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## What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia

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### Abstract

Picture books are books for children that come with pictures in almost all the pages. Pictures play an utmost important role in explaining the story. Almost 50% of the story is told by the illustration. There are even picture books that come without any text, known as Wordless Picture Books. Picture books are typically the first books that children are exposed to. The books are either intended to be read aloud to children or for children to read themselves with guidance. With that in mind, the purpose of this research is to answer the following Research Questions:

What do children really look forward to in a Picture Book? Which element in the book really attracts them? The research results indicated the key factors that children look forward to in the selection of a picture book are; namely colour, cover page design, title of the book, font size of the text, illustration, characters in the story and easy to read and understand text.

Reading a book is a unique opportunity to see the world from another person's perspective. When children read books, whether it is a fantastical story about an object come to life or a very real article about animals, they become a part of that world and see life, through the eyes of the author. Children are uniquely able to accept and invest in the reality created in what they are reading.

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11 : 12 December 2011

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What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? - A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia

## **Introduction**

Picture books are books for children that come with picture in almost all the pages. Pictures play an utmost important role in explaining the story. Almost 50% of the story is told by the illustration. There are even picture books that come without any text, known as Wordless Picture Books.

Picture books are typically the first books that children are exposed to. The books are either intended to be read aloud to children or for children to read themselves with guidance. (Lynch-Brown, 2008) There's no difficult plot or sub plot in a picture book. Therefore, it should be a positive experience for children. In addition to teaching children that reading is a pleasurable experience, picture books have an important role in a child's development.

When books are read to children and as they look at the pictures, language development and auditory discrimination are stimulated. Early concepts of reading such as how to turn the pages and which way to hold a book come into play. Concepts of print such as recognizing sound-symbol relationships and reading words from top to the bottom and left to right are introduced.

Picture-book stories need plenty of movement. There is no room for long static conversation between characters. The really successful picture books are those which manage to include a kind of 'subtext' which will engage the attention of the adult reader as well as the basic story which absorbs the child. Parents who engage in the age-old tradition of picture-book reading are not only encouraging early reading development in their children but are also teaching their toddlers about the world around them, according to a study in the November issue of *Developmental Psychology*, published by the American Psychological Association (APA). This finding shows that interactions with life-like color pictures can aid in children's learning.

With the above in mind, this research was carried out to answer the following Research Questions:

1. What do children really look forward to in a Picture Book?
2. Which element in the book really attracts them?

## **Research Participants**

A group of 20 (12 female and 8 male children) nursery children (5 year olds) from a selected class in Ho Kindergarten in Serdang, Selangor was selected as sample for this research. Ho Kindergarten is one of the oldest, established kindergarten with more than 250 children and ten staff. Most of the children come from English speaking homes. They are very fond of reading and love reading picture books.

## **Research Methodology**

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11 : 12 December 2011

Mahendran Maniam, Ph.D.

What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? - A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia

A set of picture books (200 pieces) from various publishers, different sizes and different colours was brought to the classroom. The young learners were given time to choose books of their liking from the table where all the books were neatly arranged. They were given about an hour to read the selected books. The researcher observes the activity without any interference. After the completion of the reading, the students were asked questions from the questionnaire (Refer Appendix A) by the assistant teachers. Some questions in the questionnaire were even asked in the Malay language in order to get genuine answers from children who do not understand English. The results of the answers were tabulated and analyzed using frequency count and percentage.

## Research Results

The following table shows the breakdown of the data from the questionnaire:

| QUESTIONS      | Q1   | Q2  | Q3  | Q4  | Q5  | Q6  | Q7  | Q8  | Q9  | Q10 |
|----------------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| NO OF STUDENTS | 20   | 12  | 16  | 18  | 10  | 13  | 15  | 7   | 17  | 16  |
| PERCENTAGE     | 100% | 60% | 80% | 90% | 50% | 65% | 75% | 35% | 85% | 80% |

The questionnaire results showed that there is a diverse pool of factors that are responsible for young learners to choose their picture books. The nine key factors identified are as detailed below:

### 1. Colour

From the tabulated data we know that colour (referring to Q1) plays an important role in determining why children choose a Picture Book. All the children (100%) who took part in the survey admitted that the reason for the selection of their picture book was the attractiveness of the colours in the book and cover page. Colour is the bright site of childhood. Children adore colours and give a response to it. However children's responses differ from adults' reactions.

If teachers are to communicate with children, colour should be their trump card. But teachers need to use the colour language correctly. Little children are attracted to bright colours. There are many researches in colours, indicating that young children are very much attracted to colours, especially bright colours.

Numerous researches show that young girls like pink and the boys are more attracted to bright colours like navy blue and dark green. Colour preferences are also closely related to gender. The children who took part in this research scramble to choose their books but they were very

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11 : 12 December 2011

Mahendran Maniam, Ph.D.

What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? - A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia

meticulous in their choice of colours. The boys picked the stronger colours and the girls picked more pastel colours.

It was noticed (during data collection) that almost all the female students in the class were carrying pink coloured bags. And none of the male students had any stationery in pink. Little boys like black and other dark colours more than girls. Whether this phenomenon is innate or acquired in the process of growing up is still debatable. Adults accustom little girls and boys to like certain colours choosing their clothes and toys. It's hard to give the exact answer but we are inclined to consider colour preferences to be innate. It's a difficult problem to be solved and needs further extensive research.

There are many other factors, apart from colour, that influence the children in the selection of their reading materials. Kurkjian (2005, says that the reading material must have “high literary merit” and a child must enjoy reading the material. Most often, children’s books are selected by parents and teachers as the young learners are not matured enough in book selection. Anyhow, they should be taught and trained in selecting books that are suitable for them.

## **2. Cover Page**

The cover page includes both, the front and back of the book. The cover page plays a pivotal role in attracting students to choose a picture book. Cover pages has to be the first deciding factor in a student’s decision to pick up the book and to flip through the book. It is always better to print the title of the book in bold plus the most attractive picture from the book to be printed on the cover page. In this research, the researcher realized that most of the sample want the cover page to be colourful, clear and easy to read. Any book title, written in cursive and italic form is always a taboo to the sales of the book.

People may say never to judge a book by its cover, but inevitably, every reader still does it at first impression. The saying, ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’ clearly tells us that most buyers are more into buying a picture book based on its cover page. Therefore, the cover page must have all the required information pertaining to the book, such as, the title, the author, the group its targeted for, and any other special information such as if the books comes with a CD of some kind of stickers and other guide. Information about the publisher is also pivotal as some parents and children are very selective in the publisher who they trust and rely as their constant reading companion.

As most picture books come in a series of 10 books, it’s mandatory for publishers to publish details of the other books in the series at the back page. This is really a serious selling point/ marketing strategy utilized by most publishers. Sometimes too much of decorative items/words on the cover page of a picture book might damage the intentional message that the books wants to say. Too wordy and compact cover page minus the pictures are not going to sell as children are not going to like such cover page. In this research most of the students responded by saying that the reason for the selection of the particular book (e.g. *The Joey Series* by Dr. Brandon) was that the cover page had beautiful big colourful pictures minus the words.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Mahendran Maniam, Ph.D.

What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? - A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia

The reason why only 60% of the children responded indicating cover page being the main reason for their selection of picture books was that most of the books given to them had wordy cover page. By and large, the cover page of a PB should cater for both the children who read the books and adults who buy the books for children.

### **3. Title of the Book**

The title of a PB plays a pivotal role in motivating children to select a certain book. Eighty per cent (80%) of the students who responded in this research agreed that the title of the book had made them choose a particular book as their choice of reading materials. Titles of PBs should be easy to understand and preferably with limited words. Simple phrases are the best options that writers have. ‘The Naughty Monkey’, for example, is simple and easy to understand. And better still if the title comes with the relevant illustration. Titles selected must be about something that the young learners are familiar with and which are associated with their daily life. The title must be written in an easy to read font on a clear background.

### **4. Typography-Pattern and Font**

The research findings show that ideally font- 14 would be good and easy for young learners to read. Young learners need such fonts to facilitate their reading which needs time for them to carefully analyze the letters before pronouncing the word. Ninety per cent (90%) of the students in this research agree that the big and clear font 14 writings in the books given are easy to read.

According to Elizabeth Lowe, a literacy and neuroscience researcher and reading research consultant in Brunswick, the use of large print books with third and fifth graders helped them to improve between 41% and 70% on their SRA Reading scores after one year of large print remediation programme.

Additional research is drawn from such studies conducted by Laura Hughes and Arnold Wilkins (2000), who found that typographical factors and print size aid in the development of reading, who observed that font size and its affect on legibility is a major criteria used by children when choosing books. This report also cites the work of James Bloodsworth (1993) and Elizabeth Worden (1991), who summarized the work of earlier researchers and concluded that larger font sizes coupled with specifics for font type also affect reading ability and comprehension. This can be achieved by using a serif font (e.g., Times New Roman or Courier New) and a font size ranging from 14 to 18 point.

According to the research margins should be wide (1.5 inches on all four sides), with left justification. Proportional spacing is preferred, as this mimics what students see on computers and in books. Although the sample in this research were not influenced by the spacing of the text in the story books, research proves that lines should be double-spaced, and there should be triple-spacing between items. The ideal colour for printing should be in black ink on white paper.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Mahendran Maniam, Ph.D.

What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? - A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia

## **5. Illustration**

Illustration of the characters involved in the picture book is phenomenally pivotal for the movement of the story. 'Page Turner Books' are made (in the context of picture book) due to beautiful illustration. Paradoxically, in this survey, most of the students did not like the illustrations in the picture books. Only 50% of the students agreed that illustration played a significant role in their selection of the picture books provided. It was an appalling experience for the researcher and his assistants as the students were very analytical and meticulous with the illustration. Some of the sample even said that the ears of the kangaroo (in Joey's Series) look like rabbits' ears and therefore they did not like the illustrations. Some young learners even commented on the colours of the tools used by the characters.

## **6. The size of the Book**

Only 65% of the kindergarten students in this research said that the size of the book was not a reason for the selection of the picture book. Though the books given to the young learners in this research came in different sizes and thickness, most of the students picked smaller books as the bigger ones were not handy and quite difficult to handle. A standard A4 was a popular choice. Some of the examples are Joey Series, Penguin Series and Lessons in the Woods Series.

## **7. The Characters in the book are very interesting**

Fifteen per cent (15%) of the students in the research agreed that the characters in the books attracted them to choose the particular books. Characters in the book are very important for young learners and they differ according to the gender of readers. Girls prefer gentle characters and the boys want characters that portray heroism. Most of the students in this research chose books that have characters that they have heard or watched in television or movies.

Zambo (2005) agrees that even students with ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) can understand themselves and their behaviours through picture book characters in read aloud sessions. With response to this, majority of the student involved in the research, 75% agreed that the characters like penguin, wolf and kangaroo motivated them to choose and read the respective books.

## **8. I have read this book before**

Previous knowledge of the title and characters in the books do not play a significant role in the reason for the students to choose a picture book. As only 7 students agreed that the reason for their selection of book is because they have heard about the title or character before. Children don't have to be exposed to a book in order for them to choose a book to read. What they see at the time of selection (reading) is more important than if they had seen it before.

## **9. The storyline is exciting and little writing is involved**

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11 : 12 December 2011

Mahendran Maniam, Ph.D.

What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? - A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia

Many students (80%-85%) in the research agreed that the storyline was interesting as it was easy to understand the story. The first two pages must give the young readers the confidence to continue otherwise they will change to some other books. And from the analysis made most students prefer books that come with minimum text in the story line. Minimum text does not mean that the plot is distorted or manipulated. But rather, picture book writers are good at using words for narrating things that are not depicted in the illustration. Non wordy, simple sentences are preferred by young learners.

According to Robyn Opie, children love short sentences in picture books. They are good for creating tension. In other words, when you want to show characters in conflict make their dialogue short and terse. For example: "I hate you!" snapped Katie. "I'm sorry," said Paul. "No, you're not!" "I didn't mean it." and "Right!" Short sentences can create a sense of urgency, drama.

But too many short sentences sometimes can bore young readers who are always looking forward for new things. Therefore parents and nursery teachers should buy books that do not repeat the same sentences or words again and again in different way. Every page must narrate new things that makes the story move with excitement. Endings of stories must tie everything up in a neat little bow, with no loose ends. Endings should leave the reader feeling satisfied. By and large children like happy ending. Complicated endings will make them not to choose the book (publisher) again.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

In conclusion, the research shows that children are more attracted to colours, titles and illustration than other criteria in their selection of picture books. Therefore, teachers who plan to buy books for their kindergarten and nurseries should consider these factors more than other elements. Although in this digital age many claim that picture book is losing its limelight, time and again picture book writers have proved that good books still sell like hot piece cake.

Although many teachers say that they don't want talking animal stories (anthropomorphic). But others love talking animals in picture books. Children also do not like stories with moral values. They always feel that they have been taught with moral values both at home and in schools.

Some added criteria that teachers of young learners can go for in a picture book, are: a list of difficult words and their meanings in the last page of the book, extra stickers for children to paste here and there, CD's attached to the book, stationeries attached to the book and 'pop out' illustration. Teachers who buy books for their schools should not buy anything to their taste. Children's taste should be pivotally considered at any level of the selection.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Mahendran Maniam, Ph.D.

What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? - A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia

The conflict in the story must be relevant to the young readers and not something that portrays vengeance, hostility and hatred feeling towards friends and family members. Eerie and scary topics are also not suitable for children who are below seven.

Many people think that picture books are only for the teaching of language, but picture books go beyond that. They also teach science and mathematics. Good picture books are an excellent way to open mathematical and science discussions with children. There are quite a number of good picture books that correlate with mathematical topics. Picture books can be enjoyed by more than just preschoolers and kindergartners.

In my experience as a writer and as an educator, in some cases, unethical marketing strategy utilized by the publishers play a pivotal role in the sales of books in general and picture book in particular. Some publishers sell their books at dirt cheap price in order to penetrate into the main picture book market. There were many incidences that I have noticed whereby parents buy certain picture books for children just for the sake of buying some books. They don't really scrutinize the content or any other criteria in the books. They buy them because they are cheap. And children have to read the books because the parents have bought the books for them. Therefore in conclusion, pathetically, not all books that have come for second printing should be considered as good books.

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Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 12 December 2011

Mahendran Maniam, Ph.D.

What Do Children Look Forward to in a Picture Book? - A survey in a kindergarten, in Selangor, Malaysia



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## Appendix A

**Why did you choose this particular book to read?**

**Tick the most appropriate response for you. You can choose more than one answer.**

- 1. The book is very colourful and attractive.**
- 2. The cover page is very striking.**
- 3. The title of the book is very interesting.**
- 4. The writing (text) in the book is big and easy to read.**
- 5. The pictures (illustration) in the book are very nice.**
- 6. The size of the book is suitable for me.**
- 7. The characters in the book are very interesting.**
- 8. I have read this book before.**
- 9. The storyline is exciting**
- 10. Each page has very little writing.(text )**

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