Contributi

An A–Z of Teacher Competencies for Picturebook-Based English Language Teaching

Part 1

Gail Ellis and Tatia Gruenbaum

Con un'argomentazione che si sviluppa secondo il principio ordinatore dell'elenco alfabetico con riferimento a competenze chiave individuate dalle autrici nell'ambito del tema proposto, l'articolo fornisce al lettore al contempo un'ampia panoramica sulle potenzialità dell'utilizzo dei *picturebooks* (libri illustrati) per l'infanzia nell'insegnamento della lingua inglese e un ricco compendio delle forme di professionalità richieste al docente per cogliere tali potenzialità e rendere questi materiali efficaci strumenti didattici e pedagogici.
In una discussione animata da solidi riferimenti teorici e fondata su riscontri emersi dalla ricerca e da esperienze nell'ambito della formazione docente, Ellis e Gruenbaum conducono il lettore, nelle ventisei voci che compongono l'articolo (e di cui qui forniamo la prima parte, dalla lettera A alla lettera L, alla quale seguirà la seconda, nel prossimo numero di ***lend***), verso la progressiva delineazione della ricchezza di queste risorse, capaci di originare – grazie all'opera del docente consapevole – esperienze di apprendimento linguistico con materiale autentico che implicano anche coinvolgimento emotivo, sviluppo cognitivo e acquisizione di coscienza critica riguardo a temi di grande rilevanza.
Come evidenziato dalle autrici, tramite i *picturebooks* il docente può dunque promuovere un approccio glottodidattico significativo e motivante e al contempo perseguire una pluralità di obiettivi educativi, verso una piena formazione del discente.

Part 1: Introduction

Since the publication of *The Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers* by Ellis and Brewster in 1991, picturebooks have become an increasingly important resource in early English language education. As a form of children's literature, they provide children with rich, authentic and meaningful language learning experiences. As multimodal texts, picturebooks combine words, illustrations and design features to support children's meaning-making, imagination and emotional and critical engagement. Accordingly, they are a powerful and flexible pedagogical resource which can contribute not only to language learning but also to cognitive, conceptual and literacy development, intercultural learning, developing multiple literacies, global citizenship awareness and eco-related issues.

Approaches to picturebook-based pedagogy have evolved considerably since the 1990s. Earlier approaches often focused mainly on a picturebook's language learning

potential and were selected to complement the themes, vocabulary and phrases typical of early language learning syllabuses and often included patterned language with repetition and rhyme. Picturebooks where the pictures synchronised with the words were also used widely as they support understanding. More recent approaches, however, recognise the complexity of picturebooks as aesthetic and multimodal texts and emphasise the importance of interaction, visual literacy development, critical thinking and child participation (Roche, 2015). In addition, societies and classrooms have become increasingly diverse in terms of linguistic and cultural diversity. The current thematic and artistic breadth of picturebooks gives teachers the possibility to include texts which represent a wide variety of children's lived experiences and support a wider educational remit within English language teaching. Martin Salisbury and Morag Styles (2020:42) discuss this development and claim that 'twenty-first century picturebooks are becoming increasingly authorial and inclusive in terms of age, gender, and subject matter'.

Consequently, these developments require teachers to develop competencies which enable them to engage with picturebooks not only as a language-learning resource but also as complex multimodal texts capable of supporting broader educational aims. Effective picturebook-based pedagogy therefore requires teachers to draw on a broad range of values, attitudes, knowledge and skills.

This article draws on research and teacher education initiatives from a range of international contexts, including Ellis and Read (2015), Ellis and Mourão (2021), Ellis and Gruenbaum (2023), Ibrahim (2025), Larsen (2015), Narančić Kovač (2016), the ICEPELL Consortium (2022). In her earlier work, Ellis (2006) expands on competencies associated with teaching additional languages to children in formal educational contexts. She discusses the attitudes and values language teaching should promote, knowledge and understanding central to language education, awareness of learner diversity, and classroom strategies and skills, and identifies fourteen additional competencies specifically related to picturebook-based pedagogy.

Together, these studies highlight the diverse competencies required by teachers to implement a picturebook-based pedagogy effectively and confidently. We have used these studies as a stepping stone to create an A–Z of teacher competencies associated with picturebook-based English language teaching. The entries bring together perspectives from English language education, picturebook scholarship, childhood studies and inclusive practices in order to support the design of initial and in-service teacher education programmes which provide an appropriate 'balance of theory, practice and reflection' (Ellis & Read 2015:127).

Although these studies emerge from different educational and cultural contexts, they point to a shared understanding that effective picturebook-based pedagogy requires an interconnected and transdisciplinary set of teacher competencies. This entails not only knowledge of and classroom skills for early English language education but also an understanding of picturebooks as multimodal texts, awareness of children's diverse experiences and identities, and the ability to create inclusive and participatory learning environments. Drawing on these interrelated themes, we propose an A–Z which brings together competencies from three main areas:

1. The picturebook and the child:

i. Understanding what a picturebook is and appreciating it as an art form, an aesthetic

object and a multimodal text where all elements of the picturebook, the words, the pictures, the peritext and the design, convey meaning.

ii. Becoming aware of the development of the picturebook and becoming familiar with the wide range of different types of picturebooks.

iii. Recognising the diversity of children's experiences and how they differ according to socio-economic status, dis/ability, gender, ethnicity, religious, rural/urban location, linguistic and cultural background.

iv. Understanding how the construct of childhood has evolved throughout history and how this is reflected in today's picturebooks.

v. Acknowledging children as genuine partners in the ELT classroom to establish a democratic classroom environment.

vi. Knowing the educational context and the social and emotional needs of individual children to create an inclusive, secure and supportive classroom climate.

2. Theory:

i. Understanding how children think and learn, of language learning theory and children's language development and of the conceptual and cognitive differences between children at different stages in their development.

ii. Recognising the potential of picturebooks for English language teaching and learning and how they can contribute to children's language and literacy development, their cognitive, social and emotional development as well as their potential for wider educational gains.

3. Practice:

i. Using clearly defined criteria to identify and select picturebooks which have potential in the ELT classroom, and which match the interests and lived experiences of the children.

ii. Planning a teaching and learning sequence around a picturebook and knowing how to make links with other aspects of the curriculum when appropriate.

iii. Conducting an interactive read-aloud and mediating a picturebook (effective questioning, storytelling techniques, managing children's responses, translanguaging, etc.).

iv. Assessing learning.

v. Communicating with parents.

vi. Reflecting on practice and planning next steps.

The first area, the picutrebook and the child, probably receives the least attention during teacher development programmes as these aspects lie more in the disciplines of picturebook scholarship and childhood studies than in the field of English language teaching and learning. However, becoming aware of what a picturebook is and of its complexities and of how different historical periods construct childhood is the first step to becoming an effective user of picturebooks in the ELT classroom. The competencies required for an effective picturebook-based pedagogy in the English language classroom integrate knowledge from the following disciplines: child development, early English language education, picturebook scholarship and childhood studies.

Part 2: An A-Z of competencies

Part 2 of our article is structured around an A-Z, a format that has been successfully used by Scott Thornbury and Carol Read in their blogs and Katherine Bilsborough and John Hughes in their 2025 publication on materials writing. It is not intended as an exhaustive or definitive list but rather as an **overview** designed to stimulate reflection and discussion around the attitudes and values, knowledge and skills that may support picturebook-based pedagogy. While presented alphabetically, the competencies overlap and frequently intersect across the three areas above. Each entry is cross-referenced to the competency(ies) from the three areas above which we consider to be key to implementing an effective picturebook-based pedagogy. Many of the suggested picturebooks, together with additional resources, can be found in the online library for picturebook-based English Language Teaching, *Words & Pictures Library*.

A - Appreciating authenticity

Picturebooks, unlike graded readers or coursebooks, bring authenticity to the learning experience as the language is not controlled, graded or sequenced. They expose children to rich, authentic language providing opportunities for authentic language use through interpretation of the pictures, words and design as these visual and verbal modes come together signifying the multimodal nature of meaning-making.

According to Enever (2006), the term authentic, refers to the knowledge of picturebooks being written for (L1) speakers of English. Picturebooks are authentic in language as well as in illustration as they 'have not been abridged or altered for language learning purposes' (Mourão, 2016:26).

Authenticity also refers to the type of genuine and meaningful interactions that teachers are able to establish in the classroom as well as the type of tasks and activities that they may use. Another aspect of authenticity is the accurate representation and voices of characters from different ethnic backgrounds, religious faiths, sexual orientations, socio-economic backgrounds and disabilities to enable children to meet and identify with a variety of marginalised groups.

To develop an appreciation of authenticity, teachers may like to compare three or four readers from a graded reading scheme and three or four picturebooks to discover differences and aspects of authenticity related to language (grammar and vocabulary), content, illustrations, length and size and any additional content such as language exercises, word lists, dedications, author's notes, etc.

Competencies: 1.ii, 1.iii, 2.i, 2.ii,3.ii

B - Balancing picturebook selection

Picturebooks operate on many levels satisfying learners of different ages and at different stages in their English language learning. However, one of the greatest challenges when selecting picturebooks is to be able to select the most suitable picturebook for a specific class. Children may have limited English-language but possess ideas, concepts, interests and aspirations relevant to their developmental age. Success depends on having the right picturebook in terms of its content, linguistic, conceptual and cultural accessibility and appropriacy, aesthetic appeal as well as its educational benefits.

Success will also depend on the purpose for which a picturebook is used, how it will be mediated by the teacher and how tasks will be designed to match the interests and abilities of the learners.

To support the selection of picturebooks, teachers may like to consult the following resources for criteria to use with the selection process: *Class Picturebook Profile* Ellis and Ibrahim (2015:138), Ellis and Brewster (2014:19), *The ICEPELL Picturebook Selection Guide* (ICEGuide, ICEPELL Consortium 2022) and the *Words & Pictures Library*.

Competencies: 2.i, 3. I

C – Respecting the Child and promoting Children's Rights

There are many assumptions and idealised notions of childhood where the child is viewed as cute and vulnerable, dependent and passive, as a learner and citizen in the making, rather than as an individual with their own rights and agency. In reality, children are often confined by organizational constraints at school such as restrictive curricula, prescribed methods, rigid assessment systems and targets, and rules and regulations which shape their experience of childhood and can make it seem difficult to have any agency and control over their own learning (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2021). However, Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) defines a child's right to be heard - which means they have the right to give their opinions and for adults to listen and take them seriously. This also involves children's participation in decisions that affect them.

In terms of pedagogical practices, awareness of children's rights has encouraged adults to view children as 'experts in their own lives' and has raised awareness about listening to children and their perspectives about their own lived experiences. In a democratic English language classroom implementing a picturebook-based pedagogy, this means allowing children to exercise their rights by:

- teachers giving opportunities to children to participate in decision-making by expressing their views and opinions about their picturebook preferences and learning activities, having time to choose and browse picturebooks, interpreting the words and pictures and giving personal responses during read-alouds, using their own language(s) (Article 30) as a learning strategy and as a stepping stone for further language learning;
- teachers listening and acting on children's views and involving them in decision-making about picturebook choices and activities;
- teachers reflecting on their own theories and constructs of the child and of childhood as well as the power dynamics in the adult-child relationship, in order to plan for an interactive approach to reading aloud and recognising children as genuine partners in the ELT classroom.

Since 1989, several picturebooks have been published about children's rights, such as *I Have the Right* by Reza Dalvand (2023), which provide an excellent resource for introducing children to their rights. In addition, teaching approaches should be inspired by and reflect the spirit and philosophy of the UNCRC as implementing children's rights and respecting children's views is not just good pedagogical practice but a legally binding obligation and duty which forms part of a teacher's wider professional remit in the English language classroom.

Beatrice Alemagna's *What is a Child*? (2016) offers teachers the opportunity to discuss

how the visual and verbal texts represent the child, to think about their own view of the child and to discuss how they position themselves as teachers in the classroom to listen actively to children and act on what they say.

Competencies: 1.iii, 1.iv, 3.i

D - Discovering diversity and the world beyond

Picturebooks enable teachers and learners to discover a world where learning moves beyond the classroom as they address universal themes that go beyond the 'utilitarian level of basic dialogues and mundane activities' (Ghosn, 2002:175) often found in mainstream materials. Picturebooks provide 'mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors' (Bishop, 1990) where learners see themselves reflected, windows to see other worlds, real or imagined, familiar or strange, and sliding doors for them to walk through. Such encounters can support the development of intercultural competence by helping children understand perspectives, values and lived experiences different from their own. Teachers are therefore encouraged to select picturebooks that address real-life issues (Ellis & Gruenbaum, 2025) but, at the same time, to be aware of and sensitive to the social and emotional needs of individual children and their personal circumstances (as far as possible) and to be sensitive to the requirements of different cultural and educational contexts. This will enable teachers to make judicious, appropriate and informed picturebook choices and prevent any child from feeling singled out.

The following three picturebooks provide an entry point for exploring representation. Teachers may compare *Same, Same but Different* (Kostecki-Shaw, 2011), *Olu & Greta* (Ejaita, 2021), and Jeannie Baker's wordless picturebook *Mirror* (2010), which are parallel stories of two children who live far apart, and reflect on how the children are represented in terms of equal status and stereotyping.

Competencies: 1.v, 2.ii

E - Establishing expectations

When implementing a picturebook-based pedagogy, children may perceive learning English with picturebooks as less formal or serious, so it is important to inform them of the learning aims, the purpose of learning activities, and outcomes in order to manage their expectations. This will help children see that their work with a picturebook is focussed and constructive and will make their language learning more meaningful, purposeful and motivating. It is also important to keep parents/carers informed of this pedagogical approach especially if the theme of the picturebook is potentially sensitive, such as different family/home structures. Sharing information will help prevent possible concern, develop trust, and allow parents/carers to support their child's learning at home.

The following resources provide an entry point for understanding how to make learning explicit and to manage children's expectations. Teachers may wish to consult the activities in *Teaching Children How to Learn* (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015) for examples of how learning aims are communicated in age-appropriate language. In addition, teachers could explore the picturebook called *Mabel and the Mountain* by Kim Hillyard (2020): 'Mabel might be small (in fact, she's a fly), but she has some big plans, one of which is to climb a mountain.' It is a story about believing in yourself, which can be used to establish the concept of expectations and discuss aspects such as determination and perseverance.

Competencies: 3.ii, 3.v

F - Planning **F**ollow-up activities

Effective picturebook-based pedagogy involves planning a teaching and learning sequence around a picturebook and knowing how and when to make links with other aspects of the curriculum for content integrated language learning (CLIL). Planning follow-up activities involves designing tasks that move beyond the initial read-aloud to deepen comprehension while matching children's interests and developmental stages, and providing opportunities for them to add their voice to make personal, cross-curricular, and intercultural connections.

To support the planning of follow-up activities, teachers may like to look at the series of e-lessons created for PEPELT by Ellis and Gruenbaum (2020). The activities titled *Add your Voice* and *Want More?* provide teachers with a wide range of possible follow-up activities to suit available teaching time, children's age, and cross-curricular needs. These follow-up activities often draw on audio- and video resources to offer variety and support engagement across diverse teaching contexts.

Competencies: 2.i, 3.ii

G – **G**rowing confidence

Growing confidence is a necessary competence, as teachers may express anxiety or insecurity regarding their language competency and ELT skills. Self-efficacy is built through professional development, exposure to picturebooks, practice and reflection enabling the teacher to move beyond traditional 'safe and comfortable' activities towards establishing a culture of creativity. By embracing the picturebook as a teaching resource, teachers develop an open-mindedness towards a holistic approach to language teaching and learning.

Growing in confidence is a process and teachers may like to begin by practicing and assessing their read-aloud skills by using the self-assessment questions in *Tell it Again!* (2014:27). Professional development such as observing, learning from and sharing with others can also build confidence. In addition, viewing some of the early PEPELT films by Gail Ellis, Tatia Gruenbaum, Sandie Mourão and Anneta Sadowska can highlight how the same picturebook can be discussed from different perspectives.

Competencies: 2.i, 3.vi

H – **H**ighlighting holistic learning and practice

Holistic learning is multisensory and aims to develop the whole child, incorporating cognitive, metacognitive, social, cultural, affective, emotional, psychological and physical dimensions. In English Language Teaching, picturebooks as multimodal texts, lend themselves well to holistic learning. They thus support teachers in adopting a broader perspective, one that takes all dimensions of the child into account and recognises that learning becomes more effective when multiple aspects of children's development are engaged.

There are countless picturebooks which offer opportunities for holistic learning. Classic picturebook publications such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1969) by Eric Carle, Raymond Briggs's *Jim and the Beanstalk (1970)*, and Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury's *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* (1989) provide ways to engage in arts and crafts, science and biology, health and citizenship education, and rhyme and movement. Other,

perhaps less well-known, picturebooks used in ELT, such as *A Lion in Paris* by Beatrice Alemagna (2014), offer opportunities to embrace language and culture.

Competencies: 1.iv, 2.i, 2.ii

I - **I**ncluding every child

Including every child means creating an environment where all children are welcome, children help each other and learn with and from each other. This is based on a philosophy of acceptance and a celebration of diversity within which all learners, regardless of ethnic backgrounds, religious faiths, sexual orientations, socio-economic backgrounds and physical and intellectual abilities are valued equally and provided with equal opportunities. There is a commitment to removing barriers to the full participation of everyone as equally valued and unique individuals.

Inclusion also entails adopting bias-free language (Oxfam, 2023) and making picturebook choices which offer opportunities to challenge stereotypes and create an open space for children to see themselves.

Inclusive environments are safe and secure spaces where children and teachers collaborate, and partnerships with parents are fostered. This expands inclusion beyond representation towards a broader classroom climate built upon participation and belonging.

There are several picturebook creators whose work centres on including every child. Steve Antony, for example, has written and illustrated a number of picturebooks that highlight the inclusion of all children, including *Amazing* (2019), *You Can!* by Alexandra Strick (2021), and *When I Grow Up* by Tim Minchin (2017).

Competencies: 1.v, 3.i, 3.v

J – Creating a **J**oyful classroom

Joy is a feeling of great happiness and pleasure which children experience when they learn English through picturebooks. Stories are motivating, challenging and exercise the imagination as children identify with the characters and become personally involved in interpreting the words and pictures. Picturebooks allow them to play with ideas and feelings and to think about issues that are important and relevant to them. Furthermore, participating in a read-aloud is a shared social experience which provokes a shared response of laughter, sadness, excitement and anticipation. This builds the child's confidence and encourages social and emotional development.

Understanding the gist of a story in another language is a rewarding experience in which children sense a feeling of achievement and develop positive attitudes towards language learning. These stories offer children the opportunity to respond to the human need to tell stories by drawing on their imagination and making connections with their lives, which can help to make sense of 'everyday life' (Ellis & Brewster, 1991:1).

Creating a happy and joyful classroom requires an understanding of how emotional engagement and enjoyment contribute to language learning and how to create classroom conditions that foster joyful participation and meaningful experiences with picturebooks. Joy should not be viewed as incidental to learning but as an important pedagogical dimension which generates valuable motivational gains and facilitates

children's willingness to take risks in another language.

Knowing each child in a class is key to creating a joyful learning environment and to responding to children's preferences. Teachers may like to complete the *Class profile* (Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015:37) and take time to observe children during picturebook-based activities using the Observation sheet in *Tell it Again!* (2014:29-30).

Competencies: 1.v, 2.i, 3.iii

K – Knowing different kinds of picturebooks

Effective picturebook-based pedagogy requires an awareness of the wide range of different types of picturebooks, such as wordless, informational, concept, ABC and counting, novelty, poetry and song, multilingual, and postmodern picturebooks. It also requires an awareness of the wide range of genres such as fiction, nonfiction, fantasy, and science fiction, historical, biography and autobiography and retellings of fairy tales, folktales, myths and legends, etc., as well as their pedagogical potential for different types of interaction and interpretation. Becoming familiar with different kinds of picturebooks enables informed and purposeful selection for different teaching contexts

Teachers can build their knowledge of picturebooks through award announcements, visits to libraries and bookshops, and educational platforms such as *Words & Pictures Library*. The wider the range of picturebook titles a teacher knows, the greater their ability to combine texts meaningfully, offering learners a variety of voices.

Competencies: 1.ii, 3.i

L - Developing Literacies and Literacy devices

Literary devices commonly used in picturebooks include alliteration, anthropomorphism, cumulative content, dialogue/narrative, hyperbole, metaphor, onomatopoeia, repetition, refrains, rhyme and rhythm and simile Learning to identify these devices adds to children's enjoyment and helps them develop literary literacy, which is recognising and understanding the aesthetic nature of a literary text.

Children can also be encouraged to think of how such devices are used in picturebooks in their own language(s). Contemporary picturebook pedagogy also recognises the importance of the development of multiple literacies (e.g. visual, emotional, environmental etc.), where children engage with linguistic, visual, digital and cultural modes of meaning-making.

Countless picturebooks offer opportunities for developing multiple literacies in ELT, for example, Bob Staake's wordless picturebook *Bluebird* (2013) and Judith Kerr's *My Henry* (2011). Teachers may wish to read the short PEPELT piece from 2023 titled *Memorable Multiliteracies*, which highlights some of the less familiar (but memorable) multiliteracies that thoughtful picturebook choices can reveal.

Competencies: 1.i, 2.i, 2.ii, 3.i