CHILDREN'S PLAYS AND ILLUSTRATIONS: EMBODIMENT RESOURCES FOR READING PRACTICES

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Abstract

This paper aims at enlightening the role played by illustrations in the reading of plays as means to an improved meaning assessment. Looking at the pictures, students are asked to perform, through improvisation, what is depicted in the image. This way, they engage in a mode of embodied reading that drives a new range of clues for constructing textual meaning. Students not only rely on internal processes to elaborate on the text's meaning but attain to bodily experiences to achieve a personal understanding of the plot, thus arguing for the relevance of "embodied cognition" and "embodied pedagogy" as core concepts.

Keywords: illustrations; plays; embodiment; reading; interpretation.

1 INTRODUCTION

Digital environment and new technological products have moved the educational debate on to the multimodal education level (Hassett & Curwood 2009), centering on multimodal texts, namely picture books and digital material, recognizing the demand on new practices of reading. The arrive of the digital, with its own selections and displays, has emphasized how much literacy relies on the many features of communication, taking up an improved relation with texts and a wide range of representational modes (Hassett & Curwood 2009: 270). The definition of "multimodal literacy instruction" combines textual modes with sociocognitive reading processes, with the concept of "multimodal" even applying to children themselves: "children have always been multimodal; their social and cultural resources for making meaning include talk, gesture, drama, drawing, and ways of incorporating, integrating, and extending linguistic signs" (Hassett & Curwood 2009: 271). Taking children, education, literacy and reading as multimodal is surely a challenge that enforces the complexity of learning and how we all relate to knowledge. If one takes multimodal education seriously, one shall promptly recognize how much teachers rely on new methodologies and didactic paths on a daily basis.

Fostering the debate on multimodal texts, Walsh (2006) establishes "multimodal texts are those texts that have more than one 'mode' so that meaning is communicated through a synchronisation of modes. That is, they may incorporate spoken or written language, still or moving images, they may be produced on paper or electronic screen and may incorporate sound" (1). Picture books are, though, one example of a multimodal text. The process of reading these books unfolds differently when compared to the reading of a print-based text. The combination of words with images prescribes new paths for interpretation, for meaning must be inferred from temporally driven decoding (verbal decoding) and also from spatial driven decoding (image decoding). These two different paths of communication must be processed, analyzed, and combined (6). Therefore, reading a picture book involves mainly finding strategies to combine words and images to infer meaning, also manageable in terms of our personal knowledge of the world. Nevertheless, we must add that in some cases the relationship between words and images is fuzzy and elusive, in the sense that, at least to a certain extent, words and images are caught up in contradiction.

When examining the role of illustrations in literacy, a first point to be made concerns how illustrations relate to the text. Fang (1996) is able to systematize a set of possible interactions between illustrations and text: a) illustrations help to "establish setting", clarifying time and space information; b) characters are also defined and developed through illustrations, since they depict the characters' attitudes and emotions; c) illustrations can "extend or develop the plot", adding details or even elaborating on the events, amplifying, for instance, their consequences; d) illustrations can offer the reader a different viewpoint on the plot, one that does not coincide completely with the one from the text; e) textual coherence also relies on illustrations to the extent that the depicted elements coincide with the text's;

f) illustrations can underline textual meaning, restating the plot (131-136). To sum up, illustrations are not merely a matter of repeating the literary elements of the text, but are prone to contribute to new interpretations and personal points of view (Ramos 2007: 221).

Rambusch and Ziemke (2005) assert for the importance of viewing learning also as an embodied experience, in order to overcome the learner's separation from contextual aspects (1803). In fact, learning should be acknowledged as an integral human experience. They emphasize the role of mimicry, imitation and gestures in embodied cognition. Accordingly, mimicry and imitation "are significant for social relations as they help people connect, making it possible for them to communicate and to understand each other" (1805), and gestures "not only *reflect* learning, but to a considerable degree also *contribute* to it" (1806). Therefore, the sociocultural dimension of embodied cognition assumes an important role in literacy, in general, and in reading, in particular.

As a further development on embodied cognition, the concept of "embodied pedagogy" is taking the lead in the context of drama and theatre education (Perry & Medina 2011): "Embodiment in performative pedagogical practices, we maintain, describes teaching and learning in acknowledgement of our bodies as whole experiential beings in motion, both inscribed and inscribing subjectivities. That is, the experiential body is both a representation of self (a "text") as well as a mode of creation in progress (a "tool")" (63). Embodiment also entails a relational body responding to environmental conditions and stimulus. Within a performative pedagogy the body shall assume a center role in learning, as much as pedagogical experiences depend on its awareness and engagement.

This paper addresses the functional relationship between children's plays and the illustrations accompanying them in a corresponding book edition, in terms of its consequences for reading skills and embodiment paths to be explored at school. Although we take a specific genre as case study, we aim at enlightening some aspects of the discussion around the more general dynamics between text, illustrations and child reader (Fang 1996; Nicholas 2007; Jalilehvand 2012).

In the case of children's plays, illustrations can be interpreted and used as leading clues to a first *mise-en-scène* imagined by the reader. The reader, by a well oriented effort of imagination, will thus articulate the different elements depicted to compose the scenery, and to grasp the characters' interaction on stage, enhanced by light and sound effects, even if only imagined. In this way, the plot will be set in motion by the reader, i.e. it will unfold in synchrony with the reading (Pinto 2009). This role of illustration as a stimulus to the imagination acquires special relevance when applied to the first stages of reading development, stages 1, 2 and 3 (Indrisano & Chall 1995).

At the present time, the lack of children's plays with illustrations in the Portuguese book market, and elsewhere, comes as an unpleasant surprise, for they are quite hard to find, even at the main bookstores. Unfortunately, this genre, in particular, seems to contradict the dominant trend of the leading role of illustration in children's literature. Looking from an historical perspective, one is keen to remember, for example, the first edition of *Comédies et Proverbes*, by the Comtesse de Ségur, in 1865, profusely illustrated by Émile-Antoine Bayard. In the book, the illustrations show important scenes of the plays, and they tend to underline the expressions, feelings and states of mind of the characters. They also help contextualizing the dialogues, mainly in terms of space, and how characters behave when sharing it.

Baring this in mind, we have selected three Portuguese children's plays, with illustrations, used at different learning levels: *Teatro às Três Pancadas* [*Theatre with Three Punches*] (2013), by António Torrado, and illustrated by António Pilar, read at the 4th grade of primary school; *O Príncipe Nabo* [*The Turnip Prince*] (2000), by Ilse Losa, and illustrated by Manuela Bacelar, read at the 5th grade, already in the second cycle of basic education; and *Os Piratas* [*The Pirates*] (1997), by Manuel António Pina, read at the 6th grade of the same cycle (in this particular case, 'illustrations' refers to scenery and costume sketches).

In these plays the illustrations, quite different from one another, help the reader transposing the plot to the world of the theatre, promoting an embodiment of the text well beyond the typical relation with the printed page (Pinto 2009), thus sustaining many advantages for textual comprehension and interpretation. In other words, illustrations maximize the effect of a text claiming for scenic consequences and accomplishments.

2 THE PLAYS

2.1 Os Piratas [The Pirates]

In *Os Piratas* [*The Pirates*] (1997), by Manuel António Pina, a play in nine scenes, the characters, two teenagers, Manuel and Ana, and Manuel's mother, are caught up in a time thread, with events from the past interfering with the present in such a way as to make dream and reality collide. For example, the captain of the pirates is nothing more than a shadow with a voice, bringing fear and weariness still. On the other hand, until the end of the play, we cannot either be sure of Manuel's identity. What the reader knows for sure is a shipwreck took place some time ago, and Manuel keeps a red pirate scarf nobody knows where it came from. The present tempest allows for shipwreck memories to come alive, and suddenly its tragic events return to haunt Manuel and Ana.

In the case of this book, as pointed out before, illustrations concern scenery and costume sketches. So, after the text of the play, the reader can find first all the information concerning the show staged by Pé de Vento [Wind Foot] Theatre Company, with the cast enlisted. Then, there is a black and white sketch of the scenery made for the mentioned show (Fig. 1).

Figure 1: *Os Piratas* [*The Pirates*], Manuel António Pina 1997, p. 47.

The sketch essentially depicts the space of the attic, as a privileged space, where, in fact, dream and reality are drawn together. Nevertheless, there is a path and a small staircase linking the attic to the surroundings. As the attic lacks in construction details and refinements, its condition as an exceptional space becomes even more obvious.

Next, there are three colored sketches "illustrating" the costumes worn by Manuel's mother, Ana, and Manuel himself. The costumes are unpretentious but as much as Ana's reveals elegance Manuel's mother and Manuel's display simplicity. After that, the reader is presented with four photographs from the show by Pé de Vento [Wind Foot]. The photographs refer to different moments of the plot, conveying the time shift that allows for the plot to unfold, entangled between the attic and the rest of the house. Henceforth, the images document the show, constituting an archive display. But they can also help the reader pull together on his own a setting and a mood for the plot. Besides that, the characters' imagery also becomes a more direct matter, when materialized through the photographs.

On the other hand, we argue the play would benefit from a set of illustrations not targeting for imagery concreteness but instead for giving an account of the unsettling condition of the attic as a space for untold secrets and uncertainty; for reviewing present and past interchanges, and how much they affect Manuel and Ana's perception of the events; for questioning to what extent is uncertainty bearable, since it can even affect one's identity, etc. In this particular case, for the plot cannot be simply described by a sequence of events, illustration could claim a major role in terms of helping the reader understand the complexity of what is conveyed. The reader would, then, come to terms not mainly with events but concepts instead.

2.2 O Príncipe Nabo [The Turnip Prince]

The Turnip Prince (2000) by Ilse Losa, with illustrations by Manuela Bacelar, is divided into three acts, with two illustrations for each act.

The plot develops between two universes, with two distinct groups of characters emerging, the rich and the poor. The king wishes to find a prince to marry his daughter princess Beatriz. But she mocks all the princes wanting to marry her. As a result, she will end up marrying the first man entering the palace, obeying her father in this manner. This unknown man turns out to be the last prince Beatriz had rejected, and comes disguised as a humble musician. The Turnip Prince teaches Beatriz a great lesson as he makes her realize we must accept others as they are, and appreciate the beauty that surrounds us.

Lingering for a little on the cover of the book, we find several curious aspects of antithetical nature in comparison with the title. So, if the title makes us think of a text of oral literature, the illustration, however, takes us into the world of puppet theatre, displaying a hand operating several characters, with the puppeteers widely visible. The characters are still, waiting for the reader to disclose a fresh new life for them.

On the whole, the illustrations help the reader setting a context, since they depict scenery clues. Keeping in mind the specific genre we are dealing with, information concerning the scenery is critical for an imaginary staging of the text. Another common feature between the illustrations is the repetition of elements already present in the cover, namely the reference to the puppet theatre and the use of contrasting colors (grey, on one side, and yellow, orange and green, on the other side). The illustrator combines different techniques, making also use of collage. This variety enforces the aesthetical dimension of the illustrations presented. So, the book results rather exuberant, with the illustrations asserting for a joyful world of make believe. More than appealing to the staging process itself, the play and its illustrations put in evidence the power of imagination. On that account, the reader is invited to explore his own imagination, entering a world of puppets, color and nature's glimpses.

Interestingly, in the third illustration of the book (Fig.2), some elements are added in relation to the text, nevertheless helping the staging of the play.

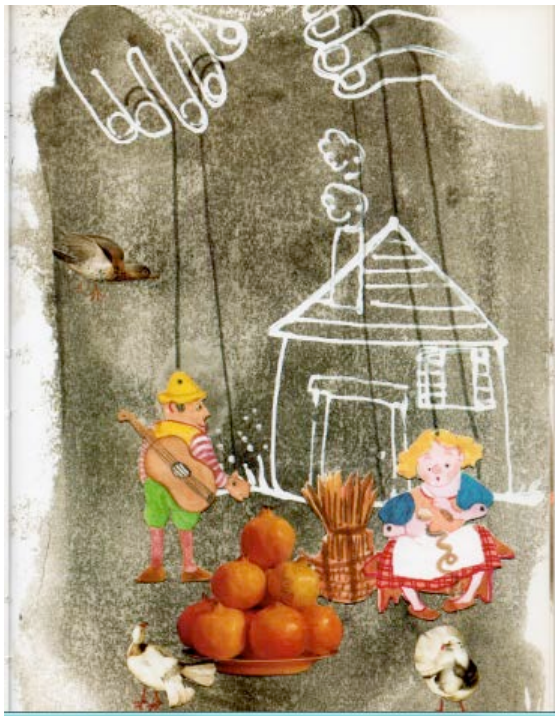

Figure 2: *O Príncipe Nabo* [*The Turnip Prince*], Ilse Losa 2000, p.31.

There, we can see the princess, without her crown, peeling potatoes, and on her side an unfinished wicker basket, remembering us of the princess's wasted effort trying to cope with the domestic tasks of her new life. Despite the reference of the stage direction to a basket of potatoes, the illustrator chooses to ignore it, and replaces it by a basket of pomegranates. In this sense, the illustration expands the plot and the staging possibilities, as it contemplates new signifying elements to build upon.

2.3 Teatro às Três Pancadas [Theatre with Three Punches]

The book *Teatro às Três Pancadas* [*Theatre with Three Punches*] (2012), by António Torrado, contains seven short plays that, according to the author, aim at satisfying teachers' needs related to appropriate plays for school staging (7). From these seven plays, only four are illustrated, in black and white, by António Pilar, with a single illustration each. We will address three of those illustrations in detail, describing and elaborating on how they relate to the text.

In *Serafim e Malacueco na Corte do Rei Escama* [*Serafin and Malacueco in King Scale's Court*], the first play of the volume, two vagrants, one thin (Serafin), the other one fat (Malacueco), end up in the court of King Scale due to the demands of their master, the Peg Leg Pirate. When they arrive in King Scale's island, they are almost immediately sent by the King and the Pirate to get lunch, but instead are magically pushed, allegedly by a tremendous fish, and, therefore, manage to return home safely as free men again.

The correspondent illustration depicts the last moment of scene one, when Serafin and Malacueco row under the command of the Pirate towards the King Scale's island. The two servants are poorly dressed, and they row without much conviction, talking, at the same time, about their misfortune. The pirate is standing at the prow, with his sword ready, pointing to the island. At the end of the page, a square shows us King Scale, a small man, wearing a funny joker hat, and stretching his arms.

The illustration does not convey a realistic approach to the plot, since it does not try to make the boat of Serafin, Malacueco and the Pirate, heading for the court of King Scale, coincide with the real world. In fact, it is quite the opposite, for the boat in the illustration is clearly not a real boat: it is supported by a big piece of wood, and it is moved by wheels and pushed by a rope. So, the illustration is all about the process of staging and the necessary stage props.

We should note the correspondence between the stage direction "Malacueco e Serafim tomam conta dos remos. O Pirata comanda, de pé, à proa" [Malacueco and Serafin are in charge of the paddles. The Pirate, standing at the prow, is in command.] (18). However, this direct correspondence does not always happen. For example, the reader is informed, by a particular stage direction, that the Pirate's house and the King Scale's isle are moved by roads, but the same is not said in relation to the boat. Instead, it is settled that "o barco fica no mesmo sítio" [the boat stays in its place] (19). In this case, the illustration seems to contradict the stage direction. These two opposing examples account for the discussion around the level of required accuracy between text and illustration, which gains a new insight in the case of children's plays, in particular, as we deal with a set of new images making way for a show.

A Raposa e o Corvo [*The Fox and the Raven*], the second illustrated play of the book, tells us how the Raven was deceived by the Fox that by praising him managed to escape with his cheese, leaving him with nothing. There is also a Narrator unveiling, to some extent, the sequence of events, and underlining the most important moments of the plot with a tambourine.

As before, the illustration (Fig. 3) concerns a particular moment of the plot, when the Fox, attracted by the smell of the cheese, approaches the Raven, standing high in a tree, and moving his wings with straightforward confidence.

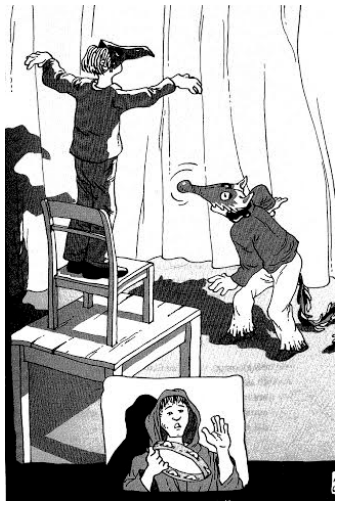

Figure 3: A Raposa e o Corvo [The Fox and the Raven] in Teatro às Três Pancadas [Theatre with Three Punches], António Torrado 2013, p. 41

Once again, we should note the correspondence between the illustration and the following stage directions: "O Corvo endireita-se, põe as mãos nas ancas e mexe os braços a fingir de asas, com ar insolente" [The Raven stretches, hands on the hips, moving his arms like wings, with a defying attitude] (39); "A Raposa vira-se para o Corvo, cheirando sempre o ar, cabeça de lado" [The Fox turns to the Raven, smelling the air, with her head to the side] (40). As with the last illustration, what is shown is the world of the stage: the Raven is standing up on a chair that has under it a table. The Fox is coming nearer the Raven, smelling the air with eagerness. The square at the end of the page presents the Narrator telling the story, enhanced by the tambourine's rhythm. Nevertheless, the illustration adds something of its own to the play, also contributing to the staging process, since the Fox and the Raven are wearing masks that emphasize their animal condition. This specific theatrical prop is not anywhere mentioned in the play.

In relation to *Os Quatro Pés do Trono* [*The Four Legs of the Throne*], we shall start by saying that the story revolves around the throne of a King that needs to be prepared and cleaned up for the next royal ceremony. Two noblemen are in charge of this task. At the end of it, they proudly show the King how much they have succeeded, as the throne is better than ever. Despite their enthusiasm, the King notes that a leg of the throne is not steady. Consequently, the throne is sent for repair. As the chief carpenter is on vacation, a learner takes the lead on this matter, trying to fix the throne several times in a role without succeeding. At the end of the play, the King, tired of the learner's incompetence, decides to attend the ceremony on a stool.

The illustration uses the comics' techniques, and, accordingly, a grid of panels accounts for the main events of the plot. The first panel entails the first stage direction, "Em cena, coberto por um lençol, está o trono do Rei" [On stage, covered by a sheet, is the King's throne] (93); the second panel corresponds to the second stage direction, "Entram dois cortesãos, um dos quais empunha um espanador e o outro um pano de pó. Gestos elegantes e cerimoniosos, a contradizer com as funções" [Two noblemen come in, one with a duster in his hand and the other with a dust cloth. Their gestures' are elegant and pompous, in opposition to the humble task they must accomplish] (93), and so forth. The small square at the end of the page reveals a tiny and quite simple stool, which is all the King ends up with. This illustration also adds something of its own to the text: the last panel shows an upset King, seating on a throne almost legless, and a carpenter's learner looking desperately for approval. Notwithstanding, in the play the learner only participates in a single scene, and once the throne is removed for repair he never comes in again.

This last illustration seeks to depict the plot differently, as it makes use of comics' techniques to display an overview of the sequence of events, focusing on the unsuccessful repetition of the learner's attempts to fix the throne, thus reflecting a misuse of time and labor.

The discussion around how illustration can relate to the play's meaning and its interpretation cannot be isolated from the main features involved in reading a play (Pinto 2009). In fact, plays bring a number of specificities into reading, and their interpretation follows from slightly different processes than the common narrative ones. A play requires the reader to reconstruct the general context framing the plot, one that, additionally, sets forth the mood for the sequence of events. In addition, the reader

must comply to the necessity of "envisioning" space, anchoring, with the direct help of the stage directions, the plot within an identifiable "where" and "When". When reading a play, space is the threshold for higher level processes, as information mapping concerning the character's location and place is essential for understanding and analyzing the plot. In comparison, a narration draws mainly on time information for its development, with the sequence (linear or not) of events undermining the role of space and location.

By introducing a dialogue situation, a play requires from the reader, more than narration, a set of decisions, and responses, towards the character's attitudes and intentions. For characters draw a course of action through the dialogue, the reader must attend to the close relationship between what the characters say and don't say. Here, the spoken word articulates with movement and gesture to endorse a set of desires and longings. When the character speaks, she does it amidst a scene based on the reader's collection of spatial and situational information. The reader is pushed into an intermediate world: not the stage itself, but not the bare printed page either, as if possible a scene come forth without a real stage. The reader must situate himself within this limbo, in order to fully grasp what is going on with all that dialogue. An extra effort is required to pull together a context placing the character's interests, motivations, attitudes and conditions. Without that level of setting, the reader will not be able to move forth to interpretation.

In addition, we shall make a point on how the reader assumes each of the character's voices as his own. In fact, when going through the text, he will be called upon to act on the character's behalf, enacting the dialogue along with reading, thus stating, paraphrasing, questioning, side by side with reading processes and strategies. One by one, the reader will take over the character's places, challenging, to a certain extent, his own voice and identity. In the end, it is like a game of otherness: to what extent can one dare to assume the other's voice without facing the risk of losing one's own? But that is a game a performer should be willing to play.

Summing up, the reader of a play has to engage with the characters and the plot in ways strange to narration readers, because a scene has to be displayed, and the voice of each character takes priority in relation to the reader's own. Consequently, in the context of a play, the reader becomes a performer in preparation (Pinto 2009: 2-3).

Combining plays and illustrations, the reader feels more at easy when engaging in the scene devising and the plot allocation. Through illustrations the reader has at his disposal an extra array of clues to accomplish the relevant reading tasks. In this case, the imagery to which he must comply to no longer relies exclusively on the printed page, but is, instead, supported by the visualization of the illustrations relating to it. So, illustrations endorse the reader's effort in displaying an intermediate level of fiction, one in which performance takes a lead as more than a mere possibility. Accordingly, plays with illustrations are an invitation to the reader's embodiment, since they are crucial for his engagement with the plot and the characters.

3 DRAMATIZING ILLUSTRATION

Considering concepts like "embodied cognition" (Rambusch & Ziemke 2005) and "embodied pedagogy" (Perry & Medina, 2011), we aimed at testing the hypothesis outlined above concerning the role of illustrations in the reader's embodiment when dealing with plays. Our main focus was to capture and describe a school experience on how illustrations could support the reading process, adding extra clues on which the reader could rely.

With this in mind, we conducted an intervention, namely an interview, comprising different phases, and the corresponding activities, in a school in the Lisbon area, with two students from the 4th grade of primary school, about two illustrations of *O Príncipe Nabo* [*The Turnip Prince*]. According to the stages of reading development ascribed in Indrisano and Chall (1995), the selected students are at the beginning of stage 3, when children start to use reading to expand their knowledge of the world.

We chose this text, only read at the 5th grade of basic education, and not *Teatro às Três Pancadas* [*Theatre with Three Punches*], read at the 4th grade, because we consider the plot of the plays included there too simple to assess reading achievements, and, in addition, we would only have at our disposal a play with a single illustration. So, in the whole, we came to think those limitations could represent serious constraints for the kind of school intervention we had in mind.

The interview, which took place in 9th of January 2014, was video recorded, by one of the authors of this article, and lasted about an hour. It must be added that the interviewed students had no prior

knowledge of *O Príncipe Nabo* [*The Turnip Prince*]. We contacted the teacher of the 4th grade of the school, and explained her we wished to record two students in a reading task. The teacher, then, selected the students on her own.

The interview was conducted at the school, in a small room used for medical assistance in another area of the school facilities, apart from the classrooms. We introduced ourselves to the students, with whom, as already explained, we had no acquaintance. Then, we said some brief words about the purpose of our presence there informing them we would be talking and debating about *O Príncipe Nabo* [*The Turnip Prince*], an illustrated play. After that, we asked if they had heard before of a story whose main character was the Príncipe Nabo [Turnip Prince]. The answer was negative.

The first phase of the intervention consisted in the students, a boy and a girl, presenting themselves stating, namely, their names and age (both are nine years old).

Secondly, they were faced with an illustration of *O Príncipe Nabo* [*The Turnip Prince*] depicting Princess Beatriz mocking one of the princes willing to take her as wife. The prince is standing, humble and respectful, in front of Beatriz, who is seating in an armchair. He is waiting for her to decide about the marriage proposal. Concerning this illustration, the students, that had not yet started to read the play, presented several hypothesis: the illustration referred to a court ceremony or festivity; the King, the Queen, the Princess, a Guest and a Jester were present; the Princess was trying to choose a husband; the Jester was doing his best to amuse the guests, etc.

After that, we asked them to perform what the illustration depicted. The room where the interview took place was not big, but it was enough to accommodate this kind of experience. So, the students, in a collaborative manner, performed a court ceremony, with the girl consistently playing the role of the Princess and the boy changing roles, between Prince, Servant and Jester. Only afterwards were they asked to read aloud the fragment of the play to which the illustration related. Therefore, they had the opportunity to acknowledge the degree of accuracy of their primer observations along with the reading.

The same steps were followed for the second illustration (Fig. 2), which, according to the two students, depicted a humble musician, as the husband of the princess, living with his mother in a farm. When considering the illustration's elements, the students relayed on previous knowledge of the story, stating that the portrayed musician was the man with whom the King had made his daughter marry. Hence, she had left the palace to embrace a different life, where comfort had given way to poor life conditions. Her mood was predictably changed, as she was no longer amused by court entertainments.

Once again, students performed what the illustration depicted. Doing this, they settled for a short dialogue between the musician and his mother, thus embodying the interaction between the two characters displayed in the illustration. The engagement of the two students in reproducing the illustration was quite striking, as they even tried to imitate the location of the characters in relation to each other within the space at disposal. After that, they read aloud the correspondent sequence of the text. At this moment, the students were checking the clues concerning text's meaning from the illustration but were also driven by their improvisation experience. So, in this case, a multimodal text was approached through a multimodal process of reading, one that comprehends a compound of verbal, iconographic and drama codes (Hassett & Curwood 2009; Walsh 2006).

It is important to call attention to the fact that when we asked the students to reproduce the illustration using improvisation they reacted positively, without much surprise, annoyance or disturb. Instead, they took it as a collaborative task, making the most of this interaction possibility. They promptly organized ideas together, sketching what they intended to do, and agreeing on the gesture signaling the end of the performance.

The positive impact of combining illustrations and plays on reading ability cannot be ignored, as it prompts readers, mainly those in the first stages of reading development (Indrisano & Chall 1995), to engage in a first imaginary staging of the plot, additionally promoting interpretation (Pinto 2009). Students were then lead into making connections, tangling over inferences, and establishing a nourishing correspondence between textual clues and prior knowledge of the world. Consequently, at school illustrated plays have the power to make interpretation a matter of performance, promoting the students' quest for an increasingly suitable interpretation. Embodied cognition, and the relevant concepts related to it, like imitation and gesture, proves well when it comes to reading practice and ability.

Alike Perry and Medina (2011), duelling with a pedagogical experience of their own (65-66), we also took drama and picture books together to enlighten the embodied dimension of the learning process. Notwithstanding, in our intervention student's interaction with the illustrations was prior to the reading of the text. Our methodology, thus, entailed illustrations, and the embodiment they could trigger, would be useful in a first contact with the plot, for the reading of the text afterwards would benefit from this first moment of embodied understanding. According to this point of view, elaborating on what the illustrations conveyed would enable the students to collect a first array of clues concerning the text's meaning, and, at the same time, would serve as preparation for the performative requirements of the text. So, differently from Perry and Medina (2011), for us improvisation was not a result of the reading process, but was intended as a preparation moment, devised as an embodiment opportunity to collect highly informative clues to use along the reading process.

The kind of pedagogical experience here described needs further testing and assessment, presenting itself, nevertheless, as a promising trend in the broader context of embodied pedagogy. Plays, illustrations and improvisation can prove well when considering the reader's skills in face of a growing and challenging number of multimodal texts (Hassett & Curwood 2009).

4 CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have addressed, in the context of a multimodal education model (Hassett & Curwood 2009), a new methodology concerning specifically the reading of illustrated plays, a type of multimodal text. We argued that the relationship between drama and illustration is a promising one in terms of reading achievements, at the higher level of interpretation, i.e., in terms of a well-suited final arrangement between the processing of different kinds of verbal clues and the assessment of visual codes, and mapping all that into a personal knowledge of the text. According to the adopted methodology, embodiment, through improvisation, played a major role, as the students bodily reproduced the plot's events displayed by the illustrations. This first moment of enactment was foreseen as an opportunity to collect meaningful clues for the next moment of the reading of the text. For that, we relied on the distinctive features of plays when compared with other genres (Pinto 2009), and on the importance of taking learning as a necessarily embodied experience (Perry & Medina 2011).

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