

## A Reflection on Diversity in Picture Books for the ELL Classroom

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### Abstract

English is a tool for global communication. Emphasizing the importance of teaching English to English Language Learners (ELLs) through global perspectives, this paper introduces the idea of incorporating diverse picture books into ELL classrooms to connect ELLs to diverse perspectives on the world through their language learning. Diverse picture books allow students to obtain knowledge of different ways of life and people from different backgrounds, appreciate our differences and similarities, and develop global, social, and academic learning. However, social and cultural issues concerning diverse views can cause unfair discrimination against race, religion, and gender. In order to bring up difficult subjects with English learners, who are yet to explore the world beyond their experience, this paper highlights the sensitivity required in selecting diverse picture books before they are introduced into an ELL classroom. While addressing the method of utilizing picture books to improve English language skills, this paper aims to raise teachers' awareness of selecting books to expand the benefits of using diverse picture books in ELL classrooms.

**Keywords:** ESL/EFL Literacy, Text & Visual Literacy, diversity, language & global competency, multicultural picture books

Language is a communication tool to develop our interpersonal relationships. English is a tool for global communication to connect us with people across the world. Dividing my time between the USA and Japan with opportunities to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL), I have always felt the importance of reminding English language learners (ELLs) of the fundamental role of the English language and the primary reason for their English learning. Language competency is an essential factor in expanding one's possibilities in a global society. However, looking back thirty years ago when I was struggling with a language barrier and cultural difference as an exchange student, I cannot deny that my determination to interact effectively with others and willingness to understand and respect our diverse societies had a significant influence in leading me to a new opportunity. Learning English through global perspectives allows ELLs to explore the world beyond, expand their knowledge of diverse views, and develop critical thinking skills for better judgment and right decision-making. Making ELLs aware that English is an essential tool to connect them with the world is a powerful incentive to motivate them. Whether my students are EFLs in language schools and corporations in Japan or ESLs in afterschool programs in the USA, I have come to understand that encouraging students to broaden their global perspectives and effectiveness through language learning is as vital as teaching language skills and systems (Kansy, 2006). Providing a teaching curriculum and learning

environment that promote students' global, social, and academic awareness is a crucial element to help them prepare to function as members of the global society through their English learnings (Kansay, 2006). Again, English is a tool for global communication, and English learning is closely connected to global competency. English language competence and global competence complement one other.

Promoting a better understanding of our diverse society fosters global competence in ELLs. As Kansay (2006) addressed, English is “the core of celebrating diversity” (p. 3). We have social, political, gender, religious, cultural, and racial diversity across the world. Obtaining accurate knowledge of different ways of life broadens our diverse perspectives on the world. Meeting people from different backgrounds allows us to value our differences and similarities (Reisberg, 2008). However, social and cultural issues are sensitive topics to talk about openly. They can trigger unfair discrimination against race, religion, gender, and politics. There is a risk of creating tension in the classroom. So, how do we handle touchy topics? Picture books have many advantages for introducing sensitive topics in ELL classrooms and teaching English through global perspectives. The book length is short with a rich vocabulary for ELL literacy. There is a wide range of selections with social and cultural themes that suit both children and adults. The illustrations provide not only the necessary information for students to understand the plot visually but also function as the beneficial vehicles to enhance students' critical and analytical thinking through visual literacy (Reisberg, 2008). While textual literacy with picture books will expose students to the strategies for thinking about the texts, raising the questions, and expanding their comprehension, visual literacy will help develop their skills for interpreting the images, thinking critically, and understanding the depth of the story.

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (2020) is the method that effectively induces the benefits of visual literacy in ELL classrooms. It utilizes three questions to enhance visual interpretation: 1) What is going on in the picture? 2) What makes you say that? 3) What else can we find? This method not only improves students' visual reading skills but also encourages them to justify their opinions using evidence. Having students answer questions verbally and articulate their explanations in a written format expands their speaking and writing fluency (Yeom, 2018). It helps develop logical reasoning in their verbal and written responses. Similarly, the Whole Book Approach is the method of guiding students' attention through the details of visual storytelling and enhancing their visual literacy skills (Lambert, 2015). This method instructs students to observe the images closely and gather the clues to read the story deeper. The process of deeper reading will allow students to reflect on the stories and organize their thoughts. Consequently, it directs them to relate to the characters, connect with them through empathy, and prepare for self-reflection on the topics in the stories. In this way, picture books can initiate ELLs to learn social-cultural issues through language learning when given an opportunity to meet the people they have never met and explore the cultures they have never experienced. In other words, the entertaining elements of picture books will help facilitate sharing thoughts on difficult topics with rhythmic texts and aesthetic visual elements.

In order to maximize these benefits of picture books, teachers must be conscious that the books introduced to the ELLs who are not familiar with the world beyond their society tend to represent the culture from a particular ethnicity. In other words, teachers must carefully review, evaluate, and select a book to provide accurate knowledge on the topics. In other words, the selected books must be culturally and historically authentic in both

texts and illustrations (Reisberg, 2008). As I brainstormed my criteria for selecting the books for my students, two incidents in the children's literature industries caught my attention. In 2016, Scholastic recalled *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* (Ganeshram & Newton, 2016) because of the public criticism of the depictions of a President's enslaved chef, Hercules. *School Library Journal* criticized the book, saying it "conveys a feeling of joyfulness that contrasts with the reality of slave life" (Parrott, 2016, para. 1). *Kirkus Reviews* stated the book presented "an incomplete, even dishonest treatment of slavery" (Smith, 2016, para. 3). As the withdrawal reason, Scholastic issued the statement that the title failed to convey the accurate images of the historical reality "despite the positive intentions and beliefs of the author, editor, and illustrator" (Scholastic Media Room, 2016, para. 2), which demonstrates that positive intentions with a lack of awareness and knowledge could unconsciously harm others.

In 2017, a similar incident occurred in the Dr. Seuss Museum in Springfield. The mural from the page of *And to Think I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (Dr. Seuss, 1937) was removed as a consequence of the public complaints about the racial stereotype image of a Chinese character (Wilkins, 2017). Nel (2014) observed how the picture books Dr. Seuss read as a child influenced "his unconscious, as an ordinary part of his visual imagination" (p.72), and his stereotypes of depictions continued to emerge in his works without his being aware of it. In 2021, six titles written and illustrated by Dr. Seuss - *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street* (1937), *If I Ran the Zoo* (1950), *McElligot's Poo* (1947), *On Beyond Zebra!* (1955), *Scrambled Eggs Super!* (1953), and *The Cat's Quizzer* (1976) - were eventually removed from publication because of a visual racial misrepresentation. During the process of publishing *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* and setting up Dr. Seuss' mural, everyone involved must have been well intentioned. However, it is implausible that no one ever realized that their intention to celebrate the legacies of Hercules and Dr. Seuss might devalue and hurt a specific ethnicity until the works were out in public and criticized.

I pictured myself showing Dr. Seuss's mural unconsciously to a class that included one Chinese student without being aware of how the student might feel among others, standing in front of the wall. What if I introduced *A Birthday Cake for George Washington* to the class with one African American student with my good intention of showing how incredible Hercules was? Then, I imagined myself as being a member of the ethnicity represented in the book I selected and asked this question to myself: Do I feel proud to be in the class while this book about my race and culture is being read, or do I feel misunderstood or belittled? In addition to word counts and writing styles matching students' literacy level, my first criteria for selecting books has become whether or not the books represent each character and culture in pride and dignity with no "distorted, negative, or laughable" images (Bishop, 1990, p. 4). According to Yoo-Lee et al. (2014, as cited in Short & Fax, 2003), there is no doubt that "only an insider to the culture portrayed in the book can sense if it is authentic" (p. 326). If the story's theme contains cultures that we are not familiar with, how do we verify a book's authenticity? Should we choose only the books by the authors and illustrators who are from the cultures on the topics or those who have a background in its culture and were exposed to it for a specified number of years? I would not eliminate a good story by the authors and illustrators who are outside of the cultures; however, when we choose the books by those who have no cultural background in its specific country, seeking feedback on the topics

from cultural insiders helps us learn about what is in the texts and implied by the texts (Yoo-Lee et al., 2014).

Acquiring insight about the books gives us an opportunity to learn, debate, weigh, and make a final decision in selection. For example, Cynthia Rylant, a native of West Virginia, is well known for her Appalachian cultural-themed books. Authentic positive Appalachian values discussed by Valentine's research (2008) such as "religion," "self-reliance," "love," "pride," "neighborliness," "familism," and "a sense of place" (p. 54) are all identified in Rylant's stories. Roggenkamp (2008) stated that the author provided Appalachian stereotypes in her works only to have the readers see beyond the negative stereotypes to which the region is often subject and explore the positive side of Appalachian value and culture. However, Roggenkamp (2008) found that the illustrations of the author's memoir, *When I Was Young in the Mountains* (1982), fell short of Rylant's effort by providing the images of the century-old pre-modern Appalachian stereotypes. Being an outsider of its culture, I found nothing but a beautifully illustrated peaceful life in Appalachia. After researching about Appalachian culture further, I decided to include this book in my selection. Rylant's love and devotion to the region are well-known from her past works. In addition to the feedback that I received from a cultural insider and a lack of sufficient evidence to support visual inaccuracy and overgeneralization, beautifully illustrated gentle scenes reinforce Rylant's lyrical language and intensify the mood and tone of the narrative. However, Roggenkamp's insights were essential in weighing the content of the book before introducing it to the class. Roggenkamp's observation brought me awareness and kept me from unconsciously raising the risk of negative stereotypes in the classroom.

Wee (2017) pointed out that "a single story forms stereotypes and stereotypes are problematic not because they are not true, but because they are incomplete" (p.3). To illustrate, *A Different Pond* (Phi & Bui, 2017) is a quiet, beautiful book that depicts the bond and love in a hard-working Vietnamese immigrant family in the United States. The protagonist's father is a war refugee, and their struggles and meager life are subtle but evident in both texts and illustrations. I felt introducing the only lasting image of Vietnamese people as poor war refugees in the United States seemed insufficient to represent Vietnamese. As Wee (2017) stated, most of the Southeast Asian-themed picture books published in the U.S. have a common plot, such as the characters' experience of war, refugees, escape from their own countries, and struggle as immigrants (Wee, 2017). It is not that this history is not true, but that consistently showing only the story of their traumatic history is insufficient for understanding their culture and tradition. We cannot portray an ethnicity's whole culture through a couple of picture books. However, using the paired books to show the variety of life from the same culture helps ease generalizations and allows ELLs to explore a character's different cultural background without inputting a fixed image of stereotype.

For instance, *Knock Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me* (Beaty & Collier, 2013) is a compelling story about a boy who overcame his father's sudden disappearance and grew into manhood to be independent. However, by introducing only this book as a representation of an African American author and illustrator, I felt I ran the risk of reinforcing the stereotype of an incarcerated black father. In order to show a different life of African American characters, I decided to pair up *Knock Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me* with *Uptown* (Collier, 2000), which conveys the passion and energy of Harlem culture. Both *Knock Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me* and *Uptown* introduce each character's life

to the readers with beautiful and powerful language and illustrations. Each book stands out with the different characters in the different settings. However, when selecting a book for an ELL classroom for the purpose of raising awareness of diversity, using the paired books facilitates ELL's discussion on the sensitive topics and connects them with the character in the story without feeding unconscious bias.

### Conclusion

Language and visual literacy in picture books are significant resources to help develop students' language skills and critical thinking abilities and teach English through global perspectives. Simultaneously, how teachers incorporate books into the curriculum and what books they select make a significant impact on ELLs' diverse views. Many ELLs are still in the process of acquiring knowledge about the world outside their culture. If the cultures are outside our own, stay humble to learn these differences and embrace this diversity. By doing so, we have less risk of unintentionally devaluing other ethnicities, cultures, and backgrounds and unconsciously passing along racially misrepresented images to the students. It seems illogical to encourage students to study one global language that allows us to connect with our diverse world without teaching the value of our diverse world. The power of storytelling will elevate students' emotional growth, and the stories in diverse picture books will raise awareness of global diversity. As Bishop (1990) pointed out, books are windows, sliding glass doors, and mirrors. Through picture books, the students are taking a journey to see the views of the world through the windows, walk through the sliding glass doors to the world unknown, and see the reflections of themselves in the mirrors (Bishop, 1990). We have invited our students to travel with us, meet people unlike us, and listen to their voices. It is our job to help them prepare for their journey.

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