A Study on the Meaning Construction of Illustrations in English Textbook from the Perspective of Visual Narratives

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Abstract

From the perspective of visual narrative analysis framework, this paper analyzes 69 pages of illustrations in the English Textbook for Senior High English (Compulsory Volume 1, FLTRP edition) from three aspects of interpersonal meaning, ideational meaning and textual meaning. The study has found that there are more contact illustrations in the textbook, and eye contact enhances interactivity. The illustrations are mainly colored images, creating an emotional atmosphere to infect readers. The illustrations in the textbook are combined with specific thematic content to reproduce the conceptual significance. The illustrations and texts in graphic layout play different roles in meaning construction.

Keywords: *Visual Narratives; Illustrations of Textbook; Interpersonal Meaning; Ideational Meaning; Textual Meaning.*

INTRODUCTION

In the development of contemporary information technology, images, as an important resource, construct meaning together with text symbols, and illustrations play an increasingly important role in the construction of discourse meaning. In recent years, the literature on picture books from the perspective of visual narrative has been increasing year by year, and the relevant studies mainly include: Liu (2016) applied the visual narrative framework to the corpus analysis of picture books, verified the feasibility of applying the framework to the analysis of multimodal narrative texts, and found that the framework has insufficient explanatory power to multimodal narrative texts. Yin (2017), based on the framework of visual narrative analysis, made an in-depth interpretation of the three selected picture books and discussed how picture books construct meaning through visual modes, so as to attract readers and generate aesthetic experience.

Wang (2019) made a comparative study on the focusing resources and emotional resources of 60 Chinese and English children's picture books by using the interpersonal focalisation system and pathos system theory of visual images in visual narrative. By 2022, the number of relevant studies has increased to six. Zhao (2022) analyzed *Crowdfunding Guide for Learning* based on the meta-functional framework of visual narrative, aiming to explore the multimodal discourse analysis path in the context of new media. Qi (2022) explored the image narrative language used in original picture books with traditional Chinese artistic expression techniques based on image analysis and image narrative framework as a template, and summarized their unique image narrative structure and differences in visual grammar application with foreign picture books.

Li (2022) adopted the visual narrative theory and selected four award-winning works of Dolly Gray Children's Literature Prize, which described autism or autism spectrum disorder and were represented in picture books, as research objects, and conducted the research by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Li (2022) took the visual narrative framework

as the theoretical framework and selected the winning works of Caldecott English children's picture books and the winning works of Feng Zikai Children's Picture Book Award for Chinese children's picture books under the same theme as the research objects, aiming to explore the similarities and differences in the construction of interpersonal meaning in Chinese and English children's picture books. It is expected that the original children's picture books in China can learn from each other and improve their international competitiveness.

Fu (2022) selected two traditional Chinese picture story books (*Uproar in Heaven* and *Mulan*) and their American versions (*Trouble in Heaven* and *Mulan*) as research materials under the meta-functional framework of visual narrative, analyzed their similarities and differences in interpersonal meaning, ideational meaning and composition meaning construction, and revealed the reasons. It aims to explore the respective characteristics of Chinese and American children's picture books in telling Chinese stories.

Based on the theory of visual narrative and the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, Shi (2022) explored how interactive children's picture books, as a new type of digital publication with typical significance, carry out visual narration and communication based on the characteristics of digital media, how different modes in the visual system work together, and how multimodal discourse participates in the meaning construction of interactive picture books. In 2023, Zhou (2023) analyzed the construction of the interpersonal, ideational and compositional meaning of the typical multimodal discourse "China's Anti-Epidemic Map" as the corpus, so as to help people better understand the optimistic and victorious spirit of the Chinese people in the process of fighting against the novel coronavirus pneumonia.

Studies on textbook illustrations related to visual narrative analysis are rare at present. Only Zeng and Guo (2021) used the framework of visual narrative analysis to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis on the textbook *New Target English*, exploring the construction of interpersonal meaning, ideational meaning and textual meaning in the textbook, and on this basis, put forward corresponding suggestions to improve the multi-modal meaning potential of the textbook. Under the framework of visual narrative analysis, this paper intends to use the illustrations from the edition of *English Textbook for Senior High School (Compulsory Volume 1)* by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press as the corpus, to analyze how the illustration constructs the meaning in multimodal narrative discourse from the three meta-functions of interpersonal meaning, ideational meaning, and textual meaning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996), under the influence of Systemic Functional Grammar (Halliday 1994/2014), published a book named *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, in which visual grammar theory is proposed to analyze multimodal discourse. Similar to the meta-functional framework (ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function) in Systemic Functional Grammar, visual grammar theory holds that multi-modal symbols such as images, colors, and layouts, like language symbols, have meta-functions of reflecting the world, interacting with the audience, and arranging visual resources. Accordingly, the meaning of images is subdivided into the following three categories: representational meaning, which is used to represent concepts such as people, events, and scenes in an image; interactive meaning, which is used to construct the previous relationship between the image and the image viewer; compositional meaning, which is used to integrate the representational meaning and the interactive meaning of an image. (Shen & Zhang, 2022, p. 77) With the development of information technology and the deepening of multimodal

research, linguists have found that the theory has many shortcomings, especially in the interpretation of complex multimodal discourse and multiple image sequences, and it cannot be used as a universal criterion for analyzing all visual images. (Hu & Xu, 2022, p. 123) Zhang and Jia (2012, p. 38) argued that visual grammar has shortcomings in the following four aspects: 1) The classification of narrative representation is not complementary; 2) The contact structure is rote and rigid, and the practical application is not strong; 3) The design of modality is not systematic; 4) When judging the importance of image elements, the social attributes of the elements themselves are ignored. They supplemented and improved the above four points. Due to the deficiencies of visual grammar, Painter *et al* (2012) put forward the theory of visual narrative. This theory includes ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning and textual meaning, expands the research object of multimodal discourse, improves the theoretical framework, and is considered as a progress and development in the study of visual grammar.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

English Textbook for Senior High School (Compulsory Volume 1) (Chen, 2022) is published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press in accordance with the *English Curriculum Standards for Senior High School* (2017 Edition) formulated by the Ministry of Education. This English textbook consists of six units, starting with students' daily life and gradually developing topics, from campus life (Unit 1 A new start), language learning (Unit 2 Exploring English), to family affection (Unit 3 Family matters), friendship (Unit 4 Friends forever), and then to concern for nature (Unit 5 Into the wild, Unit 6 At one with nature). It embodies three major themes: man and self, man and society, man and nature. Each of the six units has the same structure.

The first part is background activation (Starting out), which lets students understand the topic of this unit through videos, texts, pictures, tables and other multi-modal discourses. The second part is Understanding ideas, which focuses on the core language and structure through discourse and reading activities. The third part is Using language, which develops students' language skills through a large number of language practice activities in grammar, vocabulary and listening and speaking. The fourth part is Developing ideas, which presents unit topics through new reading discourses to test the results of students' learning activities mentioned above.

The fifth part is Presenting ideas, which mainly promote students' review and mastery of the content through discussion, selection, speech, debate and other oral expressions. The sixth part is Self-reflection, which lists the learning goals that can be achieved under the topic of this unit. Students develop their self-learning ability through self-evaluation and summary. The seventh part is Project practice, which provides real context and tasks to cultivate students' ability to obtain information, cooperate with each other and apply what they have learned.

The illustration design of these seven parts of the textbook covers a wide range. In this study, 69 pages of illustrations from the cover to page 78 of *English Textbook for Senior High School* (Compulsory Volume 1) with the six units (each containing seven parts) were selected as the research object. Quantitative and qualitative analysis was adopted to analyze the construction of interpersonal meaning, ideational meaning and compositional meaning through visual narrative. Due to limited space, this article does not present all the illustrations in the textbook, but identifies them with page numbers. In addition, the analysis and discussion of illustrations under a certain subsystem does not mean that there is only one kind of meaning construction, but that such meaning construction is more prominent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interpersonal meaning mainly refers to the interpersonal relationship and emotional expression involved in the image. (Pan & Liu, 2021, p. 40) It includes four subsystems: focalisation, pathos, ambience and graduation. The ideational meaning of visual narrative discourse is similar to the representation meaning in traditional visual grammar theory, which refers to the presentation of picture content and theme by images. (Shen & Zhang, 2020, p. 80) It includes three subsystems: character, inter-event and inter-circumstance. Textual meaning focuses on the arrangement and use of different modal symbolic resources in the text. Images and text integrate the ideational meaning and interpersonal meaning of the text through the formation of textual units, and ultimately build up a coherent whole of the text. (Shen & Zhang, 2022, p. 81) It consists of three subsystems: layout, framing and focus. This paper analyzes the textbook illustrations of the subsystems of meta-functions in sequence.

Interpersonal Meaning

Focalisation

The focalisation focuses on whether the characters in the image have interaction with the reader, and what kind of reading viewpoint the image provides to the reader. According to the interaction between the characters in the image and the reader, the image can be divided into contact and observe. The difference between them is mainly judged by whether the figure in the image makes eye contact with the reader: In the contact image, the figure in the image interacts with the reader through eye contact, while the figure in the spectator image does not make eye contact. In terms of reading perspective, the image can be divided into mediated and unmediated images according to the reader's reading perspective. The former is similar to the "subjective shot in film research" (Feng, 2015, p. 24), in which the reader's perspective is consistent with that of the characters in the image, while the latter unmediated images are objective perspectives, in which the reader's perspective is different from that of the characters in the image. Starting from the cover of the textbook, there are three students smiling towards the readers and making eye contact, which belongs to the contact image, and the interactive relationship between the characters in the illustration and the readers is established. The illustration on page 1 of the textbook shows a student carrying a bag, also facing the reader. His eye contact interacts with the reader, and he walks on the runway, implying a new beginning and beginning, which is also consistent with the theme of Lesson 1 "A new start". In addition, the illustration on page 8 (Figure 1), the illustration on page 12, and the illustration on the right of page 76 all have eye contact, and the characters in the illustration look directly at the reader, forming an interactive relationship and prompting the reader to participate in the learning activity. Another aspect of the focalisation is the reading perspective, which is divided into objective perspective and subjective perspective. The illustration on page 11 (Figure 2) of the textbook shows a girl looking at her mobile phone, the illustrations on page 26-27 show a grandfather and son discussing their career plans, and the illustrations on page 33 show brothers helping each other in a race to the finish line.

The image on page 37 (Figure 3) of the textbook shows six people sitting on the bank, holding hands and showing their backs. This is a subjective perspective, and the reader's perspective is accompanied by the perspective of the characters in the illustration. The illustration on page 41 is a walking group organized by three people, which is also a subjective perspective. The reader's perspective is consistent with the perspective of the characters in the

illustration, and the reader uses the perspective of the characters in the picture, so the reader has a strong sense of substitution.
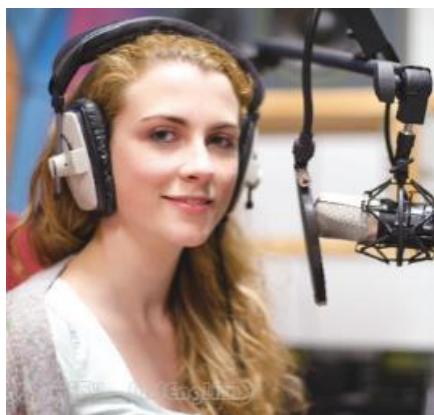

Figure 1: *On textbook page 8*

Figure 2: *On textbook page 11*

Figure 3: *On textbook page 37*

Pathos

The pathos examines the emotional relationship between the reader and the image character. There are two ways to characterize this emotional system: engaging and alienating. Engaging means that there is an emotional relationship between the image character and the reader, while alienating means that the reader has no emotional involvement in the image and only reads the image with an objective evaluation attitude. The way images engage in emotional intervention can be divided into personalising, empathic and appreciative. In the three kinds of images, the ways of presenting characters are different: The characters in the personalising type image are the images of natural style, and the character representation is the most specific; People in empathic images may be missing details such as facial features, making it impossible for readers to identify them as a specific person; In the appreciative

category, people are the simplest and most abstract images, mostly in the form of emoticons or stick figures. The ability of the three kinds of intervention to arouse readers' emotions gradually decreases.

The illustrations on page 10 (Figure 4) of the textbook is a personalising image with very specific character representation. The illustration on page 7 (Figure 5) shows a group of girls playing football. The details are not clear enough, but we can see their happy mood and rich campus life. This is an empathic image. The illustration on the left of page 76 also belongs to the empathic category, with the figure jumping joyfully, showing a joyful mood. The illustrations on page 14 and page 15 of the textbook attach emoticons to objects, the illustrations on page 16 are stick figures, the illustrations on page 31 (Figure 6) are a group of human expressions expressing the emotions of happiness, anger and sadness, the illustrations on page 36 and the stick figures on page 42, all of which belong to the appreciative type of images, and the appreciative type of illustrations have low ability to trigger readers' emotions.

For alienating illustrations, for example, the illustration on page 13 of the textbook shows the process of analysis and reproduce the distribution of language learning. It is an alienating illustration, which reflects the objective analysis of data. Alienating selects a relatively neutral, objective and critical perspective to read. In addition, the illustration on page 38 of the textbook shows the urban information network, the illustration on page 50 shows the butterfly migration route, and the illustration on page 64 shows the transformation process and the natural cycle process, all of which belong to the alienating type. The process fails to inspire empathy in the reader, who only reads in an objective and critical manner, without emotional involvement.

Figure 4: *On textbook page 10*

Figure 5: *On textbook page 7*

Figure 6: *On textbook page 31*

Ambience

Ambience refers to the visual meaning system that creates emotional atmosphere mainly through the use of color. (Lin *et al*, 2017, p. 74) It can be either activated or denied, depending on whether color is used. In activated state or in a color image, color includes three dimensions, namely vibrancy, warmth, and familiarity. The illustrations on page 19 (Figure 7) of the textbook are highly chromatic and naturalistic. In the illustrations on page 25 (Figure 8), the illustrations of "Father and Son" are caricature, showing black and white, but black and white colors cannot create an emotional atmosphere.

The three illustrations of "The von Trap family," "The Xia family" and "The Parr family" have high chromance and are in color. Among them, the first two are more natural, more authentic, and can create an emotional atmosphere and infect readers. The illustration on page 35 (Figure 9) of the textbook is a photo of mother and daughter; the illustration on page 73 is a scene of the school, showing basketball courts, classrooms, lecture halls, etc.; and the illustrations on page 75 are scenes of various family activities (such as running, visiting museums, playing basketball, cycling), all of which are real scenes with rich colors and high familiarity. The richer the color of the illustration, the more it can reflect the most authentic natural color, the more it can convey rich emotional connotation, and the closer the emotional distance with the reader.

There are not many black and white illustrations in the textbook. For example, the illustration on page 45 of the textbook is black and white. Because the more monotonous the color, the more abstract the content becomes, making people feel strange, thus widening the emotional distance with the reader. Color illustrations are often used in the teaching material. For example, the illustration on page 49 shows the beauty of nature with green and cool colors as the main color, which conforms to the colors of nature.

The illustration on page 53 shows two pandas eating bamboo, which is realistic and natural. The illustrations on page 59 are two pairs of cranes, and the illustrations on page 65 are natural dyes in warm red and yellow tones, with bright colors. There are four illustrations on page 66 (the Great Barrier Reef, the Grand Canyon, Victoria Falls, the English Channel), and the illustrations on page 67.

The illustration on pages 68-69 is a garden, the illustration on page 71 is a tea set, and the illustrations on page 77 are a set of three photographs of animals in nature: a tiger, a rhinoceros, and a polar bear. The authenticity of the illustrations creates an emotional atmosphere and infects the reader.
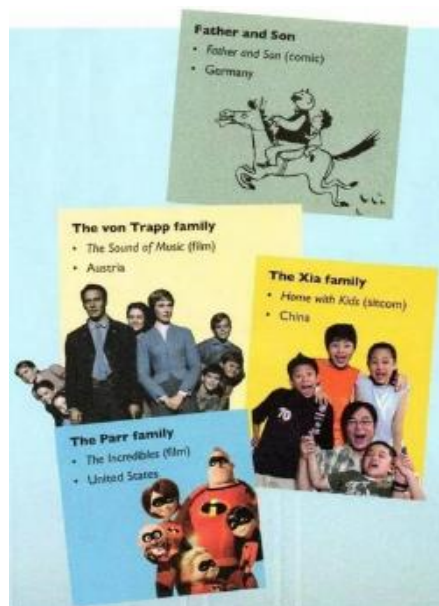
Figure 7: *On textbook page 19*

Figure 8: *On textbook page 25*

Figure 9: *On textbook page 35*

Graduation

Graduation "is a strategy to strengthen or weaken interpersonal meaning" (Wang & Zhao, 2020, p. 66). It is mainly represented in three subsystems: number, mass/amount, and extent. For example, the illustration on page 34 (Figure 10) of the textbook shows a competitor crossing the finish line. From the illustration, it can be seen that the figure in front of the track is taller than the ones behind, thus highlighting the figure's image. The working farmers in the illustration on page 62 (Figure 11) of the textbook appear particularly small in the terraces, which is similar to the terraces in the illustration on page 63 (Figure 12), highlighting the vast scope of the territory and forming a spectacular scene to attract readers' attention.

Figure 10: *On textbook page 34*

Figure 11: *On textbook page 62*

Figure 12: *On textbook page 63*

Ideational Meaning

Character

Painter *et al* divided the representation methods of the characters in the image into two types: complete and metonymic. During the complete representation, the appearance and facial features of the characters were fully displayed, and the identity of the characters was also clear. Metonymic representation, on the other hand, usually shows the characters in silhouette or part of the body, and the audience can only judge the identity of the characters through their expressions, clothes and actions. (Shen & Zhang, 2022, p. 80) For example, the illustration on page 39 (Figure 13) of the textbook shows a hand and a computer, which is a metonymic representation of character; the illustration on page 40 shows a hand holding a mobile phone in front of a computer, indicating the communication mode in the information age; the illustration on page 48 shows four raised arms to indicate the raising of hands to express opinions; and the illustration on page 55 shows a dog paw and a human hand clasping. The theme shows the relationship between humans and animals. The illustration on page 56 shows part of the photographer's face, and the middle illustration on page 76 shows students extending their arms to show each other's support and cooperation. These are metonymic representation images, and the meaning reproduction is closely related to the theme content.

Inter-event

Inter-event in visual narrative texts consists of two basic types: unfolding and projection. The former shows the temporal correlation of two events: "sequence" or "simultaneous occurrence"; The latter examines the correlation between image events and image characters' vision and thinking, that is, whether the events in one image are what the characters in another image see or think. (Shen & Zhang, 2022, p. 81) The content seen is the projection of real events, and the content thought is the projection of imaginary events.

The illustrations on page 2-3 of the textbook describe the scene of the hero's first day in high school. The story unfolds through the sequence of time. The two pages contain four illustrations in total, from his vision of the school to entering the school gate, then meeting the English teacher by chance, and then introducing himself in class. The key points of the whole process are reproduced in images, and the illustrations complement the story of this article. The illustration on page 23 (Figure 14) is also a complete story about the misunderstanding of the meaning of "toad-in-the-hole." The four pictures show the chronological sequence of events. In addition, figures b and d are dialogue bubbles of characters, and figure c is a thought bubble, that is, projection of imagination. The illustrations on page 74 are three, looking at the mistranslation on the road sign, and generating thought bubbles or questions.

Inter-circumstance

Inter-circumstance examines the way in which a visual narrative discourse continues or changes the situation. By comparing the two adjacent images, the background relationship can be divided into two categories: change and maintain. When the background changes, the audience's attention to the picture will also be affected. (Shen & Zhang, 2022, p. 81) The illustration on page 30 of the textbook is a comparison of the photos taken before and after ten years, and the background is the same, so that readers can pay attention to the changes of parents and daughters. The illustration on page 5 (Figure 15) shows the student spinning the ball with his fingers in the classroom and smashing the electronic device on the table to the ground. When the student picks it up, he visualizes the angry look of the teacher and how the

final result will be imagined by the student. The background of the whole story remains the same, and the reader focuses on the event itself.

Figure 13: *On textbook page 39*

Figure 14: *On textbook page 23*

Figure 15: *On textbook page 5*

Textual Meaning

Layout

On the level of textual meaning, Painter *et al* put forward the layout framework to analyze the relationship between images and texts in visual texts. They divide the layout into two types: integrated and complementary. In the integrated layout, text is a part of the image, and the two are projected to form a semantic relationship: In the former, text can be regarded as the

expression of image characters in language and thinking; In the latter, words and images have their own meanings and are linked to each other. In the complementary layout, the image and text occupy a part of the space, and the complementary relationship can be investigated from the axis, weight and placement, these three relationship characteristics.

Integrated Layout. The integrated layout makes the text become a part of the image, and the two are integrated to form an extended semantic relationship. The text and the image have their own meanings and are interrelated. The first part (Starting out) of each unit of the textbook uses the integrated type more. As the beginning part, the text is in the picture, and the use of videos, pictures and other means is introduced to explain the requirements and ask questions. The illustration on page 6 is six posters. Each poster is composed of texts and images, which also belongs to the integrated type. The images are on the left or right, above or below, and in the middle. Posters allow students to choose the right theme through pictures. The illustration on page 24 is a stick figure with "Good ideas" and "Great ideas" on it, forming a projected semantic relationship. Another example is the illustration on page 49, there are four pictures on top of the picture, the text on the left is on top of the picture, the illustration on page 57, the text (An Encounter with Nature) is on top of the picture, and the two illustrations on the left of page 62 have texts in the picture, all of which are integrated types.

Complementary Layout. In the complementary layout, the two modes of picture and text play different roles in the construction of meaning. For example, the illustration on page 18 (Figure 16) is six pictures, pointing out the differences between American and English vocabulary, with pictures above and words below. There are six illustrations on the left of page 50, with pictures of animals on the top and text of animal names on the bottom, in adjacent positions. The illustration on page 58 (Figure 17) consists of four pictures, the top of which is an image of a professional person, and the text below indicates the name of the profession. The illustration on page 72 consists of four pictures with location pictures above and texts indicating locations below (on a tropical island, in the mountains, in a jungle, out in the grasslands). The illustration on the left of page 50, with pictures above and texts below, is a complementary type.

The illustration on the right of page 61 shows the picture above and the text below indicating the name of the country. Pictures and texts are adjacent to each other, with images accounting for the majority and text relatively occupying a small part. Images are dominant, pictures take precedence over text, and texts play an explanatory role. All these are complementary types. This type of layout is often used in textbooks. The illustration on page 19 is a dictionary with text explaining new words, and the illustration on page 31 is a photograph of a family with the text "The International Day of Families." The heads of the illustrated characters on page 43 are gathered and looked down, with the introduction of the word "friend" below. The illustration on page 44 (portrait of William Sydney Porter, pseudonym O. Henry), with the image above and the text below, is an introduction to the character. There are five illustrations on page 54.

They are about the idioms "as busy as a bee," "kill two birds with one stone," "When the cat's away, the mice will play," "hold your horses," "It's raining cats and dogs," left for the text practice, right for the illustration, vividly describe the literal meaning of the idiom. The illustration on page 70, with illustrations on the left and interview questions on the right. In the illustration on page 78, the illustration of bamboo on the left and the information about bamboo on the right are adjacent to each other, so the text takes precedence over the illustration.

Figure 16: *On textbook page 18*

Figure 17: *On textbook page 58*

Figure 18: *On textbook page 22*

Framing

Framing is divided into bound and unbound, that is, without borders. Most of the illustrations in the textbook have borders, but the illustrations on pages 51-52, where you can see the monarch butterfly flying outside the borders, are rare in the textbook.

Focus

Focus is divided into centrifocal and iterating. For example, the illustrations on page 21 of the textbook are triplets, the left and right are images, the middle is text, the left is the author's picture and name, the right is a picture composed of pictures or text, and the middle is text, which is in the central position and occupies the main position and becomes the focus of learning. The illustration on page 22 (Figure 18) shows four heads and names on four corners, with the text "who, where, what happened" in the center. The text occupies an important position, resides in the information center, the content of the training for students. The illustration on page 34 shows the brothers' winning photo centered around a semicircle with five questions: "Who are they?" "When did they story happened?" "Where did the story happen?" "What did Alistair do?" "Why did he do it?" Text problems become the content of students' training and occupy an important position.

CONCLUSION

According to the analysis of the illustrations' meaning construction, the study has found that the characters in the textbook illustrations made more eye contact with the readers, thus enhancing the interaction between students and the illustrations, which can encourage readers to actively participate in the learning activities. The subjective perspective illustrations are the perspective that the characters in the illustrations look at, which enhances the reader's sense of immersion and increases their initiative, but such illustrations are not very common and could be considered increasing. Meanwhile, the textbook illustrations can also include personalising illustrations to enhance the reader's emotional involvement in the images and evoke the reader's empathy. The textbook has fewer black-and-white illustrations and uses more colorful pictures, using high color saturation and natural photos with high realism to create an emotional atmosphere and thus infect the reader. According to the theme content of the textbook, the illustrations have meaning reconstruction in the conceptual sense. Finally, the illustrations and text are rich in integrated and complementary layout, either prioritizing pictures or prioritizing texts, which are combined with the relevant content of the textbook. Due to the limited analysis of the illustrations in the textbook and their subjectivity, this article hopes that the visual narrative theory analysis can help teachers and students better understand the illustrations in the textbook, and also be beneficial for the textbook editors to provide some reference when considering the meaning construction of the illustrations in future textbook construction.

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