



# *English Studies in Latin America*

**Roundtable “Jornada de Enseñanza de Literatura en Inglés 2012”:** *Images in Teaching*

**Speaker:** Lens Unsworth

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## Roundtable “Jornada de Enseñanza de Literatura en Inglés 2012”: *Images in Teaching*

Speaker: Lens Unsworth

I am going to talk to you about what is often referred to as Children’s Literature. Of course, for me Children’s Literature is not just for children. Children’s Literature is for adults and people of all ages. My enthusiasm for Children’s Literature is partly because of its potential in the school system, in education. And my work is mainly with learners of English in L1, in other words, mother tongue English speakers. So it is often rather interesting to see the looks that I get on the train in Australia when I am going home from the university and people see this old guy sitting there reading children’s books. I think that if I ever develop any kind of competence at all in Spanish, it is likely that would be due to the children’s books that I’m trying to read.

I want to share with you some current issues in Literature for children in the Australian context. In Australia, a new national curriculum has just been formulated, and that national curriculum takes Literature very, very seriously. The three main strand in the curriculum in English are Language, Literature and Literacy. I think it is interesting that Literature has this formal location in the curriculum. What is also interesting is the seriousness with which this new curriculum takes the semiotics of Literature. The multimodal semiotics of Literature and the intention to develop among learners the understanding of the constructiveness of Literature.

So if you look at the outcome of students in year 8... What students are expected to do is to understand and explain how combinations of words and images in texts are used to represent particular groups in society, and how it positions readers in relation to those groups. Then you have

some elaboration on recognizing the similarities and differences between types of texts, for example a complex picture book and a feature film, in order to understand different combinations of words and images, and lead readers to interpret visual texts in particular ways according to the audience, purpose, and context.

These are the outcomes that are expected of students in year eight –that is students around 12 years of age– and there are lots of implications for what do teachers understand of these matters and how we are able to communicate these notions to students. A great resource, I think, is *Literature for Children: picture books, illustrated stories*. Because of their intrinsic appeal, and also because of the recent very successful connection with popular culture and the relationship between established literary texts, on the one hand, and popular culture such as movies, video games, and so forth on the other. Some of you will be very familiar with the Harry Potter phenomenon. Years ago when I was in Argentina, I was surprised to see Argentinean kids reading Harry Potter in translation. These are things that are important to take into account: the relationship between the world of established Literature, the world of popular culture, and the positioning of young children growing up into a world where, for them, there is no difference between the two. No difference.

I want to talk particularly of a picture book that was written by an Australian children's author called Shaun Tan. The book is about a boy who is very keen on collecting bottle tops and, wandering along the beach one day, collecting his bottle tops, he encounters this peculiar hybrid creature, part mechanical, part organic, the lost thing. It relates to marginalization, of course, because the lost thing does not seem to belong with anyone or anywhere. The boy decides that he should try to do something about rehabilitating the lost thing and finding out where it belongs. He seeks help from people on the beach, from his family, from his friends. No one seem very helpful at all. Eventually, through great persistence, he manages to find this kind of utopian refuge for the lost thing and they part from each other. The author in the text says “Well, it is not a very profound story. I told you that was going to be the case”. It is a kind of metafictional element about it, because the point is that, when we start looking at the story, it is quite profound and it has a lot of important messages to tell us. In 2011, the animated movie of the picture book, “The Lost Thing”, won an Oscar in the Academy Awards in the U.S. for best animated short film. This has drawn more attention to the picture book and the movie itself, and they have become very popular with teachers and students in school. The question is: How can we make use of this resource? It is not as if such resources are not used in schools, in the Australian context, they are. So the issue is, what happens?

How do we deal with this Literature? What are children learning? What are teachers thinking about Literature? What are the opportunities and so on.

I want to share with you just the beginning of the story. Just the first couple pages of the book, how the boy meets the lost thing, and then we will look at that section in the animated movie. It starts up:

*“It all happened a few summers ago, one rather ordinary day by the beach. Not much was going on. I was, as usual, working tirelessly on my bottle-top collection and stopped to look up for no particular reason. That’s when I first saw the thing. I must have stared at it for a while. I mean, it had a really weird look about it – a sad, lost sort of look. Nobody else seemed to notice it was there. Too busy doing beach stuff, I guess. Naturally, I was intrigued. I decided to investigate. Sure it didn’t do much. It just sat there looking out of place. I was baffled”*

Now let’s take a look at the equivalent in the movie...

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RUHNun\\_lgc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RUHNun_lgc)

If we think about just the first short section, and think about the language in the book and the language in the movie, we can detail what is the same and what is different. The language that is not in the movie is the language about the boy’s curiosity. “I was naturally curious” and so on, because it shows us that rather than telling us. Nevertheless, by a large, the language is pretty much the same. What’s crucial, though, is the difference in interpretive possibilities of the different media.

In the book version, you notice that, visually, we are positioned a very long way away from the boy and from the lost thing. There is no direct contact, we are not looking at the eyes of either character, and we are detached; we are a detached observer. In the boy’s commentary on the right side of the picture book, you get a very small picture of the boy looking at the Lost Thing, and you get almost like labels under the pictures: “Sure it didn’t do much, it just sat there looking out of place. I was baffled”. However, the way in which we are positioned as interpreters of the story in the movie is very different. You will notice that, visually, we are much closer. We are actually positioned at some points as if we were the boy, along with the boy, and along with the point of view of the Lost Thing. In the movie, we are not detached observers, we become more like participants.

I said the language is pretty much the same, and that is pretty true, I think. However, in the book it says: “It had a really weird look about it. Sure it didn’t d much. It just sat there looking out of place”. This is what the lost thing is like, characteristic traits, and there is a subtle grammatical difference in the movie which says: “It wasn’t doing much, it just sat there with a really weird look about it”. In other words, in the movie these are not inherent traits, these are current dispositions. So, interpretatively, through the image and the language, we are being positioned quite differently in relation to the story.

This, I think, has enormous potential for us. It has potential, on the one hand, because of the appeal of Children’s Literature in and of itself –in the context of Australian popular culture for young people anyway–, the increased appeal of the animated movie, which children are very keen to see, and the potential of using these two texts together in the classroom. But what is crucial is understanding that it is ostensibly the same story. The language of the story is very close, it is not like some Hollywood adaptations of Literature for children where you watch the movie and think: “Was it really about that book?”. It is not like that at all. This animated movie, linguistically, is very close to the book, and the images in the animation are very similar to the images in the book too. A couple of years ago it was the anniversary of the first publication of *The Little Prince* and a number of animated versions were produced. Interestingly, they have a television series of *The Little Prince*, and what they have done was use the original drawings for the animation. That is what happened here, the use of original drawings. So, many dimensions of the story are similar. What is different is the way you as a receiver of the story are positioned interpretatively and the semiotic means by which that happens is the interaction between very subtle adjustments in the language and the choices of images and the interaction between the two.

We cannot think about teaching Literature or teaching language anymore in terms of words alone. That will not work. Of course, we do need to teach the words, but it is not enough. Images are not simply careful props for the language; that is a very dangerous way for English language teachers to think about the role of images. The images are integral to the meaning making. The relations between the words and images are crucial for the development of these kind of interpretive possibilities. As indicated in the Australian curriculum statement at the beginning of the talk, these things are entirely possible to negotiate with children. Even with children who, on the surface of it, have a background that has not oriented them to work in Literature, are fascinated with the analytic work. It is a myth to suggest that if you become too analytic with Literature, then you will turn kids

off. Rubbish! What is the first thing they do when they get a new DVD? Of course, they watch it and enjoy the new movie and the game, and then you get the backbeat at the end. How is it made? How was it put together? That is what I want to get into.

My enthusiasm is for Children's Literature. I see the benefits of the tools, of functional, social semiotics. I see these things as being mediated to children in meaningful contexts. Ultimately, I see this as a crucial instrument of social change because, unless we can position all children in such a way that they can develop this portable understanding, that they can be in control of their interpretive processes, then any attempt at a social reform is not going to work.