



# An Effective Approach to Inspire Readers: Introduction to Stimulating Picture Books in Extensive Reading

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One of the major challenges in extensive reading practice is motivating students to read regularly. We have been incorporating various classroom activities in our respective extensive reading programs to motivate our students to read, hoping that these activities can show them the pleasure of reading. As we explored the activities using different types of stories, we observed that picture books are valuable resources that can help stimulate students' interest in reading. In this paper, we will list the picture books that were found to be effective in our Japanese university English classes and present some sample activities with these books. We will explain how we selected the books, giving special attention to postmodern picture books as promising materials for extensive reading classrooms, and provide detailed descriptions of each activity, including objectives, materials needed, and actual procedures.

This paper aims to introduce extensive reading (ER) practitioners to some useful picture books that can be used in classroom activities. Having taught Japanese university students whose English proficiency levels are limited, we have found it necessary to introduce stimulating classroom activities in order to maintain students' motivation to read in English as a foreign language (EFL).

In Japan, some schools at the secondary education level practice ER in English lessons, but in general, junior, and senior high school instructions and grades weigh more on intensive reading. For this reason, we observed that university students express enthusiasm in ER when it is first introduced to them as an alternative learning method. However, their initial interest tends to

decline because they do not read regularly even in their first language (L1). According to annual surveys on university students' reading habits conducted by National Federation of University Co-operation Associations, the number of Japanese students who do not spend any time reading books has increased from approximately 35% in 2012 to 53.1% in 2017 (NFUCA, 2013, 2018). The figure recovered slightly at 48% in 2018, but the fact remains that half of the students do not read at all (NFUCA, 2019). This is why we strongly believe that we need to introduce measures to motivate our students to keep reading and help them become independent readers. To cope with this challenge, we developed various classroom activities. In particular, we found that the World Café method using picture books can be a powerful activity to inspire students (Fukaya, Kusanagi, & Kobayashi, 2015; Kobayashi, Fukaya, & Kusanagi, 2018; Kusanagi, Fukaya, & Kobayashi, 2018a, 2018b).

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Table 1: Suggested Picture Books

Title	Year of Publication	Author	Publisher	Word Count
<i>The Adventures of the Dish and the Spoon*</i>	2007	Mini Grey	Red Fox	609
<i>After the Fall (How Humpty Dumpty Got Back Up Again)</i>	2017	Dan Santat	Anderson	375
<i>Badger's Parting Gifts</i>	1992	Susan Varley	HarperCollins	988
<i>Cicada*</i>	2018	Shaun Tan	Arthur A. Levine Books	151
<i>Come Away from the Water, Shirley</i>	1992	John Birmingham	Red Fox	133
<i>The Doubtful Guest*</i>	1957	Edward Gorey	Bloomsbury Publishing	279
<i>Fortunately</i>	1964	Remy Charlip	Aladdin Paperbacks	149
<i>The Giving Tree</i>	1964	Shel Silverstein	HarperCollins	620
<i>Grandfather's Journey</i>	2008	Allen Say	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	569
<i>I Want My Hat Back*</i>	2011	Jon Klassen	Walker Books	254
<i>Into the Forest*</i>	2004	Anthony Browne	Walker Books	532
<i>I'm Here</i>	2011	Peter H. Reynolds	Atheneum Books	200
<i>It Might Be an Apple*</i>	2015	Shinsuke Yoshitake	Thames & Hudson	678
<i>Joseph Had a Little Overcoat</i>	1977	Simms Taback	Viking, Penguin Books	182
<i>The Little House</i>	1942	Virginia Lee Burton	HMH Books for Young Readers	1,400
<i>The Lost Thing*</i>	2010	Shaun Tan	Lothian Children's Books	1,000
<i>Mirror Mirror</i>	2010	Marilyn Singer	Dutton	2,037
<i>The Missing Piece</i>	1976	Shel Silverstein	HarperCollins	609
<i>The Story of Ferdinand</i>	1936	Munro Leaf	Grosset & Dunlap	737
<i>Voices in the Park*</i>	1998	Anthony Browne	Picture Corgi Books	540

Note. Listed in alphabetical order; postmodern picture books are indicated with asterisks.

In this paper, we will share more ways of using picture books for ER in classrooms and show what types of picture books work well. We will (a) list a selection of picture books suitable for EFL learners at the secondary and higher education level, and (b) demonstrate how to use a picture book in those lessons.

### Why Picture Books?

Some readers may be doubtful of the use of picture books for adult learners. It is true that most picture books target young readers. That said, some of them appeal to adult readers as well; some works are even targeted at adults. In general, picture books are visually appealing, psychologically safe, and easily acceptable because they tend to be linguistically simple. In spite of the simplicity, picture books often offer metaphorical and philosophical messages, allowing readers to form multiple interpretations. Therefore, picture books can be intellectually stimulating and cognitively challenging for university students. They also assist EFL learners because they provide authentic cultural input of a target language (Lazar, 2015).

### Suggested Picture Books

Many types of picture books, from classic to postmodern, can be adopted in in-class activities if the ER teacher can find some elements in the book that fit their educational purposes. We generally look for the following elements: (a) Does the book lend itself easily to discussion (themes, messages, interpretations, issues)? (b) Does it have illustrations that attract readers' attention? (c) Does it have some particular grammatical points, sound patterns, and/or vocabulary to focus on? (d) Does it have an element of surprise for predicting story development? (e) Does it provide some understanding of aspects of different cultures? (f) Does it have related materials such as film adaptations or books similar in theme?

All in all, we find that any book which allows different interpretations and calls for deeper scrutiny is beneficial. The authors have found so-called postmodern picture books especially useful as they typically feature unusual style, plot, characters, and settings, challenging the readers to think about the meaning behind the stories. Table 1 shows some of the books we found useful for our practice. They contain many of the elements stated above, and most of them have proven popular among our

Table 2: Three Examples of Our Lesson Plans Using Picture Books

Picture Books Used	Main Activities	Number of Lessons	Class level
<i>Fortunately</i>	Read-aloud, comprehension sharing, creative writing, (optional reading)	1	Beginner-Intermediate
<i>It Might Be an Apple</i>	Prediction and grammar, creative writing, picture-story show	3	Beginner
Various postmodern picture books	Group discussion, core-ideas hunting, making an "eight-cell illustrated summary," class presentation	3	Advanced

students when introduced with appropriate activities.

## Suggested Lesson Plans for Picture Books

In this section, we will present three examples of our lesson plans which featured picture books in our university ER classes (See Table 2). Most classes had 20 to 30 students with varying levels of English proficiency who were mostly humanities majors. All classes met once a week for 90 minutes, 15 lessons in total, and students engaged in sustained silent reading (SSR) as well as some ER-related activities.

### Lesson Plan 1: *Fortunately*

Written and illustrated by Remy Charlip, *Fortunately* was published in 1964 and has been one of the staple children's books. The story centers around a boy named Ned who experiences one fortunate and unfortunate event—in that sequence—one after another. At the start, fortunately, he is invited to a surprise party but finds that, unfortunately, the party is held far away. Fortunately, he is able to borrow an airplane from his friend, but, unfortunately, the plane has exploded. The story continues in this manner for about 40 pages until he finally reaches the party. While the plot is exciting, you may wonder how this picture book is particularly applicable for university students. With appropriate activities, however, it can help adult readers realize how much we can learn from reading easy books. Frequently, adult learners underestimate the value of reading simple books, but classic picture books have some timeless qualities that even adult readers can appreciate. The following is an attempt to highlight what the book *Fortunately* has to offer.

### Lesson 1.

**Time: 45 minutes**

Materials: *Fortunately* (a copy for each student), comprehension quiz questions, paper with a prompt

#### Activity 1: Read aloud in groups

Purpose: To read aloud and appreciate the sounds of the carefully composed text with phrases that are repeatedly used. Enjoy different voice interpretations

Step 1: Individual students are given time to read silently at their own pace and understand the story.

Step 2: In groups of four, students will take turns reading aloud one page each until they reach the end.

Step 3: Repeat Step 2 by changing the order, and this time ask the students to read the “fortunate” and “unfortunate” parts using different vocal interpretations. The teacher demonstrates by reading one “fortunate” sentence in a light tone and one “unfortunate” sentence in a worried tone.

Step 4: Half of the class reads the “fortunate” part while the other half reads the “unfortunate” part, trying out different interpretations. Repeat Step 4, if desired, by switching the roles.

#### Activity 2: Comprehension sharing

Purpose: To guide the students to notice various aspects of the book

Step 1: The teacher prepares 16-20 questions and prints them on a strip of paper containing one question each. The questions are about the story as well as the illustrations.

Step 2: In groups of four, students pick one question at a time and try to answer the question together, first without checking the book, and then checking the book for confirmation.

Step 3: The teacher asks each group one question as a review. He/she then explains that this activity is not meant as a test to check their understanding and should instead be seen as a guide to some of the interesting elements of the picture book that may be left unnoticed. Adult readers often rely on texts alone and miss seeing the obvious unless explicitly reminded. For example, fortunate events are portrayed in color, but unfortunate events are rendered in black and white. Students are often amazed by how much they have missed and start to look for more hidden details.

### Activity 3: Creative writing

Purpose: To give students a chance to use their imagination and practice writing

Step 1: Prepare four to six sheets of paper with the prompt sentence which starts with "Fortunately..."

Step 2: Pass the paper to random students. Student A writes one sentence about an unfortunate event, following the prompt, and passes the paper to Student B. Student B then writes one sentence about a fortunate event following the previous sentence A has written. In this way, students take turns writing one sentence each, alternating fortunate and unfortunate events. Four to six sheets of paper are being circulated simultaneously, developing different stories. When students are not engaged in writing, they can read a book of their choice.

Step 3: Continue until every student has contributed one sentence.

Step 4: Collect the paper at the end of the class and share the stories that students had created in the next class.

### Activity 4: Optional further reading

Purpose: To connect one story to another

This is not so much an activity as an option for students to read more. In the case of *Fortunately*, there is a story that is thematically similar and familiar to most Japanese students. It is called *Sai Weng Loses a Horse* (Zhou, Janeti, & Chen, 2014), a traditional Chinese story where fortunate and unfortunate events take place alternatively. It is a classic proverb well known in Asia that states that life is unpredictable. Teachers can also devise an activity to compare and contrast the two stories, perhaps pointing out cultural differences.

### Lesson Plan 2: *It Might Be an Apple*

Immediately after its publication in Japan, this picture book became a bestseller and won awards. Since 2013, with the success of this book, Shinsuke Yoshitake has released numerous picture books. His books have captured readers of different generations, from young children to grown-ups.

In *It Might Be an Apple*, a young boy finds an apple on the table which gives full play to his imagination. He begins to doubt what the object actually is, questioning himself: "It might not be an apple at all. It might be ..." Then, he continues this game. Readers observe the boy's endless ideas or obsessed delusion. Unlike the image readers usually have for the cute, colorful, and minute illustrations, this book presents philosophical questions of existence. Does the object we recognize in the physical world actually exist? Can we believe this premise? *It Might Be an Apple* betrays people's expectations of



picture books and this is one of the reasons it attracts readers other than children.

### Lesson 1.

**Activity: Prediction using an auxiliary verb “might”**

**Time: 15 to 20 minutes**

Materials: *It Might Be an Apple*, a whiteboard, notepads

Purpose: To review and activate knowledge of grammar by personalization

Step 1: Draw a few figures (e.g., circle, triangle, square, etc.) on the whiteboard and ask students what they think of each shape. For instance, they may say that the circle might be a ball, an orange, a pancake, the sun, and so forth. Then, the teacher explains the different nuances between “It is...,” “It may be...,” and “It might be...”

Step 2: Ask students to draw the outline of those figures on their notepads. In pairs, they share their drawings and ask, “What might it be?” Using their creative imagination, they try to name all the possible ideas for the figure.

Step 3: The teacher gives feedback on grammatical points and students’ creativity.

### Lesson 2.

**Activity: Prediction in creative writing**

**Time: 60 minutes**

Materials: *It Might Be an Apple*, an overhead projector, a projector, a screen, notepads

Purpose: To develop writing fluency by making a story, being aware of the story construction in an entertaining way

Step 1: The teacher shows the first pages of *It Might Be an Apple* with an overhead projector, and reads aloud the lines on the pages. Students write down what they hear.

Step 2: In a small group, students collaborate to create a short story of their own with the sentences dictated. One student writes a few sentences on a piece of paper. Then another student continues the story by adding a few more sentences on the paper. They take turns to make a story until the teacher stops them.

Step 3: If time allows, a representative of the group narrates their original story to another group so that they can appreciate the diverse ideas they may have.

Step 4: The teacher shows and narrates *It Might Be an Apple* with an overhead projector and asks the class if their story is similar or different from the picture book. Students write their reflective comments on the comparison.

### Lesson 3.

**Activity: Kamishibai or a picture-story show**

*Kamishibai* is a traditional Japanese form of storytelling performance using a set of illustrated boards. The performer narrates the texts on the back of the illustrated boards. It originated from commercial street performances for children, and has been adapted in educational settings such as schools and libraries.

**Time: 20 to 30 minutes**

Materials: *It Might Be an Apple* (a copy for each group), A3 (297×420 mm) drawing paper, markers

Purpose: To give students a chance to use imagination through creativity in drawing and performing

Step 1: Each group revises the story from Lesson 2 and creates four to six picture sheets to represent the plot (present illustrations on one side and write sentences for narration on the other side). Rehearse the picture-story show as a group.

Step 2: Perform the show to the class. Reflect as a performer and the audience.

### ***Lesson Plan 3: Postmodern Picture Books***

Recently, postmodern picture books have received considerable attention from the research and pedagogy of English language as L1. Anstey (2002), one of the pioneers who discovered the educational value of picture books, introduced the characteristics of postmodern picture books as, among others, nontraditional ways of using plot, characters and settings; new and unusual designs and layouts; and, contesting a discourse between illustrative and written text. Lazar (2015) adds that postmodern picture books contain “multiplicity of meaning, subversion of literary convention, explicit focus on intertextuality leading to pastiche and parody, and self-conscious drawing of attention to the text as *text*, adding an effective use of metaphors as a final feature” (p. 97; italics in original).

These unique features of postmodern picture books may promote students to read a text more carefully and deeply. Because they are full of ambiguities, gaps and mysteries, students are inevitably encouraged to focus on these issues to elicit their own

interpretations of the text. The unusual style and subversive use of literary conventions entice students to break boundaries of literary and everyday worlds, get out of the box, and jump into a new perspective. As a result, they can attain a better understanding of the complexity of the text.

The following lesson plan shows an example of using postmodern picture books in an ER program for university students.

#### ***Lesson 1.***

**Activity: Individual silent reading of postmodern picture books in the classroom**

**Time: 15 to 20 minutes**

Materials: *I Want My Hat Back*, *The Doubtful Guest*, *Voices in the Park*, *Into the Forest*, *The Lost Thing*, *It Might Be an Apple*

Purpose: To let students read the books carefully and choose one book out of six for the group discussion

Step 1: Teacher explains the characteristics of postmodern picture books.

Step 2: Pass the books to the class. Ask students to read them carefully and choose one out of six books for a discussion.

Step 3: Create discussion groups of four to five people for each title prioritizing students' choices.

Step 4: Students read the book they chose at home and prepare their own interpretations and findings for a discussion in the next class.

### **Lesson 2.**

**Activity: Group discussion (including the core-idea hunting and making an “eight-cell illustrated summary.”**

**Time: 90 minutes**

Materials: The picture books used in Lesson 1, A3 (297×420 mm) drawing paper, markers

Purpose: To give students opportunities to share their interpretations and findings with peers based on their experience of interaction with the texts through the core-idea hunting and creating an “eight-cell illustrated summary”

In the process of these thought-provoking activities, students have input from various viewpoints of their peers and realize the indeterminacy in meanings and interpretations of postmodern picture books.

Step 1: Students discuss the issues they have found in the book of their choice in a group.

Step 2: Talking with group members, they look for the core idea of the story. The teacher explains that a core idea means the essence of the story from which the author generates the whole idea/story/structure of the story. It can be the central message, theme, or symbolic image of the book.

Step 3: Distribute a sheet of drawing paper to each group. Each group makes one “eight-cell illustrated summary” of the book they chose. Ask them to fold the paper, divide it into eight sections, and draw illustrations to represent the summary providing the highlights, core ideas or their interpretation of the story with quotations (see Figure 1).

### **Lesson 3.**

**Activity: Class presentation**

**Time: 30 minutes**

Materials: The picture books used in Lesson 1 & 2, eight-cell illustrated summaries students made in the previous lesson, and an overhead projector

Purpose: To present interpretation of each group to the class with the eight-cell summary, and learn the new perspectives from other groups’ presentations

Step 1: Groups make presentations in turn to the class (10 minutes for each group).

Step 2: Students use an overhead projector to show the class their eight-cell illustrated summary on the screen and explain their findings.

Step 3: After each presentation, the teacher asks the group where or on what page they found the core idea of the book. Students answer.

Step 4: Invite the floor for comments and questions.

### **Conclusion**

There are many ways to encourage students to read, but ultimately, we believe the key is for students to use books they enjoy and to feel reading is rewarding. One of the missions of ER teachers, therefore, is to introduce good “ingredients”—books and activities—to stimulate students’ interest. Picture books play a significant role in this regard since they are relatively short and simple linguistically, yet they often have some elements that resonate with us. We have repeatedly observed students’ positive





Figure 1. An "eight-cell" summary with illustrations representing *The Doubtful Guest*

reactions to in-class activities using picture books, and we believe it is due to the sheer ingenuity of these picture books, enhanced by the activities we devised. We have also found postmodern picture books to be highly effective for university students since they invite us to think and question more deeply about what they represent. Of course, not all ER books need to be masterpieces or have profound meanings to enjoy. If teachers can find some elements that will be instructive, then any book, in principle, should do the trick. They say, “you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” We may not be able to make everyone enjoy reading, but we hope to entice some to do so.

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