

# Baby Bear or Mrs Bear? Young English Bengali-speaking children's responses to narrative picture books at school

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## Abstract

This article presents findings from a one-year study of several Bengali-speaking children aged 5–6 years, in their first year of the English school system. The investigation centres on exploration of the children's responses, principally to the visual text, of a selection of narrative picture books used in their school. The aim was to collect children's responses to characters and visual features, and to see what narratives the children made from the picture books. The children, some of whom were relatively experienced viewers and narrators of picture-book stories, produced varied responses to character and décor. The article suggests that the books formed a bridge between the known and the culturally unfamiliar, giving the children access to an understanding of scenes from types of homes other than their own. The author asserts the need to welcome children's versions of stories and their interpretation of pictures, and to allow them the opportunity to re-read picture books many times.

**Key words:** children's literature, narrative picture books, bilingual, Bengali-speaking children, Key Stage 1, reader response

## Introduction

This article draws on aspects of case studies conducted during preparation for a research degree. It focuses largely on the meaning aspect of reading and aims to broaden our knowledge about the narratives that are being made by young bilingual children in their heads, from published picture books. At the centre of attention are six emergent bilingual Bengali-speaking children, aged five and six, in their first year of schooling.

## Background ideas

Several ideas underpin the study. The first is the importance of reader response. Iser (1974, p. 275) claims that the reader is an 'active co-author' of a book, and that readers will fill in the gaps and complete their mental map of a story according to their 'disposition'. Where picture books are concerned, Doonan (1993)

and others have extended the idea of the child being a co-author of a work to include pictorial elements. In recent picture books, the pictorial text is woven more and more closely with the verbal text, both complementing it and contradicting it (see for example Lewis, 1990; Michaels and Walsh, 1990; Nodelman, 1988). Doonan recognises that the child's interpretation will depend on prior experience.

However, it is perhaps easy to overlook how reader-viewers from minority cultures might tackle the process of creating their version of a narrative. As Coles and Hall (2001) have argued, all too often teachers in primary school try to elicit single meanings from children. This is fostered by the approach of England's National Curriculum in English (DfEE, 2000) and by the knowledge that the associated governmental tests of reading permit only a limited range of answers (QCA, 2000). My research was undertaken in the conviction that this completion of a narrative depends on children's sociocultural background, and experience of life and pictures, as well as their experience of verbal narrative. Pictures are interpreted through a child's store of mental images, which differ to some extent from one group of children to another, as well as from one individual to another.

Recent writing on picture books (e.g. Jordan, 1992; Lewis, 1996, 2001) has focused in the main on genre-breaking texts with a high level of intertextuality, such as the Ahlbergs' *The Jolly Postman* (1986) or Scieszka and Smith's *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* (1991), and on the challenge such books pose for experienced readers. But there is also potential for variations to be made on the narratives of apparently simpler picture books, which rely less on intertextuality for their effect.

Steps towards understanding by early readers of pictures have been described by Graham (1990) and by Baddeley and Eddershaw (1994), who emphasise children's difficulties of interpretation. There have, however, been a number of case studies giving a more positive picture of children's responses to and interpretation of narratives in picture books, such as those of Watson (1996) and Mines (2000, cited in Arizpe and Styles, 2002). Case studies of young, developing

bilingual Moslem children's narrative capabilities with picture books include Gregory's (1994) study of Tajul, the boy who knew how to negotiate activities around picture books; Bromley's (1996) study of Momahl, the child who knew how to categorise the books; and Coulthard's (2002) study of Sam and other children, this last focusing on reader response.

### The group of children, their families, their school and their picture books

This study focuses on six emergent bilingual English speakers, four girls, whom I have called Dina, Nasima, Rugina and Tammy, and two boys, whom I have called Raj and Zaccharia. All came from a settled community in a small town in England. Their parents had been resident there for varying lengths of time (some since the age of nine and others only since their marriage) and spoke English with widely differing degrees of fluency. Their fathers were engaged at a variety of levels, from manager to pot-washer, in the Indian restaurant business, and four of the mothers were home-workers. The families were large, with between three and five children in each, and each had at least one other aunt or uncle living with them. All the children were having Koranic lessons at home. They might therefore be expected to have brought phonic decoding skills and the skill of reciting text from home (Edwards, 1998; Robertson, 2002).

The children, aged between 5 years 11 months and 6 years 8 months, were in a school with 25% British-born Bengali-speaking children and 60% ethnic minority children overall. The school had a strong multi-ethnic policy, bilingual books and a bilingual Bengali teaching assistant from the community. Code-switching between Bengali and English was frequent during small group work. The children, who had all previously attended nursery class, could express themselves readily in English, though not fluently. Their Bengali (Sylheti dialect), though frequently used, was not fluent either. Three of the girls, Dina, Nasima and Tammy, were considered very imaginative by the school's Bengali-speaking assistant, who thought the fourth, Rugina to be "one of the best readers [i.e. decoders] in the class". Rugina would tell her teacher that she had chosen a book, "Because I wanted something hard". Dina and Nasima were described as very determined by the Bengali-speaking classroom helper.

Five of the six families were supportive of the home-school reading practices, which involved the children taking a book-bag home for a week with narrative picture books and alphabet books of their choice from the limited selection within the class. In the sixth family, Zaccharia's father took a more traditional approach to the teaching of reading, preferring to make Zaccharia learn word lists rather than 'read' the picture books that came home. Zaccharia and Raj,

when given the choice, stuck to very simple picture books such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear*, and *Bears in the Night*, with Zaccharia tending to focus on decoding words, Raj on telling the story.

There was no common pattern of love of picture books among the children. Dina, Nasima and Tammy were avid readers of the school's shorter picture books, with Nasima reporting that her mother had bought her a cassette of *Peace At Last*, and that she visited the library during her holidays at her Granny's. Her male cousin Raj, with whom she lived, provided a contrast, claiming during interview: "I not reading my book at home". He liked looking quickly through a limited range of picture books, such as *Bears in the Night*, *Peace At Last*, *Not Now, Bernard* and through *Power Rangers* comics. None of this group of developing bilingual Bengali/English-speaking children appeared to appreciate much of the intertextuality in such books as *Each Peach Pear Plum* or *The Jolly Postman* (cf. Laycock, 1998).

### The choice of books for the project

There were a few books in the school about British Asian children such as Bhatia's *Naughty Bini* (1987), but these were not particularly popular with the children. The Bangladeshi Government primers in the library also went ignored by these children. In the year before the main data-collection period of the study, I had introduced a collection of dual language books and books about Asian children, to share with the group in weekly sessions. But, apart from the dual language editions of books by Jill Murphy, these did not appeal, supporting Bromley's finding (Bromley, 1996, p. 143). The children in my study favoured particular books and some of them particular authors. The dual language edition of Jill Murphy's *Five Minutes' Peace* was so popular that it was lost!

I therefore make no apology for revisiting some fairly old picture books, including *Peace At Last* (dual language version, Murphy, 1990), and *So Much* (Cooke, 1994). These portray interesting family situations, have memorable text-lines and depth of illustration, and I had observed them as being among the children's favourites. In addition, I used *Angry Arthur* (Oram and Kitamura, 1982), also about a family situation, but more challenging, and relatively unfamiliar to the children.

### The research instrument

The project took place in a school setting, where children had become used to my presence during the previous year as a parent and helper. I designed a research instrument that would allow the children to communicate their interpretations in multiple ways. I had the twin advantages of already knowing some Bengali and of having built up contacts with families

through my own children, which meant that it was not difficult to gain access to the families for the purpose of the study. Several of the children's mothers were particularly keen on the project as it involved the children in additional use of Bengali, and wished it could have gone on longer.

I carried out participant observations with the children for approximately fifty hours over a period of four weeks at the end of the school year. Working with a Bengali-speaking classroom helper, a parent who was a distant relative of two of the children, I was able to put the children at their ease. I also gave them the opportunity to respond in either of their two languages: English or Bengali, to research activities. In the first activity, I shared a book with the children in pairs, with a pre-prepared loose Bengali translation and explanations where a child desired it. On the second occasion, we went through the book again and the children answered pre-prepared questions about the identities, activities and emotions of the characters in the pictures. They were able to interrupt with their own comments and to change the course of the activity away from questioning. In the third activity, which not all of them wanted to complete, they were encouraged to tell the story themselves with only the pictures. The fourth activity consisted of acting out the story in suitably sized groups. Fifth, working in a group, the children were given the opportunity to draw, paint or photocopy and talk about an item from each of the books. Lastly, they were asked to read a small section of text so that a miscue analysis could be undertaken.

All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the fourth activity, acting out the story, was also video-recorded. Where utterances were in Bengali, in partnership with my Bengali-speaking helper, I both transliterated and translated these. For Raj's utterances, which were in a locally-developing children's variety of Bengali, I worked with a second generation Bengali-speaking resident. The transcribed data were then subject to a content analysis. Recurring categories were noted, both categories suggested by the literature, and also categories appearing unexpectedly. For purposes of triangulation, the analysis was discussed with members of the Bengali-speaking community and with the children's teacher. What follows is an account of the children's responses to these books.

### ***Peace At Last*, a challenging visual resource**

*Peace At Last* (Murphy, 1990) is the story of a family of bears living in a rather old-fashioned looking house, where the insomniac father is disturbed by a sequence of noises. By and large in this book the verbal text briefly indicates character, place and movement, while the pictures show the characters' moods and the place in great detail. The home is of a rather old-fashioned 1970s style with antique objects such as the grandfather

clock, which might be unfamiliar to a number of children. The book is visually dense. The bears are seen from various different vantage points and distances.

### *Gendered responses?*

Unlike other children in this first-year class, three of these children were not growing out of *Peace At Last*. What is most enjoyable for many children I have taught is the author's use of a 'chorus' of direct speech in her past tense narrative:

"‘OH NO!’ said Mr. Bear, ‘I can’t stand THIS!’  
So he got up and went [. . .]”

This appeared not to be the case for these children. A content analysis of the overt responses of two of the girls, Dina and Nasima, showed that the book's attraction for them was based primarily on its domesticity. The favourite part of the story for these girls was Mrs Bear giving a cup of tea to the father in bed on page 22. They argued about who was to take the role of the mother when their unscripted role play of the story in our converted home corner transformed itself into Mrs Bear making cakes for Baby Bear's birthday. This seems to fit with what Appleyard (1991) suggests when he says that at six years of age and above children may prefer chief characters whom they want to become. He also suggests, however, that some children of this age might like characters who represent their lost past. For Tammy in particular, this appeared to have some truth as for her the book was about infancy. She had a great deal of responsibility for the baby in her family's household. Perhaps this is why she focused both on the kindness of Baby Bear to his father on page 22, and Baby Bear at play with his mobile on page 9, commenting: "I love it when he do that". Baby Bear features little in the book, but was important in Tammy's imagination.

Like Tosin, studied by Coulthard (2002, p. 179), three of the six children, Dina, Nasima and Tammy, were also very sensitive to décor. They spontaneously pointed out the matching blue and white stripes on Baby Bear's trousers and the teacup on page 22, "Look, they're same". Dina, the most artistically observant on many occasions, noticed a stained-glass window on the stairs on page 3, "Is it a clock, Miss?". These observations were not just random picking out of detail, but as with Kiefer's children (1993), formed part of a deepening response to a book they seemed to derive a great deal of sensuous pleasure from (Doonan, 1993; Kiefer, 1993; Nodelman, 1988).

Raj and Zaccharia liked the book less. In their case it was the picture of Mr Bear in the car on page 17 that was their main focus of attention, and even then Raj declared: "He's not as good as Gold Ranger [of *Power Rangers*]. He can't fight". Of Mrs Bear, Raj declared,

"She's boring. She don't do anything". With several books we used, Dina, Tammy, Nasima and Raj focused on sections of the narrative that reinforced their pre-existing expectations of gendered behaviour. Raj was a lover of Bear stories, but his favourites contained more action than did *Peace At Last*. In fact he was rather silly while we were sharing the book the second time, making many take-offs of the noises in the book, demonstrating phonemic awareness despite his reluctance to focus on print.

### *Cultural behaviour – likenesses and differences*

Two other responses are worth mentioning. Nasima was the most aware of physical vantage point, and could tell me whether we were seeing the scene from inside the room or outside. In passing the kitchen scene on page 13, she pointed to the table and explained spontaneously, "We can hide under there". As she used this 'we', she seemed to be participating in the story alongside the characters, but when asked if the characters were real, she reverted to spectator role and said knowingly, "They can't come out of the page", showing the beginnings of literary behaviour as identified by Harding (1978). Tammy had a fairly high knowledge of the book's intertextuality. She alone knew that the jar on page 8, being in a 'bear book', must contain honey, a substance not included in the diet of these children. Tammy also knew that the book held by Baby Bear on page 20 might be *Goldilocks*. Articulating this, she was able to make the meaning accessible for her partner. In general, though, there was a cultural gap, with white British, black British and Italian children in the class having a better grasp of intertextual allusions than did the Bengali-speaking children.

### *Role play, discussion and the recognition of characters*

Zaccharia was initially reluctant to share a book with me and demonstrated behaviour similar to that of a reader at an earlier stage of reading pictures, picking on and identifying apparently random items. But he was 'at home' when we acted the story out, and when his cousin arrived to join the group, he began spontaneously to give stage instructions in Bengali.

The citations from the data collected such as "Look, they're same" are typical of the children's utterances and show that their vocabulary did not do credit to the quality of their thoughts (Blackledge, 1994). The small-group work, my demonstrated interest in their ideas and the relaxed pace provided an unforced opportunity to extend the children's English vocabulary with words they were unsure about, such as the English-specific onomatopoeia: 'TOO-WHIT-TOO WHOO!' on page 14 and 'TWEET-TWEET!' on page 16, and also words and phrases such as 'fell asleep' (rather than 'felt asleep'), 'stripes', 'banisters', 'stained glass window',

'cuckoo clock' and 'honey'. In some cases discussion also served to support missing Bengali vocabulary too, so the book was a continued challenge.

Another challenge was to recognise characters at certain points of the story. Graham (1990) describes multiple depiction of the same character as posing difficulties for children, when each time the character is shown in new positions or fresh clothing. The characters in *Peace At Last* are remarkably similar in shape, and in places their distinguishing dress is minimally visible. On page 3 we recognise Mrs Bear, from her purple clothing and her tuft of hair seen in the frontispiece (passed over by these children) as she leads the way upstairs with an oil lamp. Mr Bear comes second, carrying Baby Bear on his back. However, several of the Bengali-speaking children thought Mr Bear preceded Mrs Bear. This was not because of the first bear being higher up the stairs, and therefore looking 'bigger', a perception made by one monolingual English-speaking child who joined our group. Tammy explained that the father *should* go first and that he would be the one carrying the lamp. Indeed, some of their British Bangladeshi fathers still held to the tradition of preceding their wives when out walking. So there could have been a family influence here in the narrative made by the children.

A further difference in interpretation concerned the scene where Mr Bear finally goes back to his own bed at dawn, on page 19. What is presumably a large Mr Bear is shown with Mrs Bear (recognisable by the feminine symbol of her hairnet) snuggled under the bedclothes. But the verbal text runs:

*"In the house, Baby Bear was fast asleep,  
[...]*

*Mr. Bear got into bed and closed his eyes.  
'Peace at last,' he said to himself."*

These two bears were taken to be Mr Bear and Baby Bear by some of the children, and also by the Bengali-speaking classroom helper (whose favourite part of the story this was, and who had shared the book many times with her own six children).

This interpretation perhaps comes readily to those from families where children often sleep in their parents' beds at night, and does no harm to the overall narrative. Though such an interpretation does not come within Nodelman's category of creative vision assisted by the element of redundancy in the visual text (Nodelman, 1988), I contend that at this age such a visual interpretation could be left undisturbed except where children are interested in doing 'detective' work on the pictures, as were the girls in my study.

For Rugina, these instances of visual discovery, and an attempt she set herself to translate the book into Bengali, evoked a fresh interest in a book she thought she had grown out of. The book was serving the

purpose of a bridge from the child's visual and cultural world to that of other homes and families. *Peace At Last* then presented both a huge resource and unexpected challenge.

### ***So Much* – A book about the extended family**

*So Much* (Cooke, 1994) was chosen because it had been an attraction to the children for several months, and because it is one of the few books depicting an extended family situation. The Bengali-speaking parents were quite happy for their children to have a narrative about a black family, and said they should learn about all cultures. In this book new characters are progressively introduced and are shown greeting the family and playing with the baby.

*So Much* has fewer differences between the pictures and the verbal text-line than *Peace At Last*, yet the visual story-line in this book is still somewhat different from the verbal text, with more detail of activity given in the pictures than in the words. The book includes a wordless double-page spread of father's birthday party, with food and drink, dancing and teasing.

The joyous text is laid out like a poem. Despite its length of around six hundred words, it was a magnet for the girls, Dina, Tammy and Nasima, and carried them through the difficulties of lexical challenges such as the word 'pinch' on page 22, (phonemically similar to 'punch'), and the unfamiliar word 'slap', on pages 22 and 24. This was one of the books that these three chose to 'read' over and over again, progressively improving the phonic aspect of their reading. Half of my data consist of this re-reading. At first Nasima said, "We don't have to read that" when she reached the wordless double-page party scene, showing the tendency noted by researchers of some British Asian children to focus principally on verbal text (cf. Minns, 1990). But the second time round she was ready to make her own verbal narrative of those pages.

### *Responses to characters*

Raj turned immediately to talk about the pages featuring Uncle Didi and Cousin Kaykay. Raj's affection for his own uncle who lived with him seemed to spill over into his curiosity about Uncle Didi. Next he, like other participant children, focused on Baby, making many spontaneous utterances about him both in English and Bengali: "He's sucking his thumb" (page 38); "He wanna play again more" (page 35). On a later occasion he physically kissed the picture of the baby. One thing that stood out among the two cousins, Raj and Nasima, was protectiveness for the Baby and indignation at what they saw as rough treatment meted out to him by Cousin Kaykay, who pinches his ear on page 25. Both Nasima and Raj wanted to hit Cousin Kaykay for this: "I smack him" (Nasima), "I

nearly kick him in" (Raj) and "I whacked him" (Raj, physically hitting the book). Tammy on the other hand was adamant, "They're only playing".

A further feature was the attention of Nasima and Dina to grandmother figures, in particular their earrings, Nasima making a text-to-life allusion about getting into trouble for wearing her mother's earrings. So again a link was made to female grown-up people and behaviour. Raj's reading behaviour changed halfway through this book: as he made attempts to correct his cousin's reading, he too began to focus on print. This book, unusually filled with action, kept the children busy and challenged for several hours.

### **Responses to a complex new book - *Angry Arthur***

Like *Peace At Last*, *Angry Arthur* contains an enormous amount of visual detail, but much of this relies on criss-cross lines showing discordance, and on figures in unusual positions. Alternate pictures show the setting for a dialogic chorus between successive members of his family and Arthur. In this dialogue, each character is clearly named as she or he appears in the picture:

*"That's enough,  
said his mother.  
But it wasn't."*

With *Angry Arthur* the children were still at an early stage of making sense of the story, despite a Bengali rendering of it at our first reading. Rugina, with her excellent phonic skills, decided to read the verbal text alone from beginning to end, while waiting for her turn to share the book with me. However, when she answered my questions about the characters, she made a somewhat surprising narrative from the book, producing a different sequence of characters. Nodelman (1988) is right to say "... picture books still depend to an astonishing extent on clichés of physical appearance". Many readers are used to a stereotypical introductory order of appearance of characters, typically mother with a skirt or dress and medium-to-shoulder-length hair, father with trousers, shorter hair and thicker eyebrows, grandfather with grey, balding hair and perhaps glasses, grandmother with longer skirt, and generally greying hair in a bun. However, many young Bengali-speakers may still have rather different expectations about clothing and hair. Rugina, not recognising the father's nightgown (1982 edition, page 10), and not noticing the barely visible cigarette, or his moustache blending into the pavement, thought this was a reappearance of the mother whom she had only seen from the rear, where a frying pan, skirt and apron are the keys to recognising her on page 5.

Perhaps Rugina's own visual life experience, with her long-haired mother, and her father beginning to bald somewhat like the grandfather of the book influenced

her when she continued in this vein, taking the grandfather on page 13 for the father? Finally, she took the grandmother on page 16, disguised in a spacesuit, but recognisable to us by her knitting, for the grandfather. Women in Rugina's community often engaged in embroidery, but never in knitting, so she did not pick up this symbol. I did not find Rugina's interpretation acceptable, because she had not matched the text and the pictures. At this point towards the end of the project, Rugina was becoming increasingly interested in visual detail, and I felt the time was ripe to point out the visual symbols and details she had missed, and to refer her to the relationship between the visual and verbal text.

Raj was at a much earlier stage of sorting out the visual narrative. When asked to say what was in the pictures, he focused mainly on objects. Looking at page 2, he asked "Why is he [Arthur] poor? [Bengali: *gerib*] Why is he watching television in a shed?". Perhaps the presence of the stove led him to believe that Arthur was in a shed? He himself had a shed in the garden in which he played. Since there is at that point in the book a rather complex visual mixture of settings (Wild West and TV), the 'shed interpretation' seemed a good one. Next Raj dwelt on the vehicles on pages 7, 8, 9 and 10, as he had done with *Peace At Last*, though he had no idea that the one in the centre of pages 7 and 8 might be a fire engine. The buildings he thought were a castle, and the small picture of the cracking world on page 15, a football. These interpretations serve to emphasise how important it is to explore pictures as well as reading verbal text many times over.

The children made a lot of *Angry Arthur*. Dina, who did not like the story much, and was worried by the double-page spread of the flood, enjoyed the story in other ways. Ever intent on detail, she focused on the sub-plot of Arthur's cat, who appears on every page. Later, when playing the role of Arthur's mother, she dressed herself, without asking permission, in a sari (stored away in a box in the spare room we were using), transforming the character into one dressed like her own mother.

## Implications for teaching and learning

What implications might be drawn from these data around the children's use of the books? First I found evidence that the close observation regarding characters and setting, frequently made by these bilingual children, who were still far from fluent in English, went largely unnoticed by their teachers, who encouraged the children to concentrate mainly on the verbal text. In my study, the children's reader response gave them an emotional bond with certain books, and they did indeed become 'co-authors'. Dina, Tammy and Nasima were constantly revising their hypotheses about pictures. So was Raj, when he was interested and stimulated. (I was insufficiently knowledgeable

about makes of cars to take further his special response to *Peace At Last*). Rugina was less emotionally wedded to the books and in many respects a less-sophisticated 'reader' of them than the others. Yet when she was coaxed into dropping her reliance on print, she too revised the stories she had made and went deeper into the books.

Bilingual children need to spend a long time on their preferred books and derive continuing benefit from them, something made more difficult by the prescriptions of England's National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) for a focus on a specific genre in each half-term. However, there are a number of precautions we can take. To help children delve deeper into the visual world of picture books, we need to make a thorough examination of the features used in pictorial texts, and be able to recognise that many of these are culturally specific. Before exploring the books with children, teachers should make a point of noting the stereotypes of dress or artistic style.

When reading, we need to decide whether the alternative stories constructed by the children are acceptable, or not. If we decide to tell a child the conventional adult interpretation of a picture, this must never be at the expense of slowing down the narrative and spoiling the 'tune on the page' (Meek, 1988). If treated in this way, some picture books can act as a cultural bridge from the child's visual world to that of other homes and families.

We need also to be aware of what kind of vocabulary will be useful for transforming a mental image of the pictures of the furnishings, clothes, the family, their feelings and their activities into a verbal one. Developing bilingual children are likely at this stage of their school career to have acquired vocabulary in some fields in English, and in others in their home language. We should be particularly aware of fields of vocabulary in each language where there may be a high proportion of unknown words. We should try to extend the children's language by reformulating with greater clarity their sometimes vaguely expressed responses.

We also need to support children in the process of making intertextual references, of the sort these children initially did not attempt.

There are implications for the choice of books too. The books that four of the children in this project dwelt upon were playful, skilfully designed, with deeper meanings than those on the surface, but centred on settings supposedly familiar to all children in England. While England's *National Literacy Strategy* (DfEE, 1998) recommends that the focus in the earlier part of Year 1 should be on books with 'familiar settings', the strangeness for many children of the home environments depicted suggests that such books may still be needed by these children at the end of that year. It is also regrettable that there are still so few books for this age

range that depict British bilingual children's lives today, in ways that are resonant and evoke enduring interest.

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