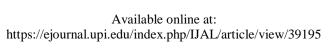
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Unfolding layers of meanings: Visual-verbal relations in *Just Ask*—a children's picture book

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ABSTRACT

Studies in the field of semiotics and children's literature have described the relationship between the verbal and visual texts in picture books as both complex and subtle. These relationships are named differently across theories, yet they still note two possibilities, whether they support or are against each other, in conveying meanings to the readers. This study seeks to explore the relations between visual-verbal modes depicted in a children's picture book entitled *Just Ask* (author/illustrator by Sotomayor & Lopez, 2019), viewed from the perspective of multimodality as proposed by Unsworth (2006). The analysis between the visual and verbal modes in the picture book is focused on ideational concurrence and ideational complementarity. The results indicate that meanings in *Just Ask* are negotiated through verbal and visual texts which may be complementary or have divergent relationships to one another. It is through such strategy that the suggested theme of the picture book, in this case accepting diversity, is consistently conveyed to the targeted readers. Since picture books are used vastly in EFL/ESL classrooms to enhance students' reading experiences, this study may help teachers develop students' ability to make meaning from verbal and visual texts and inspire their visual thinking strategies.

Keywords: Complementary relationship; concurrence relationship; multimodal literacy; picture books; text-picture relationships; visual-verbal modes

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INTODUCTION

Picture books are widely acknowledged as resources that can support young learners' literacy development. In countries with high levels of literacy such as China, Singapore, Canada, Finland, and Australia, children's reading habits are nurtured through parents or teachers reading picture books to children (e.g., Callow, 2017; Chu, 2014; Pantaleo, 2016). In Canada, for example, English literacy teachers use picture books to develop students' communication competencies by encouraging them to interpret and make sense of what they see and read in the books (Pantaleo, 2016). Likewise, teachers in Australia use picture books to engage students learning English as an additional language

(EAL) in reading practices (Chu, 2014). Discussing visual and verbal texts in picture books with the EAL students is found contributing to the development of students' critical literacy that enables them to evaluate the ways author and illustrator's choices shape their view (Callow, 2017).

Working on verbal-visual resources provides readers with greater opportunities to make a connection to the overall story that fosters meaning-making. Comprehending picture books not only involves the exploration of what words tell but also what images mean. A well-crafted picture book provides images and words that work as a double act or duet with the images conveying different aspects

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of the story to the words (Braid, 2012). In this case, readers' attention to the visual texts in the picture books supplements their interpretation of the story from the verbal texts (Chu, 2014). Therefore, the use of picture books in language classrooms, particularly for children, is inseparable from exploring meanings embedded in multimodality.

The use of picture books has gained popularity in English language classrooms for children in Indonesia (e.g., Kochiyama, 2015; Kusumawardani et al., 2018; Oktarina et al., 2020; Restanto, 2016; Retnowati et al., 2018). Studies conducted by Kochiyama (2015), for example, suggested selecting a picture book in terms of the level of difficulties such as grammar use and the social value of the story. Retnowati et al., (2018) also used a picture book focusing on its vocabulary items. While these studies recognize the benefits of integrating picture books into English language learning, the focus is heavily put on the verbal features. Exploration of the meaning-making resources of verbal and visual intersection is, thus, limited. Against this background, the study reported in this paper focuses on understanding the meaning-making based on visual-verbal relationships depicted in a picture book. The study also offers pedagogical recommendations that take into account verbalvisual relations for using picture books in language classrooms.

Table 1 *Visual-Verbal Relations of Meanings* (Unsworth 2006; Daly & Unsworth 2011)

Types of Meanings Concurrent or elaborated meanings Complementary meanings or images may extend meanings, adding new information Visual and verbal relations Equivalent or similar meanings Redundant or re-expressed meanings Augmented meanings – extra information or elements or elements Divergent meanings – Image or text at variance

The meaning-making process is not merely about the combined use of semiotic resources but is concerned with the interplay of these resources in shaping meanings. Unsworth (2006) and Daly and Unsworth (2011) suggest looking at visual-verbal relations to discuss how images and written texts interact with each other and arise new meanings from the interactions. To be specific, the creation of meanings in a children's picture book depends on the relation of both visual and verbal modes presented in the book, whether the visual-verbal relation has (a) concurrent or (b) complementary meanings. In concurrent meanings, the interaction of visual and verbal modes may have the equivalent meanings, where the visual and verbal modes are equivalent participant-processan phenomenon configuration, or the redundant meanings, where the verbal mode conveys the habitual nature of the activity while the visual mode indicates one instance, adding to the meaning of the verbal mode. In complementary meanings, the visual-verbal modes relationships may have the

Visual-verbal relationship analysis

The study is informed by Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics 1978, with its important notions of metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. According to Halliday, ideational functions deal with language resources for representing our experience of the world that focuses on 'what is happening' (Process), (Participant), 'Who/What involved' is additional information surrounding the happenings, 'How? When? Where? such as Why?' (Circumstances); interpersonal functions concerned with language resources for interacting with others, expressing feelings, taking a stance, and making a judgement; and textual meanings have to do with language resources for shaping texts that are coherent and cohesive (Derewianka & Jones, 2016).

This study particularly focuses on the ideational function that underlies how texts in a picture book visually and verbally construe goings-on, including the nature of events, the objects and participants involved, and the circumstances in which they occur. Royce (2015) argues that focusing on ideational meanings may well help EFL learners extract informational content, which is normally present in their English language learning materials. To unfold the layers of ideational meanings of a picture book, this study used Unsworth (2006) and Daly and Unsworth's (2011) framework, presented in Table 1.

augmented meanings, where the visual and verbal modes are not to duplicate the statement of the story, but rather the visual mode extends the verbal modes, or the *divergent* meanings, where the ideational content of visual and verbal modes is opposed.

METHOD

This study used a multimodal approach, as it allows the researchers to explore the communication of meaning within texts, for example, linguistic and visual phenomena (O'Halloran & Smith, 2012).

The data set

The data in this study is a picture book entitled *Just Ask* (Sotomayor & Lopez, 2019). This book was released on September 3, 2019, and became the first *New York Times* bestseller (Amazon, 2021, Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You). This book was chosen since its good quality was substantiated

by winning the Schneider Family Book Award, which makes it also worthy of scholarly analysis.

Just Ask contains 14 spreads that present the different abilities people have. Sotomayor, the author, who was diagnosed with diabetes, used her experience to write about children with all sorts of challenges and looks at the uniqueness those kids have as well (Amazon, 2021, Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You). With the help of Rafael Lopez, as the illustrator, thirteen kids are described in this book. The book presents the diversity of the kids through a sequence of events showing they work together to build a community garden. These kids ask each other how they are different from one another as encapsulated in the title Just Ask.

Due to the copyright issue, the corresponding picture book pages are not supplemented in this paper. Instead, reproduced sketches of the spreads are supplied.

Data analysis procedure

The analysis of visual-verbal relations in *Just Ask* was conducted in three stages: plot identification,

visual-verbal modes realization, and visual-verbal relations of meaning description. The first stage of the analysis, plot identification, aimed to identify the generic structures of *Just Ask*. Since different types of texts serve different purposes, it is important to have a multimodal analysis based on the genres (Damayanti 2019; Martin & Rose, 2008). Stories do not always come in the form of Narrative where a conflict needs to be resolved by the main character; stories can be in the form of Recount that unfolds through a series of events or Observation that unfolds through such stages as Orientation, Event Descriptions and Comment

The second stage was visual-verbal mode realization that aimed to examine whether or not there were differences or similarities of meanings between the modes. This stage analyzed the ideational metafunction realized in each mode. It focused on the visual and verbal representation of the events in the story (e.g., action, perception, cognition, talking etc.) and how ideas link to each other, involving characters, characters attribution, and circumstances (see Table 2).

Table 2
Ideational Metafunction of Meanings across Modes (Callow, 2020)

Metafunction	Meaning potential	Visual realization	Verbal realization
Ideational	Action	 Depiction of actions with vectors 	• Clauses with action verbs
	Perception	 Gaze vectors between characters 	Clauses with perception verbs
	Cognition	• Thought bubbles, face/hand gestures	Clauses with thinking verbs
	Talking	 Speech bubbles, face/hand gestures 	• Clauses with speaking verbs
	Character and Character attribution	Depiction of character	 Description of characters through relational clauses
	Circumstances	• Depiction of place, time, manner	• Specification of place, time, etc. using prepositional phrase

According to Callow (2020), an action is represented by a vector in the visual realization and by a clause with an action verb in the verbal realization. The act of talking is represented by a speech bubble as well as face and hand gestures in the visual realization, and by a clause with speaking verbs in the verbal realization. There may also be a situation where meaning is committed in one mode but is not committed in the other (Callow, 2020).

The third stage aimed to describe and interpret the relationships between visual and verbal modes. That is to see how meaning is constructed by the deployment of each mode (Daly & Unsworth, 2011; Unsworth, 2006). After the visual and verbal modes were transcoded in the second stage, the meanings were then described through the identification of whether the visual-verbal relation has a *concurrent* (e.g., visual-verbal represent or re-expressed the same idea) or *complementary* meaning (e.g., visual-

verbal extend or contradict each other). For example, the visual text in one of the events in Just Ask (Figure 1) illustrates a character paying attention to the sounds of cricket, which is reexpressed by the verbal text that says "she is a good listener." In this case, the relationship between the modes makes a concurrent meaning (i.e., the visual text of a girl listening to a cricket is re-expressed by the verbal text of "she is a good listener") that involves an instantiation (i.e., the visual activity of the girl paying attention to the sounds of a cricket conveys the habitual nature of the listening activity.) The description of how the visual and verbal modes work together to create concurrent meanings potentially gives readers an understanding that a visual text may emphasize what a verbal text has said.

Figure 1 Spread 9



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

To explore the meanings in the selected picture book, the study first attempted to discuss how the narrative discourse in the book was built by its genre. The next step was to see how visual and verbal texts' analysis support the meaning-making of the book.

Genre analysis

Based on the story genre family, the picture book *Just Ask* (Sotomayor & Lopez, 2019) belongs to Observation text. This means that the social purpose of the Observation is to share experiences, through stages namely Orientation, Event descriptions and then to respond to or Comment on those Event Descriptions (Rothery & Slenglin, 1997). Table 3 presents the distribution of the stages of the story is presented.

Table 3 *Plot Identification of Just Ask*

	Stages	Figures
1.	Orientation	Spread 1
2.	Event Descriptions	Spreads 2—13
3.	Comments	Spreads 14

In the Observation text, the events are arranged without any temporal-conjunctive relations. The events in *Just Ask* are shifted when each character

leaves a question to the other characters to explain. For example, the first character leaves a question, and the second character answers the question in the next spread. Then, this second character leaves another question for the third character to answer, and so on. Through such shifting, the significance of the Event Descriptions stage is constructed. This type of narrative strategy addresses readers to make meaning right after each event is presented. For younger readers, grasping the meanings behind what the event is suggesting will require adult assistance. This is where teachers/parents or other adult figures need to provide scaffolding to help young readers comprehend the text.

Visual-verbal relations in *Just Ask* that contributes to Ideational Meaning

An analysis of ideational meaning is useful when working with a picture book, since it allows the examination of how the texts construct the events, participants involved, and circumstances in which they occur. The visual-verbal relations depicted in *Just Ask* suggest *concurrent* and *complementary* meanings as elaborated below.

The equivalent meanings

Equivalent meanings are suggested in these spreads: *Spread 1*, Sonia and her friends were going to plant a garden; *Spread 2*, Sonia had insulin shot; *Spread 4*, Anthony was going superfast on his wheelchair: *Spread 5*, presents Madison and Arturo who are visually impaired and their guide dogs; *Spread 8*, presents Jordan and Tiana who are autistic.

In these events, both visual and verbal texts assert equivalency (see Table 4), which means that the participant, process, and phenomenon had the equivalent configuration.

Table 4 *Example of Visual-Verbal Relations of Equivalent meanings (Spread 5)*

Meaning Potential	Visual realization	Visual Realization
Action	 A girl guided by a dog walking with her friend, a boy with a cane 	My name is Madison, and my guide dog Lucky helps me to get places safely because
Character Attribution	 A braid-haired girl Purple sunglasses, Black shirt, blue pants, white socks, black shoes 	I'm blind. My friend, Arturo is blind too; he uses a cane to get around. Even though we can't see, we strengthen our other senses and notice lots of details others may miss; we can
Character Attribution	 A black-headed boy Black sunglasses, Plaid shirt, blue pants, brown shoes 	hear with our ears, smell with our noses, and feel with our hands. How do you use your senses?
Circumstantiation	 A brown hill of a garden with butterflies, bees, and grasshopper perched on some white hibiscus flowers 	now do you use your senses:

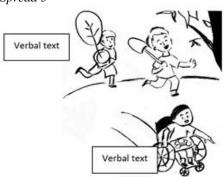
Visual verbal relations of meaning in Spread 5

In Spread 5, the two modes that occurred represent the same things. As described in the verbal text, "My name is Madison, and my guide dog Lucky helps me to get places safely because I'm blind. My

friend, Arturo is blind too; he uses a cane to get around". This similarly concurs in the visual text that showed a girl guided by a dog walking with her friend, a boy with a cane. Moreover, the depiction of these two kids wearing sunglasses which often

marked visual impaired individuals has completed the similarity between the modes.

Figure 2
Spread 5



According to Wu (2014), the visual-verbal relations of the ideational metafunction in *Spread 5* also depicts word specific meanings. The visual texts illustrate yet do not significantly add to a largely complete verbal text. This is seen in the texts that describe Madison and Arturo's other senses: smell, hearing, and touch, however, were not

followed by any visual representations. Nonetheless, the visual text answers Anthony's question of how Madison and Arturo recognized their surroundings, it is through the help of the guide dog and a cane.

The Redundant meanings

The Redundant meanings are depicted in the following spreads. *Spread 3*, presents how Rafael treated his asthma; *Spread 6* portrays Vijay who had hearing impaired: *Spread 7* shows how Bianca overcome her dyslexia; *Spread 9* reveals Anh's understanding of her surroundings; *Spread 12* shows how Nolan uses his voice to prevent his allergic; *Spread 14* displays Sonia's comment on diversity.

In those spreads, as can be seen in Table 5, readers can see that both visual and verbal texts "reexpress" the same idea but in different ways (the visual text gives an instantiation to the verbal text or portrays the habitual nature of the activity described in the verbal text). For example, in *Spread 12*, Nolan said verbally that he was allergic to nuts, and the image visualizes him saying no to a squirrel when it showed a gesture of offering a nut.

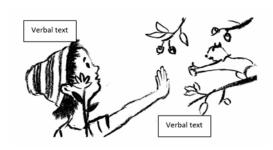
Table 5 *Example of Visual-Verbal Relations of Redundant Meanings (Spread 12)*

Meaning Potential	Visual realization	Visual Realization
Action	 A boy making gestures of saying no to a squirrel that offers a nut. 	I'm Nolan. It's helpful to me when the food I eat has a clear label that says it's nut-free,
Character Attribution	A skull caps boyRainbow skullcap, blue striped T-shirt	because I'm allergic to nuts-they can make me so sick that I would have to go to the hospital if I ate any, even by accident. So, I always tell people about my allergy and ask if any food
Circumstantiation	• In front of a nut tree with a squirrel sits in the branch of it	has nuts ingredients. Speaking up keeps me healthy. How do you use your voice?

Visual-verbal relations of meaning in Spread 12

The visual-verbal relation of this 12th spread suggested concurrent meanings, especially reexpressing meanings. It refers to the visual and verbal text that express the same idea but in different ways. The verbal texts in Figure 3 answered Manuel's question that it was helpful for a skullcap boy, Nolan when the food he ate had a clear label that stated that it was nut-free since he had nut allergies. He explained that they could make him so sick. In the last sentence, Nolan said that he had always told people about his allergy and had to be precautious about eating any kind of food, and also look for any traces of nuts in it. The visual text that followed was Nolan making a gesture to say no to a squirrel that offers a nut. Generally, the visualverbal relation of Figure 3 has an equivalent meaning, where the visual and verbal text represents the same action of Nolan saying no to nuts.

Figure 3
Spread 12



The Augmented meanings

The Augmented meanings occur in two spreads. They are in *Spread 10* that talks about Julia who suffered from Tourette syndrome; and *Spread 11* which shows Manuel with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Augmented meanings refer to the situation where what is represented in visual text and what is explained in the verbal text may be different, yet they show complementary relationships. For example, in *Spread 10*, the texts show that Julia had Tourette syndrome, and the image illustrates one of

the symptoms of the syndrome, which was blinking

her eye like an owl (see Table 6).

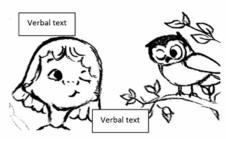
Table 6Example of Visual-Verbal Relations of Augmented Meaning (Spread 10)

Meaning Potential	Visual realization	Visual Realization
Action	 A girl blinking her eye with an owl. 	I do, my name is Julia. Sometimes I wiggle or
Character Attribution	A brown-headed girlShort brown hair	make sounds that I can't control because I have Tourette's syndrome. People may look at me funny because they think I'm not paying
Circumstantiation	In front of a tree with a brown-yellow owl perched on the branch of it	attention. But it's not true; I am listening. I don't always like having to explain—it frustrates me—but it helps when I tell people that it's just what my body does. Do you ever feel frustrated?

Visual-verbal intersections of meaning in Spread 10

In *Spread 10*, the visual-verbal relation offers ideational complementary. It refers to the situation where what is represented in visual text and what is represented in the verbal text may be different yet complementary and joint contributors to an overall meaning that is more than the meanings conveyed by the separate modes. In Figure 4, the verbal text says, the brown headed-girl Julia sometimes wiggled or made sounds that she could not control because of Tourette syndrome. The visual text displays a type of Tourette's syndrome, where Julia blinked her one eye like an owl.

Figure 4 *Spread 10*



In this case, the type of ideational complementary in *Spread 10* is augmentation. According to Unsworth (2011), this type refers to

extension, which provides an example that indicates the visual text adding to the meaning of the verbal text. Particularly in Spread 10, the visual of Julia blinking her eye extends the meaning of what the verbal text says about what Tourette syndrome might involve. Repetitive movements or unwanted sounds (tics) that cannot be easily controlled are usually the symptoms. For instance, people with this syndrome might repeatedly shrug shoulders or blurt out unusual sounds, including blinking eyes, the one that Julia experiences. Here, Julia answered Anh's question of whether she ever wondered if other people understood her. In the verbal text, Julia said that people might look at her funny because they thought she was not paying attention, especially when the symptom emerged. This always made her frustrated, that she was not comfortable with the syndrome, yet she had to bear living with it.

The Divergent meaning

The divergent meaning appears in *Spread 13* when Grace talked about what she loved, yet the visual illustrates a contradiction to the verbal texts (see Table 7). She said that she loved to sing and talk, while the image does not show Grace singing, rather it depicts a bird chirping. In this type of complementary meaning, the ideational content of visual and verbal texts is at variance with each other.

Visual-Verbal Relations of Divergent Meaning (Spread 13)

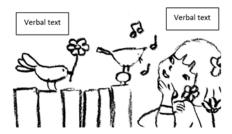
Meaning Potential	Visual realization	Visual Realization
Action	A girl listening to a bird singing	I love to sing, and I love to talk. I love to make
Character Attribution	A short-haired girlPurple blouse, floral hairpin	new friends and be included. I'm Grace. I was born with down syndrome. Kids like me with down syndrome have an extra building block
Circumstantiation	Inside a brown fence that is the girl's chest high with birds perched above it	called chromosome in our bodies. But we are all different from each other too. I can do almost anything any other kid can do, though learning new things can take some time. One way I learn is to ask questions. What helps you learn?

Visual-verbal intersections of meaning in Spread 13

The visual-verbal relation depicted in *Spread 13* (Figure 5) is ideational complementary, specifically,

it suggests divergence. This is likely to occur when the ideational content of visual and verbal are at variance with each other (Unsworth, 2011).

Figure 5 *Spread 13*



In *Spread 13*, the verbal text focuses on Grace. She was born with down syndrome. She said that she loved to sing and talk. However, the visual text didn't show Grace, a girl in a purple blouse singing, rather it displayed a bird chirping, represented by musical notation symbols. As for Grace, she was drawn as if she sang along to the birds chirping. The contradiction relationship between the modes suggests divergent meaning. Additionally, in the verbal text Grace answered Nolan's question of how Grace used her voice. The verbal text explains that Grace used her voice to ask questions when she wanted to learn new things. In this case, the visual text did not depict Grace asking a question.

Thus, juxtaposing what is seen and read at the same time will give readers the opportunity to make a connection back to the overall story. Henceforth, what the author and illustrator want to share can be derived.

DISCUSSIONS

Acknowledging diversity, avoiding prejudice: Meanings from *Just Ask*

Recognizing the visual-verbal relations in reading the picture book helps readers to understand the meaning of the story. The moral message embodied in *Just Ask* is derived through the interpretation of the two modes used, the visual and verbal texts. For example, in the Orientation stage, the image may suggest a story about the gardening activities of some kids. However, the words tell that it is more than just planting a garden. It further explains more about how the variety of plants in the garden signify how the kids are different from one another yet are still able to coexist at the same place.

The events in *Just Ask* are arranged through a question pattern that is realized solely on the verbal text posed by each character at the end of each spread. This question pattern is initiated by the main character, Sonia, in the Orientation stage, after she analogizes a variety of plants in a garden with diversity among people in the society. Through her perspectives, readers are put in the position to accept differences as a part of their daily lives. This

narrative strategy is repeated throughout the book with different characters telling their uniqueness and how they compromised with their differences. The pattern of ending each spread with each character proposing a question serves the purpose of the title *Just Ask*, that is to acknowledge diversity and to avoid prejudice or negative judgment.

Readers' understanding of both visual and verbal texts in multimodal texts should be used in conjunction with semiotic awareness. This provides possibilities for picture books to be used in EFL classrooms as supplementary materials. In this case, teachers should be familiar and skillful in reading multimodal texts, as well as be aware of the potential of those texts as teaching/learning materials. Next, teachers should be able to provide proper scaffolding techniques to gradually equipped students in making meaning from the text. As Wood and Woloshyn (1995) state that the ability of readers to ask themselves associated questions as they read and see is important in helping them to integrate the information. This activity then helps learners to be familiarized with the visual-verbal modes realization which is the first stage toward being aware of semiotic resources.

Once familiarized with semiotic resources, approaching picture books based on a multimodal text can be developed. The pedagogic practice offered by the study, especially in the EFL context can be done in several ways. First, low-level learners can work with a simple picture book (that suggests concurrent meaning) with only a sentence per image. They can try to understand the literal meaning of the sentences by juxtaposing what they see in the images. Then, intermediate learners might start reading a book with more sentences to understand the flow of the story with the support from the accompanying images. Last, students at the advanced levels can discuss complex picture books that have both concurrent and complementarity meanings such as Just Ask. The activity begins with working in small groups. For example, placing learners into groups of two or three with a picture book. The first one reads aloud, the second and the third one concentrate on the images and highlight what they see on the page that may be different or missing from what is being read. During all the process, it is significant that the teacher can provide the scaffolding regarding the visual and verbal texts in the picture book. Recognizing how verbal and visual complement each other in the picture book is fundamental, as meanings cannot be asserted by merely reading one of the modes.

When learners are allowed to express their opinions and discuss with others what they read and see at the same time, a deeper level of information processing and meaning making will be achieved than when those semiotic modes are used as separated.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that visual-verbal relations in Just Ask can describe what its meaning refers to. By examining the relationship between the visual and verbal texts in Just Ask, ideational meanings are extended. The potential of understanding the modes used in the picture book help readers to become aware of the semiotic function in a text. The analysis had uncovered two relationships between the visual and verbal texts depicted in the picture book. The first is the Ideational concurrence which refers to the equivalence of participants, process, and circumstances visually and verbally. The second is *Ideational complementary*, which refers to visual and verbal modes that extend meanings or add new information to each other. These two semiotics interrelationships of meanings provide a means in approaching picture books. Teachers and learners can look at both the visual and the verbal texts, not as individuals but as unity, where the modes work together to construct meanings. Through careful and proper scaffolding, picture book readings can help students develop visual thinking strategies, which is one of the 21st literacy skills.

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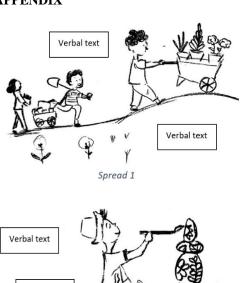
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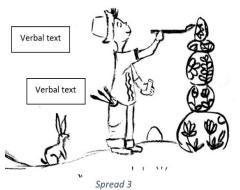
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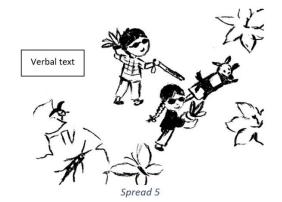
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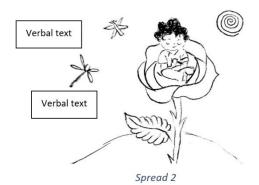
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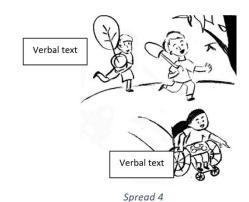
APPENDIX

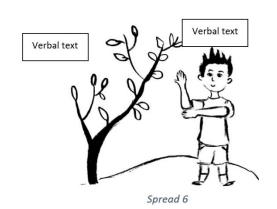














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