

The Role of Illustration in Interpreting a Multimodal Literary Text

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Abstract

The objective of the study was to establish the impact of illustration on the reading and interpreting of a poem in the case when only one illustration is provided with the text. The research study involved 408 students of the Faculty of Education and Faculty of Arts. The students were divided into two groups, of which one was given the poem *Učenjak* (Scholar) written by Niko Grafenauer and illustrated by Lidija Osterc, while the other had the same poem illustrated by Marjan Manček. Both groups had to answer a number of questions regarding personal traits of the literary character, his appearance and the environment he lives in. The results showed that the illustrations had a significant impact on the interpretation of the physical features of the literary character and the environment he is set in. This in turn affected the understanding of the message of the poem.

Keywords: *illustration, multimodal text, interpretation of illustrated text, visual literacy*

Introduction

Research Problem

Modern era has been characterised by an abundance of visual images surrounding us at every step. During their teaching practice, educators and teachers frequently deal with multimodal texts, which are texts that “incorporate a variety

of modes, including visual images, hypertext, and graphic design elements along with written text” (Serafini, 2011, p. 342). So, textual literacy is not enough for the understanding of multimodal texts. In order to be able to fully process a multimodal text, one needs visual literacy as well. “Visual literacy is the ability to (a) read and interpret a visual image and (b) communicate information using visual representation” (Vasquez, Troutman and Comer, 2010, p. 2). It is the ability to read and interpret visual images, which is fundamental to understanding multimodal texts such as picture books and illustrated books, among other things. Understanding the meaning of illustrations is based on the reader’s ability to read both visual and verbal components. Subsequently, the reader’s interpretation of illustrated sequences is based on understanding the interaction between the two codes. A necessity to use this reading method is particularly evident in picture books, where the interaction between the visual and the verbal can form an entirely new meaning. Lawrence R. Sipe (1998, pp. 98–99) defines the interaction in a picture book as follows: “In a picture book, both the text and the illustration sequence would be incomplete without the other. They have a synergistic 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.” Mazepa-Domagala (2017, p. 225) notes: “A good illustration says something more than what was said in the text. Although it derives from the text, not necessarily directly, it additionally discusses, interprets, adds, and, what is also important, should keep up with the text because children are upset when they need to look for the right image many pages later. An illustrator is a co-author of a book.” Nikolajeva and Scott (2000) explain the various types of interaction between pictures and texts in picture books: symmetrical interaction, complementary interaction and enhancing interaction. We can see the respective forms of interaction also with relation to a single illustration and corresponding text.

Research Focus

The reader’s ability to read the illustration corresponding to a text is a fundamental element of comprehensive reading. Children who are read illustrated texts by parents (or other adults) in their pre-reading period, will begin to understand “how images and the written word can weave together to form a story” (Janes, 2014, p. 23). However, as Peter Felten (2008, p. 62) notes, this kind of comprehensive reading is not sufficiently promoted later on: “Schools have traditionally placed primary emphasis on textual literacy.” That opens the question as to what approach should be used in reading a multimodal text such as an illustrated poem.

There is a clear difference between the verbal and the visual codes for conveying messages. And the narrative powers of the two differ as well. The first major difference is related to the way space is conveyed. Nodelman (1996) highlights the importance of the viewing angle and focus. The representation of time is another crucial component alongside the representation of the setting. In a society that reads from left to right, time perception is related to the left-to-right concept (Nodelman, 1996). Understanding the visual is closely related to the ability to read various symbols and codes which help define the meaning of an illustration, though only providing that the reader is able to recognise their meaning. An illustrator can change the meaning not only through what they choose to represent but also by how they depict it. Being familiar with the basics of art theory (visual elements, ways of composition, etc.), recognising differences among art techniques and their expressive possibilities is a prerequisite for understanding illustrated literary works.

Research Methodology

Research General Background

Reading an illustrated book is actually a complex process. Several authors, e.g., Nodelman (1988), Sipe (1998), Nikolajeva and Scott (2000), have focused on the interaction between text and image in a picture book, highlighting some typical characteristic of the latter, such as the sequence of pictures in the book, dynamics, rhythm, interaction, the meaning of paratext, etc. The main question is, however, how does an illustration affect one's interpretation of a literary text in the case of a poem with a single illustration. A survey, the goal of which was to identify the impact of an illustration on the understanding of a poem, was conducted in June 2014.

Research Sample

The convenience sample (n=408) included students of the Faculty of Education and Faculty of Arts in Maribor, Slovenia, majoring in preschool education (35.8%), primary education (38%), fine arts education (6.1) and Slovenian studies (20.1%). During the survey, the respective students were enrolled in the first year of the 1st cycle (17.6%), second year of the 1st cycle (37.5%), and third year of the 1st cycle (44.9%), the cycles referring to the ones defined by the Bologna Process. The survey sample included 92.2% of female and 7.8% of male participants. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

Instrument and Procedures

The students were divided into two groups and shown the illustrated poem *Učenjak* (Scholar) by Niko Grafenauer, which was projected on canvas. The first group (54.7% of the students) was given the version of the poem illustrated by Lidija Osterc (hereinafter referred to as Pedenjped A), while the other group (45.3%) was given the same poem illustrated by Marjan Manček (hereinafter Pedenjped B). The students were asked to fill in a questionnaire comprising open-ended questions (e.g., What is Pedenjped like? What kind of books does he read?).

The criteria for the selection of the poem were literary (a renowned Slovenian poet) as well as artistic (the poem was illustrated by two prominent Slovenian illustrators). For a better understanding of the paper, here is the entire poem *Učenjak* (Scholar) by Niko Grafenauer (translation by Dušan Rabrenovič).

*Pedenjped loves browsing through/ big heaps of books of various kinds./
He reads aloud and nods his head/ at notions from all sorts of minds./
Slouched o'er books at all times,/ each page he studies with intent./ His
noggin bobbing from insights,/ he props his head up with his hands./ At
home, he doesn't mind the jumble,/ with 'la-la-la' his time he passes./ But
if over a word he stumbles/ at once he dons his reading glasses.*

The poem consists of three four-line stanzas with alternate rhyme and a rather regular rhythm (in the Slovenian version a trochaic rhythm is used, though not consistently), with enjambment occurring twice in the first line. The phrase “glava ga teži (...)” (translated as “his noggin bobbing”) has several meanings in the Slovenian language (e.g., to be knowledgeable, to be worried, etc.). The interpretation of the poem is based predominantly on two keywords, namely, the verb to read and the noun noise. We could understand this poem to be about joy of reading, which nothing can interrupt.

Lidija Osterc (Figure 1, Pedenjped A) complemented the poem with an illustration of a boy with bushy hair, round glasses, shorts, striped socks and pointy little shoes. His shorts and socks resemble the fashion from the first half of the twentieth century. He is depicted in an upright position, holding in his hand the book titled *ABECEDA* (Alphabet), which is turned upside down. There is no representation of space, and the illustration is placed right next to the text. Judging by his body proportions, we can assume that it is a schoolboy rather than a preschool child.

In his illustration, Marjan Manček (Figure 2, Pedenjped B) places Pedenjped in the foreground. He is a boy with a big head (his body proportions suggest he is a young, possibly preschool child), big red glasses, brown tousled hair, blue trousers,



Figure 1. Učenjak
[Scholar] (1969)

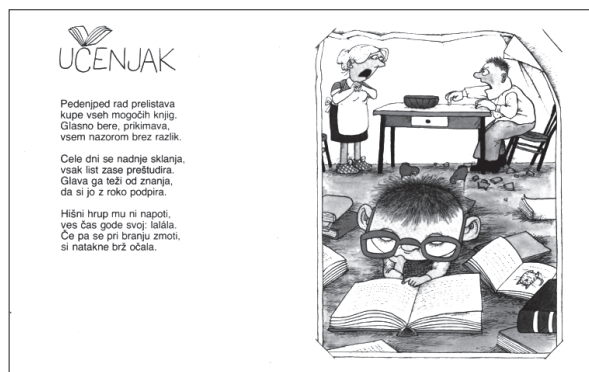


Figure 2. Učenjak [Scholar] (1979)

and red shoes. There is a thick open book in front of him. Marjan Manček made a coloured drawing with yellow, blue and red as the most prominent colours. The illustration by Manček accentuates the child's world (worm's eye view, strong chromatic colours) and the significance of the environment (family life, books), while also depicting the jumble (parents' quarrelling or, more precisely, an angry father and a scared mother).

Data Analysis

The students' responses were grouped into categories, each denoted by a statement (e.g., 'Pedenjped wears eyeglasses'). Each statement was a variable with two possible answers (yes, no). The resulting data was analysed with the use of SPSS software, using descriptive statistics (frequency) and inferential statistics (chi-square test). The chi-square test was used to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups of students (cf. Field, 2013).

Research Results

Description of Pedenjped's character traits

First, we were interested in Pedenjped's character. The students' most frequently recurring answers were: 'he likes to read or thumb through books' (44.9%), 'he is sophisticated, intelligent, learned' (34.6%), 'he is inquisitive and eager to learn' (31.1%), 'he is playful, naughty, roguish' (14.7%), and 'he is a diligent and obedient

child' (12.0%). The answers showed no statistically significant difference between the students who looked at illustration A (by Lidija Osterc) and those looking at illustration B (by Marjan Manček).

What kind of books does Pedenjped read and does he actually read?

When asked about the kind of books Pedenjped read, most students were unanimous in that he read all kinds of books (83.1%). Only a minor proportion of the students (26.2%) specified or described the books in more detail (e.g., picture books, encyclopaedias, thick books). A modest share of the students (6.4%) noted that Pedenjped read educational books. A statistically significant difference between the two groups was identified with the answer 'All kinds of books or various books.' 86.6% of the students who looked at illustration A (by Lidija Osterc) and 78.9% of the students who looked at illustration B (by Marjan Manček) noted that Pedenjped read 'All kinds of books or various books' ($\chi^2 = 4.187$, $P = 0.041$). When asked whether Pedenjped actually read or not, over half of the interviewees (68.1%) answered that Pedenjped did not really read but rather pretended to read. Analysis showed that in this case, there was no statistically significant difference between the replies of the two groups.

Physical features and appearance

The most frequently observed feature of Pedenjped's physical appearance was his eyewear, his haircut and/or hair length. The students also noted that Pedenjped was a child or a young boy. The results were analysed in view of the illustrations looked at (A or B) and it was established that none of the students in the group analysing the illustration by Lidija Osterc described the colour of his eyeglasses. On the other hand, none of the students looking at the illustration by Marjan Manček characterised Pedenjped as a big boy nor did they mention his socks. There were statistically significant differences in some of the other questions (Table 1).

Table 1. Pedenjped's appearance

Pedenjped's appearance		A L. Osterc		B M. Manček		Total		χ^2 - test	
		f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	χ^2	P
		'Pedenjped wears eyeglasses'	yes	147	65.9	141	76.2	288	70.6
no	76	34.1	44	23.8	120	29.4			
'Big eyeglasses'	yes	6	2.7	46	24.9	52	12.7	44.708	0.000
no	217	97.3	139	75.1	356	87.3			

Pedenjped's appearance		A		B		Total		χ^2 - test	
		L. Osterc		M. Manček		f	f%	χ^2	P
		f	f%	f	f%				
'Colour of eye-glasses'	yes	0	0.0	33	17.8	33	8.1	43.279	0.000
	no	223	100.0	152	82.2	357	91.9		
'Hair length'	yes	129	57.8	59	31.9	188	46.1	27.417	0.000
	no	94	42.2	126	68.1	220	53.9		
'Hair colour'	yes	30	13.5	50	27.0	80	19.6	11.819	0.001
	no	193	86.5	135	73.0	328	80.4		
'Young boy, child'	yes	62	27.8	104	56.2	166	40.7	33.827	0.000
	no	161	72.2	81	43.8	242	59.3		
'Big boy'	yes	24	10.8	0	0.0	24	5.9	21.155	0.000
	no	199	89.2	185	100.0	384	94.1		
'Protruding or large ears'	yes	3	1.3	28	15.1	31	7.6	27.388	0.000
	no	220	98.7	157	84.9	377	92.4		
'Shirt details'	yes	25	11.2	10	5.4	35	8.6	4.345	0.037
	no	198	88.8	175	94.6	373	91.4		
'Trousers details'	yes	33	14.8	4	2.2	37	9.1	19.579	0.000
	no	190	85.2	181	97.8	371	90.9		
'Socks details'	yes	25	11.2	0	0.0	25	6.1	22.094	0.000
	no	198	88.8	185	100.0	383	93.9		
'Shoes details'	yes	21	9.4	6	3.2	27	6.6	6.237	0.013
	no	202	90.6	179	96.8	381	93.4		
'Messy, poor hygiene'	yes	19	8.5	6	3.2	25	6.1	4.895	0.027
	no	204	91.5	179	96.8	383	93.9		
'Slim figure'	yes	26	11.7	0	0.0	26	6.4	23.038	0.000
	no	197	88.3	185	100.0	382	93.6		

The environment in which Pedenjped lives

Firstly, we were interested in the students' interpretation of 'hišni hrup' (jumble) from the last stanza. A large proportion of the interviewees noted that the jumble referred to the sounds in the apartment (chores being done, the sounds made by pets, etc.). Over half of the interviewed students (62.0%) explicitly noted that the jumble was caused by the parents' quarrelling. Analysis of the results showed there was a statistically significant difference between the answers with regard to the illustration observed. 93.7% of the students who looked at illustration A (by Lidija

Osterc) and 44.3% of the students who looked at illustration B (by Marjan Manček) noted that the 'Jumble refers to the sounds in the apartment' ($\chi^2 = 102.634$, $P = 0.000$). 7.6% of the students who looked at illustration A (by Lidija Osterc) and 74.6% of the students who looked at illustration B (by Marjan Manček) noted that the 'Jumble refers to the parents quarrelling' ($\chi^2 = 192.514$, $P = 0.000$). When we inquired after the environment in which Pedenjped lived, the students described it as an environment in which one cannot have peace and quiet, an unsettled environment, a friendly and stimulating environment, etc. Statistically significant differences were noticed in all the answers (Table 2).

Table 2. The environment in which Pedenjped lives.

Environment		A L. Osterc		B M. Manček		Total		χ^2 - test	
		f	f%	f	f%	f	f%	χ^2	P
'Environment with no peace and quiet'	yes	66	29.6	77	41.6	143	35.0	6.423	0.011
	no	157	70.4	108	58.4	265	65.0		
'Unsettled environment'	yes	9	4.0	69	37.3	78	19.1	72.345	0.000
	no	214	96.0	116	62.7	330	80.9		
'Friendly and stimulating environment'	yes	76	34.1	0	0.0	76	18.6	77.482	0.000
	no	147	65.9	185	100.0	332	81.4		
'Poor relationships'	yes	15	6.7	53	28.6	68	16.7	34.988	0.000
	no	208	93.3	132	71.4	340	83.3		
'Conflicts between parents'	yes	5	2.2	62	33.5	67	16.4	72.045	0.000
	no	218	97.8	123	66.5	341	83.6		
'Family environment'	yes	45	20.2	19	10.3	64	15.7	7.507	0.006
	no	178	79.8	166	89.7	344	84.3		
'Pedenjped retreats to his own world due to parents fighting'	yes	2	0.9	28	15.1	30	7.4	30.091	0.000
	no	221	99.1	157	84.9	378	92.6		

Discussion

Illustrations play an important role in the interpretation of the physical features of a literary character and the environment he/she is placed in. As a result, illustrations may change the reader's understanding of the message of a text such as a poem.

So, who is Pedenjped? According to the analysis of the results, there are no statistically significant differences among the answers of the two focus groups related to Pedenjped's personal features. Pedenjped likes reading or thumbing through books, he is smart, inquisitive, naughty, playful, etc. However, we did find statistically significant differences with regard to the features incorporated in the illustration. Thus, Pedenjped A is a tall and skinny boy, while Pedenjped B is a younger boy or a child with protruding ears and big red glasses. Over a half of all the students thought that Pedenjped did not really read but rather pretended to read, regardless of which illustration they analysed. From the point of view of literary theory, the interpretation of the text is closely related to the characteristics of the character (Pedenjped). We assume that a teacher (a student) will interpret the message of the poem differently depending on whether they will be dealing with the younger or the older Pedenjped. The message of the poem is altered considerably, depending on whether we see him as a child that cannot read yet or an older boy that does not read (possibly implying context, such as learning issues, developmental issues, his social status). Furthermore, the environment in which Pedenjped lives affected the interpretation of the poem as well. The phrase describing the environment – 'hišni hrup' (jumble) – was interpreted as the parents' fighting by over a half of all the students. The students analysing the illustration by Lidija Osterc (Pedenjped A) accounted for a minor portion, while a large share were those analysing the illustration by Marjan Manček (Pedenjped B). The latter frequently described the environment as one with no peace and quiet, messy, characterised by poor relationships and the parents' quarrelling. On the other hand, the students who were given the illustration by Lidija Osterc (Pedenjped A) described the environment as friendly and stimulating, frequently also as a family environment.

Apparently, the illustration plays a crucial role in the students' perception of the character, his environment, and the message of the poem. Pedenjped A is an older boy who does not read but lives in a friendly and stimulating environment while Pedenjped B is a younger boy who does not read, either, but lives in an unsettled environment characterised by parental conflicts and poor relationships. When we interpret the poem based on the first illustration (Pedenjped A), the message is conveyed through the written text and the literary character (the issue related to the character's age). However, if we interpret the same poem based on the second illustration (Pedenjped B), the message is conveyed through the written text, the literary character, and the environment. The latter is the element that adds a very specific context to the poem. In their description of the environment, the majority of the students examining illustration B (by Marjan Manček) noted that Pedenjped retreated to his own world due to his parents quarrelling, which implies that the

illustration has in fact changed the meaning of the poem. The written text says that he likes thumbing through piles of books but does not provide any reason for that particular behaviour.

Conclusions

The results of our analysis clearly indicate how powerful a single illustration can be with regard to the interpretation of poetry. Hence, they are of vital importance for teachers at all levels of education as well as for researchers. Preschool children and primary school pupils frequently come across illustrated poems. For this reason it is essential that the analysis and the interpretation of an illustrated literary text equally incorporate the visual code. For an integrated interpretation, the teacher will need literary as well as adequate art knowledge. This kind of knowledge enables them to point students to the key elements of an illustration, which might change the meaning of the written text. We must emphasize that quality illustrations are works of art. Viewing works of art is a process that involves both perception and reception. Krasoń (2017, p. 160) notes: "Reception of art is transferred along channels other than perception and it requires more than mere knowledge, for in a situation of reception experiencing emotions and being moved are states appearing simultaneously."

When working with multimodal texts, class teachers instructing all subjects might have an advantage over specialist subject teachers, as they possess basic knowledge of both disciplines (visual arts and literature). Unfortunately, practice shows that class teachers still regard illustration as an accessory that the reader might or might not take into the account. The situation with specialist subject teachers who teach students in higher grades of primary school is quite the opposite. Visual arts are within the domain of specialist art teachers who generally do not discuss poetry in their classes. On the other hand, literature is within the domain of (first) language teachers, who do not possess sufficient knowledge of visual arts. For this reason, it would be necessary to do some research on how students of different disciplines perceive the visual component of illustrated poetry when interpreting the verbal content.

Also, it is necessary to develop a more specific model of cross-curricular teaching, which would better prepare students for independent reading and interpreting of multimodal literary texts. The process of developing and implementing such a model should involve—along with class teachers and language teachers—also specialist art teachers. In the light of our survey results, such an education model

should be based on three Is, namely Illustration, Interaction (between visual and written text), and Interpretation.

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