

The Power of the Picture Book

by LAURA LODER BUECHEL

There's nothing better than a good picture book to get started on a new topic, to get children involved in other worlds—and to teach language in a low-pressure, relaxed setting. Trained teachers know how to tell a good tale by using acting, their voice, and appropriate pacing. And this is often enough to get learners engaged in the tale and in the language.

Yet sometimes we want more interaction and involvement from our learners—we want to really get them producing language based on the pictures and the text and showing their comprehension visibly. Thus, the aim of this article is to provide simple techniques that can be used with almost any picture book. The techniques applied here are appropriate for younger learners—children in elementary school—but many of these techniques can be used with older learners; in my experience, even older learners appreciate a good picture book now and again, and there are many such books with meaningful messages aimed at teens and adults.

I have found *The Sandwich Swap* (2010), written by Rania Al Abdullah and Kelly DiPucchio, and illustrated by Tricia Tusa, to be a story I am able to use every technique described below with—although with any story I tell, I can use most of these techniques. The classroom setting can be simple—ideally, you will be able to sit with your learners in a circle where they can all see the pages. (With

a document projector, many of the techniques can work with other seating arrangements.)

THE COVER

Before you tell a story, you want to pique your learners' interest. This can be done in many ways. With the following ideas, it is important that you don't provide the title right away—although options are to write the title on the board in scrambled letters for learners to unscramble or to show the title and have learners guess what the story will be about. These activities generate language use and can be applied to any other pages in the story, not just the cover. However, with the ideas below, you should *not* show the cover before you start the activity.

- Take a blank piece of paper the size of the book cover. Cut a “peephole” or the shape of a magnifying glass into the sheet of paper. Place the paper over the book cover. Move the hole around so that different parts of the cover can be seen by the students. Each time you reveal a bit of the cover, elicit language from the learners by asking questions such as these: “What do you see?” ... “Can you guess the title?” ... “Who are the characters?”
- Have the learners sit back to back—one faces you, and the other faces the back of the room. Put up a poster or use a blackboard in the back of the room for language support that helps learners ask

questions (e.g., “Who is on the cover?” ... “Are there people on the cover?” ... “What are they doing?” ... “Do you see a specific place?”). The learner facing you can see the cover. The learner facing the back of the room can see only the supporting language. After a few minutes of asking and answering questions, the learners facing the back of the room should have a picture in mind about what is on the cover. You can then ask those learners to turn around and look at the picture (the cover of the book). You might hear an “Oh!” as what the learners had pictured in their minds might not correspond with what they actually see. This—what they imagined and expected, and what they actually see—is a discussion point in and of itself. I have also used this technique with the book trailer if it is available online. One learner watches but plugs their ears so they can’t hear, and the other learner faces the back of the room and only listens (but doesn’t see the trailer). Taking away one sense is a great way to get learners to compare notes and ask/answer basic Wh– questions.

POST-ITS

I prepare in advance by going through the book and covering up certain pictures with post-its. When I start telling the story, I say, “Oh, my little daughter went through and stuck post-its all through my book! I wonder what’s under them!” Generally, I will have a post-it covering something on every other page or so, and I work with the post-its in the following ways:

- I first read the text or tell a particular part of the story. Then, to see who was listening or picked up on a specific word (for example, if I say, “She ate a hummus sandwich,” then a picture of a hummus sandwich will be covered), I will say, “My, what could be under this post-it?” after having read the text out loud. I say, “Think about what is under the post-it. At the count of 3, everybody shout what they think it is.” That way, every child says something (be it right or wrong), and I

don’t get stuck in the habit of calling only on specific volunteers. An alternative is to read the text without showing *any* of the pictures and, afterwards, elicit what learners imagine in relation to what they heard. You can then ask for their ideas about what is under the post-it.

- I don’t read the text—but I ask the learners what they think could be under the post-it. Everyone has a chance to speak. I tend to turn this into a pair listing activity: “With your partner, list ten things you think could be under this post-it. You have one minute. Go!” Pairs can write these things down or just tell them to another pair after the minute is up. An option, if learners write the words, is to have one pair say one word, and if another pair has that word, both pairs cross it off their lists. After this, I reveal what’s under the post-it, and we all say what it is in unison: “It’s a hummus sandwich!” Then, I read the corresponding part of the story to see if we were right!
- I also use post-its simply to remind myself what I want to do with that particular page. Maybe there is a specific question to be asked? A word to be repeated? A listing/predicting/summarizing activity? Occasionally, I pass the post-it note to a learner who reads the question out loud to the class.

EMBODIMENT

Total physical response (commonly referred to as “TPR”) activities are a way of embodying language. In this approach, the usual options of acting out words or lines and showing comprehension through movement can be used. However, it can go a bit deeper. For instance, with *The Sandwich Swap*, but also other stories such as Lauren Child’s *I Will Not Ever Never Eat a Tomato* (2007), you can do the following:

- If there’s food or a food fight in the story, write a food item (e.g., “grapes”) on a piece of paper. Show it to half the class,

on one side of the circle or room. Those students then pretend to “throw” the food item at the students on the other side. The other half of the class has to guess what is being thrown. This gets really funny for some kinds of food, such as Nutella or spaghetti. I have used this technique even when there is not a food fight in the book, but when food is simply mentioned.

- There are often short dialogues in the story. Here, a little improvisation can work well on the sentence or word level. For instance, you might have such a dialogue:

Charlie: I don't like fish fingers!

Lola: Why not? What about peas?

In pairs, one learner reads the excerpt out loud, and the other has to act it out, word by word—like an interpreter. Alternatively, let the learners read the dialogue quietly and act it out in pairs; you can then read it to them so they hear the appropriate pronunciation. After that, the learners read it out loud in pairs together again.

- Saying one thing and *showing something else* helps strengthen learners' listening skills. For instance, *The Sandwich Swap* starts, “It all began with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.” You read those lines, but you *show* eating spaghetti. Then wait a minute, make a funny face, and see who can say, “*Not* spaghetti—peanut butter and jelly!” The learners can then do this in pairs with short lines from the text or at given moments in the story.

This last idea can be done by acting, but also by having learners listen and look at the pictures. For instance, in the story, you might have a character who is clearly a woman. Instead of reading “she,” you can read “he.” Or when the picture shows a girl wearing a yellow sweater, you can say, “This story is about a girl who is wearing a green sweater.”

ROLE PLAYS AND INNER VOICE

Role playing can be straightforward: you dictate the lines of a short dialogue from the story for the learners to write down, or you write the lines on the blackboard. Then, in pairs, learners read the lines out loud and make appropriate actions and gestures. If you have the learners do this a few times, you can erase or cover words each time. Once the learners “own” the role play, if there is space in the classroom, have them do mingles and change partners and lines. I also like to have them experiment with voices—for example, as a robot, as a pirate, as a pirate talking to a robot, and so on. With learners who are more advanced, you can have them adapt the role play and make it more or less formal (e.g., learners pretend they are talking to an elderly person they know or to their best friend).

Inner-voice activities can work as role plays, but the learners create more of the text themselves. For instance, in *The Sandwich Swap*, you have, “She thought of her beautiful, smiling mother as she carefully cut Salma's sandwich into two neat halves that morning.” The learners can say what the character is thinking—for example, “I love my sandwich. My mother made it.” This technique works as well with the pictures: if you take two of the food items in the food fight, pairs can write a dialogue about what the food items are thinking. The Nutella might be thinking, “Oh, I am so sticky. Don't throw me! I want to be spread on bread!” And the grapes might be thinking, “Ha! I am easy to throw! And I bounce everywhere!”

QUESTIONS

With any story, it's important to ask questions that elicit a lot of language and thought. For this, Bloom's Taxonomy question stems can be useful and are easy to find online. I tend to avoid questions that have only Yes/No answers, although I do try to mix simple, one-word-answer questions with those that require more language. Figure 1 gives examples, in order of complexity, that can provide a basis for your own questioning. The

| Questions about <i>The Sandwich Swap</i> | What is elicited |
|--|--|
| How many girls is the story about? How many children do you think are in the cafeteria? | A precise number that can be counted or any number that makes sense, and the answer is not right or wrong. |
| How do you spell “you’re” in “you’re great”? Write it in the air/on your partner’s back/ with your elbow. | A specific target word |
| What’s your favorite sandwich? | Short utterances, different for everyone |
| What do you see that begins with an A? With a B? | An alphabetical list of objects (apples) or chunks (bubbly teachers) in which there are multiple answers |
| What did I just say? (After you read the text, learners try to say it themselves. This is especially useful—and fun—if you read with a lot of emotion.) | A structure or paraphrase, depending on the complexity of the language or whether you ask learners to say it in their own words |
| What do you think the principal said/did after the girls left her office? | If you ask what happened afterwards, you will get a lot of variation in structure and in answers (e.g., “She laughed” and “She rolled her eyes”). |
| What do you think will happen next? What was their great idea? | Answers will range from single words to short conversations. This can be treated as a “think-pair-share.” |
| The girls started a food fight. How did they feel? How would you feel? Would you have handled the situation differently? | This is complex in thought and can be broken down into simpler parts. Yet it acts as a prompt to reflect on one’s decisions and actions in retrospect, which can be complex and requires learners to think about the situation. The answer starting with “I would have . . .” can be the basis for a lot of language work. |

Figure 1. Story-related questions and what they elicit

main part of the question is in bold and can be applied to almost any book.

ONLINE TEACHING

Many of these ideas are also possible to use when you are telling the story synchronously online. Typically, the teacher reads, pauses, and asks questions, and then perhaps uses breakout rooms with Zoom or Microsoft Teams or other video-conferencing tools for further work by pairs or small groups. The screen-sharing functions on any of these tools work well for telling the story if it is found as a PDF or other document type; they also work for showing sentence starters and providing language support. When you are reading the story to a group in this setting, learners’ sound should be off unless they are speaking, and you can insist on their

engagement by choosing students at random or by making sure their cameras are on so you can see them and react to their reactions as you go.

Enjoy!

REFERENCES

- Al Abdullah, R., DiPucchio, K., and Tusa, T. 2010. *The sandwich swap*. Los Angeles: Disney Hyperion.
Child, L. 2007. *I will not ever never eat a tomato*. London: Orchard Books.

Laura Loder Buechel is a teacher-trainer at Zurich University of Teacher Education in Switzerland. Her main passions are practicing what she preaches in the elementary-school classroom and convincing university students to think outside the box.