Can picture books in the English classroom lead to increased reading comprehension?

Reading skills: Strong and Weak readers' use of Reading strategies with emphasis on Decoding & Visualization

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore strong and weak readers' use of reading strategies when reading picture books, giving particular attention to decoding and visualization. Based on the inherent interaction between the verbal and the visual expressions, the picture book illustrations can bring out key information and provide poor decoders with a more comprehensive version of the text. In addition, the readers' ability to visualize will expand their engagement with the text as well as motivate to further reading.

This case study involves a combination of two methods: a quantitative and a qualitative method. Using a quantitative and a qualitative method in combination resulted in important and insightful discoveries which are disclosed in findings and discussion.

The findings reveal that picture books in the English classroom can lead to increased reading comprehension as strong and weak readers' decoding and visualization skills expands as a result of the close relations of the written and the visual text.

In conclusion, we witness that the readers have developed as readers in the sense of improving their decoding and visualization skills through engaging in picture books.

Contents

Introduction

Substantial progress has been made over the last twenty-five years in understanding the reading process and how to approach the teaching of reading. We know about the necessity of phonological awareness in cracking the alphabetic code, the value of explicit instruction in sound-letter relationships, and the importance of reading practice in promoting fluency. However, this progress risk being halted unless we also attend to the issues of reading strategies and comprehension. Comprehension is, after all, the point of reading.

Having worked as a teacher for fifteen years, teaching Norwegian students English at the intermediate and lower secondary level, has made me realize that reading is truly the key to acquiring knowledge. However, it is not enough to know how to read. When having learnt to read, the students need to know how to extract meaning from texts. To do so, they need skills and strategies. Students who fail to efficiently decode alphabetical sounds are considered weak or unskilled readers. These students have difficulty understanding what sounds look like in print. In order to be able to read, they must learn what "a" looks like in print. William Bender (2004) claims that once children learn to decode alphabetical sounds, entire words and phrases may be read as units. The result is quicker, stronger and more skilled readers because they do not have to spend as much time decoding each individual sound in a word. Instead they can focus on becoming fluent readers who are better able to understand the meaning of what is being read.

Annemarie S. Palincsar & Ann L. Brown (1984) and Michael Pressley, Pamela Beard El-Dinary & Rachel Brown (1992) have conducted considerable research on the relationship between students' use of reading skills and their comprehension of texts. They found that readers with good reading comprehension are more strategic than those who are less competent. Being a strategic reader means being flexible and having the ability to adjust strategies to different types of texts. Reading a magazine or a text book for instance, calls for different reading strategies. Strategic readers are also confident and efficient in monitoring their comprehension of what they have read. They also reflect critically as they read, interpreting, responding and analyzing the material they read. Lastly, they seem to be self-motivated, meaning they seek out reading materials for themselves and read for the pleasure of it. This is supported by Patricia A. Alexander, Steve Graham & Karen R. Harris, (1998) and Patricia A. Alexander & Tamara L. Jetton (2000). However, Michael Pressley found that text comprehension is not only about possessing and selecting the right strategies, but the

comprehension of texts also depends on students' background knowledge and their word-level skills (2000, 2002a, 2002b).

According to Alexander et al. (1998), Pressley (2000) and Tom Trabasso & Eric Bouchard (2002), the strategies which are used for comprehension are conscious, controllable processes used to self-regulate reading for the purpose of achieving a specific cognitive goal. If the goal is to understand the text, then there is a need for good decoding skills. Alexander et al. (1998), Pressley (2000) and Trabasso & Bouchard (2002) have also focused on word level skills because of the assumption that decoding is the key in the meaning-retrieving process. This assumption will not be questioned here; suffice it to say that good decoding skills play a central part in text comprehension. Bonnie B. Armbruster, Thomas H. Anderson & John L. Meyer (1990), found that visualization has a positive effect on the readers' comprehension as well as helping the reader to remember what they have read. To visualize means creating a mental picture as you read or either produce or make use of more concrete illustrations provided to you in the text for comprehension. The interdependence of picture and word reinforces the understanding of the other. In this present study I have focused on decoding (word recognition and spelling) and visualization as they are major problem areas for the weak readers.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether picture books in the English classroom can lead to increased reading comprehension. As picture books communicate on two levels, the verbal and the visual, the picture book is unique. My hypothesis was that picture book illustrations can generate essential information and strengthen the weak readers' decoding and visualization, helping them ignore individual words and instead focus on grasping the overall meaning. Comprehension is, after all, the purpose of reading. Teaching reading strategies is therefore a crucial part of literacy instruction, not only during the preschool and primary years, but also a crucial part of reading instruction thereafter. We know much about the effect of including picture books. However, we know too little about how to continue making use of picture books for readers who struggles to decode after already having learnt to read. Norwegian students at lower secondary school will be introduced to a selection of English picture books. I will make use of a combination of two methods in order to ensure as reliable results as possible.

Having now stated my purpose, I will present the theoretical foundation for my coming discussion. When having reviewed theory, I will introduce picture books before presenting my findings and discussion. Lastly, the concluding remarks will follow.

1. Review of Theory

1.1. Literacy, Reading Comprehension and Reading Skills

In a general sense, reading is what happens when people look at a text and assign meaning to the written symbols in the text. There are two elements which are required for the reading process to begin, a text and a reader. It is, however, the interaction between the text and the reader that constitutes actual reading. This means that the meaning the reader gets from the text may not be exactly the same as the meaning the writer of the text wished to convey. This is due to different associations, experiences and knowledge, which in turn lead to differences in our perceptions. Therefore, two readers may assign different meaning to the same text.

Further, reading consists of two basic processes; decoding and reading comprehension. Both processes have to occur to construct meaning from text. Ivar Bråthen (2007) has made further reference to the term reading comprehension and defines it as follows:

> Reading comprehension implies to extract and create meaning by scanning and interacting with the written text (Bråthen 2007: 12, my translation).

It may sound simple, yet in reality reading is a very complex process. The skills we possess and the strategies we use in order to decode and understand are influenced by a number of factors all of which help to determine how successful readers we are.

When comparing the past and the present, I find that reading has primarily been associated with written texts. A written text may be defined as a text which consists of words only. The illustrations I found in books were fewer and simpler, than the ones I find in today's books. In addition, the narrow range of illustrations which could be found reflected to a small extent the text's main content and therefore must have had little impact on the reader's comprehension of the text. With the exception of fiction, which still mainly consists of written text, the vast majority of today's texts are illustrated. The use of photographs, illustrations and other graphic means has increased extensively. Electronic texts have the option to extend the repertoire even further with live video, animation and sound. All in all, this means that reading is becoming an increasingly more all-embracing skill.

Our basic reading skills will gradually become automatized for most of us. Yet, reading is much more than a set of technical skills. Becoming a strong reader is a relatively long process

which never ceases completely. Reading skills are something we continue to develop throughout life as we constantly encounter new texts.

Throughout my thesis I will make use of three different concepts in terms of reading: Literacy, Reading comprehension and Reading skills. According to David Pearson (2002), Cathy Collins Block & Sheri R. Parris (2008), Literacy deals with the technical aspect of reading like vocabulary learning, word recognition and decoding as well as the ability to read fluently. Reading comprehension states to which degree the readers are able to grasp and understand what they read. Susan E. Israel & Gerald. G. Duffy (2009) claims it is reading comprehension which is developed and improved as the technical aspects pick up. Pearson (2002) argue that the term reading skills is used in a broader context; it includes text comprehension, reading strategies as well as attitudes towards reading and the ability to acquire knowledge. In The National Curriculum, the Knowledge Promotion, the term literacy is used in an even broader sense than here; it overlaps to some extent with the above use of reading skills. This can be illustrated by taking a closer look at the National Curriculum, LK-06.

1.2. The Knowledge Promotion – LK06: Central differences between L97 and LK06

More and more children are exposed to extensive contact with the English language before starting school. Children encounter English through television and computers etc. This means that at whatever age they start learning English at school it is safe to resume that they have already heard or learnt words and phrases of the language. During recent years we have, in addition to the early exposure to English, gained new knowledge about students' academic results through different surveys conducted by various researchers and organizations. In the late 1900s and early 2000s, several international surveys of how the students benefited from learning were made. Norway was one of the countries with the largest spread in the students' skills, especially when it came to reading comprehension.

The International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) reading survey conducted in 2001 found that reading skills among Norwegian 10-year-olds were well below what was found in countries we usually compare ourselves with.

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is another large international study that also tests reading. The PISA survey emphasizes reading skills as being both a useful as

well as a necessary requirement to be able to actively take part in today's society. Every third year the student's reading skills are tested amongst Norwegian 15 year olds. The tests are conducted by OECD. The survey conducted in 2000 showed that 17 percent of Norwegian students had such reading problems that the OECD concluded that this could prevent them from being adequately educated. The survey also revealed that the Norwegian students' learning was far from sufficient, as they scored very low on learning strategies. This low score is disturbing considering that we live in a society where being able to grasp and adapt to new knowledge becomes more and more important. This was one of the contributing factors for the L97 National Curriculum to be replaced by LK06 in the autumn of 2006.

LK06 is the latest reform in the 10-year compulsory and upper secondary education and as we have seen, was heavily influenced by the recent European trends in foreign language education. LK06 defines:

- The core curriculum
- The quality framework
- The subject curricula
- The distribution of teaching hours per subject
- Individual assessment

The curriculum further defines five basic skills, which are adapted so as to facilitate integration into each subject. These skills are:

- The ability to read
- The ability to express oneself orally
- The ability to express oneself in writing
- The ability to develop numeracy
- The ability to use digital tools

This means that English teachers are responsible for teaching the students to, amongst other things, read. Although the five basic skills may be considered separate, these skills complement each other. LK06 therefore acknowledges reading as a basic skill which is necessary in order to acquire knowledge. According to LK06, to read means

> [...] to get involved in a matter, examine, interpret and reflect upon fiction and non-fiction texts with progressively more difficulty. Being able to read also means being able to process and use diverse information from images, pictures, films, drawings, graphs, tables etc. (LK06 2006: 19).

These five complementary skills are all considered to be prerequisites for the students to be able to benefit from their education.

Let us take a closer look at some central differences and changes between L97 and LK06. The LK06 curriculum is much shorter and more concise than its predecessor, L97. Where several pages in L97 were used to describe English in terms of meeting the language orally and in writing, using the language, gaining knowledge about the English language and culture, and knowledge about one's own language learning, LK06 focuses on competence aims and communication, with stronger emphasis on students developing their awareness as language learners. Although attention to language learning was introduced in L97, LK06 places far more emphasis on strategies and awareness of how languages are learnt. The European Language Portfolio is designed to help teachers and learners to work systematically on language awareness and strategies. It also offers specific language skill aims. The European Language Portfolio is not part of LK06 though.

Whereas L97 suggested various texts that could be used in lessons and encouraged students to explore, experiment with and play with language, LK06 contains first and foremost competence aims and does not mention teaching methods and content. The focus is more on what the students are able to do with the language, rather than on instruction and methodology.

Moreover, unlike L97, "methods" are not mentioned in LK06, only aims. The students are expected to demonstrate their mastery of competence aims. Nevertheless, it is clear that the methods described in L97 are suited to LK06, but need to be seen in connection with, for example The European Language Portfolio. Each school, or on many cases each municipality, is supposed to develop a local plan that specifies the academic content.

The LK06 English curriculum is divided into three main subject areas: Language learning, Communication and Culture, society and literature. These subject areas supplement each other and should be considered together, competence aims for each subject area are defined after years 2, 4, 7 and 10 in primary and lower secondary school; and in upper secondary school after the first year in the general studies program (Vg1) and after the second year in the vocational education program (Vg2).

LK06 presents the main area of language learning in the English subject curriculum like this:

> Language learning focuses on knowledge about the language, language usage and insight into one's own language learning. Being able to assess one's own language use, define one's own needs and select strategies and ways of working are requirements for attending this. The main focus is on seeing what is involved in learning a new language and seeing relationships between English, one's native and other languages (LK 06 2006: 42).

Language learning has been given increased status in LK06 as one of the three main components. One of the aims of the curriculum is that the students should become lifelong language learners. In the course of their studies, the students should develop personal strategies for language learning that suit their own preferences and situation (Angela Hasselgreen 2005). This component focuses on students' acquisition of knowledge about the language and the language learning process the students are expected to be able to assess their own language use, define their needs and select appropriate strategies and ways of working. The main focus is on understanding what is involved in learning a new language and on seeing relationships between English, their native language and other languages.

The second component, Communication, focuses on using the English language to communicate and is described more specifically, and in more detail, than in L97. Communication is achieved through listening, reading, writing, preparing oral production and spontaneous oral interaction, including the use of appropriate communication strategies. It also includes participation in various social arenas, which requires a mastery of an increasing number of genres and forms of expression. Good communication requires knowledge and skills in using vocabulary and idiomatic structures, pronunciation, intonation, spelling and syntax. New media and the development of a linguistic repertoire across subjects and topics are important elements in this area. Knowing how to be polite and to employ appropriate social conventions in a variety of linguistic situations is also an important skill. This goes hand in hand with the ability to adapt one's language to suit the recipient and the situation, including the ability to distinguish between formal and informal, written and spoken registers. The aims for communication include linguistic aims linked to the language elements necessary for communication such as words, sounds and syntax; and text genres and other functional aims related to using the language to do different things in communication. The aims in this area reflect the broad categories of skills that are used, for example reading and writing, and the basic functions that are performed. Learning takes place in spirals where the students meet a gradually more complex language. The following hierarchy of competence aims taken from the curriculum illustrates the development in relation to vocabulary over the years:

- Understand and use common English words and phrases connected to day – to – day life, recreation and interests, both orally and in writing (grade 4)
- Master a vocabulary that covers everyday situations (grade 7)
- Master a vocabulary that covers a wide range of topics (grade 10)
- Master a wide vocabulary (Vg1)

According to Hasselgreen (2005) the students should, by the end of 10th grade, have sufficient control of the language to use it with some fluency, accuracy and appropriacy, so that the language deficiencies do not significantly disturb communication.

The third component of the curriculum is Culture, society and literature, which has as its aim cultural understanding in a broad sense. Focusing on the English – speaking world, it specifies key topics connected to social issues, literature and other cultural expressions. It also emphasizes the importance of developing the students' knowledge about English as a world language with many areas of use. Working with various types of texts and other cultural expressions facilitates the development of linguistic skills, as well as understanding how others live, and of their cultures and world views. Reading literature may also help to instill the joy of reading in students and provide a basis for personal growth, maturity and creativity.

The new curriculum has much in common with L97 regarding the focus on how people live in English – speaking countries. The main difference is the increased focus on intercultural understanding, including minorities in one's own and in English – speaking countries. Over the years there is a built in progression in the curriculum focus, moving from discussions of the daily lives of children, to history and geography. The curriculum indicates the kind of genres/ media students should be familiar with, and the sources of literature, both with regard to home and place. This allows for the inclusion of any English – speaking country. The opportunity to work with a variety of texts, such as films, pictures and music, should make English lessons interesting encounters with other cultures.

In short, since LK06 does not mention methods and specific texts, as L97 did. Teachers have to decide how to best go about our teaching and what materials and aid to use, in order to help students reach the various competence aims. Teachers are also challenged to think in terms of longer periods of time, since the aims are not stated for every year, but for several years at the same time.

1.3. Mother tongue and second language reading

It is a known fact that written texts are the main repository of knowledge no matter what language. To be able to access this knowledge, one must be able to read. Good reading skills are therefore an absolute necessity in acquiring information found in texts. As a result, reading plays a profound role in the learning process in general.

When children learn to read in their mother tongue, Paul Nation & Rob Waring (1997), estimate that they have a vocabulary of approximately 4000 – 5000 words. These words are primarily learnt in their functional context, meaning by observation and communication. When children start school, there is a strong focus on the development of vocabulary and the learning process goes from the concrete, like every day words as milk and bicycle, to abstract concepts like feelings and thoughts. At school they also learn words through reading and writing by paying attention to the letters of the words and learning to recognize and decode the words.

Stephen Krashen (2004) has proven that reading skills acquired in the first language can be transferred to a second language. That means if you have developed good reading skills in Norwegian, you are likely to apply these skills when reading English. This, he claims, is due to the reading skills being basically the same and that the reading skills are being more dependent on the individual than on the language. Possessing the ability to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words from their context is a useful reading skill; another is the ability to decide which new words in a text are important to look up and which words one safely can ignore. Krashen has also found that good reading habits will accelerate the development of good reading skills. Similarly, the skills of being able to plan a piece of writing or develop an argument in a persuasive essay can be applied in the second language once they have been learned in the first.

Krashen's principal idea is that students will learn English much more effectively if they continue to develop their first language at the same time as they develop their second. Also, he finds that the pleasure of the reading habit itself transfers from the first to the second language. For this reason it is important to encourage students to continue reading in their first language. LK06 follows Krashen's claim and states that:

> Developing reading skills in English also improves general reading skills (Krashen 2006: 42).

LK06 not only stresses the importance of reading, but also comment on the importance of being able to read in a second language:

> Being able to read English is part of the practical language competence and means being able to read and understand, to explore and reflect upon increasingly more demanding texts and thus gain insight across cultures and disciplines (LK06 2006: 42).

Thus the notion of reading as a basic skill actually involves a complex network of skills, the process of developing these skills continues throughout the entire education process. John Read (2000) claims that a rich vocabulary is one of the most important requirements for successful and comprehensive reading. This is because reading increases the vocabulary. LK06 supports Read by stating:

> The main area of communication focuses on using the English language to communicate. Communication is achieved through listening, reading, writing, […] Good communication requires knowledge and skills in using vocabulary and idiomatic structures, pronunciation, intonation, spelling, grammar and syntax of sentences and text (LK06 2006: 42).

The complex network of skills which is involved in the process of reading, has a positive effect on anyone's education in the sense that the students with good reading comprehension and a well developed vocabulary have a better chance in succeeding at school.

1.4. Strong and Weak readers' use of Reading Strategies

Much of our knowledge about the use of reading strategies and good reading comprehension is based on studies of relatively strong readers. Jane Brauger & Jan Patricia Lewis (2006) and Ellin Keene (2002), claim a common trait is that strong readers are active and strategic in their reading process. They argue that weak readers, on the other hand, have a tendency to read on without knowing the intention of why they read. They will most likely also have problems explaining why they failed to comprehend what they read. They seem to read on, quite passively, without reflecting particularly on what they have read while strong readers are attentive all through the reading process. This does not mean they are able to grasp and understand everything they read or never lose their concentration though. Rather, they realize that they have missed something and are able to go back and correct what they have missed.

Brauger & Lewis (2006) and Keene (2002) state that strong readers also are able to acquire a repertoire of reading strategies which they put to use when needed, meaning they are fully

aware of what kind of text they are faced with as well as the purpose of reading that text. Being aware of this, they are able to adjust the pace for the purpose of reading. They are also able to read a section twice if necessary, knowing they missed key information; they read simple texts rather quickly while acknowledging that there are limits to how fast a text which is loaded with information can be read.

Reading in order to learn is important to get good grades and to get a high-quality education. Reading for the sake of entertainment only is closely related to the reader's passion and personal experiences. In addition, strong readers are excellent problem solvers and manage to work out whatever the problem might be. They realize whether the problems are due to lack of knowledge about the texts content, difficult words and phrases, or whether they are due to the unknown structure of the text. As earlier pointed out, strong readers have a large repertoire of strategies which they are able to access to solve potential problems. Such a repertoire may consist of reading a section twice, read slower, repeat prior information or ask for help.

1.5. Decoding (Word Recognition and Spelling)

If a reader struggles with decoding, the student's comprehension will invariably suffer (David LaBerge & S. Jay Samuels, 1974). The ability to decode unknown words requires knowledge of the processes involved in decoding, as well as knowledge of specific letter-sound relationship. The reader needs to assess both, so that he or she does not have to devote conscious attention to the words in the text and can devote all of his or her cognitive effort to understanding what is read. When students stumble over words which they are unable to decode, understanding typically suffers. The process of decoding involves three successive understandings:

1. Acquisition of the alphabetic principle
2. The ability to blend letters into sounds and
3. The ability to use both phonograms and analogies

According to Michael McKenna & Steven Stahl (2003) readers' acquisition of the alphabetic principle, the principle that letters can be used to represent sounds, is revealed by their use of letters as cues for words in both word recognition and spelling. Spelling may be a better assessment for a child's knowledge of the alphabetic principle, since children may use the first letter as visual rather than phonemic cue.

Letter-by-letter decoding is the ability to blend letters together to make words. Although this phase is fairly short-lived, it is critical: Readers need to appreciate individual letter-sound correspondences in order to move toward automatic recognition. This ability can be evaluated by measures that regulate reader's knowledge of individual letter sounds as well as their decoding of short-vowel words. Since short vowels usually are taught first in most phonics curricula, we use short vowels as the test of the reader's blending ability.

The last stage involves being able to use both phonograms and chunks of letters (such as *ick, ill, and*, and so on), and analogies (decoding *strike* by comparing it with *like*). Strong readers decode words using these strategies. Studies have found that readers need to be able to understand letter-by-letter decoding before they are able to benefit from analogy or phonogram instruction, but readers need to use phonograms in order to read proficiently (McKenna & Stahl 2003). Readers are first able to use phonograms and analogies to decode monosyllabic words; later, they can use them to decode polysyllabic words.

In order to improve in decoding, word recognition is essential. Consistent with McKenna & Stahl (2003), word recognition is the skill of a reader to recognize written words correctly and virtually effortlessly. Word recognition is also referred to as "isolated" word recognition by McKenna & Stahl because it entails a reader's ability to recognize words individually, from a list for example, without the benefit of surrounding words for contextual help. Quick and effortless word recognition is one of the main components of fluent reading. Words that beginning readers initially sound out through phonics comes to be recognized as whole units after the readers encounter them repeatedly in connected text. This means that beginning readers need to read lots of related texts at an appropriate level in order to solidify their word recognition abilities. This enables them to move from sounding out words to rapid word recognition.

The Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS), claim that readers become aware of and apply known spelling patterns to decode new words by similarity. They may use a well-known pattern such as consonant-*en"* as in *Ben, hen, Ken* to decode an alien word like *fen* (an ancient term for marsh). Still, after readers have become proficient at word recognition, they may have occasion to use their phonics skills when they encounter unusual words and complex multisyllabic words.
LINCS also point out that learners who have difficulty with word recognition often misread words by substituting a similar-looking known word for the target word; e.g., reading

carrying for *carriage* or *immorality* for *immortality.* If they are reading a text on a familiar topic, they can sometimes correct their miscues when they come to the end of the sentence or the end of the paragraph. It is fortunate when learners are able to self-correct based on context, but this inefficient strategy only works for very familiar topics. Learners who are reliant on context for word recognition usually have difficulty with unfamiliar topics and reading to learn the new.

Krashen (2004) has, as earlier mentioned, verified that reading skills acquired in the first language can be transferred to a second language. Also, students will learn English much more effectively if they continue to develop their first language at the same time as they develop their second. According to LINCS, it is important to remember that when working with non-native speakers of English who already read an alphabetic language proficiently, they tend to transfer what they know about decoding from their native language to English. However, like native English speakers, they will need direct instruction with the many English sight words that are not phonetically regular (e.g., *would*) as well as the letter combinations that can be pronounced in various ways (e.g., *-ough* in *rough, bough,* and *thought*).

1.6.Visualization

The importance of the visual in everyday life has been documented in many studies. Anne Zimmer & Fred Zimmer (1978) established that:

> People remember eighty percent of what they see but only thirty percent of what they read and ten percent of what they hear (Zimmer & Zimmer 1978: 13).

This bear witness to the importance of including picture books when learning or developing as readers.

With this in mind, David Lewis (2001) offers a thought-provoking statement:

> Children born into the first years of the twenty-first century are likely to possess a richer and more deft understanding of visual imagery and its modes of deployment than any other generation in the history of humankind. Their world is saturated with images, moving and still, alone and in all manner of hybrid combinations with texts and sounds. […] Competence with images is now a prerequisite of competence in life (Lewis 2001: 59-60).

Based on this, the claim can be made that picture books are essential as well as fundamental when learning to read and developing reading strategies.

We witness an expansion of literacy as a concept, which includes knowledge and skills in multimodal areas. Image, gesture, music, as well as written and spoken words are valued for their expressive attributes. Although facility in many of these modes can be and often is developed through social interaction and observation, leaving the acquisition of proficiency in these areas to chance can lead to gaps of knowledge and thus understanding. Both teachers and students can broaden their capacity of perception and comprehension from a careful study of the elements that compose expression in sign systems other than the printed word. Picture books offer many opportunities for novice and emergent readers, and as my study will show, weak or unskilled readers, to develop visual literacy. There is much to be read from a picture, much to be inferred and understood implicitly as well as what is obviously detected.

Astrid Roe (2011) reviews visualization as a reading strategy which makes use of illustrations that are created either by the reader or provided for the reader. Visualization helps make the content of the text clear and helps organize information. Complicated verbal texts appear clearer and simpler with illustrations. A text might seem verbal and abstract while a picture is concrete and visual. This way the illustrations may help bring out what is key information and provide the reader with a new understandable version of the text. The mutual interaction between text and picture allows the one to reinforce the understanding of the other, leading to enhanced reading comprehension. Studies have demonstrated that visualization reinforces both the students' reading comprehension as well as increases their remembrance of what has been read (Armbruster et al. 1990).

Perry Nodleman (1988) argues in his chapter on 'The relationship of pictures and words' that:

> Pictures can communicate much to us, and particularly much of visual significance – but only if words focus them, tell us what it is about them that might be worth paying attention to. In a sense, trying to understand the situation a picture depicts is always an act of imposing language upon it – interpreting visual information in verbal terms; it is not accidental that we speak of 'visual literacy', of the 'grammar' of pictures, of 'reading' pictures. Reading pictures for narrative meaning is a matter of applying our understanding of words (Nodleman 1988: 211).

Nodleman (1988) completes his chapter on 'The relationship of pictures and words' as follows:

> Because they communicate different kind of information, and because they work together by limiting each other's meanings, words and pictures necessarily have a combative relationship; their complementarity is a matter of opposites completing each other by virtue of their differences. As a result, the relationship between pictures and texts in picture books tend to be ironic: each speaks about matters on which the other is silent (Nodleman 1988: 221).

This is how it is with picture books, the words speak what the pictures do not reveal, and the pictures show what the words cannot. Together the verbal and the visual elements construct new meaning. Still, in my experience, this meaning is often untouched upon in most Norwegian classrooms today in the sense that teachers do not make use of picture books in order to strengthen reading skills. Intermediate and lower secondary school classrooms avoid picture books with the misguided perception that the students have probably them. In primary classrooms where picture books continue to hold a prominent position, they are often seen as more of entertainment than a goldmine for analysis.

Barbra Kiefer (1995) describes how young children enjoy their awareness of the subtleties of picture books. Unfortunately, she finds that

> […] few teachers spend time helping students sort out, recognize, and understand the many forms of visual information they encounters, certainly not in the same way teachers deal with print literacy (Kiefer 1995: 10).

Kiefer further argues that teachers all too often ignore the potential of picture books. As she considers some of the best art to be present in children's picture books, she believes it would be a critical mistake denying children to enrich their cognitive capacity. Rather than take away the potential in such materials, teachers should encourage their use.

2. Picture books

2.1. What are Picture books

The picture book began to be taken seriously as an object of academic study during the latter years of the twentieth century. The first major works in English to address the form and its nature was done by Joseph Schwartz in *Ways of the Illustrator* and Perry Nodelmann in *Words About Pictures* which were published in the 1980s. Since then there has been a steady increase in the flow of articles, conference papers and book chapters dedicated to the study, criticism and analysis of the picture book. The unique character of picture books as an art form is based on the combination of two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal.

Picture books can be seen "as a kind of miniature ecosystem" (Lewis 2001: 46) which suggests that "the words and the pictures in picture books act upon each other reciprocally, each one becoming the environment within which the other lives and thrives" (Lewis 2001: 48, 54).

According to Maria Nikolajeva & Carole Scott (2006), picture books give the impression of being an exciting, stimulating and vibrant branch of children's literature. During the last years they have found that there has been a vast increase in the quantity of high quality picture books published for children. Yet, it seems like our understanding of the interaction of word and image in picture books, how readers negotiate meaning and how to choose adequate picture books which leads to an increased reading comprehension, is limited.

Karla Kuskin (1998) labels the picture book;

> […] thirty-two pages of graphic drama starring pictures and words (Kuskin 1998: 161).

Nodleman (1988) portray the picture book as:

> Picture books are clearly recognizable as children's books simply because they do speak to us of childlike qualities, of youthful simplicity and youthful exuberance; yet paradoxically, they do so in terms that imply a vast sophistication in regard to both visual and verbal codes. Indeed, it is part of the charm of many of the most interesting picture books that they so strangely combine the childlike and the sophisticated – that the viewer they imply is both very learned and very ingenuous (Nodleman 1988: 2).

This statement demonstrates the essence of the picture book which lies in the combination of the childlike with the sophisticated.

In my experience, most children start looking at picture books at the age of two or three and they continue to take pleasure in them for several years to come. Initially, it is the parents who introduce picture books to their children; they read the text aloud and point out interesting features, making it enjoyable for the children to take part in the story. That way, picture books are designed for children because they use pictures to tell a story. In some cases, the picture book conveys the story entirely through pictures, without any text at all. In other cases, the pictures are accompanied by text. In both cases, the picture book is designed to introduce young children to the idea of books as well as reading.

2.2. The Interaction of Words and Pictures

When we read a picture book, we look at the pictures and we read the words and our eyes move back and forth between the two as we piece together the meaning of the text. Lewis (2001) refer to picture book text is an "interweaving of words and pictures" (Lewis 2001: 33). The words may tell us the exact same story as we can "read" from the pictures. The words may draw our attention to details in the picture and the rest is up to our imagination. It all depends upon how word and picture interact. The combination of the two levels of communication, the visual and the verbal, is what makes the picture book unique. Based on this we may say that picture books communicate by means of two separate sets of signs, the iconic and the conventional.

Nikolajeva & Scott (2006) define iconic signs as:

> […] those in which the signifier and the signified are related by common qualities; that is, where the sign is a direct representation of its signified (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006: 1).

This means a picture of a printer on a computer's command menu is an icon; a direct representation of the printer. In most cases, we do not need special knowledge to understand a simple icon. Conventional signs, on the other hand, have no direct relationship with the object signified. The word *print* in a menu only conveys a meaning if we possess the code; that is, we must know what the letters stand for. Nikolajeva & Scott (2006) define it as;

> Conventional signs are based on an agreement among the bearers of a particular language, both the spoken language and the communicators, such as gestures, dress code, or emblems (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006: 1).

That means conventional signs do not carry any meaning for those outside the given community. Both iconic and conventional signs have existed in human culture though, from its beginning, and have given rise to the two parallel types of communication we today know as the visual and the verbal.

The pictures in picture books are complex iconic signs, and words in picture books are complex conventional signs. However, the basic relationship between the two levels is the same. The function of pictures, the iconic signs, is to describe and represent while the function of words, the conventional signs, is primarily to narrate. The conventional signs are often linear, while iconic signs are nonlinear and do not give the reader direct instruction about how to read them. The tension between the two functions creates unlimited possibilities for interaction between word and image in a picture book. Whichever we start with the verbal or the visual when we "read" a picture book, expectations are created. The reader turns from verbal to visual and back again, expanding their understanding. Each new rereading of either words or pictures creates better prerequisites for an adequate interpretation of the whole. Presumably, children know this by intuition when they demand that the same book be read aloud to them over and over again. Actually, they do not read the same book; they go more and more deeply into its meaning. Perhaps adults have lost the ability to read picture books in this way, because they ignore the whole and regard the pictures as merely decorative. This is closely tied to the dominant position of verbal, especially written, communication in our society.

However, adults may read the same book twice, and experience new details being revealed as they tend to pay closer attention to the words and possible interpretations the second time around, already knowing the outcome. This brings us to reader-response theory. Reader-response theory, with its central notion of textual gaps, is also valuable in approaching picture book dynamics (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006). We find both word and picture to leave room for the "readers" to fill with their previous knowledge, experience, and expectations, and we may find infinite possibilities for word – picture interaction. Both verbal and visual texts have their own gaps and words and pictures might fill each other's gaps, wholly or partially. Having said that, they can also leave gaps for the "readers" to fill; meaning both words and pictures can be evocative in their own ways as well as independent of each other.

2.3. The Role of Picture books in Learning to Read

Pictures are common in young children's books. The younger the child, the more pictures there tends to be (Douglas P. Newton 1992). As long ago as in 1850, Mrs. F. L. Mortimer warned teachers that pictures can remove the need to use word identification skills. While her *Reading without Tears* used picture cues, she insisted that "The words must always be spelt, for otherwise the child would name the pictures without looking at the words" (quoted in Chalmers 1976).

One century later, research supports her insights. S. Jay Samuels (1970), for instance, claims that the presence of picture cues delay the acquisition of a sight vocabulary, particularly for unskilled readers. Unskilled and weak readers are the same, as they both struggle in the meaning – getting process. Yet the readers appreciate pictures. Moira McKenzie (1986) finds picture books to be an important source of interest and support for potentially difficult concepts, situations or vocabulary. Joel R. Levin (1981) argues that using pictures in texts may serve a decorative purpose, that is, they make a book attractive. Also, he says that the pictures stimulate or maintain the reader's interest in the story or information and in reading in general. In other words, they have a motivational role. Another role is that of reiteration, in which pictures repeat the information presented in words, perhaps with the aim of making it more memorable. In a representational role, pictures make concrete what is said in words. A flower becomes a particular colorful flower in a green field for instance. Sometimes pictures can be used to organize information, placing together those things which are physically or conceptually linked (Bill Winn 1987). This can help a reader construct a mental model of the situation or relationship described in the text. Pictures may also interpret the text and then translate the information into a more comprehensible form. They could transform the text into a representation which is more memorable, perhaps by using pictorial metaphors. These pictures could motivate emotional responses like enjoyment, emotions and attitudes, and support cognition by stimulating or facilitating comprehension and retention and by supplementing information (W. Howard Levie & Richard Lentz 1982).

There is evidence that pictures can have these effects. They can be effective cues for identifying words and illustrating the meaning of new words in specific contexts. They can affect attitudes and have emotional impact. They can also help to develop an organized understanding of the meaning of the text (S. Jay Samuels 1970 and Ralph Coldstein &

Geoffrey Underwood 1981). At the same time Coldstein and Underwood (1981) point out that, pictures can distract and lead the reader astray. Such is the power of pictures that they seem able to subvert reading instruction by making the reading of words redundant. However, just because they are able to subvert instruction does not mean that they must do so.

2.4. Approaches to Teaching Reading

Reading involves word recognition, or the decoding of letters, and comprehension, the construction of meaning from words and sentences. For instance, the unskilled or weak reader may have difficulty decoding words or they decode bit by bit so that meaning is not constructed. That way the weak reader may fail to appreciate that the aim is to construct meaning. Nor may they be able to establish coherence between elements of the text or have sufficient prior knowledge to give meaning to what is read (Jane Oakhill & Allan Garnham, 1988). On the other hand, the skilled or strong reader decodes in a highly automatic and efficient way and constructs a mental representation of what the text is about (Oakhill & Garnham, 1988).

However, there is disagreement amongst teachers about the best way to reach this state. I will not debate the merits of various approaches to teaching reading, but focus on how the use of pictures may play a role in them.

Some approaches to teaching reading have been described as synthetic since they emphasize the construction of meaning by building it from smaller units (Elizabeth Hunter 1977). These sub-skills are placed in order according to complexity and describe the need to master and consolidate early skills before engaging in more advanced ones. Exercises for practicing and consolidating each sub-skill have to be selected or prepared.

Those who favor holistic approaches generally hold the view that reading skills cannot be usefully subdivided. Instead, they require their students to practice across the range of word identification and comprehension skills from the very beginning. Degrees of reading skills are marked by, for example, the demands the material makes in terms of the number, nature and abstraction of the concepts, the amount of prior knowledge needed, the formality of the writing style, the grammatical complexity and length of the material, and the ease of establishing textual cohesion (Moira McKenzie 1986). These approaches to teach reading have been described as analytical since they emphasize the construction of meaning by taking

larger units of text apart. Since comprehension is emphasized at all stages, then it follows that what is read should be potentially meaningful at all stages.

Consequently, teachers advocate the use of "natural" reading materials or "real" books. These books tend to have pictures in them. Attempts have been made to include picture books in theories of children's literature (Geoff Moss 1992 and Jane Doonan, 1993). This makes it possible to talk of developing both literacy and the appreciation of literature from picture books as children no longer learn the alphabet then attempt to read the Bible, like in earlier times (Paul Chambers 1987).

Text is both written and selected for learning to read and practice, extend and strengthen skill. That may be why Dr. Seuss's *ABC* is read some time before Agatha Christie's *The Secret Adversary*. But why is *The Secret Adversary* considered to be more advanced and complicated than *ABC*? Well, for one thing, Agatha Christie uses many words which a young, unskilled reader may not recognize. Their decoding would most likely be too slow and have too many malfunctions for a young reader to make sense of.

According to Oakhill & Garnam (1988), sentence structure could also be a problem. Children frequently succeed in processing subject-verb-object sequences while reading, but relative clauses, for instance, can confuse them. Similarity, particular comparisons, casual statements, characters' goals and goal-satisfying actions may be beyond the reader's experience.

In addition, *The Secret Adversary* is longer than *ABC* and its topic most likely of less importance to a child's desires and interests. In order to facilitate progression in reading it is important to assign books as *The Secret Adversary* as well as *ABC* pictures to make a constructive contribution to the teaching of reading. The precise form of that contribution may vary according to the approach off course.

2.5. Developing Visual Literacy – Reading Pictures

As previously mentioned, picture books tell stories in both words and pictures. Authors and illustrators frequently make the most of the interaction, or synergy (Carol Driggs Wolfenbarger & Lawrence Sipe 2007), of the two media as a means for communicating a complex and meaningful story for young readers. Shelby A. Wolf (2003) writes of picture book illustrators:

> Illustrators not only tell us where to look, but what to look for, and they do this through a variety of techniques, some more subtle than others. Quite often they tell through the details of their work (Wolf 2003: 232).

Not only do the illustrators of picture books tell us what to look for, but also how to feel:

> Illustrators tell us where to look and what to look for because they want to guide us in how to feel, and they use a number of pictorial elements including size, color, shape and line as well as varying media and artistic styles to enhance the feeling. From the very first look at a book, you get a message about its content (Wolf 2003: 234).

Whether it is the physical appearance of the characters and how they relate to the events unfolding in the story, an atmosphere to enhance the telling of the story (Lewis 2001), or a discrepancy of words and pictures that leads to an understanding of a larger message (Maria Nikolajeva & Carole Scott 2001), illustrations are an important method for conveying and developing meaning in picture books. Just as writers use words to create texture and mood, illustrators also employ a set of technique, a visual grammar so to speak, with which they can appeal to emotions and generate atmospheres (Joseph H. Schwartz 1982). Color, line, shape, size and style are some of the tools with which illustrators create their effects. Molly Bang (1991) discusses how she uses shape in her illustrations:

> Smooth, flat, horizontal shapes give us a sense of stability and calm (Bang 1991: 42)
> Diagonal shapes are dynamic because they imply motion or tension (Bang 1991: 46).

Bang (1991) also refers to the composition of the elements which also can affect the overall impression. For instance, a character depicted in a bright color against a dark background, will become the focal point of the picture. As well, the size and position of the character in the setting can imply tone and predict narrative elements. For example, when a character is presented as large and placed in front of elements in the setting, this can affect the way in which the viewer relates to this character. The setting itself can play a role in establishing the tone of the story. Landscapes can be bright and brilliant, attractive or repulsive, moody, dark and depressing as well as illustrating ideas or perceptions. Images of a character moving from a gray and foggy city to a green pasture, emphasize the potential for this character. In many ways illustrators assign various roles to the landscape in their pictures (Schwartz 1982). Gaining knowledge of the cultural understandings associated with these different elements that illustrators use in creating images to communicate thoughts and feelings as well as objects and actions can assist students in reading pictures and consequently generate greater comprehension of the text in picture books (Kathleen Ellen O'Neill 2011). Whether it is building vocabulary or developing an appreciation for irony, O'Neill (2011) believes

unskilled readers can benefit from a greater sense of the meaning that can be derived from illustrations. Picture book illustrations and the message(s) they hold interact with the text to support comprehension of the printed text, perhaps expand understanding, or even establish the complexity of the plot and theme (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Nikolajeva and Scott (2006) offer a detailed metalanguage for explicating the levels of text/image interaction from wordless picture books through increasing interaction of words and pictures to books with either generic or no illustrations. I will give reasons for my choice of picture books after having presented the methodology.

3. Methodology

This thesis aspires to find out if picture books can lead to increased reading comprehension for the weaker readers. If students are to understand what they read, good reading strategies are a requirement. For teachers and educators it should be of great significance to know whether the illustrations in picture books may help the students to visualize, decode and thereby lead to improved reading comprehension.

3.1. Previous Study

In a previous study (Victoria Grundvig 2011) I found answers to what students do when faced with difficult words in a second language text. Second language (L2) is in this case English. Since the results of that study are of interest here, I will sum up my findings in the following. The purpose was to develop an insight into what strong and weak readers actually do when they come across difficult words in an L2 text. In other words, I examined the relative contribution of word recognition and decoding skills and to what extent these affect the readers' comprehension of the text.

A pre-test revealed that a qualitative method would provide me with sufficient answers considering my research's reliability and validity. Two Norwegian students from lower secondary school with high and low reading ability participated in think – aloud interviews while reading English texts. The think – aloud interview provided me with access to my students' most inner thoughts, i.e. their cognitive thoughts. After conducting the interviews I made some interesting discoveries concerning what the strong reader did when faced with difficult words in an L2 text, compared to what the weak reader did when faced with the same text. The informants were native Norwegians without substantial reading and writing disabilities or dyslexia.

I found that strong readers are more strategic, i.e. know what strategy to use and when to use it as opposed to those who are less competent. Secondly, those who are less competent are not aware of their poor decoding skills or lack of word recognition and are therefore unable to do something about it. In order to change the way they think and act, they have to be made aware of and acknowledge that they have a problem concerning decoding. Thirdly, poor decoding skills are the bottle neck in the meaning – getting process, meaning that word recognition plays a central and significant part when having to do with to what degree the different

readers is able to understand what they read. Lastly, I found that the students not always do what they say they do when answering questions and filling out questionnaires, giving me confirmation that I had chosen the right method for my purpose.

As for my current study, I will continue using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods as they in combination will provide me with the means to obtain reliable answers to my questions. Let us continue to look at the methods in more detail.

3.2. Qualitative & Quantitative Method

The choice of research method is the key to the conclusions I may draw from my findings. In other words, the chosen research method affects the outcome of my study. In the previous project, did a pre – test to see whether a quantitative method would provide me with sufficient answers considering its reliability and validity (Grundvig 2011). From this pilot study I learned that a quantitative method alone would be insufficient because it would merely provide me with numbers and statistics rather than coming to a deeper understanding of what the students actually do and not just think they do. John W. Creswell (1994) claims that it is important to be able to identify and understand the research approach underlying any given study because the selection of a research approach influences the question asked, the methods chosen, the statistical analyses used, the interference made, and the ultimate goal of the research.

As a result the quantitative method pointed me in the direction of the qualitative method. The choice I made was to combine the two methods because I found both to be insufficient in terms of finding answers to my question when used separately. A multiple choice questionnaire represents the quantitative method and as the basis for the qualitative method think – aloud interview was conducted. The students first had to answer the questionnaire, and then a selection of the students had to give reasons for and elaborate on the answers given through the interview. This gave me access to the students' cognitive thinking by getting the students to articulate and reflect upon the support of illustrations in the picture books and whether they helped them to better understand what they had read.

Since a combination of qualitative and a quantitative research method serves as the basis for my study, I find it necessary to give a brief introduction to the terms.

According to Creswell (1994) and Jennifer Mason (1996) qualitative and quantitative research are considered to be the two main branches of research. Although we find numerous examples of them being used in combination, as in my study, the benefits and disadvantages of both qualitative as well as quantitative research are often debated. It is, however, generally agreed upon that there are some phases of research where one or the other is clearly more useful than the other. Consistent with Creswell, the aim of qualitative research is to come to a deeper understanding of a social or individual difficulty from various perspectives, whereas the goal of a quantitative method is to determine whether the predictive generalizations of a theory hold true.

Qualitative research is frequently contrasted with quantitative research. Where quantitative research every so often seeks to know what percentage of people does one thing or another, qualitative research concentrates on individual cases and the human understandings that feature in those cases. Qualitative researchers want answers to those *why* questions to help form a complete picture and are not prepared to acknowledge the quantitative, measurable, answers. By permitting theories to form from what people say and do, qualitative research cannot be accused of imposing its theories upon people. Equally by keeping detailed records of what is said and of what happens, qualitative research does not reduce the complexity of a theory to clear-cut categories. Its close contact and detailed recording allows the researchers to come to a deeper understanding of their presumptions. As previously mentioned, a think – aloud interview will give me access to the students' cognitive thoughts.

The think – aloud interview originates from psychological procedures described by K. Anders Ericsson & Herbert A. Simon (1980). The term think – aloud is used to describe a very specific type of activity, in which interviewees are explicitly instructed to "think aloud" as they answer the survey questions. The interviewer asks the questions to often the subject and then records and/or otherwise notes the processes that the subject uses in arriving at an answer to the question. The interviewer interjects little else if/ or when the subject pauses. If the subject is unable to answer, this must be noted. It might be concluded that the individual has trouble determining or is unaware of, rather than not knowing.
The think aloud interview method is sometimes referred to as a cognitive interview due to its unique ability to access the subjects' cognitive thoughts. Cognitive interviewing is a technique used to provide insight into learners' perceptions in which individuals are invited to verbalize thoughts and feelings as they examine information.

3.3. Validity and Reliability

Having chosen proper methods to conduct my research, I need to take into consideration the validity and the reliability of the methods. Validity and reliability are two important qualities of any measurement procedure. Validity is the best available approximation to the truth of a given proposition, inference, or conclusion (Blaine R. Worthen, Walter R. Borg & Karl White 1993).

Validity is the measuring instruments used when conducting an inquiry. What is essential is that the instruments actually measure what they are intended to. The validity of the research in question is guaranteed by the methods I have chosen; a multiple choice questionnaire and a think – aloud interview. They are designed to provide me with adequate data in terms of reaching a conclusion. Let us then move on to reliability, how reliable are the methods in question?

Reliability has to do with the credibility and quality of the measurement. In its everyday sense, reliability is the "dependability" or "repeatability" of your measures (William A. Mehrens & Irvin J. Lehman 1986). We cannot calculate reliability, we can only estimate it. Because of this, there is a variety of different types of reliability that each has multiple ways to estimate reliability for that type. In the end, it is important to integrate the idea of reliability with the other major criteria for the quality of measurement, i.e. validity, and develop an understanding of the relationships between reliability and validity in measurement.

Reliability is defined by Mehrens and Lehman (1987) as:

> […] the degree of consistency between two measures of the same thing.

Worthen et al. (1993) defines reliability as:

> […] the measure of how stable, dependable, trustworthy, and consistent a test is in measuring the same thing each time.

In short, reliability is the credibility of the two methods in question, i.e. the credibility of what is revealed in the study through the methods chosen. To ensure the reliability of the study, my measuring instrument needs to be dependable, reliable and trustworthy.

3.4. Choosing Adequate Picture books

In order to choose adequate picture books, there are several factors to take into consideration. To find out if a picture book can lead to increased reading comprehension for the weaker reader, close attention must be paid to the language as well as the pictures.

According to Nikolajeva & Scott (2006) the two extremes in the word-picture dynamic are the text without pictures and a wordless picture book. When dealing with text without pictures, the story must be read. In some cases we find books with few pictures though, which then become illustrated books. Such books may be read without at all looking at the pictures because the text is not dependent on the pictures to convey its essential message. Kristin Hallberg (1982) distinguishes between the illustrated book and the picture book, the latter based on the notion of icontext, an inseparable entity of word and picture, which cooperate to convey a message. Either way, pictures or not, the story will remain basically the same and may be read without ever glancing at the pictures. The readers of such books are considered to be relatively strong readers who create their own mental pictures as they read. In such cases, pictures provided to them by illustrators, may be found confusing as they do not match up with the pictures already created in the reader's mind. The relationship is, in a way, similar to that between novels and their film versions.

Let us turn to the opposite extreme, pictures without words. These books are quite straightforward. Simple words may be found to accompany the pictures though. These books are the only category of picture books where a total correspondence of verbal and visual text is possible; the picture of a cat (an iconic sign) is directly connected to the word cat (conventional sign).

Having investigated the two ends of the spectrum, I will now try to categorize the picture books that lie in between. My claim is that either text without pictures nor wordless picture books will be able to measure the weaker readers' word decoding skills and thereby not be able to tell if the picture book has lead to increased reading comprehension or not. If words and pictures fill each other's gaps wholly, there is nothing left for the reader's imagination, and the reader remains somewhat passive. The same is true if the gaps are identical in words and pictures or if there are no gaps at all. In the first case, we are dealing with complimentary picture books, in the second symmetrical. In complimentary picture books, words and pictures fill each other's gaps. In symmetrical picture books, we find two mutually redundant stories (Nikolajeva & Scott 2006). However, as soon as words and pictures provide alternative

information or contradict each other in some way, we have a variety of readings and interpretations. Many of the most exciting examples of counterpoint between text and picture are to be found in picture books created by a single author/ illustrator who is completely free to choose either of the two aspects of the iconotext to carry the main load of the story. Having said so, we also find examples of successful teamwork.

The vast majority of picture books fall into the category of being "in between" by being symmetrical, constant or complementary works. This is also the category chosen for this study. In what follows, I will give my reasons for choosing the specific works used in the thesis.

First and foremost, the actual text, the words, is important. Transparent words – meaning words that sound or look like words in their first language, would make it easier for my students to guess the meaning and to help them develop strategies for making sense of the text in English. Juliet Munden & Astrid Myhre (2007) explain transparent words as "see through" words. An English word is therefore transparent if it is so similar to the Norwegian word that the students understand it straight away. Bus, glass, smile and special are examples of transparent words. This was also brought into my think – aloud interviews later on. When interviewing weak readers, being clear is essential, the interviewees would need to understand what I ask them about. Therefore I would need to use transparent words rather than focusing on correct language. Instead of asking "choose the character you preferred the most" I could ask them to "pick your favorite character which is transparent to the Norwegian "velg din favoritt person". For the weaker reader i.e. decoder, this would facilitate the interview.

Second, to be able to understand what they read, my students would need some kind of visual back-up for support. That is why I needed to ensure that the illustrations in the picture books would serve as a context for the English language, and when needed help them to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words. Books and stories that they had already read in Norwegian, which are known to them in advance, could also serve as a plus. The illustrations needed to support the text and provide greater detail or description for the reader. The vast majority of picture books seemingly falls into this category, and can be labeled as symmetrical or complementary works (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Referring to the picture books in this category as reinforcing pictures, Nikolajeva & Scott (2006) claim that the illustrations can help the struggling reader to decode and understand. In addition they strengthen the verbal description of a character and setting.

Moving along the range of picture books, we need to include pictorial design. The atmosphere which is constructed and developed by the illustrator is done so by the use of different moods as discussed previously. Among the visual design elements an illustrator may make use of, is style. Style refers to the manner in which the illustrator combines color, line, and shape to express feelings or describe qualities. For instance, smooth, soft, and curving pictorial elements in pastel colors can imply peace and innocence, whereas razor-sharp shapes and harsh, dark colors suggest danger and hidden terrors. Also, the quality of the pictures is of great importance when thinking about how they are perceived. Dull, bad quality pictures can put my students off an otherwise good text. Good pictures that stimulate the imaginations and add dimensions to the story would therefore be preferred.

Lastly, the content must be relevant and motivating for the age group of my students. The stories in the picture books had to be appealing to them and they would need to be able to identify with the characters to a certain degree. This proved to be a challenge, since picture books seem to be designed for younger children. As children grow older and are expected to know how to read, illustrated books tend to flood the market and replace the picture books.

3.5. Informants

The informants in question are Norwegian 6th grade students who are all Norwegian native speakers, learning English as a second language. The students are attending Gudeberg primary – and lower secondary school in Fredrikstad, Norway.

First, 18 students were presented to two picture books each. They all answered two Multiple Choice Questionnaires, one for each book. Then a selection of eight students was introduced to two new picture books before selecting two of the strongest and two of the weakest readers for think – aloud interviews. The four students in question have been introduced to a total of six different picture books and have answered six Multiple Choice Questionnaires each.

The informants were selected on the basis of Carl Thomas Carlsten's (2002) screening – tests. Carlsten is a collective term for reading and writing tests developed by the Norwegian teacher Carlsten. Reading tests have been designed for all levels in school. In short, Carlsten is a reading – test which not only measures how quickly the reader processes text but most importantly the readers' comprehension of the text. The texts are stories where there from

time to time resurfaces a parenthesis containing three words that are grammatically similar, but only one word is semantically correct. The reader is to underline the word that fits, and by doing so demonstrate reading comprehension. The second part of the test is a dictation that provides information about spelling skills and knowledge about the readers' use of language. The last part of the Carlsten test is a self-assessment of reading literacy and the need for help and support further on. The test is intended as a class test taken shortly after starting school in the fall and in the spring term. The main purpose is to inform the teacher about the students' reading comprehension and vocabulary level. In addition, this information should form the basis for differential education. Carlsten's screening-tests (2002) measure the students' reading competence in their native language, Norwegian. However, students with low scores on Carlsten have not developed good general reading strategies and this will transfer on to English because we use the same reading strategies in both Norwegian as in English when dealing with decoding and visualization skills. This means that those who are weak readers in Norwegian are also weak readers in English (Krashen, 2004).

In addition to Carlsten I decided to include the result of the National tests in Norwegian and English. The purpose of these tests is for the teachers and other educators to facilitate teaching. In 5th, 8th and 9th grades, all students have to participate in one test in Norwegian where their reading skills are tested and measured and one test in English. The tests measure the extent to which students' reading skills are in accordance with the competence aims in LK06, where reading skills are integrated into all subjects. Literacy as described in LK06, and as measured in the national tests, is about a skill that is a prerequisite for participation in society, both in continuing their education, at work and at home.

I also included the students' written works in class. Here I put emphasis on the students' ability to express themselves as well as their vocabulary. I focused on the detection of common words of the English language or words similar to their first language. In addition, I assessed the students' knowledge of the English vocabulary associated with familiar topics as well as some basic sentence structures. The students I chose to participate in my study are the ones with the poorest vocabulary who clearly struggle with communicating their thoughts and opinions. In addition I included students who manage to articulate and express themselves to see what effect reading picture books have on them. Also, I needed to witness whether picture books are read differently by strong and weak readers. It would also give emphasis to the contrast between how the weak and strong reader make use of their decoding and visualizing skills.

6th grade proved to be the most suitable grade for my study. The students have come to a point where they are not entirely dependent on pictures for comprehension of the text and where the strong readers already have developed good reading strategies when dealing with decoding and visualization. In addition, this is an important time when it comes to providing the weak readers with all necessary aid for them to be able to develop as readers by helping them access strategies which in turn may promote understanding and experiencing the joy of reading. By strengthening the weak readers' strategies, they will be able to read and learn, instead of learning to read. At this stage weak readers will not be able to follow their classmates when it comes to processing new information.

3.6. Method – Multiple Choice Questionnaire and Think – aloud Interview

Pre – Activities

As a preparation for the tests, the students were given a short lesson as a reminder of the importance of engaging children in literature in class. Then I narrowed it down to picture books, the interaction of pictures and words and how they might be of inspiration to all readers, especially when learning a new language.

Before doing so, my 6th graders and I took a close look at what distinguishes the illustrated books from the picture books and the inseparable entity of word and image which is used in picture books to convey a message. My students were also asked to choose a picture book and present it to their classmates. They were asked to say something about:

1. The title of the picture book; what can you expect to read about
2. The colors of the cover; what makes it inviting/ unattractive
3. Look at the illustrations in the picture book without reading the words; what do you think the book is about.
4. After having "read the pictures", would you still like to read it? Why/ why not?

During their presentation, they had the picture book with them to, if necessary – demonstrate to their classmates if they were lost for words to explain what they wanted to say, or to simply underline a point.

Then, they were given an introduction to how they could make sense of the information conveyed through the pictures by creating a two-column chart. On one side the students list

the information they can gather from the text alone. In the second column, the students' list information gathered only from the illustrations.

During a period of two weeks, the students were introduced to several picture books. All eighteen students read at least two before answering a multiple choice questionnaire after each book. Then I narrowed my selection down to eight students who got to read an additional two picture books before deciding to conduct the think – aloud interview with all eight of them. Of the eight students four are classified as strong readers and four as weak readers.

Activity:

The eight students were invited into the classroom where we sat in a circle. I asked them to pick one picture book at time, two in total, which they found appealing and read it. After they had read the book, they answered my questionnaire before choosing another picture book and repeat the activity.

Assessment:

Based on my findings I conducted a 30-40 minute long think – aloud interview with each student in order to come to a deeper understanding of the correlation between the weak and strong readers' comprehension of text and picture. I wanted to see whether the picture books had led to increased reading comprehension. The questions which were prepared before the interview were created as a starting point for the "conversation". In some cases they had to be altered and adapted thought, to fit the purpose of the interview. In the next chapter I will present the results from my research. For simplicity's sake, I have decided to present the results from one strong and one weak reader respectively.

4. Findings & Discussion

In my previous study, I found that strong readers were more strategic, they know what strategy to use and when to use it as opposed to those who are less competent. My second discovery was that those who were less competent were not aware of their poor decoding skills or lack of word recognition and were therefore unable to do something about it. In order to change the way they think and act, they had to be made aware of and acknowledge that they had a problem concerning decoding. Thirdly, poor decoding skills seemed to be the bottle neck in the meaning-getting process, meaning that word recognition played a central and significant part when having to do with to what degree the different readers are able to understand what they read. Lastly, I found that the students not always answer truthfully when replying to questionnaires. As I conducted interviews afterwards, I found that some of the informants tended to have another perception of reality than expressed in writing. This confirmed that a combination of a quantitative and a qualitative method would yield the most reliable results as to what the students actually do when faced with difficult words in an L2 text (Grundvig, 2011).

From the multiple choice questionnaires in the present study, I found that the weak readers for the most part circled "sometimes" which falls under the "I do not know/ I am not sure" category. Interesting, yet further investigation needs to be initiated in order to find out what really happens. Do they know what strategy the use and when to use it? Are they aware of their level of decoding skills? Also, do the informants answer honestly when replying to questionnaires? Therefore, in order to find out if picture books lead to increased reading comprehension for the weak readers, I needed to conduct individual interviews. Before conducting the think – aloud interviews, I feared it would be difficult to get access to how the weak readers make use of the picture books as well as their reading strategies as they seem quite unaware of them (Grundvig, 2011). The interviews provided me with answers about to what extent the picture books made a difference in helping the students decode and visualize, thus promoting reading comprehension. During the think – aloud interviews I left out the "sometimes" – alternative, hoping that it would force the students to reflect on the answers given.

To protect the students' identity I will use fictitious names. I will address the weak reader as Maya and the strong reader as Sophia. The participating students are 11 years old. They are

native speakers, that is Norwegian is their mother tongue and their first language. In addition, they attend regular class which means none of them are given special education due to reading and/ or writing difficulties.

The first students I would like to present are Maya. She is considered to be a weak reader due to poor decoding, word recognition and spelling skills. She has read a total of 6 different picture books and afterwards answered 6 multiple choice questionnaires. The answers given are almost identical on each sheet. The picture books which she has read are:

Breznak, I. (2009). *Sneezy Louise*, Clemet, R. (1998) *Grandpa's Teeth,* Donnio, S. (2007) *I'd Really like to Eat a Child*, Lewis, K. (1993) *Floss*, Seuss, Dr. (1991) *ABC,* Scieszka, J. (1989). *The true story of the 3 little pigs.*

When analyzing her multiple choice questionnaires I found that the informant like reading picture books. She finds the texts in the picture books to be fairly easy (which she later will discover is not the case). The informant reveal that she often looks at the pictures while reading, though the questionnaires do not allow her to elaborate on how or why. Although the student for the most part have circled "sometimes", to questions about whether the pictures have helped her to better understand the story, the text and difficult words, she have found the texts to be easy and the pictures to match the story. She thinks the pictures make the story more exciting or interesting (after having asked me what the words in question meant). The remaining questions, which are linked to the student's ability to read pictures, are all answered "sometimes". When answering the last question: "Has reading this book motivated you to read more books?" she has made room for her own interpretation by adding an alternative in between my "Yes" or "No" alternatives. Maya has written "in the middle" in between the two alternatives.

When sitting down with Maya to conduct the think – aloud interview, I first and foremost needed her to elaborate on the answers given in the multiple choice questionnaires. I asked Maya to choose a picture book that she had previously read. Maya chose *ABC* by Dr. Seuss. This is a fairly easy book, aimed at emergent or novice readers. The picture book blends words and pictures which encourages children to read, for themselves. Maya liked the picture book as she found the characters in the book fascinating. Some of the characters reminded her

of a movie previously seen, *Grinchen* (2000), which she thought was hilarious. This gives emphasis to what is previously claimed about how prior knowledge helps and motivates the student if having read the stories in Norwegian prior to reading the stories in English (Oakhill & Garnham 1988 and Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Maya also found the text in *ABC* to be fairly easy and the pictures to be inviting and fun. She found the text easy because there are pictures on each spread explaining what is written in words. She told me that she often look at the pictures while reading, for answers.

> Maya: In picture books there are mostly pictures. Well… At least there tend to be more pictures than words anyway. When I see that, I think I have a chance at understanding what the book really is about.
>
> Me: Is that your experience that you usually do not understand the books you read?
>
> Maya: Yes
>
> Me: But why do you read them then?
>
> Maya: Because I have to. In school that is, not at home.
>
> Me: When you read, what do you when you come across words you do not understand?
>
> Maya: Well… that is what I like about reading picture books. I can look to the pictures for answers. They always tell me what the words mean. That makes me feel good. That is why I found the text to be easy as I said in the questionnaire (pointing at the questionnaire which lies on the table between us).

I show her the <u>text</u> in Dr. Seuss's *ABC* on pages 4-5 while covering the picture which says: "Aunt Annie's alligator…A…a…A". and ask her to read it to me. Maya reads:

> A u n t (letter by letter) Annie's alligator…A…a…A. (looking at the picture above) revealing an aunt (a lady/ a mum/ a woman) riding an alligator.

As La Berge & Samuels (1974) state, the student's comprehension will suffer if the reader struggles to decode. The ability to decode unknown words requires knowledge of the processes involved in decoding, as well as knowledge of specific letter-sound relationship. The reader needs to assess both, so that the reader does not have to devote his attention to the word rather than the meaning. Therefore, Aunt is a word Maya is incapable to read as well as

decode, i.e. understand. As previously stated, the process of decoding involves three successive understandings:

1. Acquisition of the alphabetic principle
2. The ability to blend letters into sounds and
3. the ability to use both phonograms and analogies

I consider Maya to be at the second level; possessing the ability to blend letters into sounds. Then Maya asks me, confirming my conclusion:

> Aunt, does that mean riding?

Without answering the question, I ask Maya to read the picture.

> Me: Look at the picture and tell me what you think?
>
> Maya: I think Aunt means to ride.

Then I show Maya both text and picture and ask her to tell me what she sees.

> Maya: Well,.. eh.. Something Annie rides an alligator.

The word riding is quite central to Maya because that is the essence of what is portrayed in the picture. The picture is of more significance than the words, clearly, meaning the picture is easier to decode than the text. There is no doubt that Maya uses the pictures to visualize in cases where she needs help to decode words she does not understand. However, as the picture illustrates a lady riding an alligator, this is what the weak reader "reads" without further reflecting on whether that is the correct meaning of the word as it turns out to be the correct meaning of the picture. This is what Brauger & Lewis (2006), Keene (2002) and McKenna & Stahl (2003) define as a weak or unskilled reader; one who has a tendency to read on without knowing the intention of why they read. Also, weak readers tend to have difficulties explaining why they failed to comprehend because they are unaware of the fact that they have failed to comprehend. Consequently, that may be why Maya has provided me with a different answer now than in the questionnaire.

Previously, I have argued that to establish a strategy for word identification, pictures may be used to associate letters and sounds, as is the case with Dr. Seuss's *ABC*. For instance, *a* is for *apple* and *aunt*. To practice the strategy, word referents may be portrayed in pictures so that the latter serve as cues to meaning. For example *alligator* is a picture of an alligator. It is here

that there is a real danger that, as Mortimer claims, the child will name the picture and not the word as we see from the example above (Chalmers 1976). However, Lewis (2001) and Nikolajeva & Scott (2001), claims that illustrations are an important method for conveying and developing meaning in picture books. Even though we witness Maya name the picture, it also proves that naming the picture leads to the student creating meaningful messages.

There are strategies which prevent students from naming pictures. One is to separate picture and word and reveal the picture when the other strategy has failed. As in this study, where the word is to be found in a picture book, I covered the picture until the reader failed with the first strategy. Of course, the picture has to portray the word accurately in order to do so. Also, I could simply tell the student the word and so make the picture redundant.

As we have witnessed, pictures can seemingly deceive students to think of other words than the author may have targeted. When I asked Maya to tell me what the words on page 8 in Dr. Seuss's *ABC* meant, her answer proved once more the importance of the interaction of word and picture.

> Barber means *frisør* (his eyes going back and forth between the words and the pictures as he tries to piece together the meaning of the words), baby means … well, *baby* (looking at me for confirmation), bubbles means *bobler*, bumblebee means… looks like a *veps* or a *bie*… I do not know which is which, but it stings.

As we witness from the example, the picture gives rise to *wasp* or *bee* when the target word is *bumblebee*, proving how the word and picture interact. It seems like weak readers are dependent on the pictures corresponding to the words, as they tend to confuse picture books with picture dictionaries. As they are unable to decode every word, they tend to get caught up, loosing themselves in the word, making the overall meaning redundant (LaBerge & Samuels 1974). When I inform Maya that the word is *humle*, she responds;

> Then the illustrator should have made it fatter. Does he not know that bumblebees are fat?

As I witnessed that as Maya was unable to read the word *bumblebee*, as she did *aunt*, this could explain why she was unable to grasp the meaning of it, putting all her effort in reading and pronouncing the word. This made me curious about what she does when she encounters a word she is unable to understand.

Maya: I look at the picture, hoping it will tell me what it is.

Me: Then again, if the picture does not provide you with such information, what do you do then Maya?

Maya: I take a wild guess, or turn the page and read on.

Me: Does it not bother you that you do not understand? I mean, are you not curious?

Maya: Sometimes.. It depends.

Me: Depends on what?

Maya: If it is important or not. Like before a test… then I have to understand it, or else I will not remember it for the test.

Me: And this time it is different?

Maya: Yes. This time it is just for fun.

This bears witness to the weak reader being less strategic than the strong. Though, guessing is to a certain degree comprehension. However, she is unable to do something about it, initiating the right reading strategies in order to understand. Strong readers monitor to a greater extent their level of comprehension and are aware of their reading strategies. They do not make wild guesses as they tend to examine, interpret and reflect as they are more strategic in their choice of reading strategies (Alexander, Graham & Harris 1998, Alexander & Jetton 2000, Keene 2002 and Brauger & Lewis).

When initiating the think – aloud interview, I was aware of Maya's being a poor decoder, even though she thought otherwise by having answered that she found the texts in the picture books to be easy (2nd question in the questionnaire). Maya was fixated on decoding one word at a time, instead of focusing on grasping the overall meaning. My initial thought was that the picture book was "to blame" as it aims to focus at individual words building a vocabulary for emergent readers. Therefore I wanted to see if it would be easier for her to comprehend or grasp the overall meaning if we made a change in choice of picture books.

From the questionnaire I observed that Maya had answered questions 4-6 by circling "sometimes". These questions dealt with the student's comprehension. This provided me with insufficient answers to whether reading picture books improved their reading comprehension or not. "Sometimes" is in itself a valid answer, yet I would like to know whether reading a book where the focus is less on the individual word and more on the entirety makes a difference. Therefore, continuing our think aloud interview, I asked Maya to pick out a new book. She chooses *I'd Really like to Eat a Child* by Donnio, illustrated by Monfreid. Then I asked her to tell me what the book is about.

> Well.., it is about an angry little crocodile who wants to eat a child. The child is a girl and she does not want to be eaten.
>
> Me: Well, that I can understand. Do you remember how it turned out in the end?
>
> Maya: Hmm.. I do not really remember.
>
> Me: Was she eaten by the crocodile then?
>
> Maya: No, she was not.
>
> Me: What else can you tell me about the picture book? You may browse through it if you would like.

As Maya turned the pages I witnessed what I saw the last time I asked her to read to me, her eyes moving back and forth between pictures and words, trying to connect words and pictures, interpreting, struggling to create an understanding of what she reads. I asked Maya to let me in on the story, and as we turned the pages, each page directed her attention to the main and co-characters and the events that follow as little Achilles insists that he will eat a child and refuses all other food one day. The pictures themselves, however, always dominates whatever the words say and I witnessed Maya's eyes wander around, inspecting the jungle and its inhabitants, reading the words and grasping the overall meaning even though she was unable to decode them all. Monfreid's hilarious illustrations only add to the delightful humor of the story. Achilles is a memorable little crocodile with his expressive eyes and toothy antics. This enhances Lewis' (2001) statement of how words and pictures interweave, making the words tell us the same story as we can read from the pictures. This is what makes the picture books unique by assisting the reader towards comprehension.

Maya: Now I understand! (looking up from the pages of the book) The girl did not know she was supposed to be eaten.

Me: Right!

Maya: She thought Achilles was a toy for her to play with. Look here! (she said eagerly, showing me a page where the girl catches Achilles by the tail while tickling his belly. Then, when she had had enough, she threw him in the river). And it says so right here (pointing at the words on the page).

Well, this fits the description of Roe (2011) as she argues that visualization helps make the content of the text clear and helps organize information. As we can see from the interview, Maya was unable to comprehend what really took place in the story before having "read" the pictures. The pictures made it clear to her, helping her comprehend as they are concrete and visual. Armbruster et al. (1990) adds that visualization not only helps the student comprehend, but also enhances the students ability to remember. When I compared the questionnaire with the answers given in the interview, I found that they deviated from one another. In her questionnaire I found that she had answered "sometimes" to questions 9 – 1, an alternative which is linked to the students' ability to read pictures. When I mentioned this to her and asked her why, she explained:

Maya: I answered "sometimes" because I usually do not get pictures in my head while reading.. especially if I do not understand the words.

Me: What happens then?

Maya: Then I get caught up in the word, trying to figure out what it means. But after having had this conversation with you, I think I have gotten better.

Me: Gotten better at what?

Maya: Imagining.

Me: Good for you! Did you notice, by the way, if any of the pictures in *I'd Really like to Eat a Child* demonstrated how the characters felt?

Maya: Yes! Absolutely! They laughed, felt stupid, got angry, even cried. The crying part was easy though, because they shed tears.

Me: What about the other emotions you witnessed, how did those come across?

Maya: I could see it in their eyes! Plus, I also shiver all over when someone tickles me and cross my arms when I get angry. In so many ways Achilles resembles me! Well.., except from the fact that I do not want to eat a child! (laughing out loud).

This brings us back to Armbruster et al. (1990) argues that visualization, also, helps involve the students in what is being read.

As we finished up, Maya turned towards me and asked me if she could make a change on her questionnaire. At the very last question, she had made room for her own interpretation by adding an alternative as previously mentioned. I asked her which change she wanted to make and she said:

I would like to circle the "Yes" alternative because I want to read more picture books.

There, not only has reading picture books lead to increased reading comprehension, it has in addition motivated the student for further reading. From this I conclude that the qualitative interview, the think – aloud interview, has paved the way and helped the weak reader come to realize and acknowledge, not only her having a desire to read, but also contributed to new knowledge about the reader's cognitive process. The awareness the student's experience would not have taken place if it was not for the qualitative interview, camouflaged as a "conversation" between the interviewee and the interviewer. This proves that the think – aloud interview itself has had an effect on the student. That means that it is not only picture books alone which have lead to an increased interest in reading as well as reading comprehension for the weak reader.

The next student is Sophia who loves to read and is a skilled reader, strategic in her choice of reading strategies. As Maya, she read a total of 6 different picture books and afterwards answered 6 multiple choice questionnaires. The answers given here were also quite similar, throughout, as the weak readers were. The picture books Sophia has read are:

Barron, T.A. (2001). *Where is Grandpa*?, illustrated by S. K. Soentpiet, Burningham, John. (1984). *Granpa,* Lewis, K. (1993), *Floss*, Nordquist, S. (1991). *Festus and Mercury: Wishing to go fishing*, Obama, B. (2010). *of THEE I SING. A Letter to My Daughters*, illustrated by L. Long. Trivizas, E. (1997). *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*, illustrated by H. Oxenbury.

When analyzing her multiple choice questionnaires I found that reading picture books led to an increased reading comprehension in the sense that she developed further her ability to "read" pictures, i.e. visualize.

First and foremost, she found the texts in the picture books to be fairly easy. When I asked what made them easy, she answered that they already knew the meaning of the words before looking at the pictures, meaning she had initiated the successful reading strategy and were able to decode the words. Also, she made a note about that there being a modest amount of text in picture books:

> Sophia:.. like in *Floss* for example, there are more pictures than text.
>
> Me: Is that why you find the book to be easy to read?
>
> Sophia: Yes… And also, I feel the book is kind of childish...
>
> Me: I see.., Even so, you looked at the pictures while reading?
>
> Sophia: Yes… They were there and in-between the text. There was no way to avoid them.
>
> Me: Would you think differently of the book if the pictures were not there?
>
> Sophia: Actually, I do not know… I liked the pictures… They were beautifully drawn, but are picture books not for smaller children?
>
> Me: They might be. I believe it depends on the reader and the type of picture book.
>
> Sophia: Hmm.. Yes..

Well, she has a point. We usually associate picture books with novice and emergent, i.e. younger readers, do we not? If we wish to understand more about how picture books are put together and how words and images interact, we have to look into the ways in which readers perceive them. To do so, we need to pay attention to what the readers say about what they see

(Lewis 2001). I have already here argued for the importance and usefulness of listening closely to what the students tell me as they read, I am therefore excited to learn about how the strong reader view the illustrations in the picture book.

Here are Sophia's comments, right at the beginning of *Floss*:

> Sophia: Well there he is playing football with some kids… He must be good, because he has got the ball!
>
> Me: Hmm… Good.
>
> Sophia: There is an old man in the background... Who is he? Why does he not play? Oh! He is old. He has got a walking stick. See? (Showing me by pointing). I think he wants to join though, if he could… but he cannot because he is too old…

She comments on each of the pictures in turn telling me not only what she sees but also how she interprets what she sees. This in turn also helps me see the book differently (as we will see from the conversation down below). For the first time I begin to realize that what I have considered to be the students' mis-readings of the illustrators' intentions, really is nothing more than a wide range of possible interpretations. This discovery is explicitly due to the choice of method. This shows the strength of the qualitative interview which brings unexpected elements to the surface. As Maya, Sophia's response show increased comprehension, yet at a more advanced level than Maya. Sophia shows that she knows how to use the illustrations selectively for her own purposes. This can again be related to Lewis (2001) as he claims it is up to the readers' imagination to interpret words and pictures in picture books. Nikolajeva & Scott (2006) here refers to the reader-response theory where the interaction between word and picture must leave room for the readers' to fill with previous knowledge, experiences and expectations.

It cannot be taken for granted that readers make frequent mistakes when interpreting pictures as there are many possible interpretations. Neither can it be assumed that learning to "read" pictures is necessarily a demanding and time-consuming process. As Sophia and I discussed and interpreted pictures, I noticed that she looked a bit confused as she started turning the pages back and forth as if she was looking for something.

> Me: What is it?

Sophia: I do not understand why the old man sent his dog away… Did he not love him?

Me: I believe he did… (thinking he would not have sent him away if not, knowing he would be better off as a sheep dog in the country side).

Sophia: I still do not get it! You just do not send someone away if you love them…

Readers can sometimes be puzzled about what they see in pictures, but when talking about "reading" and interpreting pictures, we rarely talk about making mistakes (Lewis 2001). Learning to "read" pictures or teaching visual literacy as a comprehension strategy should therefore be aimed at increasing the rate with which students recognize and interpret what happens in the pictures they look at. If we turn our attention to the visual codes of pictures, the meaning of a picture will not only depend upon the readers' ability to read off its representative sense, whether it is a bumblebee or a dog, but also upon its function, the use to which the picture is put. If we are to understand picture book pictures, we must recognize and understand their particular function. Thus the same picture, or set of pictures, may be viewed or understood quite differently by different age groups, groups of people or at different times as we witness from the conversation between Sophia and me.

As Sophia and I continue our interview, she once more draws my attention back to the illustrations in the picture book. She tells me she found them to be a bit confusing at first. I wanted to know why.

Sophia: Well.., because they interfered with my perceptions.

Me: What do you mean?

Sophia: You know.., the pictures which develop in my mind as I read... and while I read some of the picture books, the pictures there did not match up with mine.

Me: Okay... You have read *Where is Grandpa?* (placing the book in front of her) when you see the title, what happens?

Sophia: I think about grandpa… another kind of grandpa than the one who is portrayed in this book though...

Me: Does your imaginary grandpa resemble your real grandpa?

> Sophia: Nope… He kind of looks like him, grey hair, glasses, old… but his face differ… and the face of the grandfather in *Where is Grandpa?* is unfamiliar to me.

Well, reading picture books lets us get to know new people and experience the world in new ways. To begin with we all have perceptions due to previous experiences. To use what is familiar and dear to us as a starting point for further development, is perfectly natural. But as we continue to read, we continue to develop and what once was familiar and dear to us alters and takes on new shapes.

As we continued our conversation, Sophia told me that this is what she loves the most when reading books, creating and molding her own characters and settings. That is why she found it difficult in the beginning not letting her be disturbed by the illustrations, without further room for external influence. I believe that is why she felt they interfered in the beginning. Yet, since we first started the project, Sophia has developed as a reader in the sense of improving her visualization skills. She has realized that she is able to interpret the pictures any way she wants. Also, she is allowed to have whatever opinions and views, as there is no right or wrong when discussing picture books, rather merely a matter of differences in perceptions.

5. Concluding Remarks

Throughout this study I have focused on comparing strong and weak readers' use of reading strategies with emphasis on decoding and visualization in order to find out if reading picture books can lead to increased reading comprehension.

Due to the fact that much of our knowledge about the use of reading strategies and reading comprehension is based on studies of relatively strong readers (Brauger & Lewis 2006 and Keene 2002), my initial intention was to focus only on weak readers. However while conducting research and collecting data, the need to find out if picture books could lead to increased reading comprehension changed to include strong in addition to the weak readers. A comparison between these two groups' use of reading strategies while reading picture books would reveal if or to what extent they could benefit from reading picture books.

The case study revealed that weak readers' prior knowledge helps and motivates the readers if they were familiar with the stories in their mother tongue prior to reading the stories in a second language. This is consistent with the findings of Oakhill & Garnham (1988) and Nikolajeva & Scott (2006).

Also, the readers' comprehension will inevitably suffer as the reader struggles to decode (LaBerge & Samuels 1974). This is due to the readers having to devote all their attention to the words rather than their meaning. Additionally, if the readers struggle with decoding, the picture becomes more significant than the individual word. This way, interpreting illustrations becomes an important skill for conveying and developing meaning in picture books (Lewis 2001 and Nikolajeva & Scott 2001). This is true for Maya, who struggles to decode, yet ultimately creates meaningful messages by letting the illustrations dominate whatever the words say. This proves Maya has developed as a reader through improving her visualization skills.

Consequently, we may draw the conclusion that visualization helps make the content of the text clear in addition to help the reader organize the text, i.e. increases reading comprehension. This corresponds with the discovery of Roe (2011).

At first glance picture books appear to be a simple form of children's literature, but a closer look reveals their complexity and the infinite possibilities for picture book authors and illustrators to exploit two levels of communication in order to create a story, convey meaning and provide pleasure to all age groups. Further, there is a fundamental relationship between

the verbal and the visual, and "the unity of the whole emerges from a subtle interplay of the differing parts" (Nodelman 1988: 217).

Using a quantitative and a qualitative method in combination resulted in important and insightful discoveries. From past experience, as well as my pilot study, I learned that a quantitative method alone would be insufficient because it would merely provide me with numbers and statistics rather than lead to a deeper understanding of what the readers actually do, and not just what they think they do. Once more, I experienced that the questionnaires did not provide me with sufficient data for my purposes. This proves that in this study,a combination of the two methods was necessary for reliable results.

Moreover, the unique combination of the two methods has contributed to the readers becoming aware of and acknowledging the desire to read, as well as new insight own reading process. This awareness would not have been possible if it were not for the qualitative interview. This confirms that the qualitative method itself has had an effect on the readers: it is not only picture books themselves which have led to an improved interest in reading and an increased reading comprehension.

Furthermore, the strength of the qualitative interview brought unexpected elements to the surface: What I previously had thought of as students' mis-readings of the illustrators' intentions proved to be nothing more than a wide range of possible interpretations of pictures. This discovery would not been possible, had it not been for the qualitative interview.

To sum up, the present study proves that reading picture books can lead to increased reading comprehension for weak readers. In addition, it has been confirmed that the same is true for the strong readers as their comprehension increases, yet at a more advanced level. As the weak readers experience that words and pictures in combination convey meaning, the strong readers know how to use the pictures selectively for their own purposes.

The implications for teachers is then clear, picture books in the English classroom should be encouraged, (Roe 2011), as the illustrations bring out key information and provide the readers with a more comprehensive version of the text (Lewis 2001, Nikolajeva & Scott 2006 and O'Neill 2011). Also, the ability to visualize expands the readers' engagement with the text.

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Appendix

Til elever og foresatte ved Gudeberg skole

I 12 år har jeg arbeidet som allmennlærer i grunnskolen, primært som språklærer i engelsk. Forrige skoleår besluttet jeg å ta en mastergrad. Valget falt på Masterstudium Fremmedspråk i skolen med Engelsk som målspråk.

Studiet retter seg hovedsaklig mot skandinaviske studenter som vil utvikle sine fagdidaktiske og praktiske kompetanse innenfor fremmedspråk og ønsker en internasjonal profil på sin utdanning. Studiet, sammen med praktisk- pedagogisk utdanning, kvalifiserer for arbeid som lektor i engelsk i norsk skole.

Studiet er også relevant for andre språk- og kulturrelaterte arbeidsområder innen offentlig og privat sektor. Studietilbudet gis i samarbeid med Gøteborgs universitet (GU), Linnèuniversitetet og Høyskolen i Østfold.

I forbindelse med det overstående studiet og min Masteroppgave, ønsker jeg til å gjøre en undersøkelse om hvorvidt bruk av bildebøker i engelsk kan føre til økt leseforståelse.

For å kunne utføre en kartlegging innen gitte problemområde, er jeg avhengig hjelp fra elevene for å få vite hva de faktisk gjør. Jeg trenger av den grunn tillatelse til å utføre en spørreundersøkelse, samt og dybde intervjue et utvalg elever.

Elevene vil være anonyme under undersøkelsen og anonymisert i påfølgende masteravhandling.

Skulle det være behov eller ønskelig med ytterligere informasjon, vennligst kontakt undertegnede på 69 38 43 00

Jeg godkjenner/ godkjenner IKKE at (stryk det som ikke passer)

Navn _____

klasse _____ tar del i undersøkelsen som beskrevet over

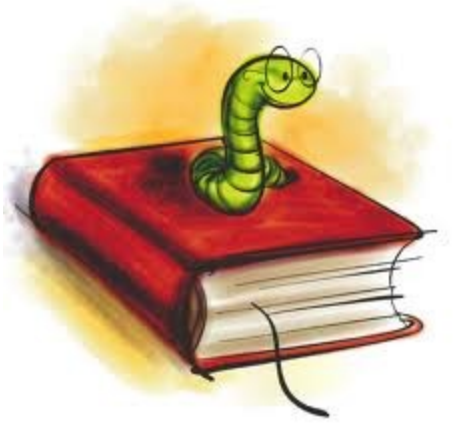
Med vennlig hilsen

Victoria Grundvig, Faglærer og seksjonsleder i engelsk

Gudeberg barne- og ungdomsskole.

Multiple Choice Questionnaire, 6th grade

This is not a test but a questionnaire. That means you are taking part in research. Therefore you are not supposed to write your name, just the title of the book.



Book title:

_____.

Then, read the picture book. Then answer the questions by circling the words you find most appropriate.

1. Did you like the book?

   Yes No

2. What did you think about the text in the book?

   Easy Understandable Difficult

3. Did you look at the pictures while you were reading?

   Often Sometimes Seldom

4. Did the pictures help you to better understand the story in the picture book?

   Often Sometimes Seldom

5. Did the pictures help you to better understand the text?

   Often Sometimes Seldom

6. Did the pictures help you to understand difficult words in the text?

   Often Sometimes Seldom

7. Do you think the pictures made the story more:

Exciting – Interesting – Confusing – The pictures didn't make any difference at all

8. What do you think of the illustrations?

Cheerful Okay Dull

9. Did the pictures match the story?

Often Sometimes Seldom

10. Did the pictures look like what you pictured in your mind while reading?

Often Sometimes Seldom

11. Did any of the pictures show how the characters felt?

Often Sometimes Seldom

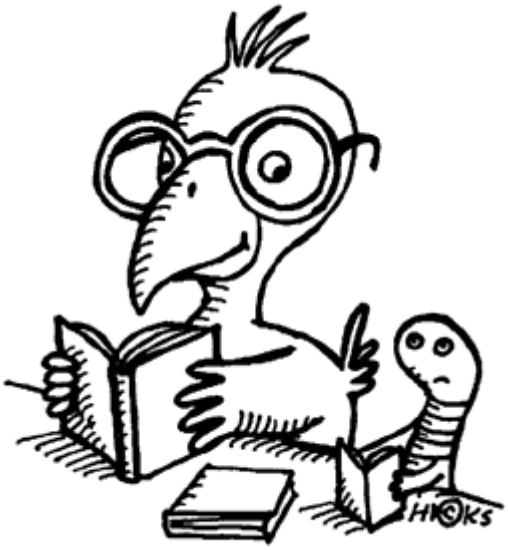
12. Did any of the pictures make you feel anything?

Often Sometimes Seldom

13. Has reading this book motivated you to read more books?

Yes No

If you have time, you can color the picture :)



Think – aloud interview Guide

1. Ask the student what he/she does when encountering into a word they do not understand?
2. How do they think?
3. How do they find out what the word means?
4. Which strategy do they make use of?
5. Are they aware that they posses reading strategies and how to use them?
6. How do they read pictures?
7. Being able to read pictures, does this lead to an increased understanding of the text?
8. Does it lead to increased reading comprehension?
9. Show the student a word they find difficult, while covering the picture. Do they understand the word?
10. Show the student the word and the picture. Does the student understand the word this time around?
11. Does this mean the pictures may lead to an increased understanding of difficult words and texts?

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The following is a list of the picture books that I have found suitable for conducting my study. The picture books are arranged by the author of the text, followed by the illustrator if different.

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