Chapter 10

Strategies for Working With Image–Text Relations in Picturebooks

Luciana C. de Oliveira
University of Miami, USA

Sharon L. Smith
University of Miami, USA

Loren Jones
University of Miami, USA

Carolina Rossato de Almeida
University of Miami, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a multimodal analysis of the picture book I Hate English (Levine, 1989) and highlights key aspects of image-text relations to help teachers understand how to focus on multimodality in their teaching. This picture book describes how Mei Mei, an immigrant child from Hong Kong, changes over time after she immigrates to New York City and learns to love English as much as she loves Chinese. Following Unsworth (2006) and Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013), the authors present an analysis focusing on representational/ideational, interactive/interpersonal, and compositional/textual meanings at the intersection of language and image to explore its subject matter, the relation it invites with readers, and the semiotic character of its composition.

INTRODUCTION

Elementary teachers have long used picturebooks to introduce children to literacy. However, the notion of reading has been redefined as coding and decoding image-text relations has become increasingly important (Smith, 2014a) and there is a demand for visual literacy to be taught in elementary schools. Visual literacy provides a focus on the meaning of images and objects, how they are combined, and how readers respond to them (Raney, 1998).

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Children’s picturebooks serve for aesthetic, psychosocial, and informative/instructional purposes (Mendoza & Reese, 2001). As an art object, aesthetically pleasing picturebooks may draw children closer to the reading, making learning to read a source of enjoyment (Arizpe & Styles, 2015; Rosenblatt, 1995). Picturebooks may serve psychosocial functions by providing characters and events with which children can identify. They also serve informative/instructional purposes because they are the vehicle through which children are often introduced to literacy for the first time; picturebooks are the primary texts utilized in early childhood education (Arizpe & Styles, 2015).

The words and pictures in picturebooks interact to create many strata of meaning that can be interpreted in a myriad of ways (Arizpe & Styles, 2015). Students need to feel the right support coming from their teachers in order to construe the image and design relationships between text and images on picturebooks (Hassett & Curwood, 2009). The richness in vocabulary and depth in content make picturebooks a useful teaching tool, and especially important for English language learners (ELLs). Picturebooks serve as a key form of scaffolding for ELLs as they work to interpret texts that are not in their first language. Picturebook-centered lesson plans may lead novice readers into more complex reading skills because it is easier to capture their attention when visual elements are present (Bland, 2013). Students will be apt to read more if they associate the experience with a pleasant feeling. These positive interactions, along with constant encouragement, is one of the ways that elementary teachers can assist in the arduous creation of lifelong readers (Teczar, 2006). A lifelong reader is a student who “leaves the class confident of his/her abilities to face the world” (Whitt, 1994, p. 488). Teaching elementary students to explore all aspects of picturebooks can offer them an engaging, intellectually stimulating, and aesthetically pleasing multimodal literary experience.

This chapter presents a multimodal analysis of the picturebook *I Hate English!* (Levine, 1989), and highlights key aspects of image-text relations to help teachers understand how to focus on multimodality in their teaching. This picturebook describes how Mei Mei, an immigrant child from Hong Kong, changes over time after she immigrates to New York City and learns to love English as much as she loves Chinese. Following Unsworth (2006) and Painter, Martin, and Unsworth (2013), we present an analysis focusing on representational/ideational, interactive/interpersonal, and compositional/textual meanings at the intersection of language and image to explore its subject matter, the relation it invites with readers, and the semiotic character of its composition.

**BACKGROUND**

**Multimodality and Systemic Functional Social Semiotic (SFSS) Framework**

Multimodal representations refer to the range of communicational modes for meaning making including image, writing, gesture, gaze, speech, and posture (Jewitt, 2009a). Multimodality extends the ideas of representation, communication, and interaction beyond language to a wide range of semiotic resources and communication forms used in a culture for meaning making (Jewitt, 2009a). Modes are culturally given resources for meaning making that are shaped by social interactions (Kress, 2009). These modes cover a wide variety of ways to communicate and represent things and phenomena, such as image, writing, gesture, sound, and speech (Jewitt, 2009b; Kress, 2009). Multimodal texts are dynamic and interactive, as readers choose where to look and how to engage with the different elements within the text (Hassett & Curwood, 2009; Jewitt, 2009b).
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