


Picture books and historical memory. Primary education students' reading responses

Berta Echeberria-Arquero 
Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), Spain
Corresponding author: berta.echeberria@ehu.es

Amaia Mariezkurrena Serrano 
Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), Spain
amaia.serrano@ehu.es

Iñigo López-Gazpio 
Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), Spain
inigo.lopez@ehu.es

Ursula Luna 
Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), Spain
ursula.luna@ehu.es

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Abstract


This study analyses the reading responses of 180 primary school students from the Basque Country following their engagement with the picture book *Mexique. A Refugee Story from the Spanish Civil War*. The students' responses, recorded on video, were transcribed and analysed using an open-source automatic speech recognition model based on Conformer-Transducer technology. These responses were categorised using an *ad hoc* tool designed to analyse the content of the textual data from the dialogues. The results reveal the students' ability to interpret the picture book and to establish links between its themes and their own life experiences, as well as with both historical and contemporary events. However, the responses show a limited depth and complexity in their reflections. Consequently, the study underscores the importance of systematically incorporating picture books into the classroom, fostering the literary-artistic competence, and critically addressing controversial topics such as the Spanish Civil War and historical memory.


Palabras clave: Picture books; literary competence; reading responses; historical memory; Primary school.

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Álbumes ilustrados y memoria histórica. Respuestas lectoras del alumnado de Educación Primaria

Berta Echeberria-Arquero 
Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), España
Autor de correspondencia: berta.echeberria@ehu.eus

Amaia Mariezkurrena Serrano 
Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), España
amaia.serrano@ehu.eus

Iñigo López-Gazpio 
Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), España
inigo.lopez@ehu.eus

Ursula Luna 
Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU), España
ursula.luna@ehu.eus

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Resumen

Este trabajo analiza las respuestas lectoras de 180 alumnos de Educación Primaria del País Vasco, tras la lectura del álbum ilustrado *Mexique, el nombre del barco*. Las respuestas, grabadas en vídeo, se han analizado a partir de la transcripción de diálogos mediante el modelo *open-source* de reconocimiento automático del habla basado en la tecnología *Conformer-Transducer*. Estas respuestas se han categorizado mediante una herramienta creada *ad hoc*, diseñada para analizar de manera exhaustiva el contenido de los diálogos. Los resultados evidencian una alta capacidad interpretativa por parte del alumnado, quienes logran establecer vínculos entre los contenidos del álbum y las experiencias vitales de sus propias vivencias, así como con acontecimientos históricos y actuales. Sin embargo, se detecta una carencia en cuanto al nivel de profundidad y complejidad de sus reflexiones. Se destaca, por tanto, la necesidad de incorporar de forma sistemática los álbumes ilustrados en el aula, fomentar la competencia literario-artística y abordar, desde una perspectiva crítica, temas controvertidos como la Guerra Civil y la memoria histórica.

Palabras clave: Álbumes ilustrados; competencia literaria; respuestas lectoras; memoria histórica; Educación Primaria.

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USING PICTURE BOOKS FOR MEDIATION IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

In recent times, pictures have come to play a dominant role in the communication of ideas and messages. Consequently, cultural memory has incorporated new expressive parameters drawn from cinema, photography and literature in order to move away from more canonical representational strategies (Quílez-Esteve, 2014), in which the visual element takes centre stage (Hirsch, 2021). The importance of pictures as a means of communication in today's world has led to a remarkable boom in all kinds of picture books, including those in the educational sector. In terms of their characteristics and their use, picture books have undeniable educational potential (Hanán-Díaz, 2007; Hoster-Cabo & Lobato-Suero, 2007): they offer the opportunity to capture students' attention (Lapeña-Gallego & Hidalgo-Rodríguez, 2017a); their interpretative flexibility, whilst complex (Nikolajeva, 2003; O'Neil, 2011; Sipe, 1998), enables the development of reflective and argumentative skills (Nodelman, 1989; Sipe, 1998); their length is suitable for use in the classroom (Colomer-Martínez, 2012) and for group reading activities; they help to develop reading conventions, as well as initial notions of metafiction (Silva-Díaz, 2005); they foster creativity and cognitive development (Galarraga-Arrizabalaga, 2018) and provide solutions and answers to current problems, as they are a socialising resource that connects readers with the collective imagination (Fernández-Tijero, 2016). Furthermore, they enable the identification of the multimodal characteristics specific to picture books (O'Neil, 2011; Fernández de Gamboa, 2023), as well as symbolic and metaphorical elements, whilst promoting literary-visual reading (Salisbury & Styles, 2012; Colomer-Martínez and Fittipaldi, 2012; Larragueta-Arribas, 2019; Jiménez and Parrado, 2022) and facilitating intertextuality and interdisciplinarity (Driggs & Sipe, 2007; Mendoza-Fillola, 1999; Vouillamoz-Pajaro, 2022).

Given the subject matter they address, they primarily explore themes related to the realities and situations of a diverse society (Centelles-Pastor, 2018; Diaz-Seoane et al., 2022), including sometimes stories that have been silenced (Amaro-Agudo and Navarro-Mateu, 2017) or taboo subjects, which allow these issues to be examined from a perspective that is both critical and inclusive. In this regard, picture books are a tool for literary, artistic and social education, given that both the text and the pictures are equally important (Senís, 2014). What is more, given the influence that reading picture books has on the development of children's personal identity and on their social and collective growth, they are a highly suitable resource for promoting multiculturalism. The two codes found in picture books help children to create – and even to question – narrative accounts of their experiences; their multimodal nature and versatility therefore make them a valuable resource for teachers in developing students' literary and artistic skills.

Although the picture book is a growing genre and there are well-informed and competent teachers working with it (González-Vázquez & Gutiérrez-Sebastián, 2024), its presence in pre-school and primary education in Spain remains restricted (Gil-Juan, 2012; Jiménez & Parrado, 2022), despite the existence of several teaching approaches based on picture books, as demonstrated by research conducted in Anglo-Saxon contexts (Arizpe and Styles, 2004; Pantaleo, 2009; Sipe & Brightman, 2009; Roche, 2015) and in the Hispanic-speaking world (Colomer-Martínez & Fittipaldi, 2012; Lozano, 2016; Galarraga-Arrizabalaga et al., 2023; Ruíz-Guerrero & Molina-Puche, 2018). All of them analyse their implementation based on the types of questions asked and activities proposed, gathering feedback from students in pre-school and primary education. The findings of the mediation sessions referred to in these studies indicate that the use of picture books elicited an emotional response in the participants, encouraging them to recount their own life experiences and compare them with the story of the fictional character. These analogies, in turn, revealed a high degree of empathy among the students towards the stories depicted in the picture books (Arizpe and Styles, 2004; Colomer-Martínez, 2012; Hansen, 2013) and even helped to shed light on the complex realities faced by some students (Arizpe, 2012).

However, most of the themes in the picture books chosen for these sessions revolve around children's life experiences, with a focus on friendship, mischief, imagination and bullying. There is also a selection of picture books that tackle pressing issues such as death, migration, stereotypes and prejudices

regarding social classes and cultures, as well as some relating to historical memory and human rights (Senosiain-Rodríguez & Gamarra-Ruiz-de-Larramendi, 2024; Lapeña-Gallego & Hidalgo-Rodríguez, 2017a; Luna et al., 2024).

PICTURE BOOKS AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The search for alternative resources to address controversial topics from the past and present in the classroom—such as historical memory and the Spanish Civil War—has been a challenging task due to the inherent complexity of the subject, the impact and controversy it continues to generate in today's society, and the lack of resources tailored to different educational levels. In this regard, literary resources such as picture books break with the academic/didactic approach that often leads to apathy among younger generations (Pighin, 2018) and encourage reflection and critical thinking about the past and the present (Encabo-Fernández et al., 2012; Ruíz-Guerrero & Molina-Puche, 2018, 2020; Tabernero-Sala & Colón-Castillo, 2023), due to their evident emotional value (Regueiro & García, 2020). Within this literary context, picture books have provided an opportunity to explore themes such as war (Ferreira-Boo, 2016, 2019; Lapeña-Gallego & Hidalgo-Rodríguez, 2017a, 2017b; Llorens-García & Terol-Bertomeu, 2015; Mociño-González, 2018; Oittinen & Roig, 2016; Roldán-Farrés, 2022; Ruíz-Guerrero et al., 2021; Ruiz-Guerrero & Molina-Puche, 2020).

As far as the Spanish Civil War is concerned, it can be considered a canonical theme that has been widely addressed in children's and young adult literature (LIJ, as per its Spanish acronym) from the Iberian peninsula, and which has been the subject of some exhaustive research and interpretation (Serrano-Mariezkurrena et al., 2024; Urzelai-Vicente, 2024). Despite this, the body of picture books on the Spanish Civil War is limited, and there are not many examples of works that deal with the subject, with the exception of, amongst others, *Gerrak ez du izenik* [War Has No Name] by Leire Bilbao and Maite Mutuberria; *Guernica* by Heliane Bernard and Olivier Charpentier; *Beroki gorria* [The Red Coat] by Patxi Zubizarreta; *Hari single bat* [A Fragile Thread] by Idoia Garzes and Leire Urbeltz; *Amonaren kea* [Smoke at Grandma's House] by Ane Ibañez and Dani Martirena; and *Anastasini zirkua* [Anastasini's Circus] by Miren Amuriza and Malen Amenabar.

To these we must add the picture book selected for this study, *Mexique. A Refugee Story from the Spanish Civil War* (also translated into Basque), by María José Ferrada, illustrated by Ana Penyas and published in 2020 by Eerdmans. This book is about the 456 children who, in May 1937, set sail from the port of Bordeaux bound for Mexico, fleeing the horrors of the Spanish Civil War (Garrido-Caballero, 2022). Those children who, taken in by the government of Lázaro Cárdenas, settled in the capital of Michoacán and came to be known as *Los niños de Morelia* (Payà-Rico, 2002). Spanning fourteen scenes rich in symbols and allusions to historical sources, this book explores issues such as forced migration, exile and war, as well as historical aspects of the Spanish Civil War. There are several teaching proposals based on this picture book aimed at primary education (Bel and Fita-Carretero, 2021; Jiménez-Martínez and Felices-de-la-Fuente, 2021), although they do not include the students' responses or reactions after reading it.

To address this need, therefore, we propose a study based on an analysis of the responses given by primary education students after reading the picture book *Mexique. A Refugee Story from the Spanish Civil War*. This study aims at assessing the participating students' interpretative skills from a literary perspective, as well as their ability to make connections between passages from the text, their own life experiences, and their knowledge of historical and current events. The reading of this picture book forms part of the GATAI project at Universidad del País Vasco (UPV/EHU) (Luna et al., 2024), in which students on the Bachelor's Degree in Primary Education at the Faculty of Education, Philosophy and Anthropology design and implement a teaching session based on the reading of a picture book that addresses a controversial topic, such as historical memory. This session, aimed at students in Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 of primary education, aims at developing literary and civic skills.

METHOD

This is an evaluative study employing a mixed-methods approach, as it combines quantitative responses—categorised according to dimensions and sub-dimensions, broken down by levels of development—with qualitative data, enabling us to analyse the content of the responses provided by primary education students.

Participants

Four schools in the Basque Country took part in the project, selected for their methodological diversity and socio-cultural context. At these schools, nine groups read *Mexique. A Refugee Story from the Spanish Civil War* (2017), meaning that 180 students took part in reading and discussion activities based on the story from which 114 responses were collected.

Instruments

From the total number of responses collected, those relating to the literary aspect were selected during the part of the session devoted to reading the picture book chosen for this study. To analyse and categorise the responses, we used a modified version of the *Visual Journeys* tool (Fittipaldi, 2012), which was redesigned to suit our research context and in line with our objectives. The result is a tool organised into four main dimensions and subdivided into specific categories related to their content (table 1).

Table 1

Dimensions for categorising responses

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Description
D1_Referential	D1.1_Cover	The cover consists of the following elements: characters, actions and the setting in which they take place
	D1.2_Title	Title of the work
	D1.3_Narrator	Narrator's voice
	D1.4_Book's topic	Topics covered in the story
	D1.5_Mediator's topic	Topics suggested by reading mentors
	D1.6_Characters' feelings	Feelings and emotions experienced by the characters
	D1.7_Characters' actions	Specific actions or situations involving the characters
	D1.8_Book reviews	How do they rate the book overall?
	D1.9_Tastes in book	Whether or not they liked the book
D2_Compositional	D2.1_Meanings	Meaning of a word, expression or phrase
	D2.2_Picture colour	Book/specific scene colour
	D2.3_Visual element	A specific visual element or illustration technique
	D2.4_Scene	Specific action
D3_Intertextual and intercultural	D3.1_Intertextual	Texts, quotations, slogans, mottos or literary works
	D3.2_Artistic and cultural representations and expressions	Other artistic and cultural expressions or representations
	D3.3_Social channels	Channels for the dissemination, transmission or sharing of cultural representations
D4_Personal	D4.1_Personal perception	What he/she thinks or feels about the events described
	D4.2_Personal experience	Life experience and connection to the events described

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Description
	D4.3_ An upcoming life experience	Experiences of those close to the person and their connection to the events described

Note: Author's calculations based on Fittipaldi (2012).

Furthermore, the total number of responses, classified by dimension, has been categorised according to the following four interpretative levels: NI1: Does not know how to answer/does not address the question asked; NI2: Identifies; NI3: Relates; NI4: Reflects. To make it easier to interpret the data and the results, each student's response has been coded using a numbering system; we refer to students' responses as "R01" or the corresponding number, and use the code "ML" for questions or comments made by the reading mediator. In addition, the year group to which the students belong has been indicated using "EP4", "EP5" and "EP6". Schools where lessons are organised by cycle have been identified using the codes "EPC2" and "EPC3".

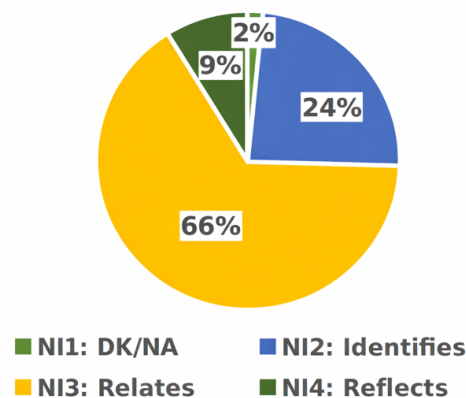
Procedure

The reading and discussion of the selected book took place during a one-and-a-half-hour session in the classroom with the primary education students. It should be noted that the book had not been read in any of the classrooms before. The sessions were designed and delivered by 19 trainee teachers on the Primary Education degree programme at the Faculty of Education, Philosophy and Anthropology at UPV/EHU. During the session, there was a reading aloud of the picture book *Mexique. A Refugee Story from the Spanish Civil War* (2017), followed by a group discussion based on Chambers' (2007) DIME strategy and open-ended questions relating to textual and visual elements in various scenes from the book.

The sessions were recorded on video. An open-source automatic speech recognition model based on Conformer-Transducer technology was used to transcribe dialogues in Basque; this is a re-optimised variant of the autoregressive model developed by Gulati et al. (2020), re-trained using 804 hours of data recorded in Basque. This model enables the precise and efficient alignment of spoken content with its textual representation. To facilitate the subsequent categorisation of the text, we used a suite of Python-based machine learning tools and the scikit-learn library ecosystem (Raschka et al., 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The responses received – 114 in total – have been analysed on the basis of the dimensions set out in the tool, according to their level of interpretation. These results show (Figure 1) a clear predominance of responses at interpretative level 3, or relational type (n=75; 65.8%), followed at a considerable distance by those at level 2, which demonstrate a basic degree of interpretation and identification (n=27; 23.7%). Conversely, the responses requiring more careful consideration—those in category 4—were far fewer (n=10; 8.8%). Finally, it should be noted that on only two occasions were the students unable to answer the question asked or to comment on the topic (n=2; 1.7%).

Figure 1*Response results grouped by interpretative level*

As far as the dimensions are concerned, the first two have attracted a very similar number of responses: D1_Referential (n=42; 36.8%) and D2_Compositional (n=40; 35.1%). For its part, D4_Personal (n=28; 24.6%) accounted for approximately a quarter of all the comments analysed. Far behind are the responses relating to D3_Intertextual and intercultural (n=4; 3.5%).

Reader responses to the Referential Dimension (D1)

Of the 42 responses analysed in this first dimension, the majority reflect a basic level of interpretation of the narrative elements (NI2: n=20; 47.6%). Close behind are those that demonstrate students' reading ability to explore topics in depth and make connections between what they read and what they already know (NI3: n=17; 40.5%). Furthermore, only five of the responses demonstrated thoughtful, well-developed reasoning that indicated a clear stance on their views (NI4: n=5; 11.9%).

In addition to categorising the responses according to their interpretative level, we consider it equally important to provide some examples of the types of responses gathered under these categories and in relation to the sub-dimensions established for their analysis.

In most sub-dimensions, the responses demonstrate a basic level of interpretation, as well as a relational understanding. As regards the cover (D1.1), for example, whilst some people see only people waving or on a boat, others suggest that these people might be demonstrating or celebrating a potential victory.

Picture 1

Cover



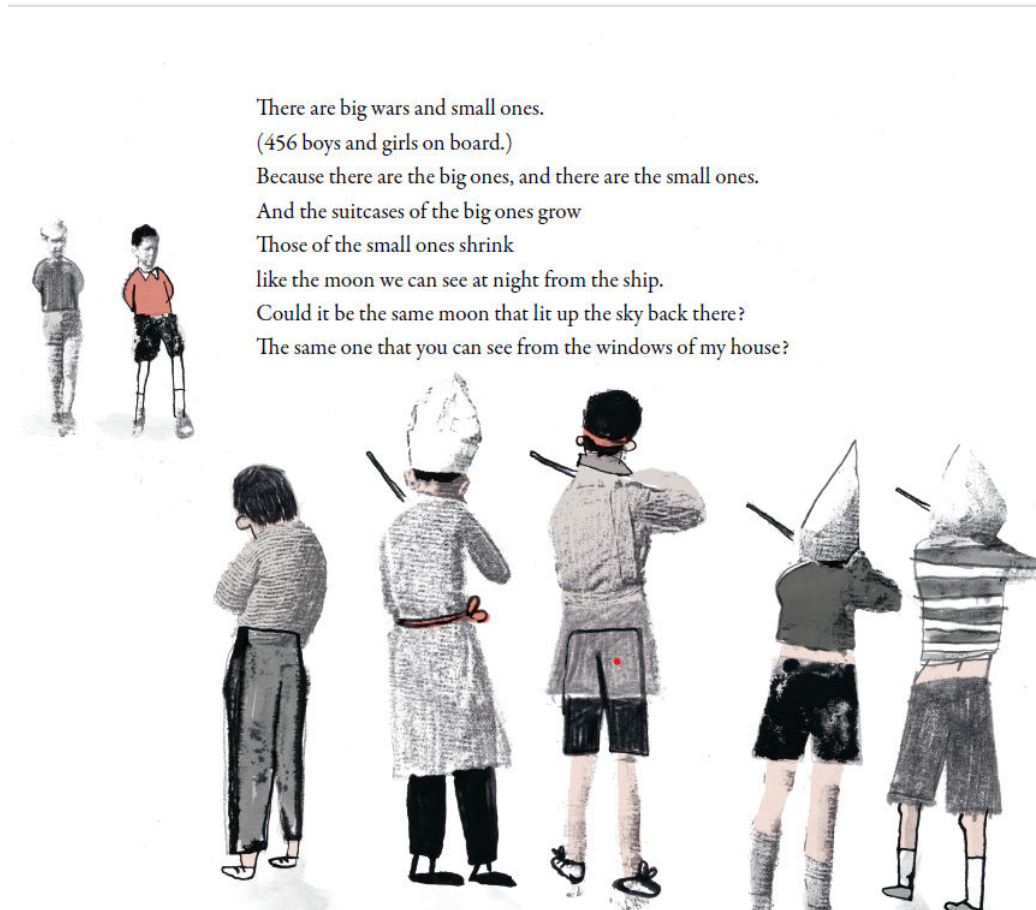
With regard to the narrator's voice (D1.3), whilst one student simply notes the presence of a single narrator, another links it to a girl or boy travelling on the ship. As regards the topics, there are certain differences between those identified by the students (D1.4) and those suggested to them by trainee teachers (D1.5): whilst the former stem from the connections the students themselves make when reading the picture book (fear, sadness or the horror of war), those proposed by the mediators involve superficial interpretative responses that reproduce phrases from the work verbatim ("the republic is a house" [R01EP4]; "Morelia is a colour" [R02EP4]). That said, it should be noted that the theme of exile has been highlighted both by the students ("it's about refugees" [R03EPC3]) and by those guiding the reading. And it was on this occasion that, when asked whether they understood what exile meant, they not only answered in the affirmative but also linked it to the idea of not returning, and speculated on the reasons for this ("they didn't have the money to go back" [R04EP4], "everything was in ruins in their villages" [R05EP4], "their relatives had died" [R06EP4]).

As for the characters, responses at a basic interpretative and relational level have also been observed. On the one hand, those relating to their feelings (D1.7), which the students have identified (sadness, calm) and linked to the reasons that may have caused them (being separated from their families and leaving the war behind). On the other hand, those relating to specific actions performed by them (D1.8). The execution scene, for example, although misinterpreted by some who believed that children were being executed, has widely been identified as a game. As well as noting that "children play at what they see and do" [R07EPC3], one student accurately points out that this is a re-enactment of the Spanish Civil War

(“they’re playing, and some are Republicans and are being shot by the Francoists, who are on the opposing side” [R08EPC3]).

Picture 2

A scene of children playing at shooting



The scene featuring the characters in the epilogue elicits responses which, on the one hand, are limited to simply identifying them (“people standing up” [R09EP6]) and, on the other, go beyond this, attributing to them a meaning linked to the events narrated (“they are the presidents, the ones who won the war” [R10EP6]; “they are the winners of the war, the nationalists”¹ [R11EP6]) or expressing opinions or value judgements that reveal their stance towards them (“they are bad, but not all of them because there is a nun who is a woman and cannot go to war” [R12EP4]).

Picture 3

Epilogue scene



Responses indicating a reflective level of interpretation (NI4), with the exception of the previous example, correspond to sub-dimensions D1.8 and D1.9. These comments included those relating to an overall assessment of the book (“it’s a very sad story because you have to leave your home and be separated from your parents” [R13EPC3]) and to the aspects that the students particularly disliked (“the bombings reminded me of Guernica and it’s very hard for me because most of my family are from there” [R14EP5]). As we can see, both examples selected demonstrate a high degree of empathy.

However, in these last two sub-dimensions, in addition to reflective responses, negative assessments and comments have been recorded at level 2 (“what I liked least was the shotgun” [R15EP5], “I don’t like the bombs” [R16EP5]) and level 3 (“the war story is a very harsh one” [R17EPC2]).

Finally, it should be noted that, with regard to question D1.2, only answers demonstrating a basic level of interpretation have been included. The students have therefore identified it by the name of the country itself, as well as by the name of the ship, as reflected in the title of the picture book itself: *Mexique. A Refugee Story from the Spanish Civil War*.

Reader responses to the D2_Compositional Dimension

This section consists of 40 questions. None of them revealed any complex interpretation that would suggest a stance resulting from deep reflection (NI4: n=0). On two occasions, the students did not know how to answer the questions asked (NI1: n=2, 5%). Seven were classified as level 2 (NI2: n=7, 17.5%) and 31 as level 3 (NI3: n=31, 77.5%).

As we have just seen, almost 80% of the responses demonstrate a relational interpretation between the compositional elements of the picture book and what their reading has suggested to them. They have focused primarily on the images and the various visual and technical aspects of illustration that make them up (D2.3). On the one hand, they have referred to flowers as a symbol of calm (“they bring peace of mind, which is why they appear on bedspreads whilst people sleep” [R18EPC3]), as well as to suitcases and a raised fist. The last two have been open to multiple interpretations, without any of them having a single,

unambiguous meaning. They believe that the suitcases could symbolise war, family, or the thoughts and emotions experienced by the protagonists, or, more generally, convey a sense of sadness. As for the raised fist, whilst it is often highlighted as a sign or symbol of something, opinions differ as to its meaning: “it means to win” [R19EP4], “it is a sign of sadness” [R20EPC3], “it means war and struggle” [R21EPC2].

On the other hand, most interpretations of the image have focused on colour (D2.2), and in particular on the predominance of red in the story (n=11). Several responses link it to blood, war, fear, anger and grief. Others, on the other hand, attribute to it the traditional meaning of love and even associate it with positive emotions such as joy. Although, at first glance, this might seem like a misguided interpretation or one that strays from the story of the book, it makes sense when we consider certain comments that link its use to the characters whom the child characters love or show affection towards: “Red is a tribute to those who die in war and their families” [R22EP5] or “the ship’s carers are in red because they look after them well” [R23EP5]. Nor should we be surprised that they associate it with joy, given that they link the colour red to values such as solidarity, help or cooperation (“the smoke from the ship is red because it means help” [R24EP5] or the carers look after them [R25EP5]) or with a hopeful vision of the future that awaits them (“the best things happen to the children on the boat; they have a bright future ahead of them because they are going to live” [R26EP5]). Similarly, some responses link the use of the colour red to the illustrator’s intention to highlight or draw attention to something specific (“she uses red to emphasise the importance of the ship’s crew” [R27EP5], “the train is important, and the red smoke helps us focus on it and show that it’s leaving” [R28EP5]). In addition to red, they mentioned black, grey and the use of black and white, linking all of these colours to sadness and noting that their use evokes something “from a long time ago” [R29EP4].

Although, as we have already noted, most of the responses that demonstrated a relational level of interpretation referred to the illustrations or visual elements of the image, some referred to aspects of the text (D2.1). Thus, when asked directly by the reading mentors about certain specific expressions, they provided fairly detailed answers:

M.L: “At one point, they talk about the new families – what do you think they are?”

R21: “They are the ones who look after them, because when we humans feel protected, those people are our family.”

As for the responses regarding specific scenes (D2.4), some demonstrate the students’ reading ability to link the actions depicted with what they infer from them; whether correctly (“the mother puts her hand to her head because she is worried about what will happen to her son” [R30EPC3] or “the mother running cannot resist; she regrets sending her son away and goes to fetch him” [R31EPC3]) or incorrectly (“they are leaving the ship because it is sinking and the mothers are picking up the children who are dead whilst the fathers are at war” [R32EPC3]).

Picture 4

A scene of children boarding the Mexique. A mother's farewell and regret



At night I close my eyes and feel the waves beating
I think they are saying something to the ship.
Mexique. That's what it is called.
Do the waves know that?
Does the sea keep the names of all the ships?



This was the only sub-dimension in which, when asked about the scene above, most of the students remained silent, saying they did not understand what was happening. At the urging of the reading tutors, one student ventured to put forward his interpretation, which, as has already been mentioned, turned out to be incorrect:

M.L: "What's going on in this scene?"

To [everyone]: ...

M.L: "Does anything here catch your eye?"

To [everyone]: ...

M.L: "What are the characters doing?"

R43: "They're jumping off the ship because it's sinking, and the mothers are clutching their dead children whilst the fathers are at war"

As noted at the start of this section, very few responses went beyond the basic interpretative level (NI2: n=7, 17.5%). In these, although the students recognise the importance of certain visual elements, they do not attach any meaning to them. Thus, they note the contrast between the colours, and the prevalence and scope of red in the story, but they do not identify the reasons for this, nor do they suggest what it signifies.

Reader responses to Dimension 3_ Intertextual and intercultural

This dimension has received just four responses. All of them are at intermediate interpretative level (NI3). Three referred to specific artistic and cultural representations (D3.2), and one referred to the medium or channel through which they were socialised (D3.3). Two responses have linked the picture book to Picasso's *Guernica* ("the characters' faces resemble those in *Guernica*" [R33EP6]) and the events that took place there ("the bombings in the book reminded me of those in *Guernica*" [R34EP5]). They have also noted similarities between the events recounted in the picture book and the song "Maravillas", dedicated by the

band Berri Txarrak to Maravillas Lamberto, a 14-year-old girl from Navarre who was raped and murdered by rebel fighters at the start of the Civil War and went on to become a symbol of Franco's repression. They have thus drawn a clear parallel between the children's departure into exile and the moment when Maravillas bids farewell to her relatives.

Finally, one of the responses highlights television's role in socialisation and the transmission of ideas, as one student states that they saw "some feminists at a demonstration making that gesture" [raising their fist] [R35EPC2].

Readers' responses to Dimension 4_ Personal

Of the 28 responses comprising D4, five show a reflective level of interpretation that allows us to understand the views of some of the students regarding the events in question (NI4: n=5, 17.8%). The remainder relate to the third level: how and in what ways the various aspects covered in the picture book are connected (NI3: n=23; 82.2%).

As regards the students' perceptions following the reading (D4.1), they link war to a wide range of elements. Some personify it by referring to Hitler and the Nazis, others mention bombs and tanks, and there are those who highlight its devastating effects, describing desolate landscapes ("there are lots of bricks because the houses are being destroyed" [R36EP6]) or referring to death and even the end of the world. It follows, therefore, that this reflects a pacifist or anti-war stance. These are anti-war views that some have explicitly expressed by stating that "wars are bad" and unjust and arbitrary ("war does not affect everyone in the same way" [R37EP6], "some people live well and nothing happens to them, but others are affected and suffer terribly" [R38EP6]). Among the emotions they have experienced, they say they feel sadness at the events described and surprise at the high number of children whose lives have been cut short. In fact, it is precisely their exile that has led the protagonists to articulate their views more clearly. In an exercise that could be described as a historical exercise in empathy, they have explained how they would have acted had they found themselves in the position of having to decide what to do with their children: "I couldn't send them away because I think it's too harsh" [R39EPC3], "I'd rather they left than be shot" [R40EPC3].

The topic of exile has enabled them to link it to the phenomenon of migration. They have referred to its multi-causal nature, citing the multitude of factors that account for the displacement: "Work, weather, war and love" [R41EPC3]. To this end, some have recounted their parents' experiences ("my Venezuelan parents came here for money, to look for work" [R42EP5]; "my father came from Wales for love" [R43EPC3]) or their own ("I am here because my country is at war" [R44EP5], "I came from Honduras a month ago and it is difficult because of the language and because my family is far away" [R45EP5]).

As we have just seen, the students have made strong connections between the picture book and their personal experiences, whether their own or those of their loved ones. These constitute the second and third sub-dimensions into which the responses from D4 have been grouped. In these accounts, we have seen that they have sought to relate their own circumstances to the events described ("My grandmother told me she was born during the war and that's why she doesn't speak Basque" [R46EP6], "My grandparents, who are in the war in Ukraine, have had to leave their home" [R47EP4]), they have felt personally addressed by them ("I've thought a lot about this because most of my family is from Gernika" [R48EP5]) and have delved into their own life stories to bridge the gap with the text ("I once visited Zerain prison, where Franco's forces took prisoners, and there are still marks left" [R49EP6]).

CONCLUSIONS

An analysis and categorisation of the students' responses demonstrate the educational potential that picture books can offer, as in this case, at primary school level. Group reading, together with the mediators' effective and engaging approach, has proved essential in (re)activating students' prior knowledge and

encouraging their participation by making them feel personally engaged with the facts presented, thereby enhancing their social skills (Fernández-Tijero, 2016).

The students have also demonstrated a clear ability to identify and interpret all the literary and artistic features of the selected picture book, which reinforces the importance of working with this literary genre in primary school classrooms to develop literary competence (Ruíz-Guerrero & Molina-Puche, 2018). Beyond identifying and understanding the key elements of the narrative, they have shared a space of memory in which, through empathy (Arizpe and Styles, 2004) —towards their peers and the protagonists of the picture book— they have forged links between their own experiences and those described, thereby giving new meaning to the story itself and reinterpreting what they have observed and read in a reflective manner (Colomer-Martínez, 2012).

However, the results reflect the students' difficulties in formulating more complex answers that demonstrate a higher level of critical thinking. This may be due both to a lack of literary literacy and to a lack of reading habits among primary education students. No significant differences have been observed between the different years, so age would not, in itself, constitute a determining factor in the degree of development and depth of their formulations.

Furthermore, some interesting responses have been gathered that link events from the historical past depicted in the selected picture book with current events, demonstrating a certain ability to draw connections between the present and the past. However, these links have sometimes amounted to little more than passing references that have failed to foster critical thinking more effectively. The urgent need, therefore, to educate future citizens to become critical thinkers and active advocates for free societies and democracy—all the more so in today's turbulent times—highlights the imperative to address controversial issues, such as historical memory, through picture books from an early age (Luna et al., 2024).

We therefore emphasise the need to promote teaching approaches that incorporate or are based on the use of picture books in primary education (Gil, 2012); to this end, of course, appropriate teacher training is essential (Jiménez & Parrado, 2022) as well as working with picture books that deal with controversial topics such as the Spanish Civil War (Luna et al., 2024; Serrano-Mariezkurrena et al., 2024).

NOTES

¹ This is a very common and widespread confusion of terminology among students, who mistakenly use the term “nationalists” when they mean “nationals”.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Berta Echeberria-Arquero: Project management; Conceptualisation; Data curation; Writing – first draft; Writing – revision and editing; Research; Methodology; Resources; Supervision; Validation; Visualisation.

Amaia Mariezkurrena-Serrano: Project management; Formal analysis; Conceptualisation; Writing – first draft; Writing – revision and editing; Research; Resources; Supervision; Validation; Visualisation.

Iñigo Lopez-Gazpio: Data cleaning; Methodology; Writing – original draft. Research.

Ursula Luna: Conceptualisation; Writing – first draft; Writing – revision and editing; Research.

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