

Using Pictures to Understand What We Read

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Introduction and Rationale

“Students need visual images to help them read and understand texts. Visual information can support reading and help make meaning of text.”¹

– Dr. Diana Dumetz Carry, www.etacuisenaire.com/drcarry

Good readers learn how to construct meaning from a text using the words and images included with the story. It has been found that it is important that teachers find effective ways to teach students how to “read” pictures. It is also important that their mental imagery skills also be developed because both help with their understanding of what they are reading. Pictures help build on what the reader may already know or helps build new bridges of information. One research project found that pictures even serve as clues for readers so that they know which parts of the story are important and need to be focused on. My goal then with this unit is to help my students become better readers by using the text and images in the stories to help them understand and comprehend what they are reading.

Second grade is when most children practice skills that they have learned in first grade and kindergarten. They should begin to become independent and use strategies that they have earned with ease. Second graders can apply their analytical abilities and read more and more texts to become a more fluent and accurate reader. These children need to be able to read fluently and effortlessly so that they can comprehend what they are reading. They are now able to practice the skills that they learned in earlier grades and use those skills with ease. They begin to develop their analytical abilities and can apply what they learned to more complicated material. They also are becoming more accurate readers and reading more and more texts within the classroom and at home. Second grade is when students become better at creating mental pictures. For example, if they read a story about a mountain they can then create a picture in their mind IF they have seen a mountain in the past. What this means is they can visualize a mountain if they have seen a mountain, but they may have trouble imagining unfamiliar things.² Children in this grade are so much better at processing information than they were able to do when they were younger students. They can build on things that they already know so that they understand more about them. If they are fascinated by topic, now they are ready to get more details and compare them to something else. They are also able to make connections to many new concepts. Therefore, using images, illustrations or photographs, would help my second graders with their reading comprehension.

“Visual literacy: the ability to decode, interpret, create, question, challenge and evaluate texts that communicate with visual images as well as, or rather than, words. Visually literate people can

read, interpret the purpose and intended meaning, and evaluate the form, structure and features of the text. They can also use picture and word images in a creative and appropriate way to express meaning...”³

Visual Literacy is important to my second graders because as we know we live in a world where images are important because it is presented as a combination of words and images. It is important that my students can understand what they read but also become a visually literate person. One you can read, interpret, and evaluate a text. One way to help my students will be to have them read then summarize what they have read and seen.

Images, pictures, and signs have been found to improve both teaching and learning. They help all levels of learners who have many ways of learning skills. Visual information can help support reading and enable students to make meaning from a text. Visually literate people can read and infer the intended meaning in an image. It is then important that all students learn how to become visually literate. In order for students to do this, students need to learn how to analyze images and learn how to understand the socio-economic contexts surrounding the information. Student can use picture and word images in a creative way to express meaning of what they have read.⁴ They also need to support their reading with diagrams and story maps so that they can aid in their understanding of the setting, define and develop the characters, develop the plot, provide different viewpoints, and reinforce the text. Illustrations are important to readers because they provide mental scaffolds to facilitate in their understanding of the written text. Thus, pictures in the story represent a relatively concrete, familiar experience that can easily identified with. These pictures help children develop their language and inferential skills.

Semiotics

Semiotics is one of those things that is essential to human beings. It is one of those things that is intrinsic to communication in all forms. Signs come in many diverse various such as gestures, road signs, commercials, drawings, paintings, and many more examples. As adults we must stop and think “what does this mean” or “what is this trying to tell me”. Semiotics is “the tools, processes, structures and contexts that human beings have for creating, interpreting and understanding meaning in a variety of different ways.”⁵ Signs are explained or understood by humans in many ways. We get meaning from many sources, one of those being things that are from our natural environment. These are things in our environment that have been discovered by humans such as animals or vegetables. These are items that are in our life that we understand because we have seen and interacted with the item. Such as a potato being a vegetable that is dug out of the ground. There are also cultural signs that have been invented by humans “to communicate with each other in complex ways”.⁶ For example a picture of a gold ring could symbolize marriage or an emoji with tears could mean either sadness or laughter. “Signs can be literal, analogical, or metaphorical. All of them provide us with ways to make meaning”⁷ The signs that we interact with, whether any of the type listed, give forth the outlook of the society that has created it. Students are faced with a huge amount of media and must navigate within

these environments as well as decode them so that they can acquire an understanding of the item. These students will need semiotic awareness so that they understand the symbols and contexts that they are presented within. Semiotics goes way beyond just print because it can be applied to art work, images in advertising, mathematics and many other media forms. The driving force of constructing meaning all pertains to understanding the signs and symbols within any type of communication system. However, we cannot simply accept the meanings that these signs seem to be offering to us. We must question and shift the perspective of the person who created it or our own perspective to make meaning of the sign. We then must use what we know, how the sign is used, and the context of what it is used in to make meaning from the sign. Semiotics, then, is important because we must continually revisit, rethink, review the meanings of the signs that we constantly come across in life.

Can Semiotics Improve Teaching and Learning?

Research in this century has found that literacy is best learned through an integration of language and image. A semiotic perspective enables understanding of general skills that people use to give their environment meaning. It is an important part of culture that then can become an important to education.⁸ Using visual art in elementary school to communicate understanding is a tool that is used for teaching elementary school children. Many times these children are encouraged to compose a text that has both an image and words explaining themselves. This type of curriculum based in semiotics which uses multiple means of communication is valued. Students can express or respond to a text in one medium with their response created in a different medium, such as drawing after reading a story. Being able to do this helps many of our elementary students make meaning from a story that they have read or had read to them. Researchers have found that by approaching a literacy curriculum from a semiotics perspective and including an integrated linguistic/pictorial integration produces curricula that provides multiple pathways for learning and expression.⁹ This means these students have a variety of texts that involves both learning to read the written language but also learning to read the images that they encounter. These students will then take that understanding and respond to the text using images and language. These products will enable them to explore the language that they are encountering and also image the world in which they live and dream of being a part of one day. It is important to note that any curriculum that is chosen to be used should include both stories with just words and stories with just pictures. This way students interact with both and make meaning from both. Students gain understanding through the words that they encounter plus they are able to make meaning by connecting with the literature through pictures and/or signs that they create. It is important for teachers to make sure their teaching and the learning taking place within their classroom is both responsive to the needs of their students. It is important to ensure that students have access to a curriculum that consists of texts based in language and image so understanding can be made.

Visualization and Using Pictures

Good readers will be able to form mental images as they read a text. By using their prior knowledge and background understandings, readers can connect the author's writing with a mental picture. This can then lead to comprehension. One article I read online stated that "often students with reading difficulties are so stuck on 'the code'- decoding unfamiliar multi-syllabic words, that they don't get as far as the meaning. Many times, they actually miss the meaning."¹⁰ Focusing on the illustrations and pictures help students focus on the meaning and author's purpose before even having read any text.

"If I can't picture it, I can't understand it."¹¹

Visualizing helps us while we are reading. Visual literacy can be defined as the ability to interpret messages as well as generate images for communicating ideas and concepts and is one of the key skills students should have for their future. It helps readers engage in the text in ways that help it become more personal and memorable. Readers become more involved in the text. "According to Puett Miller visualization is a proven strategy to improve reading comprehension."¹² Visualizing is a powerful technique that makes reading interesting for the reader and more engaging as well. Many students are visual learners. They love interacting with symbols, illustrations, and photographs. Using pictures almost always asks students to generate their own ideas rather than answer multiple choice questions. Many times, using pictures while teaching allows for students to learn at their instructional level. They can understand a picture, so before they have to apply a new concept to a text they can practice the concept using something that they are familiar with-a picture. Kids are very engaged when they have a picture to work with and not have to struggle with the text. When students struggle while reading a story their comprehension of the story is lessened. Students need to realize that there are strategies they can use to help them when they come to something they do not understand. Two of those strategies will be using pictures and visualization. As stated in one article, "Picture books are profusely illustrated books in which the illustrations are, to varying degrees, essential to the enjoyment and understanding of the story."¹³ Students who are visually literate will have a basic understanding of the elements of visual design and media, be more aware of emotional influences of visuals, apply their knowledge of visuals towards electronic media, and be a more effective communicator.

This unit will be taught to my homeroom of second graders, all who are of varying reading levels during our English Language Arts period. The second unit in our district's curriculum will be a perfect place to integrate this unit since we are working on understanding what we read by using nonfiction texts. My students will have the opportunity to access different forms of nonfiction and then use what we have learned so that they can create their own nonfiction project and apply what we have learned within this unit.

Demographics

The elementary school where I teach, Wilmington Manor Elementary School, is located in New Castle, Delaware. It is part of the Colonial School District which is composed of a variety of students in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language ability, and special education classification. This is a small school, with about 331 students in grades K-5. There are three classrooms of second grade with my classroom being a Single Approach to Mastery (SAM). This year I have 16 students in my classroom due to the fact one of my special education students has a behavior as well as academic IEP. My class also has a full time Para-educator for the one-on-one requirement of the IEP. All subjects are taught within my classroom, specifically, ELA (Reading and Writing), Math, Social Studies, and Science. Each year the special education students that I have in my classroom could have classifications ranging from mild intellectual disabilities to orthopedic impairments. Primarily, my classroom consists of low income families, however all socioeconomic status groups are represented. Many of our families are a mixture of grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents and other friends of the family helping to care for our children. Our classroom schedule includes two intervention periods, one for Reading and one for Math.

As with other schools in the district, we use the Response to Intervention (RTI) model for both reading and math. Every nine weeks a group of us, which consists of grade level teachers, reading specialists, building literacy coach, English Language Learner teacher, counsellor, and principal meet to discuss student progress and make decisions of how our students are doing and where to place the students to meet specific needs. We use many data points including benchmark assessments, teacher observations, formatives, and classwork to determine areas of need for the student and place our students in those groups. We have two reading specialists who work with our Tier 3 groups consisting of 5 or 6 students who have the highest level of reading needs, two reading interventionists who work with four of our lowest level students for 45 minutes at a time, and one ELL teacher who works with our English Language Learner students. Our grade level teachers usually take and split the rest of the grade level into Tier 2, Tier - lower level, and Tier 1-higher level. Tier 2 usually focuses on fluency and sight word recognition. Tier 1 works on fluency and comprehension using literature circles of different novels, research, or other projects that focus on grade level standards. The Tier 2 group usually has 8 to 10 students in it. The Tier 1 groups can have 12 to 15 students in them. I usually work with the Tier 2 or 3 students working on phonetic skills, decoding skills, and other beginning reading skills. We also work on their fluency level.

There is a very high population of English Language Learners (ELL). 37.7% of students at Wilmington Manor are classified as ELL. Many of our students are their family's only English speaker. Many parents cannot read my notes or information/instructions that are sent home in English, and they are unable to help their students with work that is sent home in English. Within my own classroom 13% of students are labeled Special Education. They are serviced within my

classroom by me. 87% are Regular Education students that are also in my classroom, although many of these “regular” education students are reading below grade level. I teach all subjects in my classroom, specifically, these subjects are ELA (reading, writing, and grammar), math, science, and social studies. With such a diverse group of students my unit will include activities for all different levels of learners. Those students that work above grade level, on grade level, and below grade level all have equal opportunities to work toward proficiency in this unit.

Learning Objectives

The Common Core standards for second grade ELA have been broken down by our Curriculum and Instruction Department into six units that are taught throughout the school year. Our second unit is “The Big Idea” and focuses on understanding Informational stories through context clues, text features, and research. This unit also focuses on fables and folktales and the moral or lesson to be learned through these stories. All of these concepts need the students to be able to read and be able to understand the images that are presented within the stories.

There are three objectives that I intend to focus on within the implementation of this unit. My first objective is that my second graders will read a variety of literature stories and informational text and discuss the differences between them. Being able to read these different types of genres will help them see the difference between fiction and nonfiction and how each has different requirements. They will work in a whole group, with partners, and individually to read and understand what they have read. We will be reading chorally, echo-reading, partner-reading, and reading to self.

My second objective is for students to learn strategies to help them use the images within the stories to help them interpret what they have read. They will also evaluate the images and discuss with the whole group, partners, and individually what they have read and how those images help them better understand the topic or story. They will also be able to write and draw to answer questions related to the stories that are read to aid in their understanding.

The third and last objective will have the students answer questions about the literature and informational text they have read. They will use the strategies learned and the images that are part of the texts to help them answer those questions.

In this unit, Using Pictures to Understand what we Read, I hope to develop lessons using a variety of visual images and stories so that students can derive literal meaning and develop an understanding of what it is they are reading. Lessons will be created for a thirty to forty-five-minute ELA block that will last 5 to 8 days but could easily be broken down into smaller blocks. The activities will include whole-group discussion, small group mini-lessons, and opportunities for independent practice that can be used for both formative and summative assessments.

Essential Questions

- How do we use images to read and comprehend literature and informational texts?
- How do illustrations help us gain information?
- How do images contribute to and clarify a text?

As I have read the different books and articles I feel that a unit on understanding images would benefit my second graders. My ELL students will benefit from the use of images to enhance their understanding of what they read. This unit will enhance all of my students' vocabulary and background knowledge. The stories will be read several times to and with my students so that they hear and see the story and number of times. Teachers need to educate our students on how to use different strategies for reading texts and using the images that are included so that they can demonstrate an understanding. They must learn how to make meaning from the images. In this unit I hope to help my students become better visual learners. Plus, I hope they are able to get clues from the images and words in the story and explain what they have learned or understood from the text.

Strategies

This unit will be based on stories and informational articles that I will read aloud to my students and that we will read together in a variety of ways such as: whisper reading, echo-reading, choral reading, and silent reading. Students will show their comprehension through graphic organizers, questions related to the pictures, photographs, or images. There will be an activating activity for either a whole group, small group, partners, or individual. A whole group pre-assessment may be needed to see what the students know about using visual images to understand what they have read. Students will be given a story with images. At the end of the story there will be two to three questions for students to answer (Appendix B). This unit will focus on my student needs plus allow them to gain the ability to decode, interpret, question, and evaluate texts.

To teach my unit I will rely on several teaching methods including direct instruction, collaborative pairs, collaborative groups and videos.

Whole group direct instruction will occur daily at the beginning of my lessons. There will be activating strategies, an introduction to the concept we are working on that day and the concept of I Do, We Do, and You Do so that my activities will be scaffolded throughout.

Collaborative pairs offer a great way to ensure that all students become engaged in an activity. Pairs usually help the students focus on what they need to do without too many people monopolizing the conversation. Students have an opportunity to discuss what they know and explain their opinions to others. Collaborative groups will stay to no larger than 4 students so that they can still have a rich discussion without one or two in the group monopolizing the whole class.

Unit

Activating Activity

To activate this unit, you are going to want to pick a google image to use. It can be from a unit that you are doing in Science, Social Studies, or Reading. Have the image on the Smart Board. Tell the students they need to study the photo and think about what they notice about it. They should then turn and talk to their elbow partner, discussing what it is they noticed. Give them two minutes to discuss what they noticed. You can write their observations on a chart paper or on the Smart Board. Explain to them that many times when we are reading a story and pictures or images are included we need to pay attention to what is right there in the picture and what is not “shown” but what we gather from evidence in the picture.

Activity 1

For the first activity you will need to choose an informational article from either a book or magazine article such as from *Scholastic News*, *Time for Kids*, or the website *Readworks.com*. You are going to want to be sure that the story includes images or photos that you will be using to help with the comprehension of the story. Choose four trouble spots that you feel the pictures help explain. Explain to the students that in today’s activity you will be practicing a strategy that they can use to help them when they don’t understand what they have read. You can ask why you think pictures are a part of the book that you are reading. You will then explain that the pictures help us understand what we are reading. Show them the book and explain that you are going to read the story to them. While you are reading to them you should do a teacher “think aloud” as you come to a part that you want to show as a part that they may not understand, you will stop and look at the picture and explain that the picture or image is there to help you understand what you are reading. Make sure that as you are doing this you are stopping at the spots that you marked as trouble and explain to the children how the picture helps you to understand what you have read. After practicing this with the children you will then have the students practice with another story that you have chosen. You should hand out paper and make sure they have a pencil to write with for this activity. Describe to the children how they will use the paper to keep track of each place in the story where the picture helped them understand the text. Tell them to make sure that they write the page number on their paper so that it can be revisited. They will need to write down the part that they found difficult and how the picture helped them understand what they were reading. You may want to have them work with a partner, possibly a lower level with a higher-level student. After giving them the time to work with their partner pull them back as a whole group and discuss what they found and wrote down. Ask them what strategies they used to help them understand what they read. Hopefully, they will answer with: look at the pictures or make connections to information that they already know.

Activity 2

For this activity you will be helping your students learn how to use visualization to help them understand what they read. Choose a passage that is descriptive so that they can easily create vivid images in their mind. You will need to explain to your student that when they visualize, it is important to use their background knowledge and words in the text to help them imagine a

picture in their mind. It is important that student understand that there is not one correct answer. If you have younger students start with an object and describe it by color, size, shape and smell. Ask students to close their eyes and create an image. Students can then share their image with their elbow partner. This strategy is called “Think, Pair, Share.” Next, you can use a different selection from the same text and ask students to draw a picture/illustrate while they listen to the teacher read. This is a strategy that can be practiced at any time. During a story in Reading class, during a Read-Aloud time, or even during Social Studies or Science.

Activity 3

Pictures are often less difficult for students than texts and are much more engaging. With this activity you can use one the two described activities to use a picture to help your students practice analyzing pictures. The first would be for younger students. You would use a Picture Word Inductive Model. In this you pick a picture for your students to look at. The picture can come from a unit you are studying or from a story that you have read or will be reading. You can do this as: a whole group, groups of 3 to 4 students, or pairs of students. Give a copy of the picture to the students. They will then brainstorm twenty words related to the picture. Next, they will put those words into categories and add any new words to those categories. You can have sentence starters for the students to use their words to describe the picture.

For older students, you can go to the site called Image Detective located at: http://cct2.edc.org/PMA/image_detective/index.html. This site can be used whole group on the Smart Board or individually/partners on Chromebooks. The teacher or student poses a question about the photo that they choose. The student identifies clues within the photo that help them answer the question they chose. Then the student can investigate background information on the picture or the topic it represents. Finally, the student will make a conclusion. If you are trying to show your students how to look at historical photos and interpret what they see. You can then have them write about their conclusions.

Appendix A Implementing District Standards

- **Reading ELA Literacy CCSS: RL.2.7**-Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot. ¹⁴
- **Reading ELA Literacy CCSS: RI 2.7**- Explain how specific images (eg a diagram showing how a machine works) contribute to and clarify a text. ¹⁵
- **Reading Literature CCSS: RL 2.10**- By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories and poetry, in the grades 2-3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. ¹⁶
- **Reading Informational Text: RI 2.10**- By the end of year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 2-3 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range. ¹⁷

The four standards chosen for this unit uses the both literary and informational text to understand what is read in the classroom. Students will use pictures within stories and articles that enable them to explain their understanding and be able to explain how these illustrations or images have helped them gain that understanding. Throughout the year the stories and articles will progressively get harder so that they are working toward gaining knowledge in the higher end of the range of the text complexity band and be proficient with those texts.

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¹ www.etacuisenaire.com/drcarry

² (PBS parents n.d.)

³ www.etacuisenaire.com/drcarry

⁴ Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown

⁵ (Hall 2012)

⁶ (Hall 2012)

⁷ (Hall 2012)

⁸ Zoss 2007

⁹ Zoss 2007

¹⁰ Webster, Jerry online article

¹¹ Einstein, Albert

¹² Miller, Puett 2004

¹³ Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown

¹⁴ www.commoncorestandards.org

¹⁵ www.commoncorestandards.org

¹⁶ www.commoncorestandards.org

¹⁷ www.commoncorestandards.org