

Picture Story Books in Elementary School English Education: Revisiting the Mechanisms of Transmediation

小学校英語教育としての絵本とその絵本 に関するトランスメディアション

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Abstract

This paper explores the mechanism of transmediation in terms of the potential for picture story books in elementary school English in Japan. After presenting the background regarding the use of illustrations in language education, the article focuses specifically on the mechanism of transmediation in terms of using the illustrations that accompany such story books and how varying uses of these illustrations can enhance language learning. The results point to the appropriate and effective use of story books in a manner that capitalizes on the potential of the accompanying illustrations and thereby increases the language learning potential of the story.

Keywords: elementary school English, storybooks, transmediation

Introduction

Picture story-books have recently been offered as a potential approach in elementary school English education in Japan on the basis of their effectiveness in language teaching and learning (see Brewster et al. 2002, Ghosn 2002, Rausch 2008, 2009). However, upon consideration of the mechanisms by which the effectiveness of picture story book illustrations was outlined (Sipe, 1998), it was apparent that the extent of the explanatory model was insufficient to fully address the case for English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Thus, with an understanding of how picture book illustrations operate in the first language domain, this paper re-examines the mechanisms by which stories can provide contributions to language development in a foreign language learning setting and the various ways in which these mechanisms can be best utilized in such a setting.

Background

The impact of illustrations in stories is clear (see Fang 1996). Hsiu-Chih's (2006, 2008) work on the challenges of using picture story books in pre-adolescent EFL in Asia revealed a number of detailed elements related to motivation and comprehension, confidence, interpretation, creativity, teacher as mediator, tolerance of differing opinions and allowance of various learning (and teaching) styles.

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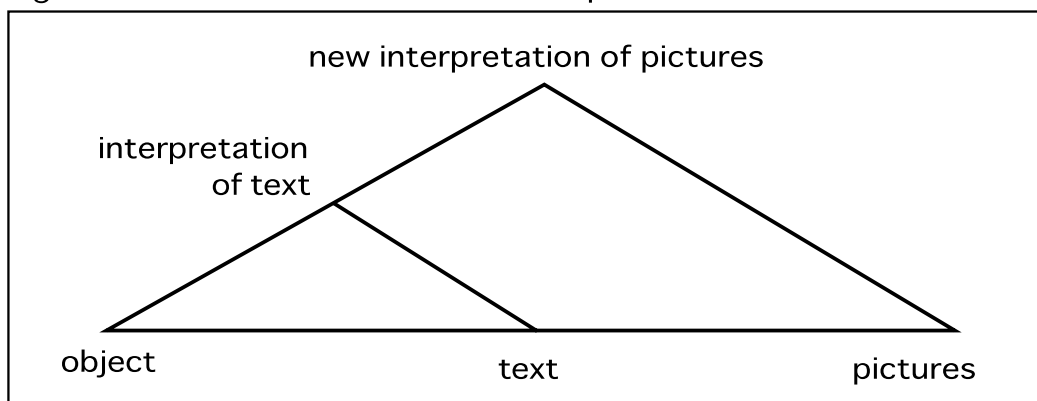
An increase in motivation was seen as a reflection both of the inherent interest of stories, which is increased by the illustrations, and an outcome of the increased comprehension that comes with being able to decipher the story through the illustrations accompanying the text, all of which then inspires learner confidence with the language. One explanation for this increased comprehension can be found in Nodelman's (1988) outline of how understanding of language generally progresses from a focus on details and moves toward interpretation of a whole, whereas understanding of illustrations progresses from interpretation of the whole and moves toward a focus on details. This would imply that young learners are able to take in the overall story through the illustrations and then attend to the specific details of the story, presumably through the language of the story. Stories allow for many interpretations, a reflection of individual creativity and a precursor to a tolerance for different viewpoints and opinions, but a reality which also calls for the teacher to take the role of mediator, both between the story and the students, and between the differing interpretations of the story.

Understanding the Mechanisms of Picture Books

In order to understand the mechanics of how picture books work, Sipe (1998) used Suhor's (1984) concept of transmediation, though which an oscillation between the sign system of the verbal text to the sign system of the illustration contributes to the production of new meanings. Siegel (1995) represents this transmediation conceptually through use of a semiotic triad, which outlines how the inclusion of either pictures accompanying text in one direction, or text accompanying pictures in the other, contributes to new interpretations of the text or the pictures, respectively (see Figures 1 and 2). From Sipe (1998), "(W)hen we interpret the word in terms of the pictures, or move from the sign system of the words to the sign system of the picture, the semiotic triad with the words as representamen (*the sign itself*) becomes the object of a new triad, and the interpretant (*the equivalent sign*) for this new triad changes accordingly," (102; italicized portions added by author for clarity).

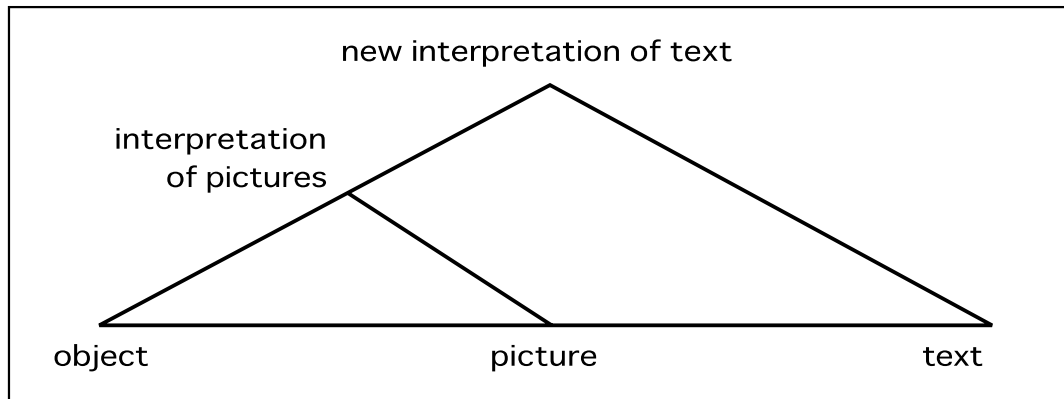
However, in the case of the potential of story-books in EFL as outlined herein, these triads are insufficient. First of all, the process as outlined by Sipe (1998) assumes first, an independent reader interacting with the picture book in a first language, and second, one in which the interaction between picture and text is described as an oscillation, a process of near-simultaneous, if not instantaneous,

Figure 1 Transmediation to New Interpretation of Pictures



(after Sipe, 1998)

Figure 2 Transmediation to New Interpretation of Text



(after Sipe, 1998)

moving from the sign system of the verbal text to the sign system of the illustrations and back. In the methodology outlined by Rausch (2008, 2009), neither of these conditions are true. Rather, the sequencing of picture first, followed by text is intentional, with the aim of initiating an understanding of the story at the level of image and impression prior to the input of the language of the story as language to be learned. In addition, the sequence and the timing is highly controlled by the teacher to both ensure and maximize the interaction between a text and a non-native reader of that text. Therefore, two amended triads, specific to the case for the use of story picture books in EFL, are outlined in Figures 3 and 4, organized on the basis of initiation either with the illustrations or with the text, which is followed by the addition of either text or illustration as appropriate. Figures 3 and 4 also allude to the functional elements that can be presumed to be occurring: the illustration (or text) initially (1) ‘creating the story for the learner,’ followed by (2) the addition of the text (or illustration) to contribute either ‘the language’ or additional visual-based understanding, which then contributes to (3) the final input of the content of the story as language.

Figure 3 From Illustrations with the Addition of Text

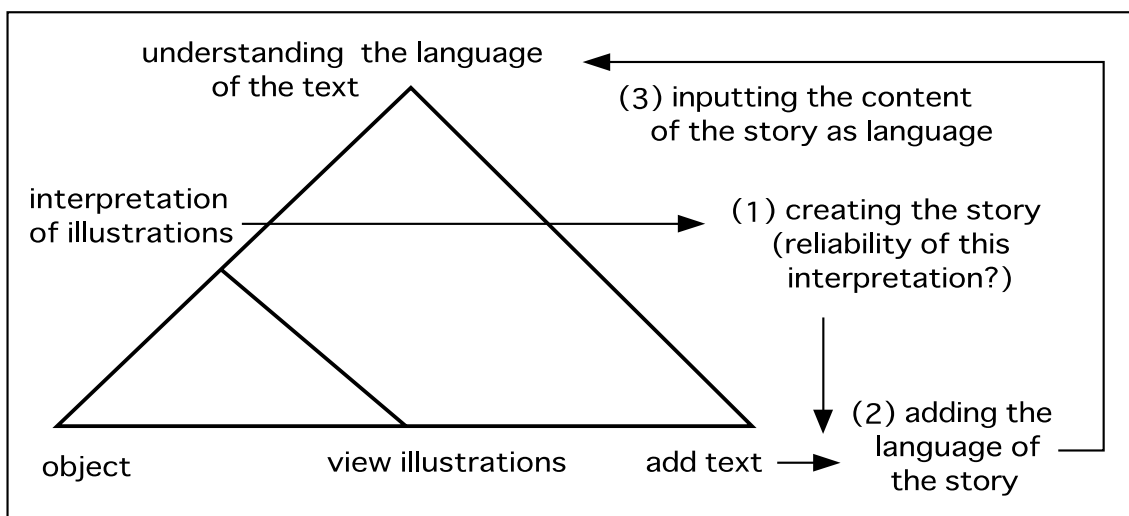
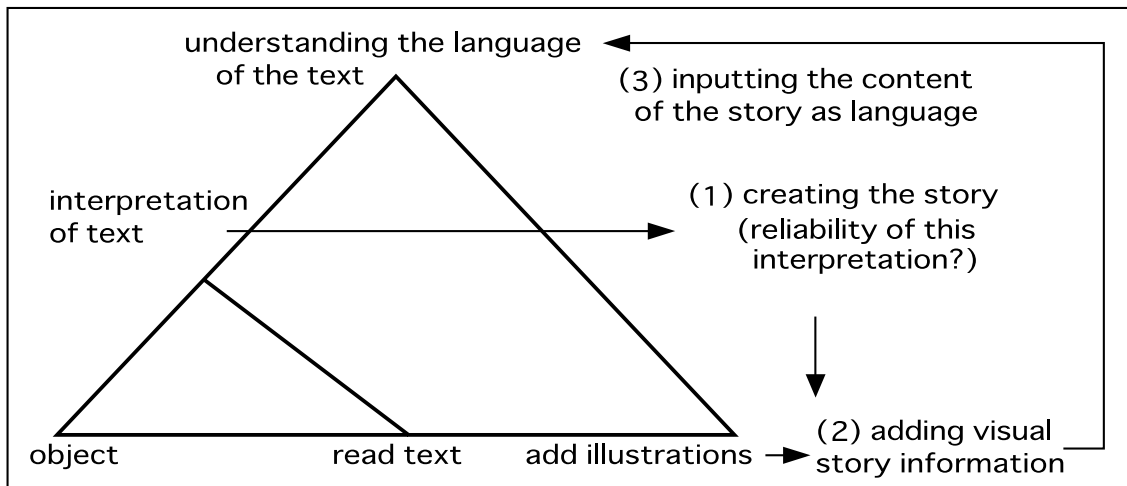


Figure 4 From Text with the Addition of Illustrations



In order to understand, and assess, these processes at an applied level, feedback on a Story Time English reading sequence was obtained. This feedback was organized to identify to what degree interpretations based on the illustrations of such graded level story books differ from the linguistic version of the story. This relates to whether the illustrations lead the learner to a reliable interpretation of both the eventual story and the language of the story. Sixteen elementary school students were asked to respond regarding a reading of *The Magic Key* (Level 3 (out of 7), 24 pages, 273 total words, 11.4 average per page, 17 illustrations, part of the Oxford Story Tree series, Oxford University Press) that was undertaken as follows.

Step 1: The illustrations of a story-book were shown to participants, who were instructed to write down a short sentence describing what they believed the scene depicted as a story (in Japanese).

Step 2: The responses were collected, photo-copied and returned to the students as part of the ongoing Story Time English activities. Assessments were based on identification of key words and whether the sentences were true both visually and in terms of matching the content of the story, or true to the visual representation of the story alone but not true in terms of the story content as represented in the language of the story. As what was written by the students could be assumed to be a reflection of what they saw in the illustrations, what was written was visually true. Further, what the students wrote was, for the most part and in general terms, highly accurate in reflecting the content of the story as presented in the English language text content, which is to say, the story itself.

However, a close and critical reading of what the students wrote revealed a complex dimension: while what was written based on the illustration was true to the overall story content, both in terms of the events and progression of the story as well as most of the specific linguistic representation of the story, there emerged several cases where notable differences between the language of the students and language of the story could be seen. The four most representative cases were based on verb clauses, the first of which was a student writing 'have' (as in 'I have;' used in past tense, 'had') for an illustration of a character holding an object which was represented in the story language with 'pick up' (used as past tense, 'picked up'). The second was a different rendering of the same case, with

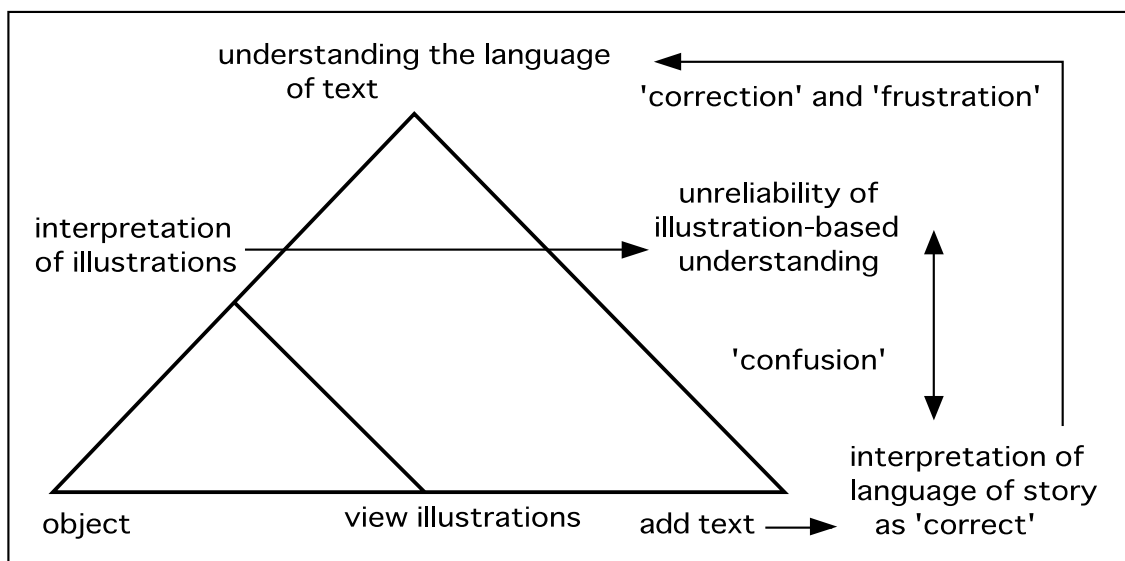
'hold' (used in present progressive 'was holding') used instead of 'picked up.' The third case was based on differing interpretations of movement, with students using 'go' (used as past tense, 'went') for what in the language of the story was represented as 'run' (used in past tense, 'ran'). The fourth case reflected a sequence in which it was difficult to tell the difference in the illustration between an action being 'pushing' or 'pulling,' which meant that for some, the two separate but consecutive actions were both seen either as only 'push' or 'pull' or were cast in the reverse order of the text.

Discussion and Implications

The assumption of the Story-Time Cycle and English Story Time in elementary EFL education was that presentation of the visual images of a story as a means of creating the story in the minds of the learners preceding the initial reading of the story as linguistic input would provide for a direct link between the illustrations as content and the language as comprehensible input. Therefore the sequence was organized from non-linguistic story content input based on showing the illustrations, through which children might imagine the language of the story, followed by the reading of the story providing the connection between that non-linguistic content and the actual language of the story.

However, the present research suggests a potentially problematic aspect to the assumptions that support the methodology of the Story-Time Cycle. While less in terms of story content than specific linguistic input, the variability that can occur when predicting the linguistic content of stories based on such pre-viewing of illustrations could contribute to confusion and conflict for the learner. This is specifically in the gap between the story that is created in the mind of each learner on the basis of the illustrations and the adding of the 'true' language of the story, which amounts to a 'correction' of the language to be input as content (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Gaps Between Illustrations and the Addition of Text



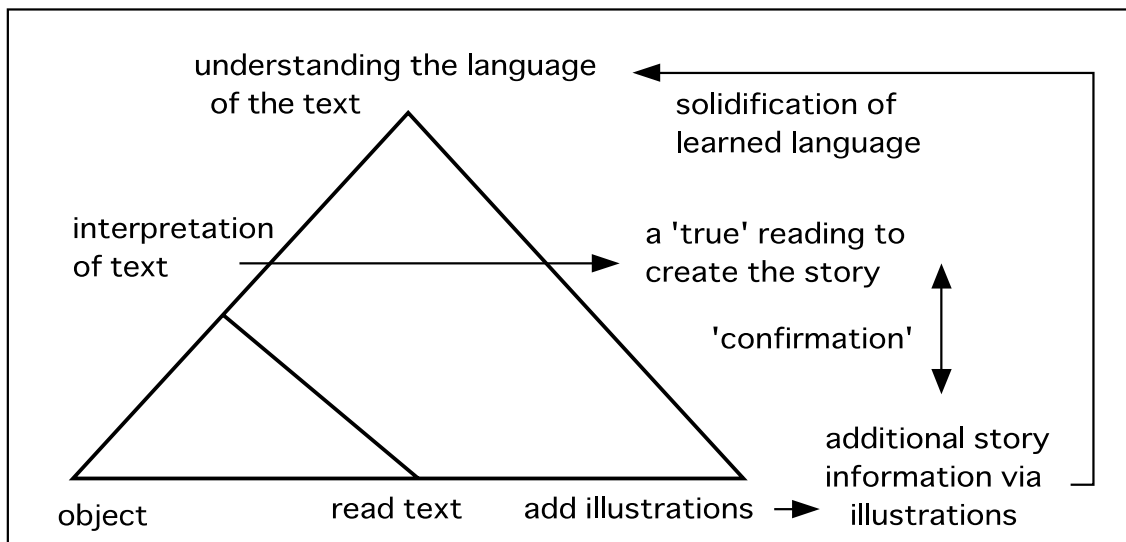
While one would not expect perfect language-use predictions, particularly in terms of the use of status-based versus action-based characterizations (‘*was holding*’ versus ‘*picked up*’), and one role for the teacher is to moderate between student guesses and the language of the text, the potentially problematic nature of such gaps and the risks they present is apparent. Clearly, there is potential for highly concrete miss-learning: a learner predicts and anticipates what the vocabulary of the story will be on the basis of a viewing of the illustrations, but the gap between this vocabulary, produced for the learner in the mental imagery of the native language, and the true vocabulary of the story, presented in the language to be learned, is never directly and fully addressed. For the truly uninitiated learner, for whom all the vocabulary to be learned is new, this can be a very serious learning gap and something which may go undetected, caused by the busy and chaotic elementary school classroom setting of the methodologically untrained and linguistically unqualified EFL teacher. This could be true both at the level of the general content of the story, where the language chosen by the learner would not reflect the framing or progression of the story, as well as in the use of, in particular, verbs, which can be either status-based and somewhat vague (e.g. *have* and *had*) or representative of action and therefore highly specific (e.g. *picked up* or *hold/held*). An informed reading by the researcher revealed other potentially problematic points on the basis of interpretations of appropriate verbs, as for example: *looked in the house (through a window)* for *looked in the window* (as in the text); *but she couldn't open it (the door)* for *she couldn't get in* (as in the text); *Chip pointed at it* (a mouse, as in the illustration) for *Chip looked at it* (as in the text).

Addressing this gap would depend on identifying the initial mental vocabulary associated with the illustrations—time-consuming and dependent on teachers that are both well trained and fluent in English. In addition, for those learners with some degree of English knowledge, however limited, the miss-match of anticipated language and actual language, often on the basis of synonyms or variations in phrasing, can be confusing and lead to frustration, both of which can negatively influence motivation and confidence. Many young EFL learners know a little, although limited and highly selective, amount of English; having made the prediction, to have their language then subsequently ‘corrected’ through the reading of the story can be a negative experience for some learners. This is particularly true when they may be aware that what they anticipated is, in fact, correct on the basis of the illustration (‘*had*’ versus ‘*picked up*’ and ‘*held*’).

What do these potential risks argue for in terms of elementary school EFL education? Given the overall potential in terms of comprehensible input in a manner characterized by flexibility and expandability that is presented by use of stories in EFL, methodological awareness and accommodation of these risks are offered as essential elements to take into account in any use of stories. Out of this awareness and understanding emerge several approaches that more effectively use the illustrations of a story while minimizing these risk that can be organized. The first approach is to pro-actively ‘teach’ the vocabulary of the illustrations, by providing the vocabulary of the actual story, either in the native language or in the target language, or both, in an isolated and non-contextualized manner before reading the story itself. This vocabulary will then be contextualized

in the reading of the story. While this decreases the imagination inherent in the story-listening experience for individual students, it stabilizes the vocabulary component from the beginning. The second approach is to use the illustrations as a guessing game, contextualizing the fact that one's vocabulary predictions may prove not to be correct — however, only in the sense of one's application of vocabulary to the illustrations versus the vocabulary of the story. Through a whole-class activity, this could also increase the vocabulary presented — the total vocabulary proposed on the basis of the illustrations and the actual vocabulary that is realized in the story. The third approach is to switch the order of presentation: to present the linguistic input of the story through a reading the story first with no use of the illustrations, essentially using the language of the story to create an interpretation of the story in the form of mental illustrations (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 Use of Stories: From Text with the Addition of Illustrations



The use of picture story-books has been offered as one way of addressing the deficiencies in preparation and practice of elementary school EFL education while also providing an approach that is both motivating and effective. However, the theory and practice outlined herein identifies the particular risks that accompany the use of picture story-books. That said, the illumination of these risks not only contributes to awareness about them, but also organizes approaches to using picture story books in such a way as to circumvent these risks so as to be able to capitalize on the potential of picture story books in elementary school EFL education.

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