PICTURE STORY

Andijan state institute of foreign language
Foreign philology and tourism faculity
Translation theory and practice:
english 2-year student: ***Xolmatova Roxatoy***
Supervisor: ***Abdurahmonov To‘raxon***

Abstract: This article explores picture stories as one of the oldest and most natural ways humans communicate. It begins with prehistoric cave paintings and rock art, showing how images carried meaning long before writing existed, and traces how pictures gradually became symbols, sounds and alphabets. This history is then linked to early childhood education: because children move from image to symbol to word, picture stories offer young language learners a gentle, meaningful bridge into a new language. The article outlines key classroom benefits, including immediate access to meaning, inclusive participation, prediction skills, reduced anxiety, emotional connection, integration of the four skills and flexibility across levels, and it presents a seven-step teaching routine. It then turns to translation, examining the main difficulties of translating picture stories, such as cultural differences in images, the partnership between text and picture, limited space and reading direction, rhyme and sound effects, text inside illustrations, names and wordplay, and the dual audience of child and adult reader. Finally, it highlights the rewards of this work: constant visual context, a protected story core, creative freedom, cultural bridge-building and value as a classroom translation activity. The article concludes that pictures remain a shared first language that connects learners, teachers and translators across cultures.

Key words: picture stories; visual communication; prehistoric art; origins of writing; early childhood language teaching; young learners; wordless picture books; children's literature translation; cultural adaptation; text-image relationship.

Before there were alphabets, dictionaries or grammar books, there were pictures. A person picked up a piece of charcoal or a lump of red ochre, touched it to a wall, and made a shape that another person could understand. No translator was needed and no one had to learn a vocabulary list. The picture itself was the message. After twenty years of teaching and translating, I am still struck by how often I return to this simple idea. When a six-year-old looks at a drawing of a boy chasing his hat down a windy street, she understands the story at once, even if she does not yet know the words boy, hat or wind in the language she is learning. In that moment she is doing what our ancestors did: reading meaning directly from an image. This article follows that thread. It begins with the first human pictures on cave walls and traces how drawing slowly turned into writing. It then asks why picture stories are such a powerful tool for teaching young children, and ends by looking at what makes picture stories both difficult and rewarding to translate. The oldest known human artworks are far older than any writing. In the Chauvet Cave in southern France, paintings of lions, rhinoceroses, horses and bears are around thirty thousand years old. The famous paintings at Lascaux, also in France, are roughly seventeen thousand years old, and the ceilings of Altamira in Spain were decorated in several phases tens of thousands of years ago. On other continents, the same impulse appears. In Cueva de las Manos in Argentina, hundreds of hand outlines were left on the rock by people who blew pigment around their own palms. In Australia, Aboriginal rock art preserves images that some researchers believe to be among the oldest continuous artistic traditions on earth. We cannot be certain what these images meant. Some may have recorded successful hunts or the movement of animal herds. Others may have been part of ritual, teaching or storytelling, perhaps performed by firelight with spoken words and songs that vanished long ago. What we can say with confidence is that these people understood something important: an image can hold a thought outside the human head and carry it across time and space. A handprint says "I was here." A painted herd says "this is what we hunt" or "this is what we fear and respect." A line of figures with spears tells a story of cooperation. These are not isolated decorations. They are early attempts at communication, and many of them are arranged in sequences or scenes that invite the viewer to read them in order, much like the frames of a

modern picture book. It is no accident that humans drew before they wrote. Seeing is one of our oldest and most powerful ways of understanding the world. A drawing of a horse does not require the viewer to know a specific language. It works for any person who has seen a horse. This is the great strength of pictures: they are iconic, meaning they resemble the thing they represent, and so they are understood with very little training.

Spoken language, by contrast, is arbitrary. There is no natural reason why the sound "horse" should mean that animal; in other languages the sounds are completely different. Words must be learned. Pictures, at least at the simplest level, can be recognized. Writing did not appear suddenly. It grew out of pictures through a long process of simplification and clever invention. Around 3400 to 3200 BCE, in the Mesopotamian city of Uruk, record keepers began pressing marks into clay to track goods such as grain, sheep and beer. Early signs were recognizable pictures: a head of grain, the head of an ox. Over time, scribes found it faster to make simplified wedge-shaped marks with a reed stylus, and the pictures slowly lost their resemblance to the objects. This became cuneiform. In Egypt, around the same time, hieroglyphs developed, and many of them remained beautifully pictorial for thousands of years. In China, the oldest well-documented characters, found on oracle bones from about 1200 BCE, still show their picture origins: the character for "sun" began as a circle with a dot, and the character for "mountain" as three peaks. A decisive step came when writers realized that a picture could stand not only for a thing but for a sound. This is called the rebus principle. Imagine you want to write the English word "belief" using only pictures. You could draw a bee and a leaf. The pictures no longer mean an insect and a plant; they represent sounds that, put together, make a new word. Ancient scribes used exactly this trick to write names and abstract ideas that are difficult to draw. Once pictures could represent sounds, the door to alphabets opened. Our own letter A is a distant descendant of an ox head: the Egyptian-inspired Proto-Sinaitic sign for an ox, called aleph, was turned on its side and gradually simplified until it became the letter we know. A picture became a sound, and a sound became a letter. This history is more than a curiosity. It means that every child learning to read repeats, in miniature, the journey of the human race. A very young child first understands pictures, then recognizes symbols such as logos and

signs, and only later learns to decode abstract letters and words. When a teacher uses picture stories, she is not lowering the standard or avoiding "real" language. She is building a bridge along the same road that humanity itself traveled: from image to symbol to word. Young children do not yet have the vocabulary, grammar or reading skill to handle long chains of abstract language. But they have powerful visual intelligence. They notice details in illustrations that adults overlook: the tiny mouse hiding in the corner, the color of a character's shoes, the shadow that suggests something is about to happen. Educational research supports what teachers have long observed. Allan Paivio's dual coding theory suggests that we store information in two linked systems, one verbal and one visual, and that learning is stronger when both are used together. Researchers also describe a "picture superiority effect": people tend to remember pictures better than words alone. A new word attached to a vivid image has two memory paths instead of one. This idea is not new. In 1658, the Czech educator John Amos Comenius published Orbis Pictus ("The World in Pictures"), often described as the first illustrated textbook for children. His belief was simple and revolutionary: children learn best when words are connected to images of real things. Seven benefits of picture stories in the classroom. First, Meaning is available from the first second. In a foreign-language classroom, one of the biggest barriers is that beginners cannot understand what the teacher is saying. Picture stories remove that barrier. The children can follow the narrative from the images, and the new words are learned inside a meaningful context rather than as isolated items on a list. Second, They invite every child to speak. Questions like "What do you see?", "Who is this?", "Where are they?" and "What will happen next?" can be answered at many levels. A beginner may point or say one word. A more advanced child may produce a full sentence or even a short explanation. Everyone has an entry point, and that sense of inclusion is powerful. Third, They develop prediction and thinking skills. When children look at the first pictures of a story and guess what will happen, they practice the strategies of skilled readers: predicting, checking, inferring and revising. They learn to read clues, such as a character's worried face or a dark cloud in the sky. These are thinking skills that transfer to every subject. Fourth, they reduce anxiety. A child who is afraid of making mistakes in a new language

can still take part by pointing, drawing, acting or arranging pictures in order. The pressure of "perfect" speech is lifted. For shy children or those who are new to the class, this can make the difference between silence and participation. Fifth, they connect language with emotion. Stories are not just collections of vocabulary; they are about feelings. A child who sees a character lose a favorite toy feels sad, and the word sad is anchored in that feeling. Emotionally linked words are remembered far longer than words memorized from a list. Sixth, they support the four skills together. One picture story can generate listening (the teacher tells it), speaking (children retell it), reading (they match captions to pictures) and writing (they create their own captions or an alternative ending). Few other materials link all four skills so naturally. Seventh, they are endlessly flexible. The same set of pictures can serve a three-year-old with five words and a ten-year-old writing a paragraph. The teacher changes the task, not the material. A special category deserves mention: the wordless picture book. Titles such as Mercer Mayer's A Boy, a Dog, and a Frog, or Shaun Tan's remarkable The Arrival, contain no text at all. The reader must construct the story entirely from the images. For language teachers, these books are a gift. They give children total freedom to describe the story in whatever words they have, and the same book will produce a different version from every child. A beginner may say, "Boy. Frog. Water." An older child may narrate a whole adventure with feelings and dialogue. The book grows with the learner. Over the years I have developed a simple routine that works for young learners in almost any context. It can be adapted for different ages and levels.

Step 1: Picture walk (before any language). Show the pictures one by one, with no text, and let the children talk. Ask open questions and accept every answer, including answers in the children's first language. The goal is engagement and curiosity, not correctness. Step 2: Pre-teach key vocabulary. Choose five to eight important words and teach them using the pictures, gestures and real objects. Keep the number small. Young learners can focus on only a few new items at a time. Step 3: Tell the story. Read or tell the story aloud, pointing to the pictures as you go. Use your voice: whisper for scary moments, speed up for chases, pause for suspense. Repeat important phrases so the children can join in. Step 4: Retell together. Ask the children to help you tell it again. They

supply words and phrases, and you build them into sentences. At this stage a refrain such as "Run, run, as fast as you can!" becomes a chorus the whole class chants. Step 5: Sequence the pictures. Give pairs or small groups a set of picture cards in mixed order. They arrange them to match the story and then retell it to a partner. This checks understanding without requiring written answers. Step 6: Act and create. Children act out the story, draw their favorite scene, write captions or invent a new ending. Creativity turns passive listeners into authors.

Step 7: Revisit. Return to the story on another day. Children love repetition, and each retelling deepens language without feeling like drill. This cycle moves from understanding to production, from teacher support to learner independence, and from picture to word, which is exactly the journey writing itself took. At first glance, translating a picture story seems like the easiest job in the world. There are few words, the pictures do half the work, and the vocabulary is simple. In reality, picture-story translation is a deceptively demanding craft. Here are the main difficulties I have met in my own work. We often say that pictures are an international language, and in a basic sense this is true. But images are full of cultural meaning. Colors, gestures, clothing, food, animals, houses and even the direction in which people walk can mean different things in different places. A white dress suggests a wedding in some cultures and mourning in others. A thumbs-up is friendly in many countries and offensive in a few. An owl is a symbol of wisdom in much of Europe, but in other regions it is associated with bad luck. A picture of a child sleeping on a bed with a pillow and blanket may look natural to one audience and strange to another, where families sleep on floor mattresses. A dish on a table, a type of school uniform or a style of greeting may need explanation or adaptation. The translator must therefore "read" the pictures with the eyes of the target audience and ask: Will a child in this culture understand this image the way the original child did? If not, the translator must decide whether to leave it, explain it in the text, or, if the publisher allows, ask for a change to the illustration. In a good picture book, the words and the pictures do different jobs. If the text says "The boy was very happy" and the picture shows a smiling boy, nothing is gained. The best books use the gap between the two. The text may say "Everything was fine," while the picture

shows a flood rising behind the characters. The humor, irony or tension comes from the contrast.

The translator must protect this relationship. A translation that explains too much can destroy the joke. A translation that changes a key word may no longer match what the picture shows: if the original says "the red ball" and a natural translation uses a general word, the child may look at the picture and see a mismatch. Every word has to be checked against the image on the page. Picture-book pages are carefully designed. Speech bubbles, captions and text boxes have fixed sizes. Languages differ greatly in length: a sentence in English may become 30 percent longer in German or Russian, and shorter in Chinese. The translator cannot simply write what is most natural; the translation must also fit. Direction of reading adds another layer. Arabic, Hebrew and Persian are written right to left, and in many such editions the entire book is mirrored so that the first page appears where the last page would be in an English book. This means the pictures themselves, with their compositions and characters moving left to right to suggest forward motion, may need to be flipped. When a character walks "forward" in the original, she may walk in the opposite direction in the mirrored edition, and the translator or editor must be aware of what that does to the meaning. Picture stories for young children are written to be read aloud. They are full of rhyme, rhythm, repetition, alliteration and sound effects. These features are what make children giggle, chant and ask for "again!" And they are among the hardest things to translate. Consider onomatopoeia. A dog says "woof" in English, but "gav-gav" in Russian, "vov-vov" in Uzbek and "hav hav" in Turkish. A rooster says "cock-a-doodle-doo" in English and "kikeriki" in German. A translator who keeps the English sound would confuse children who expect their own language's version. Rhyme is even tougher. A rhyming couplet cannot be translated word for word, because the rhyme will almost certainly vanish. The translator must recreate the verse: finding new words that rhyme in the target language, while keeping the meaning close enough to match the pictures. This is closer to writing a new poem than to translating a sentence, and it demands real creativity. Many illustrations contain written words: shop signs, newspaper headlines, letters, labels on jars, graffiti on a wall, a note pinned to a door. These words are part of the story, and sometimes they hold

crucial clues or jokes. But they are part of the artwork. To translate them, someone must redraw or retouch the illustration, which costs money and may not be permitted by the illustrator or the rights holder. The translator then faces a choice: leave the foreign text in the picture and add a note, translate it in the main text, or request a modified illustration. There is no perfect answer, and the decision often depends on the budget and the importance of the detail. Characters in children's books often have names that carry meaning or humor: a clumsy bear called "Mr. Bumble," a clever fox named "Sly." Should the name be kept, translated or replaced? If the name carries meaning, keeping it may lose the joke; if it is translated, the character may sound foreign to the original fans. Puns and jokes that depend on English sounds usually cannot be transferred, and the translator must find a new joke that fits the same picture. Finally, the translator has two audiences at once: the child, who needs simple, vivid, age-appropriate language, and the adult reading aloud, who needs text that is smooth and pleasant to say many times. Sentences must be short enough for a small child to follow and natural enough that they do not sound like "translationese." Reading the translation aloud, ideally to a real child, is the most reliable test. After so many difficulties, a reader might think this work is a headache. In fact, it is among the most satisfying kinds of translation. Here is why. The pictures provide constant context. In a long, abstract text, a translator may struggle to understand an ambiguous word. In a picture story, the illustration usually settles the question. If the word could mean "bat" the animal or "bat" the sports item, the picture shows which one. This reduces guesswork and error. The core of the story is protected. Whatever happens to the words, the plot, characters and emotions remain visible in the pictures. The translator is working with a secure foundation, and a child who cannot understand every word can still follow the story. There is room for creativity. Because the text is short, each word matters, and the translator has freedom to find a fresh rhyme, a playful sound, a rhythm that dances. Creating a delightful line in the new language, one that makes a child laugh as the original does, is deeply rewarding. Picture books are bridges between cultures. A translated picture book lets children meet characters, landscapes and customs from other parts of the world while feeling safe, because the pictures make the unfamiliar approachable. A child in

Tashkent can enjoy a story from Norway or Japan, and that first friendly encounter with "other" can build curiosity and respect for years to come. They are a wonderful teaching tool for translation itself. In the classroom, comparing the same picture story in two languages is a rich activity. Older learners can ask: Why did the translator change this word? Why does the rhyme work here and not there? What happened to the joke? They can try translating a few captions and discover how many choices even a simple sentence contains. This builds language awareness, cultural sensitivity and appreciation for the translator's craft. From the painted walls of ancient caves to the colorful books in a modern kindergarten, pictures have been humanity's first shared language. They were there before the alphabet, and they gave birth to it. When a teacher opens a picture book for a group of small children, she continues a tradition thirty thousand years old: telling stories through images.

For young learners, this tradition remains the gentlest and most effective way into a new language. Pictures give meaning, confidence and joy, and the words grow naturally from them. For translators, picture stories are a delicate challenge. They demand attention to culture, sound, space and the subtle dance between text and image. But when it is done well, the reward is great: a child in another country opens a book and feels the same wonder as the child for whom it was first made.

Perhaps that is the deepest lesson of picture stories. Words divide us into many languages, but pictures remind us that we all begin in the same place, looking at the world, wanting to understand it and wanting to share what we see.

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