



**Grit Alter and Thorsten Merse (Eds.)**

***Re-thinking Picturebooks for Intermediate and  
Advanced Learners: Perspectives for Secondary  
English Language Education***

**Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2023, 262 pp.**

**ISBN: 978-3-8233-8474-8**

**Reviewer: Tatia Gruenbaum**

### **Introduction: Picturebooks in Secondary ELT**

The exploration of picturebooks as a teaching resource remains relatively limited within secondary English language education. As Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer notes in the foreword to the book under review, much research in this area has stemmed from literacy studies. Apart from the common perception that picturebooks might be better suited to younger language learners, Mourão (2013) suggests a possible reason might also be the dominance of coursebooks in secondary English language education. Although mainly in the context of primary English language education, Ellis and Gruenbaum (2023) point out that factors such as rigid reading programmes and limited access further contribute to the underuse of picturebooks worldwide. Yet some recent studies underscore how picturebooks can foster creative language and intercultural learning with secondary-aged learners (e.g., Heggernes, 2019; Yeom, 2019). Hence, this volume arrives as a timely addition showcasing recent developments in picturebook-based secondary English language education.

### **Overview of the Book**

Following the compelling foreword by Kümmerling-Meibauer, there is a comprehensive introduction by the editors, who are based in Austria (Alter) and Germany (Merse). Their geographical location is reflected in the book as several chapters are situated in German-speaking

contexts. The first four chapters centre on 'conceptual perspectives' to position the picturebook in secondary ELT, while the remaining five chapters are grouped under 'themes, competences, and literacies'. Each chapter offers a combination of theory and practical teaching ideas, often accompanied by examples of selected picturebook(s) and/or samples of learners' pictorial work, enhancing the visual experience for the reader. A box with 'Warm-up: Engagement questions' at the outset of each chapter, seemingly designed to explore the readers' existing knowledge, suggests both in- and pre-service teachers as a target group, who are expected to make use of picturebooks as a teaching resource to enhance the classroom experience for their learners.

### **Chapter-by-Chapter Walkthrough**

The editors' introduction opens with a quotation from Ommundsen (2015), who asks, 'Who are these picturebooks for?', indeed a central question which aims to locate picturebooks within ELT at the intermediate and advanced levels. To begin with, Alter and Merse argue that the ubiquitous focus on picturebooks at primary level might have resulted in 'a gap, or an under-interrogated field of engagement and research' (p. 15) at secondary level. To avoid the primary / secondary distinction, they clarify in a footnote that each chapter defines its target learner group and that as editors they refer to intermediate learners as ages 13-16 and advanced learners as ages 17-19. This contrasts with Ellis (2014), who clarifies the term 'young learners' in line with the International Standard Classification of Education and proposes lower secondary learners (11-14) and upper secondary learners (15-17), thereby highlighting the lack of terminological consistency within the field.

Chapter 1, 'Eco-picturebooks for older learners: Features, selection criteria, and practical suggestions' by Theresa Summer makes a strong case for the use of eco-themed picturebooks to support critical environmental literacies with learners aged 12-19 in Germany. Summer proposes some excellent picturebooks, diverse in illustration and text volume, and provides a range of teaching ideas to encourage deep reading. To support the picturebook selection process, Summer categorises eco-themed picturebooks into implicit and explicit texts and proposes three criteria which go beyond visual aspects. Markus Oppolzer's inspiring Chapter 2 focuses on 'The centrality of conceptual metaphors to reading of characters' thoughts and feelings in Shaun Tan's picturebooks'. Through the perspective of conceptual metaphors, Oppolzer introduces readers to

several of Tan's works and presents six inroads (thematic, empathetic, performative, artistic, biographical, and generic) to support educators when exploring Tan's *Cicada* with advanced students of CEFR B1/B2 English levels.

The rather anecdotal chapter 3 by Anne Herlyn titled "It was all very mysterious indeed" – Addressing the counterpoint effect in Oliver Jeffers' *The Great Paper Caper* in the upper secondary classroom' might be more suited for an educator new to picturebook-based ELT. Herlyn discusses visual literacies and narrative complexity and reports on a classroom project with *The Great Paper Caper*, in which learners received either the text or illustrations and were invited to (re)create the missing elements. Undoubtedly, this project would be suitable for a wide range of learner ages, not only secondary. Annika Kolb and Heiko Kist's exceptional Chapter 4, "The book really got me" – Individualized reading of picturebooks in a secondary EFL classroom,' is based on a four-week case study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. By focusing on common classroom realities such as the challenges of selecting a picturebook to suit an entire class, Kolb and Kist promote individualized reading by offering learners a choice of twelve picturebooks, selected for topic relevance, complexity, and aesthetic quality. The success of their project is supported not only by empirical data but also by a student's poem, which highlights their linguistic, cognitive, and creative engagement.

In Part 2, Chapter 5, '(Re-)Envisioning picturebooks for social justice education in advanced audiences: A critical literacy perspective from Canada' by Eleni Louloudi and Chapter 6, '*I Dissent* – Discussing Ruth Bader Ginsburg's egalitarian version of the American Dream at higher secondary level' by Katja Heim both centre on social justice and human rights. Louloudi explores the engagement of student teachers and high school students during a university seminar in Canada when using *The Composition* by Antonio Skármeta and Alfonso Ruano. Based on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and critical literacy as social justice education, she proposes a five-step picturebook teaching cycle and details how she used *The Composition* with advanced English language learners, including a focus on reflection. Heim's chapter on the use of *I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark* by Debbie Levy and Elizabeth Baddeley with English learners at higher secondary level notes the challenge of low-frequency vocabulary and highlights how the visual support in the picturebook helps learners to grasp meaning, which teachers will appreciate. She identifies three key aspects of education for democracy (affective, participatory, cognitive),

which she applies to the picturebook. She then offers a set of questions for analysing the visuals in *I Dissent* and a sample analysis of three double spreads. These are of great value for teachers new to extracting meaning from picturebook illustrations, and in this way, the chapter both educates and encourages the reader.

Chapter 7, 'Picturebooks matter: Developing citizenship education in the EFL classroom with teenage learners' by Helena Lopes, reports on a picturebook-based research project at a secondary state school in Portugal. Lopes promises a practice-orientated approach and she delivers. Building on UNESCO's (2018) guide for preparing teachers for Global Citizenship Education (GCE), she presents a general set of practical strategies, approaches, and activities before delving into her classroom research. Her project explored three GCE topics with *Eric* by Shaun Tan, *Willy the Wimp* by Anthony Brown, and *The Hueys in The New Jumper* by Oliver Jeffers. Lopes focuses on the latter in her lesson outline and activities. Chapter 8 "'Who's that man?'" – Stirring teenagers' curiosity through Peter Sís's *The Wall*, is based in Norway, and author Sissil Lea Heggernes explores how visual features can inspire teenage language learners' curiosity. After a short introduction to the importance of curiosity, Heggernes offers an in-depth visual analysis of the coming-of-age story *The Wall* by Peter Sís, which helps teachers recognize its value for the ELT classroom. The detailed account of her study addresses how colour and the paratextual features (e.g., endpapers, flaps) raised students' curiosity, developed their visual literacy and, in turn, prompted meaningful discussions.

Sandie Mourão's thought-provoking closing chapter, 'Crack in the classroom: A picturebook about the social problem of drug abuse and retrospective reflections from the classroom', shares a rare example of picturebooks that focus on drug use and abuse, as well as educators who use such picturebooks in the classroom. Mourão skillfully outlines the visual and verbal text in the openings of *The House That Crack Built* by Clark Taylor and Jan Thompson Dicks before shifting attention to the classroom. Here, the experience of Mourão and the participating teacher in Portugal shine through in the lesson planning and activities, which follow a before-during-after cycle. The topic-related discussion questions are aptly short and age-relevant. The results of the students' creative writing confirm the value of this picturebook for English language learners in secondary education.

### Final Thoughts

Duncan and Paran (2018) highlight how a teacher's enjoyment and passion for literature can make a selected text appealing to secondary students. This volume clearly reflects each chapter author's passion for their selected picturebooks and their pioneering approaches to successfully integrating these books into secondary English language education. The editors have carefully selected chapters that are varied in structure and foci and of significant value to their intended readership. The chapters with detailed visual analyses support teachers who, as Kümmerling-Meibauer points out in the foreword, are often not taught visual literacy. While I, perhaps overly optimistically, would have liked to have seen more diverse teaching contexts represented, there is no doubt that teachers, teacher educators, and researchers in picturebook-based language teaching will find this volume to be of great interest. Ultimately, the publication is an exciting and inspiring step forward which helps to elevate the role of picturebooks in secondary English language education.

### References

- Duncan, S., & Paran, A. (2018). Negotiating the challenges of reading literature: Teachers reporting on their practice. In J. Bland (Ed.), *Using literature in English language education: Challenging reading for 8-18 year olds* (pp. 243–269). Bloomsbury.
- Ellis, G. (2014). 'Young learners': Clarifying our terms. *ELT Journal*, 68(1), 75–78. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cct062>
- Ellis, G., & Gruenbaum, T. (2023). Reimagining picturebook pedagogy for online primary English language education. In D. Valente & D. Xerri (Eds.), *Innovative practices in early English language education* (pp. 147–170). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12922-3\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12922-3_8)
- Heggernes, S. (2019). Opening a dialogic space: Intercultural learning through picturebooks. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 7(2), 37–60.
- Mourão, S. (2013). Responses to the lost thing: Notes from a secondary classroom. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 1(1), 81–105.
- Ommundsen, Å. M. (2015). Who are these picturebooks for? Controversial picturebooks and the question of audience. In J. Evans (Ed.), *Challenging and controversial picturebooks: Creative and critical responses to visual texts*. (pp. 71–93). Routledge.

UNESCO. (2018). *Preparing teachers for global citizenship education: A template.*

UNESDOC Digital Library. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265452>

Yeom, E. (2019). Disturbing the still water: Korean English language students' visual journeys for global awareness. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 7(1), 1–20.

**Tatia Gruenbaum** is a visiting researcher at TU Braunschweig, Germany and is based in the Netherlands. She holds a PhD in Applied Linguistics, and her doctorate focused on the use of picturebooks as a tool in pre-service primary teacher education in the Netherlands. Her current research explores picturebooks focused on Jewish lived experiences during the Holocaust. Tatia is one of the co-founders of Picturebooks in European Primary English Language Teaching (PEPELT), a finalist in the 2020 British Council ELTons awards.