

Evelyn ARIZPE, Teresa COLMER, Carmen Martínez-Roldán and contributors.  
*Visual Journeys Through Wordless Narratives: An International Inquiry with Immigrant Children and The Arrival*.  
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For some, reaching a destination is the purpose of a journey; for others it is the voyage that is the end in and of itself. In *Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives*, an international research team embarks upon a journey paralleling one presented in the graphic novel, *The Arrival* by Shaun Tan. Set in a time and place, which the reader can only attempt to deduce, *The Arrival* depicts an immigration experience through pencil drawings. These illustrations are devoid of words, except for ones appearing in a familiar-looking yet undecipherable script, sketches painstakingly sequenced and laid out in what looks like a worn, old photo album. Both this picturebook and the study described in *Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives*, whose primary focus is to document *The Arrival's* learning and teaching potential, rely on imagery and the familiarity almost everyone has of travel narratives. Both relate moments of hope and ways of working as they unveil understandings of worlds and their complexly interwoven and interrelated elements. Both, in their own way, constitute narrative excursions through wordless landscapes.

*Visual Journeys through Wordless Narratives* is the product of an ambitious attempt to document how visual imagery could be useful for educators working with immigrant children. The team of researchers worked with focus groups in the UK, Spain and the USA, as well as Italy, setting out to explore the extent to which *The Arrival* with its wordless narratives would develop recent immigrant children as readers.

Two fundamental underpinnings unified this study. Firstly, there was the notion that literature, in this case picturebooks, could serve as a tool for helping the children of immigrants with literacy and education in the face of challenges encountered in a new sociocultural environment. Additionally, the study hinged on the power of exchanging perspectives and on literature's potential to better the situation of migrant children, especially in fighting against injustices and intolerance encountered in a host country.

In order to gather data attesting to these broad goals, Arizpe, Colomer and

Martínez-Roldán adopted a qualitative interpretive approach. Interpretation was necessary in many cases given the emotional charge of some of the experiences or because students had difficulty in commanding the language needed to retell the story or due to ambiguities apparent in the narrative. Moreover, owing to the young learners' identity being in flux from their recent immigration experience as well as to the transformational power of literary sources, interpretation of data was essential in coming to meaningful conclusions on the potentialities of visual imagery.

Quite literally, the passengers on this journey arrived and, in many cases, from far-off countries. In one of the groups under study, there were also participants taking part from the host country, although the majority in all groups was students settling into or perhaps merely sojourning at the school. By and large, the traditional host education system relies on a one-sided approach which aims to assimilate the children into it, missing opportunities arising from integration including those stemming from individuality, imagination and creativity, not taking advantage of immigrant children's literacy in one medium or area to promote another. Thus, whereas the standard approach for educating migrant children puts the educational environment in the center and looks to downplay the importance of individual backgrounds, this study allowed the children to exhibit their own skills and knowledge through interaction with each other in the act of reading a picturebook.

Picturebooks indeed bear promise for the classroom. As a genre, postmodern picturebooks rely on intertextuality, metafiction and even irony in the illustrations to lead students across boundaries traditionally held between that which is graphic and that which is verbal. This activity provides an environment fertile for discussion and interpretation, also confronting the reader with the task of making meaning while transcending traditional boundaries of narrative structure and visual support. The result is a rich crossroads between geography, science, literature, history and social studies, interspersed with the personal experience of the reader.

Applied to a language-learning context, picturebooks serve as a stage in which to try out emerging vocabulary and grammar structures, free from a prescribed or graded level of language. Picturebooks also provide opportunities for repetition of grammar or vocabulary structures and for vocabulary introduction through pictures that reinforce text, while in terms of affective variables, picturebooks can also aid in raising motivation levels and in stimulating discussion. Compared with illustrated storybooks, these wordless narratives rely on placement of images, emphasis of perspective and, at times minute, details in the pictures in addition to some of the sequencing characteristic in a comic book to transmit a story without words. The result is a "free" word structure, bound by a storyline represented in images.

For migrant children, in particular, who have come from different walks of life, imagery can offer prompts for sharing culturally diverse origins and backgrounds, whereas at the same time spurring collaboration on collective

construction of meaning, thus moving on past an isolated interpretation of a work. On a social level, triumphs and tribulations of migrant children are brought to the fore through unraveling stories, some of which are mixed with fanciful imagination, showing burgeoning personalities and an awareness of cultural heritage. Children are faced with emotional burdens posed by drifting away from their parents as they grow and by the under-praised work that these children do in their roles of communication facilitators, mediators, translators and technology consultants. In this work, these children are described as true bilinguals, in the sense that bilingualism not only means speaking but also living in two different languages. When assimilating into a new school system and becoming bilingual in that respect, literary practice in the 'home' language and the host language are as important as the languages themselves. Literacy determines school success and allows for greater integration into the host culture.

The literacy involved in this project includes reading visual imagery and the retelling associated with it, a re-creation of the story transmitted in images, requiring inferences at many different levels. Connections arise, past moments intermingle with the current act of reading and so personalized narratives unfold. Visual images and the multimodality afforded by picturebooks engage young learners into sharing their patchwork quilt of memories, experiences and understandings of the world. Moreover, an intertextual version of world experience emerges as movies and other modern narratives are integrated.

In one part of the story sequence, many of the children read several pages as an immigrant experience, remembering Titanic and other such stories. Following another narrative thread, one of the children constructed an extended sequence of a treasure-finding story, associating the dragon-like tails, which many had read as symbolic, with a map as well as with a strange pet keeping company on a long journey, such that his own experience in literature and familiar narratives form the cohesive framework for a personal reading.

Working with a wordless narrative leaves open for further interpretation the question of what reading is. Are words really the main component of a narrative? Picturebooks clearly present another type of version of "writing" and hold new possibilities for "reading". Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán found new support for what reading is, supporting the idea that readers, in the act of reading and retelling a story, construct a parallel text, incorporating their own background knowledge and past experiences, leading readers who interact with the same texts to construct their own parallel texts.

Besides provoking reflection, another benefit identified in this study is enhancing children's ability to read intertextually. Tan's narrative brings a new cultural environment to life, requiring the children to make intertextual links and engage in social constructivism. *The Arrival* is a safe place to share intercultural knowledge and heighten intercultural competence. The act of retelling permits the reader to remain silent about certain issues that are cultural sensitive or emotionally charged. However, those aspects that are, in

fact, addressed in the classroom indicate that those involved in the retelling act are more enriched from cultural sharings.

Finally, after seeing *The Arrival* as a social tool and one that boosts several types of literacy, Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán also encountered evidence in the data for wordless narratives acting as language teaching and learning tools. One of the contributions of the Italian study was that the children (one of the multi-cultural groups) emphasized that the retelling of the story had been useful for them in learning new words in Italian. They repeatedly asserted how useful it had been for them to learn new words in Italian. Interaction had been centered around this narrative, spurring students to exchange vocabulary, expressions, discourse strategies and manners of explanation. In leading students through this intercultural, intertextual and interpersonal experience, the teachers had also helped the students in the L2.

Outside of the linguistic realm, another notable finding emerged: improvement of students' self-esteem and the possibility for them to participate in a forum where knowledge, ideas and imagination abound. The children's minds were opened in many directions, helping them in speculating, explaining themselves, making connections, using new expressions, and so on. Furthermore, the group in Italy identified a discourse of confidence, signs of learning and the ability to move around in a new landscape when seeing the daughter in *The Arrival* is able to get around and carry out daily activities by herself, having just arrived in the country. When applied to the students' own context as well, empoweredness may result from this reading.

While the pedagogical and social implications are many, this book is particularly suitable for exploring the children's personal histories and roles in society. Conclusions presented in *Visual Journey* show that picturebooks are a space for inclusion, growth and exploration, as long as reading and discussion are left flexible and open, in turn, also promoting creativity.

Centered on the visual image, classroom sessions using *The Arrival* serve to build on experiences that children already have with a whole spectrum of image types encouraging reflection on current and past situations, in addition to promoting language skills and literacy. Intertextuality comes to the forefront through discussions on the visual imagery, a part of a larger corpus of visual images which arguably pervades within youth culture virtually worldwide. This pushes students to explore their understandings of the real world and to come to terms with emotions that arise from their journeys. Throughout the study, we gain a sense of the developing characters of these travel companions. Reading graphic novels as Arizpe, Colomer and Martínez-Roldán have promoted demonstrates the performative function of *Visual Journeys*. As children make sense of the drawings, so to do the researchers and the reader. As meaning is co-constructed through the wonderful inclusion of

students' ideas and perceptions and, as *The Arrival* is brought to life, we gain a heightened awareness of the power of picturebooks.

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