Into the deep end:
The experience with *Flotsam* in Australia

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Abstract

The Visual Journeys Project is an international research study being conducted in Scotland, Spain, the United States and Australia to examine immigrant students' responses to wordless texts. This paper presents findings from the study in Sydney, Australia. In this study, the researchers worked with a group of refugee students from the Sudan and with another group of migrant students who were not refugees to examine both groups' responses to David Wiesner's wordless picture book Flotsam. *We investigated ways in which the students were able to interpret aspects of visual images and draw on experiences from contemporary culture in their responses to the text. The study revealed a huge difference between the responses of migrant students and those of students from refugee backgrounds and thus highlights the danger of seeing all second language learners as having similar learning needs. The refugee students' interpretations and responses revealed a disparity between assumptions about culture, appropriate pedagogy and the literacy learning needs of students who have experienced trauma and displacement.*

Introduction

One of the realities of globalisation is that the majority of schools throughout Western countries are comprised of multilingual populations. Of these multilingual groups, students have either migrated with their families through a formal process or have been accepted as refugees. The diverse language learning needs of such multilingual students have been the subject of study for several decades (see, e.g., Cummins, 1979, 1995, 2000; Collier 1995; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Explicit pedagogy has been developed to assist students to acquire the target language, be it a second, third or additional language, for the country in which they are being educated. The focus of such pedagogy has been primarily on scaffolding students' move from their home language to the target language, and from the use of everyday communicative language to the cognitive academic language needed for education within the host country (see, e.g., Gibbons, 2003; Dufficy, 2005; Hammond & Gibbons, 2005; Hammond, 2008). The Visual Journeys Project was conceived to investigate ways in which

visual communication, in this case the use of wordless picture books, can be a further scaffold for migrant and refugee students' development of language and literacy in their new country.

Since visual communication has become dominant in the developed world through news media, advertising and screen-based communication devices such as mobile phones and computers, it would seem pertinent to begin language development with immigrant students using the wide range of visual resources, particularly picture books, available in schools. For some time it has been recognised that skills in the reading of visual texts or, indeed, 'multiple literacies', are essential for communication in the diverse landscape of today's society (see, e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Unsworth, 2001; Walsh, 2006). Research into popular culture and digital media texts has shown how even students who are not fluent in English are able to use digital communication systems and participate in multimedia communities (such as Internet games, Internet video and social media), usually with far more adroitness than the adults around them (Marsh, 2007). Many of the multimedia texts which bilingual students encounter, although dominated by English, offer students hybridity and the opportunity of a multiplicity of identities (Kenner, 2004). Similarly, ethnographic research with ethnic minority students in the United Kingdom has shown how the narratives that students constructed for themselves from popular media texts are related to family histories and cultural identities (Pahl, 2005). A further study demonstrated the importance of the use of artifacts from students' homes and communities (Pahl & Roswell, 2011). Research into students' writing has also shown how their creative expressions reflect the multimodality of the images and texts that surround them (Bearne, 2004).

Most writing about the use of wordless picture books for developing English language and literacy has come from teacher librarians (e.g., Henry & Simpson, 2001; Trinkle, 2006; Brodie, 2011). Their studies have focused on practical teaching ideas without exploring the wider issues of second language pedagogy, diverse cultural meanings or the complexities of visual grammar. However, a few language and literacy researchers have examined immigrant students' responses to narrative picture books. Their studies reveal how students whose language skills do not match the average level for their age can develop their literacy skills and grasp deeper layers of meaning through careful looking, story-telling and interactive discussion (Arizpe & Styles, 2003; Coulthard, 2003). These researchers have shown how bilingual students from various cultures were able to interpret the visuals in two of Anthony Browne's picture books with understanding and depth (Coulthard, Arizpe & Styles, 2003). Other studies have evaluated the responses of young multilingual students to picture books to show the pedagogic potential of using such texts (e.g., Walsh 2000, 2003). These research initiatives have shown that the use of narrative picture books allows students to recognise visual images, and to draw

on and make comparisons with their own experiences and culture. Additionally, if the images do provide a different discourse, they allow teachers to explain the context of these images and use different levels of language within such discussions.

For this project the teams from each country agreed that working with visual representations in picture books could provide a context for reading and associated literacy tasks. At the same time, we realised that while visual communication is an important aspect of many cultures, it may not be presented in the same ways as in Western culture and that significant differences could exist for students from non-Western backgrounds. In school, visual encounters in texts usually occur through printed illustrations and images. Immigrant students' interpretations of and responses to this array of images will be based on their previous experiences of the visual and on their visual literacy skills. In turn, these experiences and skills will depend on students' personal experiences, previous schooling, the presence or absence of images in the home and the ways in which their home culture understands the visual. In some cultures, for example, visual communication is an important aspect of communication but may not be represented in print or digital forms. This is especially true of students who have lived in refugee camps or in remote rural environments where there is little or no access to commercially-produced visual texts.

This paper presents the results of a study of how a group of refugee students and a group of migrant students in Sydney, Australia, responded to visual images in wordless, narrative picture books. The purpose of the Sydney study was to contribute to the overall aims of the international project, which were

1   to examine how 'immigrant' students respond to and interpret visual images in narrative picture books
2   to find out how students respond to representations of migration
3   to consider how findings can assist pedagogy.

While teams in each country used the same wordless narrative picture books, *The Arrival* and *Flotsam*, this paper reports on the students' responses to *Flotsam*.

Background to the Sydney study

In Australian schools, students from other countries are referred to as 'New Arrivals', and this term includes both students whose families have entered the country by choosing to migrate and students whose families have been forced to leave their country and apply to enter Australia as refugees. A large number of new arrival students in Australian schools are refugees and, more recently, many of

these have come from Africa. Studies of African refugees with interrupted schooling have identified some key gaps for these students (Miller, Mitchell & Brown, 2005; Cranitch, 2010). These learners have

- missed the staged cognitive development which occurs in formal Western schooling
- little age-appropriate experience of literacy, numeracy, use of print and multimodal texts
- limited content knowledge of the world, and
- little experience of problem-based learning.

There is significant evidence from a study of adult African refugee students (Burgoyne & Hull, 2007) that pre-literate learners from an oral culture with rich traditions of story-telling have particular difficulties in moving into print-based literacy because they come to English language learning with different assumptions about discourse patterns and language use and have problems transferring these assumptions to English. The arrival of such refugee students has created new challenges for teachers since their language and learning needs are so different from those of other new arrivals and raise new pedagogical questions.

Flotsam

Flotsam is a postmodern wordless picture book created by David Wiesner and winner of a Caldecott medal. The book depicts the imagined journey of an underwater camera that captures images of fantastic aquatic scenes as well as pictures of the children who have found it on its voyage to different parts of the world. While on first impression the book might seem to contain random and at times unconnected surrealistic imagery, or 'flotsam', it is in fact unified by the image of the boy who first finds the camera that has been washed up from the sea and who then passes it on. The reader is led by the images to infer that each child will take further photos and pass them on by throwing the camera back into the ocean. The recurring motifs of the camera lens, photographs and the eye give further coherence to the text. Particularly effective are the photos within photos: layers of photos of children from different parts of the world. These images further unify the narrative.

Research design

This was a case study design within a qualitative research paradigm (Creswell, 2002; Barone, 2004). Ethics permission was obtained and the teachers at each school ensured that students who volunteered to participate in the study and their parents understood the purpose of the research. The wordless picture book *Flotsam* was itself analysed as a visual narrative by the researchers using Kress & Van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design (1996).

The researchers worked with two groups of new arrival students who will be referred to as Group 1 and Group 2. Group 1 consisted of refugee students from the Sudan. Group 2 comprised students whose families had migrated voluntarily for business or family reunion purposes. All of the students were in either Year 5 or Year 6 of primary school.

The students in Group 1 were in an urban, highly multicultural school in Sydney. Many of them were older than the other upper primary students and some did not know their exact age. These students were all from recently arrived refugee families from Africa and had either spent time in refugee camps in Africa or in another country such as Egypt. If they had any previous experience of education, it would most likely have occurred in large classes with largely untrained teachers and few if any print-based resources. In addition, there was clear evidence that several of the students were still suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Their reactions to changes in classroom routines and unfamiliar teachers varied from withdrawal to extreme restlessness and anti-social behaviours.

The students in Group 2 were also in the upper primary grades in an urban, highly multicultural school but were from families who did not come from the same kinds of disadvantaged backgrounds. Their parents were educated, and either skilled workers or professionals. Several were from India and most had been educated in their home language and had some exposure to the English language before migration.

The researchers met with each group of students for an hour a week over six weeks. The sessions were planned with a range of strategies to enable open responses from the students and with a range of activities that drew on different types of reading to elicit oral and written responses. Each session progressed with the researchers introducing themselves and the book generally through to building up a series of learning tasks for the students. The book was shared several times to gain the students' initial and developing responses to 'reading' the images within the whole text. In order to engage the students in talking about the book, activities were developed as provocations. These activities were also used by other teams in the project and included a page-by-page 'walk through' of the book, use of annotated spreads for individual pages, illustrations photocopied and sequenced in graphic strips, some dramatisations and the use of photographs.

Introductory sessions with each group consisted of 'getting to know you' activities between the researchers and the students. Then *Flotsam* was introduced so that the students, each with a personal copy of the book, were invited to comment or respond as the researchers 'walked through' the book with them. This procedure occurred several times in the first and proceeding sessions, spending time

on those pages that aroused interest or curiosity. The researchers used open-ended prompts and questions (such as 'Tell me what you think …'; 'What do you see happening here?'; 'Have you seen …?'; etc.), in particular using the 'tell me' principles developed to encourage students to respond to literature (Chambers, 2003). In each session some specific activities were designed to engage the students as well as to examine their levels of understanding. For example, the students were shown how to write annotated comments on photocopied pages from the book, sequence a section of images from the book, compare different perspectives used by the illustrator, and draw or write their responses to one or more pages.

Data consisted mainly of audio recordings or notes as well as some video recording of students' oral responses. Specific images which attracted the most attention were used with the students to elicit further responses and to examine any strategies they were using in reading/viewing the images in the book. The researchers analysed the oral language of students' responses along with any written or illustrated responses. Samples of students' writing, drawing and photographic responses were analysed, including annotated responses to specific pages.

The data were analysed using a combination of visual, oral and textual analysis. Categories for oral responses, detailed in Table 1 below, were developed through consultations with the international teams through meetings in each site, emails and video conferences.

Metafunction	Additional descriptors
Experiential (referential): Who, what, when, where?	Labelling Describing Questioning Speculating
Interpersonal (relationships)	Relationship to author Adding voices/character's thoughts Affective Intratextual Intertextual Relating to own experience (cultural, as a reader, as an immigrant) Questioning Speculating / Hypothesising
Compositional (textual): How?	Questioning and Speculating based on: • Colour and Shade • Perspective • Gaze • Design
Interpretive: Why? What does it mean?	Hypothesising (based on evidence and causality) – in relation to the whole image or the whole text

Table 1 – Framework for analysis of students' responses

The oral responses of the students were analysed using the same criteria across each site (Farrell, Arizpe & McAdam, 2010: 202). The criteria in the left hand column of Experiential, Interpersonal and Compositional responses are adaptations of descriptors derived from Halliday's metafunctions (Halliday, 1978; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). 'Interpretive' is an extra category decided on by the international team as the students' responses were analysed. Additional descriptions of the types of student responses occurring within each of the metafunctions are listed in the right hand column of the table (see Kiefer, 1995; Walsh, 2000).

Findings

Students' engagement in the reading of the text

There were differences in the ways students from each group engaged with the text. While the researchers used a variety of strategies, the students in Group 1 had difficulty in engaging with *Flotsam* or taking part in a conversation about the book. They were not used to talking about books or the meanings in books or illustrations. The students had limited concentration and were unable to sit still, had difficulty staying in the room, were noisy and at times were aggressive towards other students. Both gender and racial issues were present. Such behaviour fits with other research that has investigated the effects of post-traumatic stress on refugee families (e.g., Lustig et al., 2004; McFarlane, Kaplan & Lawrence, 2011). We knew this behaviour was related to the trauma that the students and their families had experienced but we were faced with the dilemma of remaining 'researchers' along with considering the need to assist the literacy development of these students who were reluctant to read or write. In response to these concerns we organised teaching and management strategies for each meeting while maintaining our research focus of observing and recording students' responses to the illustrations in the picture book. The students required structure and consistency and tasks needed to be short and varied as sustained talking and listening were not possible. They needed explicit, continuous assistance with basic reading and writing. The students responded best to concrete activities, especially digital ones. For example, the lesson whre students were most attentive was when we had them using digital cameras to develop picture stories.

In contrast, the students from migrant families in Group 2 were able to participate in class activities and provide oral and written responses to the researchers' questions throughout each session. These students were from India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and South America and had experienced education in their home countries, with some students having had a little prior education in English. They were able to engage in conversation around the book and were familiar with the idea of a wordless picture book whereas the students from Group 1 could not understand why a book would be written without words. For example, one refugee student asked with annoyance: 'Where are the words?'

Oral responses of students to the reading of *Flotsam*

Some representative examples of students' responses to particular illustrations are presented in Tables 2 and 3 below. The examples refer to specific illustrations from the book and detail representative examples of responses from both groups of students. Bold font is used to show the categories of analysis from Table 1.

Picture 1 (page 1)
This image shows a close up image of the boy's eye looking at the crab on his hand. The complete image of the crab is enlarged and in the foreground of the page with the boy's eye in the background but taking up the whole page, thus demonstrating the relative size of the crab (i.e., its smallness despite being magnified in the image).

Group 1	Group 2
Students explained their understanding of the illustrator's purpose of having identical images on two pages. They understood the use of a close up and a long shot to show the relative size of the crab. [**Compositional: Perspective**]	Several students were able to explain the concept of near and far. They understood that the crab was quite small based on the fact that it was the same size as the eye. [**Compositional: Perspective**]
One student explained that 'the crab looks as big as an eye'. [**Experiential: Describing**]	One student commented: 'The writer does this on the first page so that they make us think to use our imagination about what we cannot see.' [**Interpersonal: Relationship to author / Speculating**]
Another student thought the boy was using a magnifying glass to see it up close.	
Another student said: 'The crab is sitting on the boys hand' while others disagreed and thought that the crab was sitting on the sand. [**Experiential: Describing**]	

Table 2 – Students' responses to Picture 1 (page 1) taken from *Flotsam*

These examples of responses showed that while some of the refugee students in Group 1 were a little confused, most of them understood the use of the close up and how this use of perspective showed the size of the crab. The students in Group 2 saw this quickly but were also aware of the writer/illustrator's purpose (as indicated by the student's comment). Their responses demonstrated how these students were used to the purpose of books and talking about them. There was a difference throughout in the language of the students in each group. The statements of the students in Group 1 were framed in simple sentences and they responded to literal details in the illustrations. In contrast, the student in Group 2 used a complex sentence and a cause-and-effect grammatical structure.

Picture 2 (pp. 8-9)
In this double page spread there are sequential framed images of the boy with the camera he found on the beach. There is a close up of the camera and a long shot back to the boy at the edge of the ocean so that the reader can understand that the camera had been washed up by the waves. Other images focus on the boy showing the camera to others at the beach and then discovering the film inside it.

Group 1	Group 2
One student explained: 'This is an underwater camera'. [**Experiential: Labelling**] Students understood that the boy opened the camera and found 'film', e.g., 'It's a camera film!' [**Experiential: Labelling**] One student explained that the boy looked at the camera and then showed his parents. Another student randomly exclaimed: 'The mother and father are dead!' [**Interpretive: Hypothesising**]	One student explained that the boy had found film in the camera. [**Experiential: Describing**]. She used her experience of seeing film in cameras to explain the process and noted that her father had an old camera that he had shown her. [**Interpersonal: Relating to own experience**] Another student commented: 'The boy thinks the camera is lost so his parents tell him to take it to the lifeguard so that he can check if anyone has lost it'. [**Interpretive: Hypothesising**]

Table 3 – Students' responses to Picture 2 (pp. 8-9) taken from *Flotsam*

When asked what is happening in the picture with the lifeguard, the students in Group 1 were unsure and unable to comment. They were unfamiliar with the terms 'lifeguard' or 'lifesaver'. However, they were able to identify the camera and suggest it was an underwater camera. One child understood that the boy was showing the camera to his parents while another child's comment that the boy's parents 'were dead' had no basis in the illustrations but possibly suggested the influence of this child's prior experiences as a refugee. The comments from the students in Group 2 showed more background knowledge, contained more detail and were framed using complex sentences.

It is interesting to consider some examples of responses from students from both groups that were Experiential and Interpretive as these types of response showed the students were thinking beyond the details on the page. For example, in response to the image on page 29 (the illustrations show the boy throwing the camera back into the ocean), the students from Group 1 understood that the camera was being thrown back into the water for others to find and continue taking photos. One of the students said: 'He is throwing it in so someone else can do the same.' A child from Group 2 also speculated with the comment: 'He has to hold the photo of the other kids so that the next kid knows what to do when they find the camera.' The latter comment shows this child was able to infer from the information on the page and speculate about how the photograph would be understood by another when it was sent on and found.

The pattern of other responses from both groups was similar. The students in Group 1 showed they understood many events in the illustrations even though their backgrounds meant they were not as familiar with written literature or picture books. However, the students in Group 2 were more fluent in their discussions of features in the illustrations and more able to see them as part of a connected narrative. In a later example (from page 36 – this is the last page where a girl finds the camera washed up on the beach) a student in Group 1 commented on how the camera would be found and passed on

to others: 'Now the next girl is going to do the same. She is going to take a photo with that picture'. Three students from Group 2 also speculated with comments building on other students' observations:

> This girl is younger than the boy. She might not know what to do with it.

> I think she lives on an island because of the trees that you can see in the picture.

> There probably isn't one of those photo shops on that island so the girl won't know what it is.

These comments show the students in each group had similar understandings but the students in Group 2 were able to provide more detail in their language, suggest cause and effect and then elaborate and justify their predictions with more complex oral language structures.

Students from Group 2 were more able to identify with the object, characters and contexts depicted in the text than the refugee students. Some of their comments that showed this metatextual awareness were as follows:

> The writer does this on the first page so that they make us think to use our imagination about what we cannot see.

> This makes us get more anxious. We really want to see what the boy is looking at but the writer doesn't let us see.

The examples presented in Tables 2 and 3 are typical of the responses from students in each group and highlight differences between the students in Group 1 and Group 2. The reasons for and implications of these differences are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

There were many significant differences in the responses from each group of students and these have several implications for educational contexts. Apart from the differences in classroom interactions which have been described, there were differences in the way the students in each group behaved when using the book. The students from Group 1 were unfamiliar with book handling skills and seemed unsure of what to do with the book as a physical artifact. As well as being limited by their oral language they were not used to talking about books or engaging in a continuous conversation where aspects of a text are discussed. Though they had fewer points of reference from their life experiences and we expected they would have difficulty with the postmodern images of the book, they did not seem surprised by the unusual effects. The Group 1 students were able to identify images and the events that were occurring – with their responses mostly at a literal level addressing what 'is' in the picture – but they did not see each page of the book as part of a continuous narrative. They had difficulty understanding the difference between the author and the author as an illustrator or artist. In

contrast, the Group 2 students' responses showed how previous experience with education and reading enabled them to talk about the book and offer predictions and explanations. They were accustomed to considering features in texts and building on these for further interpretations. While these interpretations were speculative, they were also often compositional and metatextual, where they talked about their awareness of the features of the text and the purpose of the author. They were able to engage in conversation around the book, saw it as a continuous narrative although wordless, and could engage in hypothesising and analysis. They showed that they were familiar with the purpose of visuals, e.g., angles, position, colour and framing, although they had difficulty finding the vocabulary for some things such as 'magnifying glass' and 'microscope'.

There were a range of rich oral responses to the images in *Flotsam* and these revealed that students in both groups understood many aspects of this postmodern picture book although, as shown in the previous section, the responses of the students from Group 1 were more literal and generally confined to individual images. Differences between the responses given by the two groups of students were also related to the categories of the responses and the nature of the responses within those categories, particularly the language used in their responses. Overall, the students in Group 1 gave more Experiential responses (either Labelling or Descriptive), while the students in Group 2 gave more Interpretive and Compositional responses. Students from both groups offered some Interpersonal responses and these were either Affective (e.g., giving an opinion about whether they liked an image or not) or Relating to their own experience.

This study confirms previous research on students' oral responses to images in picture books (e.g., Walsh, 2000, 2003). Such research demonstrates that differences between second language learners and native speakers were not so much in students' understandings but in their use of oral language required for educational tasks. Most of the responses of the students from Group 1 consisted of simple sentences, present tense constructions and literal understanding. In contrast, the students in Group 2, although from migrant families, were able to form more complex sentences, use predictive language, and use structures of cause and effect in their interpretations because of previous education in their own languages. They were also more aware of the textual features of the book as a narrative, provided more metatextual comments and indicated an awareness of the role of an author/illustrator.

Obviously the differences between these groups can be explained by the fact that the students in Group 2 had experienced education in their home language, and some in English, whereas the students in Group 1 had little or no previous education and would have been affected to some degree by the trauma of their family's refugee experiences. Indeed, disruptions to education have been shown

to impact on cognitive and intellectual development (Kaplan, 2009). We consider, however, that the issues are even more complex than can be explained by gaps in education, refugee trauma and English language development. There are further issues to be considered which have not been fully researched. The following observations are based on the findings from the present study and also on substantial experience of one of our authors, Maya Cranitch, working with African refugee families and in refugee camps in South East Asia. The first is that students from refugee backgrounds in Africa and South East Asia are not exposed to commercially-produced visual texts in their everyday environment. Lack of familiarity could mean that the students had few expectations about texts and consequently displayed a lack of surprise at the elements of fantasy and surrealism in the book. Thus there could be different layers in their understanding that the researchers did not fully realise. The African students' background of trauma, behavioural issues, lack of education, minimal literacy skills and lack of exposure to commercial visual texts meant they had not yet acquired the ability to 'look' and 'see' for textual meanings.

The results reported in this study indicate something of Sudanese refugee students' understanding of pictures as representations. It could be argued that the disruption to the students' education and the lack of exposure to artistic practices in which pictorial representation is paramount, as in Western contexts, would have significant impact on the development of their understanding of the purposes of illustration in literary texts. These findings are similar to the results of a study of West Indian adolescents' beliefs about picture meaning. Students aged 12-14, with little exposure to art education other than drawing activities at Sunday School, demonstrated more naïve pictorial understanding than mainstream British counterparts of the same age (Freeman & Sanger, 1993). Results of the present study showed that the refugee student participants aged 11-13 years based their interpretations of picture meaning on what they immediately recognised in the pictures they saw. This is also consistent with the kinds of pictorial understanding of six year olds in mainstream British and Australian educational contexts (Maras, 2008). The students in the present study had yet to learn how to factor in the intentional role of artists in making the pictures look a certain way. This may also explain why metatextual comments did not occur.

Further, the question of cultural content of visual images is an important factor that needs to be considered. The students from refugee backgrounds had not been regularly exposed to the type of visual texts that are part of Western culture and therefore were not able to make intertextual links or understand the use of perspective or the overall cultural context. The fact that one Sudanese child made a comment that 'the boy's parents must be dead' showed that while there was an attempt to draw on prior experience to make meaning, the result revealed the tragic background experiences this

child knew instead of more predictable meanings. For this student, an image of a solitary boy on a beach suggested abandonment rather than any evocation of the potential pleasure or adventure of exploring a beach alone.

Conclusion

This study of the responses of the two different groups to the wordless narrative of *Flotsam* reveals the importance of educational researchers, curriculum developers and teachers understanding different types of second language learners, particularly the different backgrounds and needs of students from refugee backgrounds. These students need development in oral language, reading and writing along with basic understanding of the structures of books, narratives and language about books. More importantly, they need understanding of the cultural contexts underlying the language of texts and ways of talking about and interpreting texts. The study demonstrates the need for further research to investigate differences in cultural meanings and how students from different cultures interact with visual texts. Furthermore, there needs to be investigation into the effects on learning when students grow up without access to the kinds of visual texts that are commonplace in the developed world. Exploring these questions will provide more insight into how visual texts can be used to support the development of language learning and literacy skills.

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