to creating discussion, though comparing the two media also led to interesting talk. I'd like to suggest that as ELT professionals we consider this approach more often, using books and then the films to afford opportunities for talk in English. The challenge for us as teachers is to help our students work with the two media and encourage a critical reading of each, in particular of the film where students can be encouraged to question the choices made by the film maker – choices we saw from their reflections they may not have made themselves.

The implications of the use of picturebooks in second or foreign language classes are countless, but it is evident from this report that it is possible to use a picturebook

successfully with older learners, and that it provides opportunities for students to use English for a real purpose. Picturebooks are challenging for both students and teachers, but they can provide exciting new possibilities for classroom practice. The teacher who allowed me to work with her class was so taken by the success of this picturebook that she planned to use it again the following academic year with a new group of students. What she actually did was even better: instead of just one class, she used *The Lost Thing* with three 10<sup>th</sup> year classes and has since told me how successful it was on many levels. She hopes to use it again in following years.

Implications for teacher training are evident and I would like to highlight the need to include more information about picturebooks in both pre- and in-service teacher training courses. These should include modules to help teachers understand the picturebook as a form of multimodal literature as well as information on the variety of book titles and topics that are available. The sharing of successful practice, which can be motivating for teachers, would also be a useful inclusion on a training course. I have persuaded the teacher I worked with to present at a local English teachers' conference to share her positive experience, in the hope that her enthusiasm is contagious and other teachers consider using picturebooks with their older students.

In relation to selection of texts, I'd like to emphasize the importance of taking a more critical stance regarding the choice of texts to use in an English language classroom. We should be moving away from using the more traditional, mainstream material offered by the multinational publishing houses, which promote the use of language learner literature often in the form of graded readers, towards using more authentic literature. Learner literature tends to be unchallenging and rarely fosters a critical reading – if we want our learners to become critical readers, exposure to challenging picturebooks like *The Lost Thing* can help foster this critical stance.

The time I spent with these young adults as we shared the picturebook *The Lost Thing* and its film, has confirmed for me that a picturebook can indeed be beneficial in a classroom of older learners. I was able to observe how the interanimation between picture and word fostered discussion as motivator for language use, thus opportunities for interthinking. These students demonstrated that they were able to read the world and critically talk about it in another language. The teacher I worked with has since shown me

that there is no need for a native speaker visitor to be in the classroom for other students to do the same and be motivated by a picturebook. I hope that many more teachers begin using picturebooks to challenge their students to be critical readers of the visual and the verbal.

### Notes

1. This paper describes only part of the project, which took place in Portugal and in Argentina. The project involved using the *The Lost Thing* with 12 year-old students in Argentina and older students in Portugal and their responses were compared. Luciano Camio, the teacher in Argentina, and I presented together about our project at the IBBY Conference in London in August 2012. Although I take full responsibility for this paper, I would like to acknowledge Luciano's contribution to the thinking behind it, which reflects discussion while preparing our joint presentation. His input was invaluable.

2. There are a number of picturebooks considered appropriate for older language learners; many have been featured on my blog, <http://picturebooksinelt.blogspot.pt/>

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### Filmography

*The Lost Thing* Dir. Andrew Ruhemann & Shaun Tan. Screen Australia & Passion Pictures Australia, 2010. DVD

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