

Using Picture Books – Fifty Pioneering Years

Opal Dunn



After World War 2, picture book publishing rapidly developed in the UK and picture books soon became available in children's sections of public libraries as well as in book corners in UK nursery and primary school classrooms. Children's librarian training as well as primary and early years' teacher training began to include picture books in literacy programmes. As picture books became an accepted art form and genre of literacy, the term Real Books was introduced. This classification distinguished picture books' language content as 'authentic', natural language, that children could transfer and use, from reading schemes where language was carefully selected and graded. Graded readers, unlike Real Books, focused on learning how-to-read English words based on ease of readability rather than on mother tongue speaker children's real use of language. Meaning for many children came from adult mediation of the accompanying colourful, cultural-based illustrations. Improved reading schemes are still used today in most British primary schools supported by book corners including selected Real Books.

In the 1950s, as a graduate and staff member of the Froebel Education Institute, (now known as Froebel College and part of the University of Roehampton), I had used selected picture books and was aware of the role they could play in individual young children's holistic development. Believing that learning consisted of a supportive triangle between the home, school and child, I included both story and information picture books. Initially they were part of classroom experiences and, once familiar, I encouraged children to take them home using them as a platform to stimulate natural interaction with their families.

In the 1960s, little was known about how young children learned English as a foreign language and teacher training rarely included sessions on foreign language learning. Few young learners' schemes or course books existed and many teachers based their teaching on easily available reading schemes, like Ladybird, or on a simplified adult curriculum. During this period, my professional life changed. Married to a British Council officer meant I travelled abroad with him and was not allowed to work professionally, even voluntarily, without permission.

In Phnom Penh, Cambodia, I was asked to open a small English school for non-mother tongue speaker children aged 4 to 8. I had to design child-sized school furniture and introduced picture books selected for learning-to-read. These beautifully illustrated picture books contributed to young children's well-being and holistic development, as well as their acquisition of English. This was a very new genre for most Cambodian, Vietnamese and some European parents / caregivers, who while used to French textbooks and traditional methodologies, had never seen a picture book. It took time for them to understand that through the mediation of picture books, I was able to provide holistic, total immersion and well-being essential for successful language learning and speaking. Enthusiastic, confident children soon proved that I was not 'wasting their learning time'!

In the late 1960s, I moved to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia where I worked with local primary school inspectors, who had been Froebel trained. They knew that through picture books children could self-educate cognitively, emotionally and socially, but we could do little due to the lack of availability of picture books either in English or Malay. Only one bookshop in the capital sold imported picture books.

It was not until the middle of the 1970s, through the research and writings of Bruno Bettelheim in the US, and Margaret Meek at the Institute of Education, London, that the importance of picture books in children's development was recognized and their status elevated. To some extent, this evidence confirmed my own personal classroom research and assessments and gave me confidence to pioneer further. In 1971, posted to Tokyo, Japan, I found a society already publishing, using and enjoying picture books. There I met people who understood my passion to get picture books into the hands of children, but had not yet thought about

learning English as a foreign language through sharing picture books. Through an introduction from the Malaysian Director of Education, who knew my work with picture books, I was invited to join the Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO as a member of a Japanese research group training other Asian professionals to create picture books. This broadened my knowledge of publishing as it entailed working alongside well-known Japanese publishers, children's librarians as well as authors and illustrators, many of whom still follow my work.

In Tokyo, I was also introduced to the Macmillan regional representative, Richard Slessor, who understood my methodology and later commissioned me to write a book for young learners in the Macmillan ELT Series. In the 1970s, contact with far-away London was still difficult and work in the Far East was not well known or readily accepted by UK publishers. This applied to my work with young learners and only after several interviews with Dr Roger Flavell at The Institute of Education, did he agree, as one of the two editors of the Essential Language Teaching series, to finally accept my manuscript editing it as two books. Published in 1983 and 1984 they were the some of the very first EFL methodology books for young learners written by a trained young learner specialist*. Also, in the 1970s, to meet the increased interest in ELT in Japan, the British Council, Tokyo, invited many famous UK university professors including Michael Halliday and Peter Strevens. Visits included one-day conferences at the British Council in Tokyo. I had opportunities to meet many of these academics personally and explain about Real Books. However, it was through being responsible for preparing and serving the lunch at these one-day conferences that I was able to attend sessions and retrain!

Every New Year in the 1970s, we were invited to visit Japanese homes in Tokyo and it was from one of these Japanese families that I learned about Kodomo Bunko (Children's Home Mini-Libraries). After World War 2 bombing, no public libraries remained in Tokyo, so women, whose houses remained, opened up their personal collections of picture books to share with local children. The flexibility of this concept impressed me and later, in 1977, I opened an adapted model (Dan Dan Bunko) as the first English International Children's Bunko for bilingual Japanese children. By the time I left Tokyo in 1980, 50 IC Bunko existed in English, French or German for Japanese bilingual children who had lived abroad with their families. These voluntary International Children's Bunko (mini-libraries) exist worldwide in 4 different languages, but now mostly in Japanese to support the increasing number of 'Double' Japanese children (from bi-cultural marriages) who, through picture books and related activities, develop their weaker home language and confirm their Japanese identity.

In the 1980s, having read *Learning to Read with Picture books* by Jill Bennett, a student of Margaret Meek, (published in 1979 by the unique Signal Press), I planned to write a similar book for EFL teachers and parents / caregivers introducing suitable picture books published by a British publisher. The reality was, however, that no EFL publisher would publish a book introducing another publisher's picture books. (My plan was only realized in 1997 by writing, self-publishing and distributing *REALBOOK NEWS*). Also, posted to Morocco in the 1980s, I had easier access to London and Europe, where teaching young learners was increasing and I could begin to build networks. Through contact with publishers, lecturing and writing, I aimed to increase picture book publishers' awareness of the new, different, worldwide market for suitable picture books for non-mother tongue speakers learning English.

In 1983 at the IATEFL Brighton Conference, Peter Strevens, then IATEFL President, contacted me to ask if, as a trained young learner professional, I would start a SIG (one of the first 2 SIGs). Together with Andrew Wright, supported by Leonora Froelich-Ward, who edited the SIG's first Newsletter, we founded the YLs SIG. Later, at Peter Strevens's request, I represented the YLs SIG at an IATEFL Committee Meeting (see also Rixon, pp. 8-13). Also, in the 1980s, I was invited on several occasions to Germany to lecture about picture books on INSET courses organized by Chris Edelhof and also Heide Nieman, whose influential book *Mit Bilderbüchern Englisch lernen* was published in 2002. I was also invited to Poland several times by the Council of Europe to lecture on the value of including picture books in children's EFL programmes.

Later, I met Gail Ellis in Paris, whose work with young learners was innovative and influential thanks to the vision of Chris Snowdon at Penguin English. In 1991, Penguin published *The Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers*, which aimed to give teachers the background to a story-based methodology and to promote Picture Puffins. Sold worldwide through Penguin offices, it was also translated into French and Japanese.

In 1997, during a conference in Warsaw, Poland, I realised that, to sustain momentum and move forward, there needed to be more easy-to-access information. Since organisations like the Council of Europe, the British Council and universities appeared uninterested and, as I did not want to be restricted by being tied

to one publisher, I knew I would have to provide the support myself. Thus, in 1997, I decided to create *REALBOOK NEWS*, twice-a-year, writing, publishing on my computer, funding and distributing it free. After two issues, I decided to include an article written for teachers in easy-to-access English to introduce cutting-edge information including Emotional Intelligence, Why boys need different books, etc.

In 1998, Gail Ellis was recruited by the British Council to set up the first teaching centre in France. It was a dedicated Young Learner Centre for children and teenagers and Gail was able to further pioneer the use of picture books by structuring the short, intensive holiday classes for children around a story-based methodology. After publishing ten Issues of *REALBOOK NEWS*, I felt that there needed to be more research in ELT with picture books and, the only way to start this, was to sponsor some focused research myself, affiliated to *REALBOOK NEWS*. The first two research projects were:

- **The Pecs REALBOOK Project in Pecs, Hungary led by Professor Marianne Nikolov, Pecs University and researched by Reka Lugossy (now PhD).**
- **The Nettlehouse REALBOOK Project, Portugal led by Sandie Jones Mourão (now PhD).**

In 2002, whilst I was still publishing *REALBOOK NEWS*, Andy Cowle of Scholastic Books suggested I wrote a book introducing selected Scholastic picture books and how to use them in EFL classrooms. As I was too occupied, I suggested Sandie Mourão, based on her experience, authored *Realbooks in the Primary Classroom* in 2003. After 15 issues, numbers of teachers using *REALBOOK NEWS* had so increased that I suggested to colleagues at the 2004 IATEFL Brighton Conference, it was time to arrange a picture books conference that brought together teachers, trainers, researchers, publishers, authors and artists. Thanks to the enthusiasm and energy of Janet Enever and Leonora Froelich-Ward, we managed to arrange a short, inexpensive, focused conference. In November 2004, the Learning English through Picture Books International Conference was held at the International Youth Library, Munich, Germany. The conference, attended by 180 enthusiasts from 21 countries, was supported by *REALBOOK NEWS*, IATEFL, Munich University, London Metropolitan University and the British Council who showcased The Magic Pencil – an exhibition celebrating the best of British children's book illustrators.

A unique MAFF series publication, *Picture Books and Young Learners of English*, (now in its third reprint) became the first conference publication devoted to picture books. The Munich Conference launched *Picture Books in the EFL Classroom*. The idea took off from what was pioneering to become a recognized part of YL programmes. In 2010, thanks to Jenny Simms, who at that time was Global Manager, Young Learners for the British Council, *REALBOOK NEWS* issues were added to the TeachingEnglish website making them widely accessible for young learner practitioners around the world.

Children need picture books if they are to attain well-being and their holistic potential. Picture books are created for children but, since those pioneering days, many children, teachers, schools and homes still have difficulty in accessing them. Models of small experiments and bigger partnerships exist, but details are not centralized, so few are available to act as an adaptable model or guidelines for sponsor proposals. It seems timely to once again think creatively across the children's picture book industry, as we did at the Munich Conference, and bring together creators, users, publishers, suppliers, sponsors, trainers and researchers to cooperate in more ELT shared-schemes and partnerships that get picture books into the hands of young children. Attitudes and interests are formed early and, I maintain, to hold and enjoy some picture books during these years should be one of children's rights. ■

Opal Dunn has been pioneering the use of children's picture books in ELT for the last 50 years. Her current interests focus on developing strategies to support the increasing number of 'double children' growing up in families with two languages and two cultures (or more). She advises parents / caregivers, teachers and communities on how to respond to double children's learning abilities and to respect their unique qualities. You can contact Opal at: opalduinn@me.com

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* Please see these references in Shelagh Rixon's Top YL Reads below.

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30 Years of Top Young Learner Reads

Shelagh Rixon

This is a personal selection of books and articles that I have found fundamental over the past 30 years. Please note that in the early part of the period there was little or nothing to read. I have 'cheated', therefore, by starting with some already-published works from the BYLTSIG (Before YLT SIG) era which would have been available to a keen-to-learn YL-er starting in 1986. I have been selective in favour of whole books on YL, including only a few single chapters when I think they offer something that is not covered in other works. The articles I have chosen tend to be survey or 'landmark' items. The only course material I have included is that by IATEFL's Founder, W.R. Lee whom I mentioned in my article on page 8-13. Some years have been fruitful and some rather sparse. Where I could not find a major work for a particular year, these years have been omitted from the table.

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