



Adult EL Reading Comprehension: Improve and Empower

by [Lauren A. Vogel](#)

Using a high-quality crossover picturebook with my adult English learners (ELs), I was able to both promote literacy skills and stimulate student agency and autonomy. One particular text, [Duck, Death and the Tulip](#) (Erlbruch, 2007), not only promoted reading comprehension but led to student empowerment. I'd like to share the benefits of crossover picturebooks in the adult English language classroom, how I used them with my students, and some practical activities for using these books in the EL classroom as well as a suggested book list.

What Is a Crossover Picturebook?

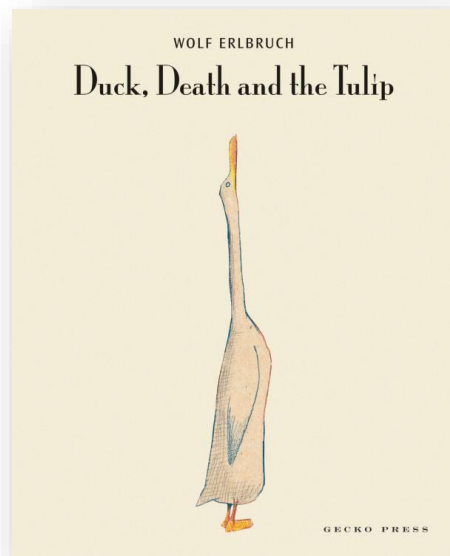
A crossover picturebook is a picture book for all ages. It has sophisticated content and encompasses multiple layers of meaning (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2015). The illustrations of a crossover picturebook, often appealing to the adult market, are an integral component of the book's purpose and function. They broaden the scope of the story and can often be a story in themselves, adding to the richness and depth of the book. The artistic images allow yet another dimension for readers to explore—separately or in conjunction with the text. These books are engaging and offer a wide range of topics for the more mature audience, ranging from fiction to nonfiction, controversial and taboo to fantasy. It is the complexity, illustrations, and appeal to readers of all ages that distinguishes this unique genre of picturebook from other picture books.

Benefits to English Learners

Crossover picturebooks are authentic and relevant and can be used to promote language skills. They build background knowledge by serving as a springboard for the concept development and vocabulary building necessary to understand more complex texts (Lightsey, 2006). The illustrations support the text and enhance the vocabulary, which supports reading comprehension that can often be challenging for ELs. The relationship between the text and the illustration promote visual literacy as well. When using the crossover picturebook as a read aloud, students hear new words pronounced correctly and authentically in the right context with the correct intonation useful for correct grammar usage. As reading and writing are reciprocal processes, crossover picturebooks can also be used to teach literary devices.

Perhaps more importantly, aside from promoting language skills, crossover picturebooks foster student agency and voice, skills essential for successful English writing and speaking. Perhaps as many language instructors know, agency and voice are generally, sometimes profoundly, lacking in our language learners, and therefore, important to develop. Crossover picturebooks provide a way for students to share their personal viewpoints, demonstrate their authoritativeness and presence, and project all of these more freely.

In summary, crossover picturebooks can be used to enhance language skills in addition to being used as a self-empowering tool to help students gain agency and voice. Because crossover picturebooks are engaging, complex, and evocative, these books have the propensity for students to take control over their own learning and decide where it will go.



In the Classroom

The first time I introduced a crossover picturebook to my adult High Intermediate and Advanced Reading class, I really had no idea how the students would react. Students have expressed concern in the past when I would stray from the standard language texts and assessments. Students are familiar with—and therefore comfortable with—a “typical” reading book that, for example, has a vocabulary section and asks them standard main idea, purpose, and detail questions. Because crossover picturebooks are not language learning books, they have and do none of this. I knew I was taking a risk.

I read to them *Duck, Death and the Tulip* by Wolf Erlbruch (2007), a crossover picturebook about a compassionate Death who befriends Duck. The storyline and illustrations opened up—for an otherwise straightforward, albeit sensitive and often taboo topic—such uninhibited *student-led* discussions encompassing so many different perspectives that there was no endpoint to the conversation. My 10 international students, coming from very diverse backgrounds, were co-constructing meaning, sharing their personal viewpoints, and asking each other—not the teacher—questions. They were directing their own learning. They were empowered.

Comprehension

As many language instructors know, a lack of vocabulary can greatly impede comprehension. Additionally, comprehension is also often inhibited by students’ cultural beliefs and societal paradigms. For instance, in this particular story, one might assume—as most of my students did—Death to be cold, unkind, or even scary. When students did lack the vocabulary, the illustrations clearly supported the text by showing Death as kind, friendly, and compassionate. My students spent a great deal of time discussing this dichotomy.

“How could Death be *compassionate*?” asked a student. “Death is a *skeleton* but treats Duck kind. This is not scary!” exclaimed another. By using the illustrations to help guide their comprehension, my students understood the story to be about kindness and compassion contradicting their own personal assumptions (see Figure 1). The storyline was not impeded by their opposing cultural values and norms or lack of vocabulary. The discussions about the illustrations also prompted students to come up with their own vocabulary list, words like *compassionate* and *skeleton*: words they extracted from the text not found within the text.

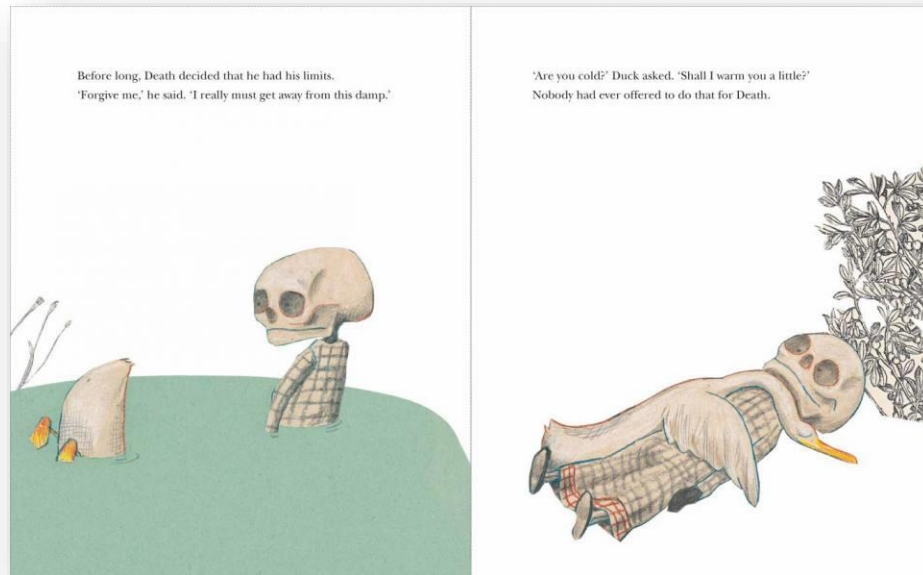


Figure 1. Illustrations from *Duck, Death, and the Tulip* (Erlbruch, 2007; retrieved from [Gecko Press](#))

Empowerment

My students were captivated by the storyline and illustrations. They were genuinely interested in learning how their peers viewed death and questioned their own beliefs. What’s more, no one was striving for a “right” answer, something otherwise so common in the language classroom. Instead, students were inquiring and candidly questioning both themselves and their peers. They were respectfully sharing their viewpoints and accepting the differing viewpoints of their classmates. They spoke uninhibitedly and freely.

This story brought out a unity in differing perspectives, a compliance and acceptance of differences, and an awareness of other cultural values and beliefs—all led and implemented by the students themselves. This picturebook changed the learning dynamic so profoundly that I was no longer a facilitator in the classroom; I was an observer. I watched in amazement as they took control over their learning and demonstrated their agency.

Activities With Picturebooks

The sophisticated and relevant content of the crossover picturebook lends itself to rich discussion, whether that discussion takes place orally or in writing. Additionally, because storylines often encompass multiple meanings, class discussions and interpretations are often endless because there is no “right answer” to pursue. Therefore, a crossover picturebook lends itself to student-generated discussions and inquiries, student-motivated vocabulary building, and multiple “correct” interpretations. The classroom focus then is no longer on language learning, but rather on meaning making. In this regard, students can feel less inhibited to make mistakes, which in turn will promote student agency and autonomy. When students feel some autonomy in their learning, they will then be empowered. To help students feel empowered, choose a high-quality picturebook to read aloud to your class and then consider the following steps:

Steps to Get Started

- Before beginning, ask students to look at the front and back cover and make predictions.
- Before reading aloud, ask the students to “read” the illustrations only and share what story they believe is being told by the illustrations. Focus on color and the emotions being evoked by the illustrations.
- Read the story aloud without pausing.
- When the story is over, ask students for their interpretations. Ask which illustrations struck them the most and why. Keep a list of student-generated vocabulary.

Follow-Up and Extension Activities

- Follow up with a reflection or journal writing where students focus on how the story made them feel, what they were confused by, and what questions they have.
- To further enhance vocabulary, ask students to draw some of the new vocabulary words they learned and share with their peers.
- Additionally, you can ask students to research one interesting aspect of the story and present their findings to the class.
- Have students create their own sophisticated picturebook; this is another great activity to promote literacy skills and agency.

Suggested Crossover Picturebooks

- [*Death, Duck and the Tulip*](#) (Wolf Erlbruch): death/mortality, compassion, friendship
- [*I Am Thomas*](#) (Libby Gleeson and Armin Greder; [Teacher Notes](#) available from the publisher): identity, courage, relationships
- [*Rose Blanche*](#) (Roberto Innocenti): holocaust, curiosity, compassion
- [*Smoke*](#) (Anton Fortes and Joanna Concejo): holocaust, friendship, a mother’s love
- [*The Big Question*](#) (Wolf Erlbruch): questioning life’s purpose; Why are we here?
- [*The Island*](#) (Armin Greder; [Teacher Notes](#) available from the publisher): refugees, prejudice, differences, compassion

- [*The Mediterranean*](#) (Armin Greder; [Teacher Notes](#) available from the publisher): dangerous journey of refugees; politics, based on a true story
- [*The Visions of Ichabod X*](#) (Gary Crew and Paul O'Sullivan): environment, past and future
- [*The Watertower*](#) (Gary Crew and Steven Woolman): mystery, childhood, adventure
- [*Waiting for Mama*](#) (Lee Tae-Jun and Kim Dong Seong): child-mother bond, bilingual book

Conclusion

I walked into my High Intermediate and Advanced Reading class knowing I was taking a risk by reading to my adult students a crossover picturebook. I worried that straying too far from traditional classroom activities would not be well received. To my excitement, my adult students enjoyed sitting in a circle and being read to. They were captivated and engaged by both the storyline and illustrations. The discussions were candid and lively. There was a renewed energy in the classroom.

Crossover picturebooks can be a great tool to promote literacy skills, autonomy, and student agency. When students become excited and engaged about their learning, and thus take learning into their own hands, they become empowered. And when students are empowered, the instructor is empowered, too.

References

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