Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* as an Example of Teaching Visual Literacy

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Abstract

This paper attempts to re-evaluate Maurice Sendak's masterpiece *Where the Wild Things Are* in light of the more recent trends in teaching English as a foreign language. It has, for instance, become indisputable that today's visual culture requires students to be visually literate, that is to be able to deal with visual images both receptively (comprehending and interpreting) and productively (creating and producing). Assuming this perspective, and referring also to ideological critique, the potential of Sendak's work to aid students in their development of these competencies is assessed and briefly exemplified. It will be argued that *Where the Wild Things Are* is particularly conducive to fostering receptive visual literacy as it requires students to consider the relation between verbal and visual texts and forces them to engage in 'reading the images' (Oakley, 2010, p. 4). A focus on this relationship also opens up opportunities for the development of productive visual literacy.

Keywords: picturebooks, *Where the Wild Things Are*, visual literacy, EFL, ESL, reading images

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Introduction

Since its first publication in 1963, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, a Caldecott Medal winner in 1964, has been widely recognized as one of the best children's books ever created (Waller, 1977). Yet, despite its continuing popularity and topicality, few scholars have attempted to revisit Sendak's masterpiece in light of the more recent trends in teaching English as a foreign language. Scholarly material on *Where the Wild Things Are* published after 1995 is difficult to find. It is thus necessary to re-evaluate the potential of this picturebook for usage in the contemporary EFL classroom. In this context, the development of visual literacy certainly plays a key role in assessing the pedagogical value of Sendak's work.

On the Importance of Teaching Visual Literacy

Today maybe more than ever, children are growing up in a visual culture: a phenomenon that has largely been caused by the sweeping rise of popular media. Galda and Short remarked as early as 1993, that 'children today are immersed in a visual culture of television, videos and computers' (p. 506). Six years later, Giorgis and colleagues echoed this observation, commenting on children's constant encounter with visual images in their daily lives: '[They] must constantly use and interpret these images as well as analyze and think critically about the significance of what they are seeing' (1999, p. 146). While using and interpreting visual images has become routine for children and young adults, analyzing and thinking critically about what has been seen is more complex due to the fact that today's 'visual symbols […] require more complex thinking skills than traditional literacy requires' (Seglem & Witte, 2009, p. 216). This fact can primarily be attributed to the different kinds of logic inherent in written texts and visual images: While 'written text is governed by the logic of time or temporal sequence, […] visual images are governed by spatiality, composition and simultaneity' and 'work across multiple sign systems' (Serafini, 2011, p. 343). In other words, they are 'infinitely more than just "painted words"' (Doonan, 1993, p. 51). Thus, conventional strategies used to understand a (written) text do not suffice to fully conceptualize today's visual images.

For a long time, 'traditional literacy' (Seglem & Witte, 2009) was the only understanding of the term 'literacy', which referred to what Goody (1977, p. 10) termed a

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'technology of the intellect' and Graff (1995) considered 'a technology or a set of techniques for communications and for decoding and reproducing written or printed material' (p. 10). As these definitions suggest, literacy used to be clearly focused on oral and written culture and as technology progressed, so did the concept of literacy. Hence, today the idea of one single literacy has been dismissed and replaced by the assumption of a wide spectrum of 'multiliteracy categories' (Tyner, 1998, p. 103). McClure (1994) argues for four overlapping literacies: traditional literacy, computer literacy[1], media literacy[2], and network literacy[3], which together create a fifth central literacy that he terms information literacy[4]. While McClure's division into five literacies clearly accounts for the notion of 'multiliteracies', the emphasis he places on information literacy can certainly be questioned. Media or visual literacy could well be considered the central literacy for, as Barry (1997) argues, 'vision developed before language, [thus] images are a natural part of our primal sense of being and represent the deepest recesses of ourselves' (p. 69). Arizpe (2001) agrees, stressing the importance of visual literacy for the development of other forms of literacy: 'visual skills are essential not only for encouraging an active interpretation of information but also for providing a foundation for thinking about other literacies' (p. 115).

Given this focus and the aforementioned ongoing development towards a visual culture, it is visual literacy that is of interest in this article. In an attempt to define this specific literacy, Considine offers the following, 'Visual literacy refers to the ability to comprehend and create images in a variety of media in order to communicate effectively. [...] Visually literate students should be able to produce and interpret visual messages' (1986, p. 38)

According to his definition, visual literacy combines two different sets of skills, namely receptive (comprehending and interpreting) and productive (creating and producing) skills. In relation to the former, there is a popular misconception that students somehow acquire these receptive visual skills along the way, that there is no need for specific training to develop these competencies (Ladevich, 1974). In an attempt to debunk this myth, Ladevich remarks that 'visual symbols have design features that are unique to them and which are not shared by verbal symbols' (1974, p. 114). Thus, visual receptive skills cannot be acquired while dealing with verbal texts only and need to be specifically

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cultivated in class. If this fact continues to be neglected, Raney (1998, p. 41) warns that students will miss out on, among other things, 'discussions of creativity, judgement and "aesthetic openness"'. This special focus required to develop visual literacy does not mean, however, that visual and verbal receptive skills are two entirely different entities. On the contrary, 'the thinking processes involved in visual communication […] are similar to reading skills such as detecting sequence, determining main idea, reaching conclusions, and making judgments' (Read & Smith, 1982, p. 929). It is for this reason that picturebooks and graphic novels, multimodal texts that combine the verbal and the visual, are ideal media to develop visual literacy.

The inclusion of the latter set of skills, creating and producing, in the framework of visual literacy is based on the assumption that visual literacy goes beyond the mere gathering of information and rather includes the appreciation of 'the aesthetics of quality nonverbal presentations' (Read & Smith, 1982, p. 929). Being able to evaluate images means that visually literate students become aware of the features that constitute quality visual material and are thus empowered to produce such texts themselves.

This importance is also slowly being recognized by educators, although not explicitly mentioned as a competency, several aspects of visual literacy can be detected numerous times in the curriculum for English of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia in Germany. The paragraph 'Dealing with texts and media' (MSW NRW, 2007, p. 42, own translation), for instance, features both receptive and productive visual skills, in that the Ministry of Education (MSW NRW) requires students to be able to perform the following: 'employ basic techniques to explore the effects of authentic texts' as well as 'employ productive techniques to deal with texts' (2007, p. 42, own translation). Texts, in this context, are obviously understood to include any medium communicating information, yet many teachers still restrict themselves to using verbal material, either printed or online. This is surprising since there is an abundance of visual resources available to EFL teachers: picturebooks and graphic novels in particular have enjoyed increasing popularity. In addition, Bland notes:

> … school students as digital natives are used to combinations of text, image and dynamic layout, and find multimodal texts such as picturebooks and graphic novels stimulating. Multimodal texts do not

demand linear reading but allow a choice of reading path, recalling the multiple windows simultaneously open on computer screens. (Bland, 2013b, p. 5)

Reasons for the continuing neglect of multimodal texts are manifold: Visual literacy has been regarded as 'a potential threat to the present dominance of verbal literacy among elite groups' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 17), while picturebooks are wrongfully accused of discouraging the development of creativity (Protheroe, 1992). A further common misconception about multimodal texts is their alleged restriction to primary students. In this context, Burwitz-Melzer (2013) points out that these books are often believed 'to offer only entertainment for the very young' (p. 56). As a result, schools feel less inclined to acknowledge the vital importance of visual literacy and less inclined to teach using picturebooks. What these critics tend to overlook, however, is the inherent appeal that picturebooks have for children of all ages; a fact that Styles (2003) perfectly illustrates in her anecdotal preface to *Children Reading Pictures*: 'When I laid out piles of delectable picturebooks […], I noticed how many of the older pupils […] made the sort of "Ahhh" and "Mmm" appreciative noises that are more suggestive of […] encountering delicious food' (p. x). According to Doonan (1993), this is due to children considering the reading of multimodal texts 'a pleasurable activity, not regarded as work' and the texts being 'satisfying subjects for investigation' (p. 49).

Teaching Visual Literacy with *Where the Wild Things Are*
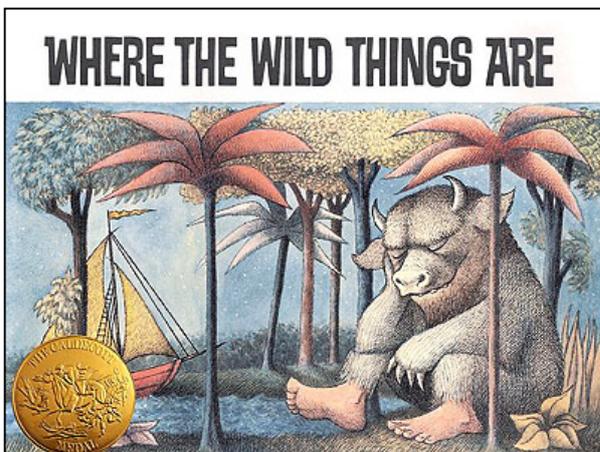
Given the potential that picturebooks hold for the development of visual literacy and their favorable position among children, it is surprising that Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, a widely-praised book that 'holds a treasured position on perhaps more bookshelves than any other American picture book in

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history' (Shaddock, 1997, p. 155), has not been assessed from this perspective. To lay the foundation for the upcoming analysis, it might be useful to provide a quick summary of the picturebook's plot: The story begins with young Max being sent to his room by his mother for causing trouble while wearing a wolf suit. Desiring to escape the domestic constraints, he dreams himself into the land of the wild things, reflected in the gradual transformation of his room into a colorful forest, where he is met with hostility at first, yet manages to become king of the wild things. Having enjoyed his time but feeling lonely, Max eventually leaves this imaginative world, sailing back over the ocean into his very own room. As will be explored in this article, this story offers a multitude of opportunities to develop both sets of visual skills.

In this respect, receptive skills demand particular attention, as *Where the Wild Things Are* is a picturebook in which students are required to read beyond the verbal text. To completely understand the plot, the illustrations have to be carefully studied and regarded 'not [as] an extension of the text that simply reinforces the meanings of the words, but necessary for comprehension' (Galda & Short, 1993, p. 506). Sendak himself has called it his job as an illustrator to 'open[] up the words in a way that children at first did not see was possible' (Haviland, 1971, p. 276). Illustrations, form and content are interdependently linked in *Where the Wild Things Are*. For instance, panel sizes vary considerably depending on which (imaginative) world Max is situated in, which according to Arakelian (1985) 'reinforces the correspondence between the boy's power in the place he creates and the lack of power in his room' (p. 123).

The connection between verbal and visual texts is particularly obvious when considering openings four to six,[5] which depict Max's imaginative journey into the wild things' forest. As nature begins to take over his bedroom, the size of the panels increases each time the verb *grew* is repeated, until the illustration in recto reaches the edges of the page (Arakelian, 1985). While text and illustrations do not always complement each other as neatly as in the given example, their relation is still essential for a picturebook to be understood in its entirety, '… the tensions between the competing mediums of prose and picture illustrate the transformation from Max's initial reasoned reaction, described in words, to his wild frenzy and cathartic rage, which can only be illustrated in wordless pictures (Waller, 1977, p. 133)

Thus, the task of 'reading the images' (Oakley, 2010, p. 4) is key in having students develop receptive visual literacy. Here, students are supposed to move below the surface of what the verbal text might suggest and look for correspondences and conflicts between their understanding of what the words tell and the images show (Lewis, 2001). This happens, as Arizpe and Styles (2003) have shown, in a process of repeated movement between text and images in order to form meaning. While the text might entice the reader to read on, 'the pictures require [him or her] to stay, look, search, reflect – they interrupt the text at regular intervals' (Doonan, 1993, p. 58). To guide students through what might be an unfamiliar process, Oakley proposes to have students think, pair and share their ideas, using the following guiding questions:

- Why did Maurice Sendak choose this colour palette?
- Notice the framing of the illustrations and their relative size on the page throughout the story. How does it change and why?
- Notice changes to Max's suit throughout the story. (Is the hood on? Does he have his crown?) What role does this have in telling his story?
- How do the images show Max's power in the story? (Relative size of objects, etc.).

(Oakley, 2010, p. 4)

Although it makes sense to offer students a roadmap for analyzing images, Oakley's suggestions are limited to the form of the illustrations; for like many other scholars, she does not consider the images' content and, equally important, does not acknowledge their inherent ideological nature. Being 'entirely in the realm of ideology' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 12), all images, even apparently neutral ones, favour particular discourses and neglect others and are thus ideologically charged. Given the predominance of illustrations, picturebooks in particular are highly ideological. Bradford states the following:

> [Picturebooks] afford repertoires of visual images and narratives anchored in cultural assumptions, systems of meaning and ideologies. They thus reflect and advocate concepts and values responsive to the times and cultures in which they were produced, even as their reception often stretches beyond these times and cultures. (Bradford, 2011, p. 183)

In this light, the reading of a picturebook like *Where the Wild Things Are* at least has to acknowledge the fact that the book reflects worldviews prevalent in the Western culture at the time of production. While I agree with Doonan (1993) that picturebooks can function as a 'courteous translation' (p. 49), which aids students in understanding the complex realities of today, and 'are a significant means by which we integrate young children into the ideology of our culture' (Nodelman, 1996, p. 116), being able to detect ideology and think critically about images should be just as much part of teaching visual literacy as productive and receptive visual literacy should be. Putting this into practice requires teachers to prepare thoroughly for ideological critique, which has been singled out as one of the hardest challenges for students (Anstey & Bull, 2000). Eeds and Peterson (1991) envision the teacher to act as 'curator' or 'literary leader' to help students 'develop literary insight and aesthetic judgment' (p. 119), and offer a set of questions about literary elements (for example structure, character, place), which teachers should consult as preparation for literary critique in class. Writing about multimodal texts in particular, Prior, Willson and Martinez (2012) suggest that 'perhaps the best preparation is simply lingering over and reflecting on ways in which both the visual and verbal texts work to convey important information about characters' (p. 204).

With regard to Sendak's work, the imperialistic notion of conquering the savages, a reading that could be taken from Max reigning over the wild things for instance, is a subject that might demand special attention in class. Shaddock (1997) observes how the plot mirrors the nineteenth-century adventure novel in the protagonist's desire to escape from the domestic domain controlled by women and the move towards the freedoms of the uncivilized world. Depending on the students' age and familiarity with history, discussion about imperialism can range from simply having students take on the role of the wild things and reflect on their experience of being subdued by another, to linking the

imperialistic process (arriving, conquering, leaving) to actual historical events. Sendak illustrates this ideology in particular by means of depicting clear-cut power relationships between Max and the wild things. Besides Max wearing the crown as an obvious symbol of rulership, a closer investigation of the size relations, for example, reveals how his increasing power is mirrored in his size assimilating to the wild things. Having established this link with the students, it might be worthwhile discussing whether physical size actually reflects power.

That said it has to be noted by scholars and teachers alike that a purely ideological reading of *Where the Wild Things Are* would not do this text justice and disregards numerous other opportunities for the development of receptive visual literacy and language skills. In fact, a key reason why the book is particularly attractive for younger students is the fact that the story features a boy who they can easily identify with and whose situation they might have been in themselves. By having these students 'relate their personal histories or their understanding of the world' (Cummins, 1996, p. 91) to the text, their motivation, not only to read the text but, even more importantly in the context of EFL or ESL, to talk about it, increases. Images intensify this effect since 'the visual image is more effective than spoken or written language in evoking an affective response' (Arizpe & Styles, 2003, p. 223) and thus a personal connection. In the context of an EFL classroom, teachers should place more importance upon talking about a picturebook; the reading of more complex works in particular can be enhanced by having students talk and collaborate among each other (Pantaleo, 2004). For instance, students can retell personal experiences comparable to Max's situation or describe his facial expressions, body language and gestures to try to establish emotions and relate them to times when they felt similar. Regardless of the activity selected, students need to be given enough time to read and revisit the picturebook, if possible several weeks, for 'thinking, discussion, unconscious processes of "gestation" and response in a range of modes' (Arizpe & Styles, 2003, p. 245).

So far, the potential of *Where the Wild Things Are* for the development of receptive visual literacy is obvious. Admittedly, this is where Sendak's work is most conducive to fitting use in an EFL classroom. Nonetheless, the picturebook can also be employed as an effective tool to strengthen and develop productive skills. Here, it is again the relationship

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between verbal and visual texts, or absence of verbal text, that presents a basis for a number of creative tasks. One possible way to approach this relationship in a productive way, for instance, is to work with the three wordless double spreads of Max and the wild things' 'wild rumpus' (openings 12 to 14).

An obvious, yet highly stimulating task is to have students come up with text of their own for these verbal gaps (Oakley, 2010). Similar activities include the retelling of the story from different perspectives or having students invent titles for each double spread (Bland, 2013a). Working with trainee teachers yet also adaptable to the EFL classroom, Nodelman (1988) proposes storytelling without the comforting focus that the words offer the reader: He shows his students the pictures only and has them write stories of their understanding of the plot; after being read the original story, his students typically realize that 'words can make pictures into rich narrative resources – but only because they communicate so differently from pictures that they change the meaning of pictures' (p. 196). These tasks, of course, need to be selected according and adjusted to our students' linguistic competencies.

Taking a broader perspective on the question of what productive skills entail, Waller proposes that students could successfully re-enact Max's story. He writes:

> Sendak's books […] are not therapeutic in intent. They do not explain to the child how to imagine, what to imagine, how to reinterpret the adult world. They simply attempt to reflect and evoke the child's imaginative experience. Perhaps for this reason, children quickly identify with the protagonists and can easily act out plays about *Where the Wild Things Are*. (Waller, 1977, p. 139)

In other words, Sendak does not patronize the readers as he refuses to lay out the whole story but rather trusts them to co-author it for themselves, leaving gaps for them to fill with their own experiences and imagination.

What is more, although the plot might seem rather simplistic and geared towards younger children initially, *Where the Wild Things Are* actually offers a number of different angles from which students can approach the story, depending on their age, grade and language proficiency. In this context, DeLuca fittingly notes that 'simplicity is deceptive'

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(1984, p. 13) since 'children's literature […] yield[s] multiple meanings' (p. 6). Bosch and Duran (2009) illustrate this by pointing out how readers of different ages read the same picturebook in different ways: While children tend to focus more on the character's actions and the plot, adolescent readers read visual and verbal texts more carefully, trying to recognize historical and cultural references and to make out how they relate to the plot.

In fact, Sendak himself argues that he does not write for children specifically: 'I certainly am not sitting down and writing a book for children. I think it would be fatal if one did. So I write books' (Haviland, 1971, p. 266). Anderson agrees with this notion, pointing towards the 'healthy sense that children's literature is not really separate from adult literature after all' (1974, p. 214). Thus, although most activities presented in this paper are geared towards primary and early secondary school students, a picturebook like *Where the Wild Things Are* should not per se be considered a children's book to be used only in these grades. Through its multilayered meaning, *Where the Wild Things Are* is a suitable text to introduce students, regardless of their age, to picturebooks and prepare them to deal with images both inside and outside of the classroom. Besides, Dave Eggers' novel *The Wild Things* and Spike Jonze's film adaptation also provide excellent opportunities, particularly for advanced students, to explore intermedial readings: from picturebook to novel to film. Hence, instead of questioning the appropriateness of the work itself, it is only sensible to focus on the appropriate ways to make effective use of it in the EFL classroom.

Conclusion

Where the Wild Things Are is a beautifully composed picturebook that has enjoyed continuous popularity for over fifty years, largely because of its captivating story and artful images. However, it might have been a side effect of this popularity that few contemporary scholars have dared to closely evaluate the work's pedagogical potential, which is tragic since, and as I have attempted to show, Sendak's masterpiece holds great value for the EFL classroom, particularly for the development of visual literacy and with learners of all ages.

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Notes

[1] Computer literacy can be defined as 'familiarity with the personal computer and the ability to create and manipulate documents and data' (Spitzer, Eisenberg & Lowe, 1998, p. 27).

[2] As media literacy and visual literacy are often used synonymously and denote similar sets of skills (Spitzer et al., 1998), a definition will be given as the paper progresses.

[3] Network literacy includes the ability 'to locate, access, and use information in a networked environment such as the World Wide Web' (Spitzer et al., 1998, p. 28).

[4] Burchinal defines information literacy as the skills 'to efficiently and effectively locate and use information needed for problem-solving and decision-making' (1976, p. 11).

[5] Permission was not given by the publisher to include pages from this picturebook, however readers are encouraged to access online versions of the book from the following links:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKNaYlzssbc

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3A7M3qDlgQ

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