

## PICTURE BOOKS WITH PRESCHOOL CHILDREN



*Martina Blažević\**

OŠ Ante Kovačića, Marija Gorica

**Preschoolers love picture books that tell a story. They predict what the story might be about; while reading, they repeat frequently used words and phrases; they act out and mime events and characters from the story. After reading, they sequence the events, or create their own picture book by creating drawings in connection with the plot.**

**Many picture books are beautifully illustrated, which can be used for demonstrating or practicing concepts of colour, size or number. By involving children, as a group, in pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities, picture books help them become aware of the sound of English and develop a 'feel' for language.**

*Key words: illustrations, story, four skills, presentation, children's involvement*

Picture books will always be a good choice for our English playroom if we know how to use them. The success is guaranteed if pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities are well organised. Thus, children get involved in the story at many levels; by using their bodies, minds, emotions, language and interacting with other children.

It is amazing how many very young children start attending English classes nowadays. How can we organise an English lesson with preschool children? Considering that preschoolers still haven't learned to read in their mother tongue, activities that are based on reading and writing are excluded. What can we do? We can use:

- ❖ nursery rhymes
- ❖ songs (action songs, traditional songs)
- ❖ mime -
- ❖ drawing
- ❖ games (action games, competitive games)
- ❖ picture books

Picture books, especially those that tell a story, are well accepted among preschoolers. They seem to have a sort of magical impact on little 'pupils'. What is so special about them? Firstly, most picture books integrate pictures and text, which is a source of great pleasure



for children if we know how to use them properly. This paper deals with this type of picture books. A successful combination of text and pictures will help children remember illustrations as an integral part of the story. Secondly, sitting on the carpet in a semicircle with friends is enjoyable, especially when the teacher invites you into the fantasy world of wonderful dreams and talking animals that can bake bread or have birthday parties.

There are many authors who emphasize the importance of stories in teaching English to children. For instance, Wright claims that stories help children become aware of the general „feel” and sound of the foreign language (1995:7). According to him, it is inevitable for a teacher to use mime and gestures while presenting a story. Wright suggests many variations, such as moving quickly or slowly, jerkily or smoothly, with grand gestures, or with minor movements of eyebrows (1995:20).

Brewster, Ellis and Girard describe stories as motivating and fun, which can contribute to developing positive attitudes towards the foreign language and language learning (1992).

When it comes to picture book illustrations, authors like Brumfit, Moon and Tongue find them important for stimulating interest among children and developing their artistic perception and imagination (1991). The authors are aware of sociological importance of picture books and claim that participating in the same activity unifies the group and establishes closer bonds among the learners as well as between them and their teacher. (1991:78)

If we decide to use a picture book with very young learners, we have to take into consideration many factors. When choosing a picture book, we have to take into account its language level, topics, and visual elements (illustrations, design). Picture books offer different types of stories (traditional stories, fairy tales, animal stories...). We also have to consider its educational purpose and psychological aspects. Close attention has to be paid to organising pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities (both for the teacher and for the children).

This paper offers some possible solutions.

## ***1. CHOOSING A PICTURE BOOK***

### ***1.1. Language level, topics, type of story***

When selecting a suitable picture book for young beginners, the following points need to be considered regarding its textual part:

- Is the language (vocabulary, sentence structures) too difficult with respect to the age and language level of children?
- Will the story be interesting to children (considering the subject matter)?
- Is there a clear story line?
- Is the story too culture-specific (e.g. some traditional stories)?

Stories can be written in several ways. Preschool children may prefer a shorter text; e.g., in *My Friends* by Taro Gomi one simple sentence with repetitive structure is accompanied

by appropriate illustration: „I learned to walk from my friend the cat.” (Gomi, 1995:2), „I learned to jump from my friend the dog.” (Gomi, 1995:4)

Stories written in the form of a dialogue are a good choice, especially if they use language patterns repetitively, with little or no change; e.g., in *The Chick and the Duckling* by Mirra Ginsburg:

„I am taking a walk, said the Duckling.  
Me too, said the Chick.  
I am digging a hole, said the Duckling.  
Me too, said the Chick.”

Four- to five-year-olds, while still a little bit egocentric, are at this age beginning to realise that other people have feelings and needs. Picture books dealing with topics that are a part of child's immediate experiences, such as helping a friend who is in trouble (e.g. in *The Chick and the Duckling* by Mirra Ginsburg), coping with a new baby in the family (e.g. in *Spot's Baby Sister* by Eric Hill), or starting school (e.g. in *Spot Goes to School* by Eric Hill), are well accepted at this age.

### *1.2. Visual elements (illustrations, design)*

Children like leafing through picture books. They comment on the illustrations and laugh if they notice something funny. Illustrations are, of course, crucial part of picture books; they should be present on every page and dominate the text. Children pay more attention to them than to the text itself. They should thus support the text, help children understand it, and stimulate excited discussion. For example, illustrations in the picture book *Together* by George Ella Lyon are full of details; we can talk about them with children for hours. Regarding the design, picture books about a puppy named Spot offer a lot. They are lift-the-flap books in which flaps, that are very attractive to children, invite them to get actively involved as they open them in search for new information within the story. Speech bubbles can also help.

*Yoo-hoo, Little Rabbit* is a picture book with a different type of design. Each page of this board book contains a differently shaped little hole through which children can peek and point out the object or animal on the next or on the preceding page.

## **2. LINGUISTIC VALUES**

### Picture books in listening activities

It is quite clear that listening is the skill that children develop first, as they have not yet learned to read. When children listen to the story offered by a picture book, they are exposed to elements of language, such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar patterns.





### Developing the four skills

It could be said that picture books which offer stories are suitable for developing all of the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. Children learn how to listen and concentrate on the essential points. When it comes to speaking, they repeat words and simple sentences from the story. On the other hand, they gradually start showing interest for reading and writing as well (they „read” with the help of pictures and pay attention to the text, commenting on its „odd” spelling).

### Vocabulary building

- ❖ While listening to the story offered by a picture book, children often remember simple sentences and phrases (e.g., in *Look at Me* by Dean Hay children can easily remember the sentence „Look at me! ” which is repeated on each page).
- ❖ We can use picture books for demonstrating and practicing concepts of time, number, colour, and size.
- ❖ Picture books are used as visual stimuli (such as those in picture dictionaries); we tell children to look at the picture and find trees, animals, sky, flowers... Thus we are revising or introducing new vocabulary.

### Grammar

Children are exposed to grammar patterns, such as the present continuous tense (e.g., in *The Chick and the Duckling* by Mirra Ginsburg there is a pattern like this: „*I am taking a walk.*”, „*I am digging a hole.*”), or the present simple tense (e.g., in *The Enormous Turnip* published by Ladybird, emphasis is put on the verb – „*One turnip grows and grows and grows*”). Of course, children are not yet aware of these patterns, but later on, in their further education, they will start recognizing them; children will, surely, remember how they sound.

## **3. PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS**

Children identify with the main characters and the plot. They connect the story from a picture book with their everyday experience and want to share it with the teacher, even while still reading. They just cannot keep their emotions to themselves.

While a child is sitting on the carpet in a semicircle with other children, social interaction is taking place. Reading/telling activities, which include joint mime, gestures, and repetition of words or simple sentences, also contribute to social interaction, motivate children, and raise self-confidence in children that are more quiet and afraid to cope with the foreign language.

## **4. PRE-READING ACTIVITIES**

**4.1. How should teachers prepare themselves before presenting a picture book to children?**

It is possible to choose a picture book according to the theme or vocabulary set covered that day. On the other hand, we can dedicate the whole lesson to a certain picture book. In either case, the lesson must be well prepared. It is very hard to improvise if we are not familiar with the text of the picture book. When we improvise, we concentrate on the meaning of the text, and not on the way in which we present the picture book to children. We have to think about the dramatic aspects of our presentation which include mime, gestures and special voice effects. We have to involve children as much as possible. The best way to achieve their participation is to prepare pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. Often the picture book itself is not enough. Additional materials are always welcome. We can provide (e.g., when we present a picture book about Halloween) more pictures, puppets representing some characters from the picture book, masks, objects connected with the story in the picture book.



#### How to create positive atmosphere?

Children can sit on their chairs, or on the floor covered with a carpet, forming a semicircle. The practice has shown this to be the most effective arrangement for young learners.

#### ***4.2. Children's involvement – pre-reading activities***

To encourage children's personal involvement, we can try any of these activities:

- ❖ talk with children about their experiences connected with the main topic of the story in a picture book;
- ❖ discuss with them anything they may know about the topic of the story;
- ❖ show the front cover of the picture book and ask them to guess what the story might be about.

### ***5. WHILE-READING ACTIVITIES***

#### ***5.1. How to use a picture book?***

##### Reading or telling

Perhaps it is best to combine reading and telling without turning the picture book away from the children. It is easily done because the text is usually quite short.

##### The first language

We should never read/tell the whole story in our mother tongue. However, it is advisable to translate some long or more difficult phrases and then repeat them in English. Of course, we should point to the illustrations to make the phrases more understandable to the children.

Eye contact

We need to maintain eye contact with individual children as frequently as possible. By doing this, we are inviting children into the story and giving them a sense of participation in the story telling process.

Our voice

Every teacher should find her/his own way of telling/reading a story from a picture book. The dialogues should be acted out. Our dramatization allows children to personalize with the text they are listening to.

Mime and gestures

We should use our bodily and facial movements to act out the actions of the characters or to mime natural events (wind, rain, etc.).

**5.2. Children's involvement**

Children have a strong need and desire to be involved. Therefore, while listening, they may participate in any of the following activities:

- Listen and repeat
- Listen and predict
- Listen and mime
- Listen and point

**6. POST-READING ACTIVITIES****6.1. Comprehension**

- Another version of the story  
Children offer their version of the story in a picture book – „*What else might have happened?*”
- Sequencing the events  
Children put the events of a story (using pictures) in the right order.
- Making a picture book cover
- Making a picture book  
Children make their own illustrations after reading the story from a picture book. Each child is responsible for one page. You agree upon who will draw what in advance because the complete story should be covered.
- Who am I?  
Children act out the characters from the story. A child mimes one character; the others guess who he/she is.

## 6.2. *Getting feedback from children*

Children can be asked questions like the following:

- Have you enjoyed the story from our picture book?
- Do you understand the story?
- Which part did you like the best?
- Which part did you not like?



To answer the first two questions, children can express their approval or lack of it by whispering „a little” or shouting „a lot”. They answer the last two questions in their mother tongue.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Teaching English to preschool children requires a lot of initiative. When choosing among all of the activities that we can do with them, we know that we cannot go wrong if we opt for a picture book. While listening to someone reading a story from a picture book, children are being exposed to the richness and magic of language no course book could ever offer. Besides, almost all picture books for young children include repetitive pattern; children enjoy repeating words and phrases. By doing so, they acquire the English language the natural way.

Topics such as friendship, responsibility, or coping with a new baby in the family help them in their growing up. The integrating power of reading together adds to their pleasure. It doesn't matter that children can't read the text yet; they „read” the story with the teacher through a friendly and relaxed conversation about the characters and the plot. They can also „read” the story by looking at the pictures, which are the essential part of all picture books, and by describing what they see. We give them a chance to communicate using non-verbal language, such as bodily movements and facial expressions.

To sum up, picture book activities are good for children because they can participate in the story at many levels; by using their bodies, minds, emotions, language and interacting with other children.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brewster, J., Ellis, G., Girard, D. (1992): *The Primary English Teacher's Guide*. London, Penguin Books.
- Brumfit, C., Moon, J., Tongue, R. (1991): *Teaching English to Children*. London, Harper Collins Publishers.



- Dunn, O. (1991): *Beginning English with Young Children*. London, Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Dunn, O. (1992): *Developing English with Young Children*. London, Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Ellis, G., Brewster, J. (1991): *The Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers*. London, Penguin Books.
- Morgan, J., Rinvolutri, M. (1983): *Once Upon a Time*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, S. (1999): *Drama with Children*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Scott, W. A., Ytreberg, L. H. (1993): *Teaching English to Children*. New York, Longman.
- Taylor, E. K. (2000): *Using Folktales*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Vale, D., Feunteun, A. (1995): *Teaching Children English*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, A. (1995): *Storytelling with Children*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

### Picture Books

- Gomi, T. (1995): *My Friends*. New York, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill.
- Ginsburg, M., Aruego, J., Dewey, A. (1995): *The Chick and the Duckling*. New York, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill.
- Hill, E. (1989): *Spot's Baby Sister*. London, Ventura Publishing Ltd.
- Hill, E. (1989): *Spot Goes to School*. London, Picture Puffins.
- Lyon, G. E., Rosenberry, V. (1995): *Together*. New York, Macmillan/McGraw-Hill.
- Miller, J. P. (1986): *Yoo-hoo, Little Rabbit!*. New York, Random House.
- Hay, D. (1981): *Look at Me*. Glasgow, London, William Collins Sons & Co Ltd.



## SLIKOVNICE S DJECOM PREDŠKOLSKE DOBI

### Sažetak

Djeca predškolske dobi vole slikovnice koje nude neku priču. Ona predviđaju o čemu će u priči biti riječ, za vrijeme čitanja ponavljaju riječi i fraze koje se u priči ponavljaju, glume i oponašaju događaje i likove. Nakon čitanja, djeca stavljaju događaje iz priče u pravilan redoslijed ili crtaju događaje i likove vezane za tijek priče i tako stvaraju svoju vlastitu slikovnicu. Mnoge slikovnice su prekrasno ilustrirane – ilustracije se mogu iskoristiti kako bi djeci demonstrirali ili s njima uvježbali prepoznavanje boja, veličina ili brojeva. Slikovnice pomažu djeci osvijestiti „zvuk“ engleskog jezika i razviti osjećaj za jezik jer nam daju mogućnost da ih uključimo u aktivnosti prije, za vrijeme i nakon čitanja.

*Ključne riječi: ilustracije, priča, četiri vještine, prezentacija, izlaganje, sudjelovanje djece*



