A Murder of Crows: Using Picturebook Sequencing in Language Education

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In the teaching module described in this presentation a collaborative creative writing module in ESL is described and discussed. Specifically, the presentation explores how sets of wordless pictures were interpreted, sequenced, read, discussed, and given literary form by two cohorts of students in Sweden, one in upper secondary education (ESL), the other one in tertiary education (teacher students). The underlying assumption is that literature is a suitable training ground for the language learner. It presents well-defined chunks of memorable language that can be approached, analyzed, and processed in different ways. Moreover, although literature can be characterized by its language content, it is also an aesthetic object, and a carrier of cultural content. Previously, we had explored the creative writing potential of written templates and fanfiction models (Sauro and Sundmark, 2016), as well as collaborative writing (Sundmark 2008), and the use of single-picture prompts and maps (ibid); now the idea was to move towards a more explorative approach involving sequences of pictures.

2. For this purpose, we used two works by Russian illustrator Igor Oleynnikov¹ (H. C. Andersen Award Winner 2018): “The Dead Tsarevna and the Seven Bogatyrs,” and “The Book of Judges.”

3. As a warm-up, the students worked with a single illustration from “The Book of Judges”. The task was to describe the picture in detail, and come up with a caption and story title. The illustration can be seen to the right. It shows nine birds – crows or ravens, probably – some descending, some already on the ground. The bird in the foreground has something red in its beak, presumably a bloody piece of flesh. This gory detail provides the only

¹ The illustrations are printed with Igor Oleynnikov’s permission.
dash of color in the otherwise greyscale picture. It draws the attention of the reader. Interestingly, the ground itself is out of view. In the nondescript background, a vertical thick black line can be seen in silhouette against a grey sky. Most of the students identified this as a pole. Other suggestions were “tree without branches,” and “tornado.” The dramatic nature of the picture escaped no one. One student came up with the caption: “The crows landed in the bloody snow to feast on their master,” and the story title *A Murder of Crows.* Another student suggested the title *Crowcopalypse Now!*  

4. Second, we presented Oleynnikov’s eighteen illustrations to Alexander Pushkin’s “The Dead Tsarevna and the Seven Bogatyrs” (1833/2016). Neither title, nor author, nor any other information was provided. Sets of the illustrations were then distributed to groups of four to five students.  

The majority of the groups eventually recognized the fairy tale as a version of *Snow White* (tale type AA709). But the challenge still remained to accommodate their story expectations with that of Pushkin’s and Oleynnikov’s version of it. The process here is similar to what takes place in fanfiction writing, where there is a known original, which is used as a starting point for new versions. The difference here is that, in a sense, Oleynnikov’s version (of Pushkin’s version), could already be interpreted as a form of fanart. In this study, the students only provided oral plot summaries of “The Dead Tsarevna and Seven Bogatyrs,” but the task could easily be expanded into a larger writing assignment and workshop.  

5. Now that the students knew the procedure, we presented another set of eighteen pictures by Oleynnikov from his *The Book of Judges.* As before, the details about the pictures or the illustrator and author were not disclosed at this point; the illustrations were exhibited in no particular order and without words. While the students identified the previous set of illustrations as having fairy-tale connotations, specifically to *Snow White,* the second set proved more challenging. The raising of the bar was intentional, and none of the groups saw anything
Biblical in the illustrations, which is not surprising since there are no recognizable Judeo-Christian features in the visual text, and the whole narrative has been moved from its original Middle Eastern setting to a northerly, nomadic setting (Lapland, Siberia, Northern Canada, comes to mind) – just as in the Russian “Snow White.” Sets of the illustrations were then given to groups of 4-5 persons. The groups were asked to:

- Decide on the setting of the story,
- Order the pictures in such a way that the sequence will make narrative sense,
- Agree on what each of the pictures represent,
- Write captions to each picture,
- Name significant characters, places, activities,
- Decide on style and genre features,
- Establish how the story should be narrated (point of view)
- Decide the genre,
- Agree on a story title for,
- Discuss the possible message and/or relevance of the story,
- Divide the pictures between the group members (4-5 each).
6. When the group members had agreed on the essentials, each of the group members chose four or five pictures, and was tasked to contribute 400-600 words to the total story. Each student also provided a caption for each picture – that is, a phrase that also occurs in the story itself. The captioned images provided scaffolding for the story; it also ensured that the illustrations were not just used as decoration, but provided meaningful story content. Following up on the individual writing, the students then met to harmonize their texts and provide peer review. The completed collective tale totaled 1600-2000 words. In the final class, the groups presented their versions to each other, and discussed different storytelling solutions.

7. The ulterior aim of the teaching module was to improve teaching practices with regard to language development and literary competence. The analysis of the stories focused mainly on the development of students’ literary competence, that is, how well they were able to apply basic critical concepts, such as setting, plot, narration, style, genre, characterization to their writing.

8. To just give one example, single, linear plotlines dominate, but a number of the groups have chosen to frame the main story as a flashback or memory. In these stories, and a few others, an old man is about to die; he thinks back on his life in the tribe, his success and his defeats. When the tale is told, the old man dies, and the narrative is back in the frame story (burial ceremony). Besides being a convenient storytelling device, the framing serves the purpose of reducing the number of characters in the story, since the protagonist (and potentially other characters) can be portrayed both as their young and old selves. With this strategy, the number of picture of the main storyline can also be reduced to 12-13 images,
which some of the groups found helpful. Furthermore, this narrative strategy makes it natural for the writers to tell a story that plays out over a long time period, something that is potentially (fictional) history, autobiography, and legend. All of the groups, except two, make use of third person narration. However, the degree of focalization varies greatly. Some groups have chosen a strongly focalized third person protagonist. This is from the beginning of “Relived”:

Break of dawn. Again. It was freezing in the old man’s hut because the fire had died out during the night. Only the smoke remained. Despite the cold, Kumya woke up sweaty. He couldn’t remember the last time he didn’t. Always the same dream. Every morning he wished it was just a dream, but he knew all too well that it wasn’t. The images were as clear in his head as when it happened.

9. To sum up, the project is positive in several ways: the students are motivated to become better readers and writers, and their visual, verbal and critical competence is developed. As always, the proof is in the pudding. Much hinges on the students’ interpretation of the pictures and how these can sequenced into a story, and deciding on what kind of story this is. Most of the groups settled for stories of revenge and tribal history, often centering on one heroic leader. Interestingly, this is actually quite close to the gist of the original Book of Judges. The basic, repetitive narrative of the Book of Judges is how the Israelites succeed under the leadership of their judges to overcome their enemies (Moabites, Philistines etc), and, conversely, how easily they are destroyed as soon as they are without leaders and stray from God. Thus, somehow, Oleynnikov’s illustrations alone, and randomly presented, stimulated storytelling that replicated the pattern of the bloody and episodic tribal tales in the Book of Judges (minus the Judeo-Christian God). Still, motifs and themes related to sacrifice and rituals are common both in the students’ stories and in the Book of Judges (eg Jephta’s sacrifice of his own daughter).
10. The students’ choice of genre will affect the style of writing in various ways. Many chose a simple, realistic style of writing even if they include supernatural events. In their reflections, they tended to identify their stories as adventure, horror, or action. In a few cases as fantasy. Interestingly, not one of the groups identify their story as a fairy tale, or as a legend. Perhaps this is due to the tragic and violent nature of the pictures. Unlike the fairy tale, there is no picture in the set visualizing a positive outcome in this set. This means that it is also a challenge to work out or integrate a purpose or message. Rough justice and revenge are meted out, certainly, but not happiness and success.

The project brings together literary competence and language learning through collaborative creative writing and the creation of a challenging picturebook. The instructions and scaffolding make it possible for the students to create stories on the basis of the set of illustrations given them. First, the scrambled set of illustrations challenge the students’ ability to create narrative meaning out of chaos. Second, their own creative and collaborative faculties are challenged. Each of these stages represent a learning opportunity that engages the students’ linguistic and literary competence, as well as their aesthetic sensibilities and metacognitive faculties.

References


Sundmark, Björn (2016). “Report from Middle Earth: Fanfiction Tasks in the EFL Classroom.” Co-authored with Shannon Sauro. ELT Journal 70.4. 414-423