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***A Stone Sat Still for Children's Language and Environmental Education***

**Abstract I:** L'albo illustrato non-fiction *A Stone Sat Still* (Wenzel 2019) incoraggia i lettori e le lettrici (bambini/e e adulti/e) a osservare, interpretare e pensare in modo critico alla natura e ai suoi ritmi adottando prospettive diverse e riflettendo sulla mutevolezza e sulla persistenza degli elementi naturali. Questo articolo presenta e discute l'albo *A Stone Sat Still* analizzandone la complessità e la composizione multimodale. L'articolo mira a comprendere le potenzialità dell'albo come veicolo per comunicare e creare significati durante le performance di lettura ad alta voce con i bambini e le bambine per l'educazione ambientale in inglese come lingua aggiuntiva.

**Abstract II:** The non-fiction picturebook *A Stone Sat Still* (Wenzel 2019) encourages the readers (children and adults) to observe details, interpret information and think critically about the time scale of the natural world adopting different perspectives and reflecting on changeability and the persistence of natural elements. This paper presents and discusses the complexity of *A Stone Sat Still* as a combination of visual and verbal resources, and it aims at understanding the affordances of the picturebook as a vehicle to establish meaning during read-aloud performances with children for environmental education in English as an additional language.

**Keywords:** non-fiction picturebook, children, read-aloud performances, environmental education, EAL.

[t]he meaning of a work  
is not what the writer had in mind  
at some moment during composition of the work,  
or what the writer thinks the work means  
after it is finished, but, rather,  
what he or she succeeded in embodying in the work  
(Culler 1997: 66).

**1. Introduction**

In this article, I discuss some findings from my PhD research study on the use of non-fiction picturebooks as vehicles for authentic and contextualised communication between adults and children during read-aloud performances in out-of-school contexts for environmental

education in English as an additional language. The article attempts to analyse and discuss the non-fiction picturebook *A Stone Sat Still* (Wenzel 2019). The main aim is to promote teachers', librarians' and care givers' reflection on how to make the most of the verbal and visual text of the picturebook in order to facilitate comprehension, scaffold communication and promote interaction during read-aloud performances with children for environmental education in English as an additional language.

The first Section introduces some key concepts related to the research study; the following Sections delve into the analysis of the multimodal composition of the picturebook. Section 2 focuses on the cover of *A Stone Sat Still* and discusses the multimodal features of the dust jacket and the hardback cover. Section 3 and Section 4 focus on the illustrations and the written text of the picturebook as separate units. Section 5 discusses the interplay between words and pictures and the affordances of the dynamic interaction between the two semiotic systems in additional language education contexts.

In the field of children's literature, picturebooks are multimodal artifacts in which images, text, design features, typographic and peritextual elements work in concert with one another: the illustrations can show, complete, clarify, enhance what is presented through the written text and vice versa, and the interplay between written and visual texts enables endless interpretations of meaning (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006).

Children's picturebooks can be broadly categorised as non-fiction and fiction. These two categories are neither clear-cut nor easy to define; in general terms, non-fiction picturebooks belong to "the literature of fact" (Kristo & Bamford 2004: 12). In the last decade there has been an increase worldwide in the publication of non-fiction picturebooks for children; these publications offer a creative and critical approach to knowledge and information (Grilli 2020a; Goga *et al.* 2021). According to Pappas, non-fiction literature "[makes] general statements about animals, objects, people, and so forth, because their purpose is to inform" (1991: 451). In non-fiction picturebooks the multimodal interplay of verbal and visual resources presents information and knowledge and by combining different discourse conventions and features, non-fiction picturebooks offer children a comprehensive and accessible way to understanding factual information (Grilli 2021: 24). Researchers have demonstrated that not only can non-fiction picturebooks be motivating and enjoyable sources of information for children (Barnes *et al.* 2015), but they can also promote literacy education (Caswell & Duke 1998) and contribute to improving children's communicative development increasing the exposure to new vocabulary and expressions presented in an accessible and captivating way (Sanders 2018).

Non-fiction picturebooks rely on the devices and conventions which derive from various text-typologies for scientific dissemination, and many contemporary non-fiction picturebooks present a combination of features relying, among others, both on poetic features and narrative conventions; they can offer detailed representations of reality by combining photos, maps, figures and artistic illustrations; some of these picturebooks use the conventions of comics and involve the reader in interactive activities. Some non-fiction picturebooks provide information through a narrative in which events are presented as a story with a clear beginning, a middle state and a conclusion. Many non-fiction picturebooks are non-narrative, which means that they "do not convey stories or construct storyworlds" (Narančić Kovač 2021: 49) but they offer readers structured information.

Non-fiction picturebooks invite readers to co-create meaning and their structure involve readers in paying attention to phenomena, speculating and questioning facts and events (Swartz 2020). By blending aesthetic and informational dimensions, these texts can offer children new ways to approach knowledge and familiarise themselves with factual information on a variety of current and relevant topics and raise their awareness on relevant issues.

Non-fiction picturebooks can be used as an involving and motivating medium for sharing knowledge and information with children during read-aloud events crossing the boundaries between different content areas and educational contexts, in their native language and in an additional language. The non-fiction picturebook *A Stone Sat Sill* (Wenzel 2019) was read aloud during one of the events of the *Telling And Listening to Eco-sustainable Stories* initiative<sup>1</sup> (TALES initiative). The TALES initiative is a series of read-aloud sessions in English as an additional language<sup>2</sup> (from now on EAL) for children's environmental education and informal approach to the target language. It is organised by the Teacher Education Department of the University of Udine (Italy) in collaboration with local cultural associations and institutions. Postgraduate students of the Primary Education Course of the University of Udine (Italy) participate in the initiative as volunteer storytellers: they select non-fiction picturebooks and give read-alouds in English for children's language and environmental education in out-of-school contexts such as the Natural History Museum of Friuli and municipal libraries of the Udine area (North-East Italy).

The hardback version of *A Stone Sat Still* was read aloud by Elena Serino at the Natural History Museum of Friuli in Udine during the TALES event *Stories Around the Stone*, in July 2021. This paper discusses this picturebook as a literary object (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006; Terrusi 2012; Goga 2020; Serafini & Reid 2022), meant to be read by potential readers (adults and children) and shared with potential young listeners during read-aloud performances in EAL. In the field of additional language education, the read-aloud performance is the means through which the meaning potential of a picturebook is activated in order to establish communicative interaction between adults and children (Winters *et al.* 2017: 101; Masoni 2019; Ellis & Mourão 2021). In read-aloud performances picturebooks are the "material resource used in the production of a semiotic event" (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2001: 22) and they function as playscripts for the adult's read-aloud performance (Winters *et al.* 2017; Zhang *et al.* 2016). The multimodal composition of picturebooks generates performative possibilities (Mallan 2002; Rowsell 2013): although the book does not offer explicit directions for the storyteller to follow, the dynamic interaction between the written text and the illustrations, the peritextual features, the materiality of the book and the graphic devices influence the way in which the picturebook is read aloud.

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the picturebook *A Stone Sat Still*,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://yell.uniud.it/en/storytelling/tales> (consulted on 24/05/2024).

<sup>2</sup> In line with the recent developments in research studies in language learning and use (among others, Diamantopoulou & Ørevik 2021), the term 'additional language' is used in this paper to identify English as non-native language for the participants involved in the TALES initiative and to acknowledge the plural identity of English in their linguistic repertoire.

recognising its complexity as a combination of visual images, written language, and graphic design features. The peritextual elements (i.e., the cover and the dust jacket), the written text and the illustrations (both as separate units and related to each other) are discussed in order to understand the affordances of the picturebook as vehicle to negotiate, develop and establish meaning during read-aloud performances for children's environmental education in EAL.

## 2. *A Stone Sat Still*: Cover and Dust Jacket

*A Stone Sat Still* was written and illustrated by the American, award-winning author, Brendan Wenzel and it was published in 2019 by Chronicle Books. The narrative in this picturebook is unusually long (it has 56 pages, instead of 32 which is the standard length of a picturebook) and it develops in 24 double page spreads<sup>3</sup>. The author uses an apparently ordinary stone as the main character of the whole book and presents its characteristics through the experiences of different creatures who over time interact with it and the natural context. Through the combined use of written text and illustrations, Wenzel organises, presents and interprets facts about ecosystems and conveys information about various species of animals in an entertaining, inspiring and touching way. The picturebook presents factual information about the relations between different creatures and the stone in a creative way and encourages the readers/listeners to identify with the living experience of other species and natural elements creating affective and emotional connections with the environment.

The hardback version of *A Stone Sat Still* is covered by a dust jacket in which the front cover presents the title and the image of a brown snail on top of the stone against a white background. The snail's colours on the dust jacket capture the reader's attention and provide a contrasting element against the cold tones of the stone, the background and the title, emphasising the absolute relation between living creatures and the natural context in which they live. A trail of slime left by the snail over the stone indicates that although it might seem to be still, the snail is in fact moving, and this contributes to emphasising the steadiness of the stone. The illustrations on the dust jacket coherently combine with the design of the hardback cover and allow the reader to interpret it.

Underneath the dust jacket, the entire surface of the book cover is illustrated to look like the texture of a rock's surface. On the surface there is an embossed pattern of translucent wavy lines, which reflects the light, and reveals a trail that can be perceived as the trail of slime left by the snail over the stone. The trail is almost invisible at first sight, but it has a distinct tactile quality that can be felt by running a finger over it. This implicitly evokes that one of the aims the picturebook is reminding the readers/listeners of the multisensory nature of experiences in the environment.

During read-aloud performances in EAL, storytellers can use both the dust jacket and the back cover of the picturebook in order to set the context and stimulate the children's curiosity towards the topic of the session. For instance, children can be invited to focus on the snail and follow its trail throughout the entire picturebook. They can be invited to

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<sup>3</sup> Picturebooks usually do not have numbered pages; scholars generally refer to double page spreads, namely two facing pages, the verso (left page) and the recto (right page).



explore the characteristics of the hardback cover (i.e., the colours used by the author, the embossed pattern) using their senses. Finally, their attention can be oriented towards the stone stimulating children's curiosity towards the unusual character of this picturebook.

### 3. The Meaning-making Potential of the Illustrations

In *A Stone Sat Still*, while the stone is represented in a salient position in the semiotic space of the double spread and remains the centre of the attention throughout, in each double spread the author depicted a different scene: different creatures and elements are represented while they act with and around the stone in different environments as if each double spread represents a fragment from a different story. Wenzel used a mix of techniques that include cut paper, pencil, collage, and paint in order to represent the different materials, elements and textures that can be found in the environment. He also uses a colour palette of greens, browns, yellows, red and blues well suited not only to the representation of the natural world but also to convey positive feelings related to nature. The colour palette includes both warm (i.e., reds, yellows) and cool (i.e., blues, greens) colours. Warm colours are used to depict sunsets, warm seasons and environments and cool colours are used to represent shadows, water, and the coolness of shaded areas. Predominantly blue and green illustrations evoke feelings of tranquillity and calm, while reds and yellows are used to evoke feelings of happiness, excitement and surprise.

In *A Stone Sat Still* there are 24 full-bleed illustrations that extend to the edges of the page without any frame (Sipe 2001: 33). There are 10 full illustrations that cross the whole page spread, there are 4 double spreads that have different illustrations on the verso and the recto, there are 2 double spreads with 4 vertical panels (illustrations that occupy a quarter of a double-spread page), 1 double spread with 3 vertical panels, and 1 with two horizontal panels. The different layouts of illustrations offer different affordances to the reader/listeners during read-aloud performances in EAL.

Full-spread and half-spread illustrations “[suggest] a life going on beyond the confines of the page, so that the beholder becomes more of a participant than a spectator of the pictured events” (Doonan 1993: 81). Thus, they contribute to promoting the listeners' engagement and involvement during the read-aloud performance. In *A Stone Sat Still*, full-spread illustrations also offer to the readers/listeners the opportunity to have an overview of entire ecosystems showing the interaction among various animals, insects, plants and natural elements such as, mud, water, etc.

The four panels in *A Stone Sat Still* have different affordances: some panels focus on specific details (e.g., a small insect crawling up the stone) offering the readers/listeners the opportunity to zoom into items of interest; other panels are “instances of continuous narration” that represents a sequence of events through time (Sipe 2001: 35). These illustrations enable the representation of events and phenomena that require a very long time to take place and/or that cannot be effectively described through words (Terrusi 2012) but need to be shown.

During read-aloud performances in EAL, the illustrations of the picturebook are key in the meaning-making process. In *A Stone Sat Still*, not only do clear and enjoyable

pictures capture the listeners' attention, but they also allow children to access information and make meaning of new expressions. The illustrations depict characters, facts, events and logical relations and offer visual representations of abstract concepts providing additional or complementary information to the written text (see Section 5). Each picture is carefully crafted to depict the behaviours and habitats of different animals, which can serve as an educational tool for children to learn about various species and their interactions within an ecosystem. This can foster an appreciation for biodiversity and encourage curiosity and involvement about the environment.

The stone maintains its shape throughout the book, thus, during read-aloud performances, the listeners can be invited to identify it in the illustrations even though the environment has changed around it. The visual representation of the stone's interactions with the natural world can be used to evoke sensory experiences, such as the feel of the wind or the sound of water, thus creating a more immersive and multisensory experience for young listeners.

The title page and the last double spread page present similar illustrations with a similar design and contribute to the circular structure of the picturebook. The title page occupies the entire double spread, a full bleed illustration showing a riverbank, or lake shore, immersed in fog, the towering shape of the stone rises above the scene on the recto page and the snail is crawling towards it on the verso page where the title is displayed. Similarly, in the last double spread the full bleed illustration represents an underwater landscape; the image of the stone, also positioned on the centre of the recto page, is immersed in an underwater landscape and a sea snail is crawling over it. These illustrations can be used during read-aloud performances to orient children's attention on the unchangeability of the stone despite the passing of time and the changes in the environment.

#### **4. The Potentialities of the Written Text for Children's Communicative Development in EAL**

In the selection of picturebooks for read-aloud performances in EAL, adults generally focus on the written text they contain, which should provide language within the potential range of the listener's competence or slightly beyond that (Brewster *et al.* 2002; Lado 2012; Ellis & Brewster 2014; Masoni 2019). In a picturebook, the number of expressions in the written text children are supposed to know is a fundamental aspect in adults' selection of a specific book since, during the read-aloud, the audience can rely on familiar expressions and build on those in order to understand unfamiliar expressions. For what concerns the written text of *A Stone Sat Still*, some verbal expressions it presents are within the potential range of primary school EAL learners' competence. There are several expressions that children might have encountered in other educational contexts such as English lessons at school (e.g., the names of some elements and items such as water, grass, house, kitchen and some adjectives). However, this picturebook also offers to young listeners several expressions and structures which might be unfamiliar and gives them opportunity to develop their communicative competence in EAL.

When a picturebook offers new language items, the presence of repetitive structures and repeated expressions scaffolds the listeners' comprehension since repeated patterns

are particularly easy for children to grasp and memorise. Cameron argues that “repeated pattern, or parallelism, creates a way into the story for the active listener, as well as providing a natural support for language learning” (Cameron 2001: 163). Repetitions make the story predictable and they allow associations (Linse 2007; Porras-Gonzales 2010: 99-100); they raise expectations so that children can guess what comes next and feel they can master what they are listening to; repeated patterns also give rhythm and musicality to the narration.

Fleta (2017) and Kaminski (2020) underline the importance of selecting picturebooks that contain repetitions and patterns of language enhancing rhythm, in order to help children become familiar with the sounds and musicality of English and stimulate them to participate in the read-aloud performance, becoming storytellers themselves.

In *A Stone Sat Still* the verbal text has a repetitive, clearly identifiable pattern. In double spread 1 the verbal text is “A stone sat still/ with the water, grass, and dirt/ and it was as it was/ where it was in the world”. The same passage is repeated in double spreads 6 and 12 with a slight variation: “and it sat where it sat/ with the water, grass, and dirt/ and it was as it was/ where it was in the world” (Wenzel 2019). The repeated expressions and magical, slow musicality of the language attracts the readers’ attention, highlighting the unchangeability of the stone despite the fact that various creatures engage with it and the environment around it continuously changes. In all the double spreads in-between and up to double spread 18, each sentence begins with the expression “And the stone was [...]”. This repetition highlights the role of the stone as protagonist and attracts the readers’ attention towards the adjectives that complete each phrase: “and the stone was dark”, “and the stone was bright”, “and the stone was loud”, “and the stone was quiet”. The use of different adjectives invites readers to notice the changes that occur in the illustrations. The use of a patterned structure and the repetition of expressions creates a predictable structure conveying to the reader/listener a sense of expectation and familiarity with the sequence of events presented. The repetition and variation in the verbal text work together and convey both the regularity and the unpredictability of the natural world.

In the last double spread of the picturebook the verbal text rephrases the title and the written text in the first double spread of the picturebook. Noticeably, while the title and the verbal text in the picturebook are written in the past tense, in the last double spread the author uses the present tense: “... a stone sits still in the world”. This indicates that the story is still happening and suggests that the events described are current and ongoing.

In the written text of *A Stone Sat Still*, the use of metaphor (e.g., the stone is a home for a family of mice), anthropomorphism (e.g., it is a throne for a lynx, it is a kitchen for an otter) and personification (e.g., the stone is a memory) can help children develop empathy and appreciation for the environment. These literary devices allow adults to introduce environmental concepts such as habitat, biodiversity, and the importance of respecting and preserving ecosystems.

## 5. The Affordances of the Interplay between the Verbal and the Visual Text

Grilli (2021) and Goga (2020) remark that it is possible to identify an international phenomenon in the publishing industry that has intensified in the last decade: authors have addressed more attention towards the use of artistic illustrations in non-fiction picturebooks in order

to offer children innovative creative and critical approaches to knowledge and information (Grilli 2020a: 11). This phenomenon was first mentioned by von Merveldt who identified a “pictorial turn” (2018: 231), namely a greater importance given to the illustrations and to the interplay between visual and verbal texts in conveying meaning in non-fiction picturebooks. As for fiction picturebooks, contemporary non-fiction picturebooks rely on a variety of interactions between words and illustrations; they convey multiple meanings and allow for interactivity, exploration and interrogation engaging the reader/listener to actively participate in a dynamic dialogue (Grilli 2020b: 11).

In *A Stone Sat Still*, the illustrations and verbal text combine in complementary and enhancing interplay (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006): the illustrations show details that are not explicit in the written text and vice versa, thus they fill in each other’s gaps and offer a complementary perspective to the readers/listeners. The written words and the images combine to orient the readers’ attention to specific characteristics of the stone and invite them to make connections and draw inferences about interactions in the natural world. Colour changes, different perspectives, and variations in scale combine with the verbal text emphasising the variable characteristics of the stone in relation to the diversified environments in which it is immersed, as well as the creatures that engage with it. For instance, for a slug “the stone was rough”, and its roughness is represented through the use of zigzag lines all over the surface of the stone; for a porcupine “the stone was smooth”, and its smoothness is represented through the use of soft pastel shades of grey.

Grilli states that in many contemporary non-fiction picturebooks “the text is largely at the service of the images rather than the other way around” (2020a: 18). In *A Stone Sat Still*, the illustrations expand or develop the content of the verbal text in an enhancing interplay with it. For instance, in double page spread 11 the illustrations show a fox that sniffs the stone which is painted in various vivid colours. On a black background, chalk drawings around the stone illustrate animals in various colours. The verbal text is “and the stone was a smell”. The intangible notion of *smell* is made visible through the use of colours: the drawings of animals in vibrant colours represent the different scents emanating from the stone as they are perceived by the fox depicting aspects beyond the content of the written text. Not only do the illustrations depict the meaning of “smell”, but they also expand its meaning showing to the readers/listeners what animals interacted with the stone before the fox. Thus, the expression “smell” in the verbal text and the illustrations work together in an enhancing interplay and potentially allow children to make meaning and to understand the role of the stone as a marker for animals.

Another example of the enhancing interplay between the illustrations and the verbal text is given in double spreads 18 to 24 where the stone disappears under water, but it leaves a trace of its presence that is graphically represented through the use of shades of colour. The illustrations combine with the poetic verbal text, “And the stone was a memory” and “And the stone was always”, which invites the readers to reflect on the persistency of the stone through time. These last double spreads of the picturebook give space to questioning and speculating while infusing a sense of mystery, discovery and wonder, and most of all they allow children to experience awe (Grilli 2020b).



The enhancing and complementary interplay between the written text and illustrations in *A Stone Sat Still* generates interpretive space where the reader/listener is invited to construct meaning in transaction with the picturebook (Rosenblatt 1986). During read-aloud performances in EAL, adults as storytellers can encourage children's engagement by inviting them to fill in the gaps between words and images with their own knowledge, experiences or imagination (Grilli 2020b) promoting the co-creation of meaning. Storytellers can invite children to participate asking them questions about different creatures and their interactions with natural elements, labelling or describing illustrations, clarifying concepts and inviting children to make inferences and comments about facts and events (Ellis & Mourão 2022). In this way, storytellers can elaborate on the contents of the picturebook promoting meaningful interaction in EAL among participants and encouraging young listeners to take part in the process of sharing knowledge and sense making.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

As many contemporary non-fiction picturebooks, *A Stone Sat Still* is "designed to give pleasure, and enlightenment, to arouse wonder, and to reveal [children's] capacity for self-awareness and understanding" (Kiefer & Wilson 2011: 291). Through the interplay of the written and visual text, it provides information about the natural world, the ecosystems, living creatures and natural elements yet it is also open to dialogue. It fosters a sense of wonder and curiosity about nature inviting the readers/listeners to observe various ecological interactions.

Its written and visual text as independent units and their interaction between the two semiotic systems make this picturebook a powerful tool for mediating communication about nature and the environment with children during read-aloud performances in EAL. The illustrations depict the diversity of species and landscapes that coexist with the stone, prompting discussions about interdependence and the cyclical nature of life. The images offer visual aids that can help adults convey meanings and encourage children to observe details and make connections between the new information they are exposed to and their previous knowledge. The simplicity of the written text and its repetitive structure can help children infer the meaning of unfamiliar expressions and structures and allow the exploration of concepts and ideas in an accessible way.

The interplay between the written text and illustrations can promote interaction between adults and children during read-aloud performances in EAL, as it allows for creative exploration and understanding of expressions and concepts related to the natural world. As Meek states, "[a] picture book invites all kinds of reading and allows the invention of a set of stories rather than a single story" (1982: 174). Adults can use the picturebook *A Stone Sat Still* as a springboard for discussion about rocks, animals, plants and other natural elements inviting young listeners to construct their own interpretations, imagining and describing the experiences of the creatures depicted in the illustrations. This can lead to the creation of parallel or sequential stories that can extend the content of the picturebook, while expanding the context of interaction in EAL and promoting critical thinking, ecoliteracy and creativity.

Sipe states that images and written text in picturebooks "have a synergic relationship in which the total effect depends not only on the union of the text and illustrations but

also on the perceived interactions or transactions between these two parts" (1998: 98-99). Although picture-word relationships are foundational to picturebooks, during read-aloud performances the ways of interpreting their relation and developing their meaning potential depends on the adult as a storyteller who reads, explores, interprets, performs and exploits the picturebook meaning potential, and also on the young listeners who are involved in the event. Through the contextualised communication favoured by the picturebook *A Stone Sat Still* and mediated by the adult as a storyteller, children can participate in meaningful interactions through English as an additional language and develop a lifelong appreciation for the natural world and the interconnectedness of all living and non-living beings.

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