

Addressing Racism with Young Language Learners through Picturebooks

Julia Reckermann & Frauke Matz

Abstract

English language teaching (ELT) has the potential to facilitate student reflection on their own positionality, thereby enabling the cultivation of an understanding of diversity and different cultural contexts. It can play a pivotal role in nurturing empathy, respectful communication and critical reflection on issues around identity and mutual respect. Therefore, it is well suited to address issues surrounding discriminatory and harmful practices, including those surrounding 'race' and racism. While racism is undoubtedly a challenging topic for educators to address, it is an integral component of structural violence that should be incorporated into the early years of ELT curriculum. This is essential for fostering children's capacity to reflect on social practices and promote positive societal change early on. In the context of the ELT classroom for young learners, this topic holds particular pertinence, as these young students have begun to internalize issues of social identity and discrimination, but have not yet established definitive stereotypes and tend to be open-minded and interested in cultural and social practices and backgrounds. This article suggests that picturebooks are well placed to address such sensitive and seemingly difficult topics and explores which books as well as which teaching activities might be suitable.

Keywords: racism, diversity, picturebook analysis, challenging picturebooks, social justice, young learners, tough topics

Julia Reckermann is Professor of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the University of Münster, Germany. Her research focuses on young language learners, picturebooks in language learning, diversity-sensitive language education, development of language competences (particularly listening, reading, speaking and vocabulary), and 'Global Englishes Language Teaching'.

Frauke Matz is Professor of English Language Education at the University of Münster, Germany. Her research focuses on the role of cultural and literary learning in language classrooms, with a particular emphasis on digital texts (such as videogames and VR applications), children and human rights as well as peace education.

Introduction¹

English language teaching (ELT), with its emphasis on language, identities and cultural contexts has the capacity to make a substantial contribution to a socially just pedagogy based on democratic principles, and human and children's rights, thereby contributing to the cultivation of a more peaceful society. It can assist students in reflecting on their own positionality, facilitate learning about diversity and different cultural contexts, and encourage the development of empathy and respectful communication. To achieve this objective, it is essential that from primary education onwards ELT includes 'tough' topics, which 'might involve students revealing stories that teachers don't know how to deal with and might ignite strong emotions in students' (Swartz, 2020, p. 9). Racism is certainly not only one of those tough or challenging topics, but can be considered an inherent part of language education, as issues 'around race and ethnicity have been widely discussed in relation to the identities, literacy skills, and multicultural/lingual development of ethnic minorities in ESL [English as Second Language] contexts' (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023, p. 94).

Furthermore, children experience structural as well as everyday racism in schools frequently and openly (see Braselmann, 2023). Teachers need to recognize and acknowledge existing racial biases, as well as the privileges associated with a certain background, 'regardless of their [learners'] racial or ethnic background and identification' (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023, p. 118).

However, to become 'antiracist educators who can actively fight against race and ethnicity-based inequities and injustices' (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023, p. 159), teachers require assistance in the form of support, conceptual frameworks and teaching materials for all ages and language levels. In the context of primary and early secondary education, the question thus arises as to not just why, but also how issues around 'race'² and racism are a topic suitable and appropriate for and with young language learners from Years 3 to 6 (aged approximately eight to twelve). Young learners are receptive to social practices and, while they have begun to internalize issues of social identity and discrimination (Erdinger, 2022), they have not yet developed permanent stereotypes or established practices of (undesired) othering and discrimination (e.g., Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020; Sussex, 2020). However, they are aware of socially constructed differences and have already formed 'pre-prejudices' (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020, p. 40). They are also likely to have experienced racist practices themselves. In this article, the argument is put forward that picturebooks represent an ideal means to raise awareness of and to begin to learn about racism in

the early language classroom. These texts have the capacity to introduce learners to complex issues and to engage with challenging matters (see, e.g., Bland, 2018; Dolan, 2014). The subsequent discussion will thus address the following question: How can picturebooks help to raise awareness and cultivate a deeper understanding and emotional connection to the issue of racism in the context of young learners in ELT?

To address this question, the contribution proceeds as follows: The aim of the first section is to outline how to introduce issues of 'race' and ethnicity in the language classroom and to provide an insight into guiding principles that might be helpful in raising awareness about racism. A special focus is then set on young learners. This is followed by a discussion of how picturebooks can be used to engage with this topic, and how suitable picturebooks can be selected. Based on that, several picturebooks are discussed for their potential use in class, including some suggestions for discussion prompts and teaching activities. Finally, a conclusion is drawn that also points to research desiderata as well as limitations of the contribution at hand.

This contribution is partially based on a presentation that was delivered by the authors on 7 May 2024 at the RidEL conference held at Nord University, Norway. We would like to express our gratitude for the insightful questions and comments that were received following the presentation. We would also like to thank our reviewers for their critical and constructive feedback, which was instrumental in challenging our assumptions and finalizing this text, and express our gratitude to our student in Münster Isabelle Johnen for her contributions to this article.

Anti-Racist (Language) Education

Before exploring strategies for addressing racism in ELT, it is crucial to acknowledge the complexity of the concept of 'race' and provide a definition of the term 'racism'. 'Race' is a human invention, socially as well as historically constructed and used 'to legitimize inequitable, exclusionary, and discriminatory socio-economic structures, policies, and actions that benefit particular "races", usually White populations' (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023, p. 95). Racism is thus predicated on this false assumption of the existence of distinct 'races' of people and is a form of structural violence that is created, shaped and maintained by societal norms, cultural beliefs and power structures, and has a profound impact on a wide range of ethnic and religious groups (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023). It can manifest itself in numerous ways, ranging from overt racism (which

includes racial or ethnic profiling, or racist comments) to more subtle forms, such as inquiring about someone's origin solely based on the colour of their skin or the name they have (Kalpaka, 2015). Furthermore, it can occur on an individual basis, as a result of hatred or harmful personal ideologies, but also on a systemic, structural level, in the form of legislation and public policy. This systemic level constitutes an endeavour to establish and perpetuate inequalities at global and local levels (see, e.g., Mitchell, 2022; Riccucci, 2022). In any case, the perpetuation of such practices often relies upon the harmful practice of 'othering' (see, e.g., Arndt, 2021).

Teachers who are committed to creating classrooms that are founded on a socially just pedagogy, underpinned by anti-racist and democratic principles, who strive to contribute to the cultivation of a more peaceful society, based on human and children's rights, can find support in Critical Race Theory (CRT; see Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). It 'equips students, teachers, and communities with tools to identify the presence of racism; diagnose its root causes; and create healing solutions' (Cook & Bryan, 2024, p. 3) and thus also serves as the basis for this article. CRT scholars acknowledge the pivotal and detrimental role of 'race' and racism, 'othering' of various types in society, challenge established racist ideologies, employ counter-storytelling techniques, engage with intersectionality to disrupt essentialism, and 'value and uphold the voices, insights, and perspectives of people of colour to challenge dominant narratives about them that are inaccurate' (Cook & Bryan, 2024, p. 4), as well as of people of another peripheralized 'minority' wherever.

However, as Swartz states, '[c]onversations about racism can be tricky and the context will vary depending on who is talking and what their personal experiences with race and racism are' (2020, p. 25). Many (language) teachers may not feel fully equipped to engage in anti-racist education and as anti-racist education does not appear to be part of language teacher education in the European (and especially West European) context and beyond, teachers might 'shy away from uncomfortable moments in the classroom' (Braselmann, 2024, p. 146). They may feel inadequately prepared to address racism and might thus be reluctant to engage with it (Ludwig & Summer, 2023). Moreover, teachers lack teaching materials to address this topic with their language learners. As an initial recommendation, Braselmann (2023) presents a set of principles that secondary school teachers can adopt in light of the limited availability of resources on the teaching of racism in the ELT classroom, which are adopted here for use with young(er) learners. She suggests that educators

adopt a critical and self-reflective stance when dealing with issues of race and racism. It is essential that they

- possess the ability to convey their knowledge about racism in an informed and articulate manner,
- are well-prepared and able to convey knowledge about racism,
- have in-depth knowledge on ways to speak about certain groups and challenge the pervasive binary notions that perpetuate the concept of 'us' versus 'them',
- are aware of racial identities and experiences of racism among their learners, and
- demonstrate a sensitivity to the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their students, without resorting to simplistic categorization (Brasemann, 2023, pp. 194-196).

Admittedly, addressing racism 'requires a great deal of preparation and willingness for discussion and dissent in the classroom – a hurdle that often appears to be too high to be taken' (Brasemann, 2023, p. 169), but it is necessary in the strive toward learning to live together peacefully and without discrimination.

Addressing racism in the ELT classroom is deeply connected with the overall objectives of language learning: To learn to live together in our shared global space and to enable children to participate in discourses that are meaningful to them (see, e.g., Matz & Römhild, 2024; Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023). In learning languages, learners develop the capacity to listen to and engage with others, to express their own views and experiences, and to advocate for themselves and others (Römhild, 2023).

Learning About Racism with Young (Language) Learners

As early as kindergarten, at the age of 4 or 5, children begin to recognize differences and construct social identities as they try to make sense of their world (Ali-Tani, 2017; Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020). They begin to form categories (e.g., skin colour, religious/cultural practices, languages, etc.) as an important step in finding orientation in our complex world, but these categories might become problematic when they develop into hierarchical patterns in thinking and acting (Ali-Tani, 2017). Derman-Sparks and Edwards term these as 'pre-prejudices', which are 'seeds that might grow into actual prejudice if a child's family or other important people [...] ignore or reinforce them' (2020, p. 40).

Racism is an omnipresent issue (see, e.g., DeZIM, 2022 for Germany) and Rösch (2019) notes that children are often observers as well as recipients of it. Therefore ‘delaying conversations about racism in the classroom is tantamount to delaying the support they [the learners] need to understand this issue, cope with it, and address it’ (Grace-Williams, 2020, p. 26). Young language learners are unlikely to have established irreversible stereotypes and tend to be open to and interested in cultural and social practices (e.g. Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2020; Sussex, 2020), so the topic of racism is well suited to facilitating discussion and reflection on social justice and everyday practices early in learners’ lives.

Two questions remain, however, about the involvement of young learners in discussions and reflections on racism:

- a) What are young learners able to understand cognitively about racism, i.e., which aspects of racism can be addressed?
- b) How can teachers approach the topic of racism in young learners’ English classes, taking into account their learners’ limited English language proficiency?

Question a) is an issue that has not yet been addressed in the context of young learners in ELT. Partly based on Rösch’s (2019) suggestions for discussions about racism in learners’ home language or school language, we would therefore like to suggest the following key aspects that could be addressed with 8 to 12-year-old language learners (the older learners are, the deeper the conversations can be and the more difficult and complex concepts and terminology can become):

- The concept of ‘race’ is a human invention, but over the centuries it has been used to discriminate and exercise power over certain groups of people (possibly underpinned by examples from a context that is familiar to the learners, for example slavery in the USA).
- Racism is discrimination against a person or a group of people because of their ethnicity/origin, place of birth, language(s), religious beliefs/practices, etc.
- Racism is a violation of human and children’s rights, as all human beings have the right to be treated equally and to live without discrimination (the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [UN, 1989]). Teachers can engage learners in a conversation about discrimination and question it: What does it mean to not treat everyone equally and/or to treat someone fairly or unfairly? What does it mean that one group has unjustified power over another? What are examples of someone being treated unfairly/discriminated because of their

language, skin colour, country of origin, religion, etc.?

- Stereotypes are harmful social practices and should be avoided, clarified and rectified. (To explain the concept of stereotypes, teachers need to provide examples that are related to the learners' lives and spheres of experience.)
- Everyone's opinions and values are shaped by their parents, friends, teachers, role models and, increasingly, by social media and its algorithms – and yet, they can be changed.
- Skin colour relates to racism/discrimination and there are harmful as well as acceptable terms to address skin colour. (Discussions can include: What is the reason for different skin colours? Which terms are harmful, which terms are acceptable? Who might be hurt by a term, who might not be hurt by it, and why? (See also Braselmann, 2023).)

These key aspects are highly dependent on the social and geographical contexts and experiences of both learners and teachers. The role of the teacher and the teacher's in-depth knowledge of racism and terminology, including what is acceptable/unacceptable and why, becomes very clear at this point. Also, teachers need to reflect on their own position and value base, as anti-racism is an attitude that requires a teacher's commitment (Braselmann, 2023).

Addressing Racism via Picturebooks

Picturebooks have long been recognized as an ideal resource in ELT for young learners. With regard to challenging topics, they can effectively introduce learners to a range of complex issues and bear great potential for addressing sensitive and seemingly difficult themes (Dolan, 2014; Mourão, 2015). They 'allow students to explore a social issue from a distance' (Ellis & Gruenbaum, 2023) and are a suitable medium for addressing complex issues and helping learners to see 'people who seem "different" as just the same, with the same capacity for love, joy and pain as the child herself' (Ellis, 2020, p. 7). Stories also allow learners to develop perspective-taking skills by enabling them to see beyond their own world and to (positively) experience the world of others (Heggernes, 2022; Mourão, 2022). Nikolajeva (2013) describes how fiction can foster learners' empathy and emotional literacy, and, in a later study (Nikolajeva, 2018), outlines why picturebooks in particular have the potential to trigger emotions and foster emotional literacy. They can support learners' respect for others and encourage them to develop positive attitudes towards diversity (Mourão, 2022). Also, they have considerable potential to encourage learners' engagement with challenging

subjects and facilitate emotional engagement as well as the development of empathy and new perspectives. According to Scales (2023), 'books about [...] racial injustice are the best way to have open conversations with the young' (p. 46).

Previous research, although very scarce, supports that picturebooks have great potential to address racism with young learners. Mourão (2022) describes the use of the wordless picturebook *Colour of People* (Negro, 2017) with 20 pre-primary school children in Portugal and finds that the book served to initiate a discussion about identity and 'race' and was thereby successful in fostering competencies associated with global citizenship education. Furnes Sindland and Birketveit (2020)³ found in an intervention study (N = 21 Year 5 learners of English in Norway) that the use of the book *The Soccer Fence* (Bildner & Watson, 2014), which centres around Apartheid in South Africa, significantly increased the learners' ability to decentre.

Selecting Picturebooks about Racism

Given the complexity of the issue, criteria for text selection go beyond the more general guiding criteria for selecting a picturebook that is suitable for young learners in ELT (e.g., Ellis & Brewster, 2014). Selection criteria focus more explicitly on the content, particularly the portrayal of racism in these books, and the potential for using the books to instigate conversations about the issue: 'It is important for educators to choose books with maximum potential for exploring global and justice perspectives' (Dolan, 2014, p. 108).

First, an important distinction in three different types of picturebooks that relate to racism needs to be made: On the one hand, there are valuable picturebooks that depict and celebrate People of Colour (PoC) without any reference to or occurrence of discrimination or racism (type 1), and on the other hand, there are picturebooks that overtly depict racial discrimination in a literary read (type 2). Finally, there are picturebooks that are more informational or factual and teach learners about racism (type 3). This study will focus on types 2 and 3, and only those that explicitly depict or address racism, since materials and texts for anti-racist ELT should 'make racist language, images, and narratives visible' (Brasemann, 2023, p. 172) and 'choosing texts that address racism openly can be beneficial, as they [the learners] can focus on an explicit understanding of concepts of race' (Brasemann, 2024a, p. 198). This is important for initiating conversations about racism, as such books clearly illustrate a problem, usually offer a solution, and thus allow even young

learners to identify injustice, discrimination, and thus racism, as well as see examples of how to counteract it. Such books can thus be a starting point that can lead to further exploration of the issue of racism, including background information, personal experiences, and a perspective on what learners themselves can do about (racial) discrimination.

At the same time, books should not include instances of (unresolved) discrimination (Alter, 2018), including (unreflected) latent or manifest racist language (see Blum et al., 2022; Rösch, 2019): They should by no means 'uphold, reproduce, and reinforce racist knowledge' (Braselmann, 2023, p. 172). This includes not only explicit racist knowledge and language: Biases against certain groups of people or power relationships between groups might also be carried in the storyline (Derman-Sparks, n.d.). Finally, racism and all forms of discrimination should never be accepted, taken at face value, or portrayed positively in any book used in educational settings. From previous research and suggestions in (young learners') ELT and beyond – all of which did not have an exclusive focus on selecting picturebooks for anti-racist ELT –, we have synthesized the following key guiding questions as selection criteria for picturebooks that overtly address racism with young English learners:

- Does the book explicitly and openly address racism, without casting it in a positive light, and invite readers to critically reflect on it? (see explanation above)
- Can the learners relate to the content and/or do they have experience with/previous knowledge about it (see Bland (2022) on the importance of content familiarity)?
- Is the book inspiring and does it include key features of literary texts, i.e., is it more than a 'didactic picturebook' that overtly intends to teach the learners, but rather provides them with an exciting reading experience (see Alter, 2018; Bland, 2022; Kaminski, 2016)?
- Does the book avoid stereotyping, superficial treatment of protagonists/environments, and shallow depictions of certain characters/groups as well as tokenism (i.e., having only one person from a particular group to represent the whole group) that young learners might take for granted, absorb unconsciously, and cannot critically question (yet) (see, e.g., Alter, 2018; Derman-Sparks, n.d.; Rösch, 2019)?
- Are PoC and/or minorities naturally main or accompanying characters, not portrayed as 'other' or/and unfavourably against a perceived (White⁴) norm, but as characters who have agency and power, whose voices are heard, and for whom the standards of success are the

same as for any other character(s) (Braselmann, 2023; Derman-Sparks, n.d.; Reckermann, 2020; Rösch, 2019)?

- Does the book encourage learners and provide realistic examples of how to stand up against discrimination and how to stand up for themselves (Derman-Sparks, n.d.; Rösch, 2019)?
- Does the book focus on a story of resistance, hope and joy rather than (solely) victimization and suffering (see Braselmann, 2023, 2024b)?
- Who is/are the author(s)/illustrator(s)? (The question of authorship is challenging, since also seemingly biased authors can write unbiased picturebooks (e.g., Alter 2018). Still, the question of who is/are the author(s) and how they qualify to address racism can be critically examined, see Derman-Sparks (n.d.)).

These questions can be answered in the affirmative or negative; yet, for a book to be used in class, the answers must mirror an anti-racist stance. It is also possible (and likely) that the answer 'with mediation' will be selected, since some aspects might require careful mediation by the teacher for the book to comply with anti-racist values and beliefs. Potential critical issues in a book can, for instance, be mediated through asking questions during the reading as well as via engaging learners in discussions and critical thinking in the follow-up phase (see Ellis & Mourão, 2021). In those cases where the analysis of a book shows that one or even more of the questions are answered in favour of racism, teachers should very carefully consider their use in class. They might of course be used as negative examples, i.e., to illustrate racism and then discuss and question it critically. However, Rösch (2019) outlines how particularly young learners (in Year 3, aged about 8 to 9) are hardly critical, for instance regarding racist language, while older learners (Year 6, aged about 11 to 12) tend to identify and criticize as well as speak against it.

Last but not least, this list is not exhaustive and users of it are kindly encouraged to add criteria, particularly those that cater to taking into consideration the individual contexts and needs of the learning groups.

Selected Picturebooks and Teaching Suggestions

Following a review of more than 40 books, this section will delve more deeply into a carefully selected subset. All of them meet the criteria outlined above and can serve as a valuable starting point to raise awareness, initiate discussions and impart knowledge about racism, as well as to

encourage taking action against it.

All the books in the subset explicitly and openly address racism, yet without casting it in a positive light. Additionally, all of them avoid stereotyping, shallow descriptions of certain characters or tokenism. In all literary texts depicted, PoC and/or minorities are main or accompanying characters who are not portrayed unfavourably or as 'other', who possess agency and power and whose voices are (eventually) heard. Moreover, all the books focus on stories of resistance and hope and not purely on suffering and victimization. More details on the remaining selection criteria will be presented for each book, coupled with insights into each book's content. For each item, we also provide some suggestions for teaching prompts and activities. All of these can be linked to Ellis and Gruenbaum's (2023) three steps of 1) raising awareness, 2) developing understanding, and 3) informed involvement/taking action (see also Valente (2022b) on taking action).

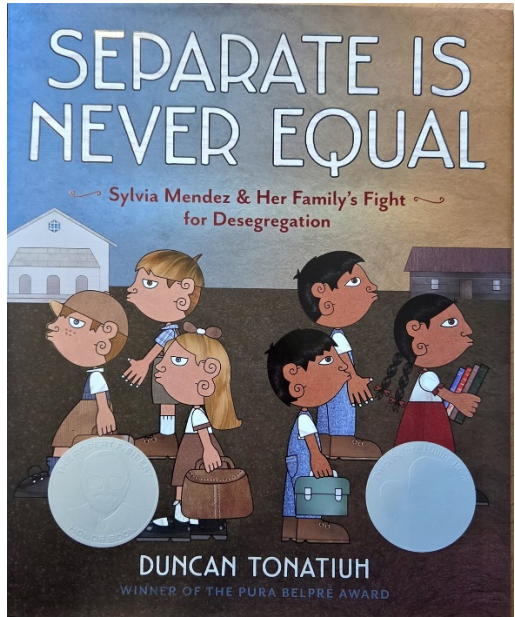
<i>Separate is Never Equal</i> – Sylvia Mendes & her Family's Fight for Desegregation	
Year of publication: 2014	
Author and illustrator: Duncan Tonatiuh (born in Mexico City; grew up in Mexico; still lives in Mexico and frequently travels to and in the US; award-winning author)	
Type of book: literary text that tells a moving story which overtly depicts racism and is based on a true historical event (type 2)	
How does it depict racism: contains racism at the structural level as well as microaggressions/everyday racism at the individual level	
Glossary and/or peritext: glossary (which unfortunately does not contain the term 'race'); information about the author; information on and photographs of the true story behind the book	
Suggested age range/level: more advanced learners in Years 5 or 6 (aged 10 to 11)	

Table 1. *Separate is Never Equal*

This book deals with the segregation of learners into different schools in California in the 1940s based on 'race', origin, or language. The story is based on a true story and revolves around the perspective of Sylvia Mendez, a US-born elementary school student with Mexican roots, and her experience with the lawsuit concerning (de-)segregation in California's schools, and the two schools she attended: the 'Westminster school' and the 'Mexican school' [*sic*]. Since the narrative takes the girl's point of view, the book provides a tangible perspective for young learners, although the content is rather complex and relates an honest and unvarnished truth of how non-White people were treated at the time. Yet the book manages to break down the complex issue of segregation into fairly easy language and a story that is accessible for young readers and allows them to understand the historical (yet unjustified) reason for segregation as well as the injustice of segregation. At the same time, it is a story of hope and agency, as the matter is resolved in favour of equality and the resolution is based on the personal action and persistence against discrimination by Mr Mendez (and others).

While it thus provides readers with examples of how to make a stand against discrimination, initiating a lawsuit is certainly not realistic for the majority. However, the book also contains smaller-scale examples. Racist behaviour becomes overtly clear in several scenes: the text features (but questions!) sentences like 'white students are superior to Mexicans' (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 27) or 'Go back to the Mexican school! You don't belong here!' (Tonatiuh, 2014, p. 2). The visuals, drawn in folk-art style, support the message of segregation and discrimination. Many scenes feature White characters with their heads and noses up, while PoC characters are facing down, artefacts like fences clearly separate White and PoC characters, and so does a sign that says, 'NO DOGS or MEXICANS ALLOWED' (Tonatiuh, 2014, pp. 18–19).

Despite the fact that the book is about events in the past, its content and message – that is, the notion of treating people unfairly or excluding them on the basis of their background or identity, as well as questions of belonging – can easily be transferred into the present globalized world, a world that is characterized by migration and, all too often, (explicit or hidden) segregation. It thus offers great potential to engage learners in a conversation about discriminating against people because of, for instance, their outer appearance or their language: 'Is it fair that Sylvia was not allowed into the Westminster school? Why/not?', 'Why is Sylvia not swimming in the pool? Is that

fair?', 'How did Silvia feel when she was told that she did not belong to that school? Or when she was not allowed to swim in the pool? Why?'. Teachers can also ask learners about their experiences ('Have you ever been excluded?', 'Have you ever been treated unfairly or observed someone else being treated unfairly?' 'Was this provoked, for instance, by outer appearance or language?', 'How did you/that person feel?').

While these prompts refer to raising awareness and developing understanding, taking action can include the implementation of a class agenda for treating everyone fairly and equally, which can be used to establish rules for classroom communication and behaviour. These can then, of course, also be transferred to school life during the breaks or even to life beyond the school.

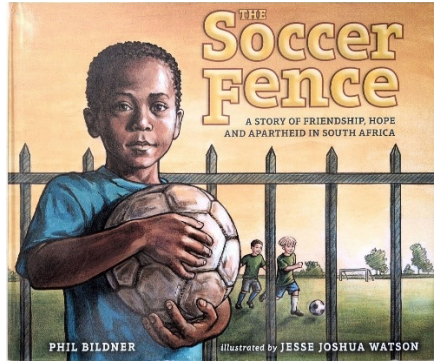
<i>The Soccer Fence – A Story of Friendship, Hope and Apartheid in South Africa</i>	
Year of publication: 2014	
Author and illustrator: Phil Bildner & Jesse Joshua Watson (both White US citizens; living in the US; both dedicated to social justice themes; J.J. Watson organized student actions in his high school for Nelson Mandela's freedom)	
Type of book: literary text that tells a moving story which overtly depicts racism and is based on a true historical event (type 2)	
How does it depict racism: contains racism at the structural level (apartheid) as well as microaggressions/everyday racism at the individual level	
Glossary and/or peritext: information about the author and illustrator; four pages of information about apartheid in and the history of South Africa	
Suggested age range/level: beginner learners with some previous knowledge of English in Years 3 or 4 (aged 9 to 10)	

Table 2. *The Soccer Fence*

This book, also used and described in detail in Furnes Sindland and Birketveit's (2020) study, is a useful resource that similarly features a racist historic event: Apartheid in South Africa. The story

is told from the perspective of a Black boy, Hector, who loves to play soccer. Compared to the previous book, its language and content is easier to understand, although the story of apartheid, of course, is a very complex one. Yet, the focus on soccer as well as the story being told from the boy's perspective make the book and its content very accessible to children. They will likely also be able to relate to some of its situations, e.g. when being excluded from a game they would actually like to join.

While the book provides examples of how children can stand up against being excluded, this needs to be discussed critically for this book: Hector seems to play soccer extraordinary well (see, e.g., the ninth verso and recto of the picturebook), yet his attempts to join the White boys on their soccer field fail. Eventually, it is one of the White boys who takes a step towards Hector and invites him to play. The way the book plays with colours and the way it depicts emotions on the characters' faces makes it a very emotional read in which learners can straightforwardly identify the discriminatory practices and how they make the PoC characters feel. This is supported by the realistic, yet to a certain extent stylistically simplified, visualizations.

Teaching suggestions in the form of activities or prompts are similar to the ones above: 'How does the boy feel when he is not allowed to play soccer?', 'Have you ever been excluded from a game? How did you feel?', 'What can a child do if he/she is excluded? Why and how can those children that are playing include an excluded child? Why should they?' Since the pictures in the book are full of emotions, teachers can ask their learners to detect these emotions: 'What does the boy's face and body posture tell you (e.g., in the sixth and eighth recto of the book when he is excluded from the game)?' in order to recognize disappointment and sadness. 'How does the boy feel when the South African team wins the match (recto 17)? How do you know?' – in order to detect feelings of joy, hope, excitement, and enthusiasm. Thereby, children can learn about different emotions, their respective terms in English, and how to read emotions by someone's facial expressions, body posture, etc. Taking action can include asking the learners to carefully observe the people around them (teachers, classmates, family members) to create a journal of emotions, with drawings or pictures of people in different situations, expressing different emotions. This bears potential to encourage them to pay better attention to someone else's feelings, based on which they can add ideas of what they could do when someone shows negative emotions.

<i>Your Name is a Song</i>	
Year of publication: 2020	
Author and illustrator: Jamilah Thompkins-Bigelow & Luisa Uribe (J. Thompkins-Bigelow lives in the US and is a PoC writer who centres Muslim and Black children in her work; L. Uribe has a master's degree from Loughborough University, England, and lives in Columbia)	
Type of book: literary text that tells a very emotional story full of adjectives and metaphors which overtly depicts racism (type 2)	
How does it depict racism: contains racism at the individual level in the form of microaggressions/everyday racism	
Glossary and/or peritext: information about the author and illustrator; glossary of names featured in the story; author's note on the importance of pronouncing someone's name correctly	
Suggested age range/level: beginner learners with some previous knowledge of English in Years 3 or 4 (aged 9 to 10)	

Table 3. *Your Name is a Song*

This book deals with the difficulties that teachers (and peers) may have in pronouncing unfamiliar names and includes instances of ridiculing certain names. The story is told from the perspective of a Black primary school girl, Kora-Jalimuso, who walks home from school with her mother and is frustrated as well as sad that her teacher could not pronounce her name and that her classmates even made fun of it. Her mother explains that names can be sung like songs and while walking home they try doing so with many different names, some of which are rather uncommon in English. The next day at school the girl teaches her class how to sing her and others' names.

Names represent a fundamental aspect of an individual's identity. Therefore, it is a harmful social practice and a form of everyday racism when names are subject to ridicule and/or when there is an absence of (serious attempts of) proper pronunciation. The story of names that are mispronounced or even made fun of is one that many learners in classrooms worldwide can relate

to and that all learners are likely to have experienced before, as recipients, observers, and/or perpetrators. Thus, it provides an ideal starting point to discuss everyday racism with young learners and can also serve as a springboard for discussions about other instances of everyday racism, such as discriminating someone because of their clothing, their language, their skin colour, etc.

One questionable aspect about the book, however, is the fact that the main character needs to put more effort into the correct pronunciation of her name than her peers. While this does assign her agency and the ability to resist discrimination, it is nevertheless the responsibility of the teacher to ensure the correct pronunciation of names and to handle such situations competently and sensitively. This can be used as an example in class to talk about responsibilities (e.g., ‘Whose task is it to ensure that a name is pronounced correctly? The name-holder’s and/or the speaker’s? Why?’, ‘What are polite ways of asking for correction or support in pronouncing a name?’, ‘Why is the name x difficult to pronounce for you and the name y easier?’). In addition, it is important to raise awareness that a name, regardless of its origin, can be held by anyone and is not linked to a person’s country of origin, skin colour, language, or other aspects of identity (‘Is there something like a [e.g.] typical German name?’, ‘Is there a rule who may or may not carry a certain name?’). Again, it is advisable to make a reference to the girl’s emotions (‘How does she feel about her name and the mispronunciation?’). In order to take action, each child can focus on and possibly research their name and create a product (for example, a visualization), inspired by the adjectives, metaphors and illustrations in the book, about the significance of their name, the adjectives and/or pictures or metaphors attached to it, possibly its origin and/or meaning, and so on. These products can then be displayed in class to celebrate and value the diversity of names.

Further Suggestions

Since the scope of this paper is limited, we cannot go into detail with respect to all the books we would have liked to present. Therefore, we would like to briefly recommend the following books to address racism in the young learners ELT classroom and encourage readers to explore these books and possible teaching activities themselves, based on the analysis criteria and examples provided in the previous sections.

- *Freedom River* (Rappaport & Collier, 2000) is based on a true story and relates how John Parker, a slave who had bought his freedom, became famous for helping hundreds of slaves to escape, for instance, he helps a slave family to escape via the Underground Railroad. Similar to *Separate is Never Equal*, this picturebook is rather complex and more suitable for more advanced learners.
- *Something Happened in our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice* (Celano, Collins, Hazzard & Zivoin, 2018) revolves around a Black and White family who discuss the incident of a Black man shot by a White policeman with their children. Arguably, its ending is a bit too happy and, overall, the book might evoke the impression of wanting to teach the reader; yet its elaborate peritext and the rich visualizations as well as the book's complex content bear the potential to spark numerous discussions. Detailed teaching suggestions for this book can be found in Reckermann and Matz (2021).
- *Not my Idea – A Book about Whiteness* (Higginbotham, 2018) addresses racism from the perspective of critical Whiteness. The book exposes colour blindness and invites (White) readers to reflect on their Whiteness and the benefits it brings, and to challenge the daily and systematic inequalities towards those perceived as non-White. Since it does not follow a classic storyline and is overall rather complex in its contents and design, teachers may rather find that selected parts of it could be used in the classroom.
- The books *Our Skin: A First Conversation about Race* (Madison, Ralli & Roxas, 2021) for beginners and *How do I Feel about Dealing with Racism* (Green & O'Neill, 1996) for more advanced learners do not meet the criterion of literary reading for pleasure but are more factual (type 3). Teachers can use both as resources to teach young learners about racism and address factual information in a simple and child-friendly way, even in ELT contexts. Both books also provide realistic examples and ideas for children of how to stand up against racial discrimination, both as victims or as observers.

Conclusion and Outlook

As outlined in this contribution, multiple aspects come into play when addressing racism with young language learners through picturebooks: the learners' (and teacher's) context and experiences, the teacher's knowledge about racism, the teacher's (and learners') awareness and

critical reflection of their own identity, the careful selection and analysis of a suitable picturebook, and the skilful use of prompts, reflection questions, and teaching activities.

We would like to point out, yet again, that the actual practical application of the suggested books is contingent upon the specific learning objectives, as well as the individual experiences and contexts of learners and teachers. These contextual factors are highly individual and cannot be addressed in a single article.

We hope to have provided a framework that allows teachers as well as researchers to delve deeper into the topic of racism and to ultimately break with the taboo and to take the risk to address such a complex topic in ELT, also with young learners. This contribution has shown the relevance of anti-racist language education already at a young age and why the ELT classroom, in particular, is one of the right places to do so. While previous publications have explained teachers' reluctance and difficulties in addressing racism, this article proposes picturebooks as a springboard for addressing the issue. Still, teachers will need background knowledge, only some of which could be provided within the scope of this contribution.

It is important to mention that the vast majority of books we found (including those presented in this article) either come from or depict the US American context. It was truly hard to find English-language picturebooks from other locations which overtly address racism. However, while racism in each country and context might somewhat differ and is rooted in specific historical events, the actual practice of racial discrimination and treating someone unfairly based on categories such as language, skin colour, external appearance or country of origin remains the same. We thus suggest that the transferability of events and racial and/or discriminatory practices as depicted in a picturebook are 'just' the starting point for teachers to initiate and support learners in a transfer of this to their lives, experiences, and contexts. However, this highly depends on the teacher's skilful use of prompts and teaching activities, some of which we have outlined above. However, future research might detect books that meet the criteria established above and originate from outside the US context.

Given young learners' fairly low target language competences, racism should not only be tackled in ELT. It is a cross-curricular topic and should be treated as such. In the young learners' ELT classroom, conversations about racism are likely to be (at least partly) in the language of schooling and/or the learners' first language(s), while picturebooks provide rich and authentic input

in English. Competent translanguageing thus takes an essential role when tackling tough topics like this one.

Notes

¹ It is imperative to acknowledge that both authors of this paper are writing from a privileged perspective as White middle-class women working in an academic context in Germany. This may limit the extent to which we can contribute to the issue of racism, but we recognize that White people, as opposed to non-White people, can freely choose whether to think about their identity in relation to the concept of 'race'. We would like to raise this issue for discussion, as we believe that refraining from addressing racism is not as constructive as addressing it from our perspective. We are aware that our viewpoint is privileged, but we believe that we as educators have a responsibility to reflect on the matter. We are in agreement with Kendi's position that education must be anti-racist to affect change (Kendi, 2019).

² In this contribution, 'race' is purposefully used in single quotation marks – unless part of direct quotes – to indicate its use as a socially constructed and not a biologically valid term to address humans.

³ Our article is founded on the notion of cosmopolitan citizenship education (see, e.g., Römhild et al., 2023). This differs from the notion of Intercultural Communicative Competence which forms the basis for Furnes Sindland and Birketveit's (2020) analysis.

⁴ 'White', as used in this article, is capitalized based on APA's suggestion for capitalization of this term to refer to an ethnic/racial group with proper nouns. Clearly, similar to Black, it refers to much more than skin colour, yet we would like to highlight once again that the social construct of Whiteness comes along with White privilege and the notion of White supremacy.

Bibliography

- Bildner, Phil, illus. Jesse Joshua Watson (2014). *The Soccer Fence. A Story of Friendship, Hope and Apartheid in South Africa*. Penguin.
- Celano, Marianne, Collins, Marietta, & Hazzard, Ann, illus. Jennifer Zivoin (2018). *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story about Racial Injustice*. American Psychology Association & Margination Press.
- Green, Jen, illus. Christopher O'Neill (1996). *How do I Feel about Dealing with Racism*. Aladin Books.

- Higginbotham, Anastasia (2018). *Not my Idea. A Book about Whiteness*. Dottir Press.
- Madison, Megan, & Ralli, Jessica, illus. Isabel Roxas (2021). *Our Skin. A First Conversation about Race*. Penguin.
- Negro, Mauricio (2017). *Colour of People*. Little Island.
- Rappaport, Doreen, illus. Bryan Collier (2000). *Freedom River. Jump at the Sun*.
- Thompkins-Bigelow, Jamila, illus. Luisa Uribe (2020). *Your Name is a Song*. Innovation Press.
- Tonatiuh, Duncan (2014). *Separate is Never Equal – Sylvia Mendez & her Family's Fight for Desegregation*. Abrams Books.

References

- Ali-Tani, C. (2017). *Wie Kinder Vielfalt wahrnehmen: Vorurteile in der frühen Kindheit und die pädagogischen Konsequenzen*. Kita Fachtexte. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from https://www.kita-fachtexte.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Publikationen/KiTaFT_AliTani_2017_WieKinderVielfaltwahrnehmen.pdf
- Alter, G. (2018). Integrating postcolonial culture(s) into primary English language teaching. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 6(1), 22–44.
- Arndt, S. (2021). *Rassismus begreifen. Vom Trümmerhaufen der Geschichte zu neuen Wegen*. C.H. Beck. <https://doi.org/10.17104/9783406765568-2>
- Bland, J. (2018). Introduction: The challenge of literature. In J. Bland (Ed.), *Using literature in English language education: Challenging reading for 8–18 year olds* (pp. 1–22). Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccz032>
- Bland, J. (2022). Picturebooks that challenge the young English language learner. In A. Ommundsen, G. Haaland & B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (Eds.), *Exploring challenging picturebooks in education* (pp. 122–142). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003013952-9>
- Blum, A., Lunkenheimer, T., Thiele, L., & Wüst, A. (2022). 'Ich würde das nicht so eng sehen': Der Umgang von Lehrer*innen mit rassistischer Sprache in Kinderbüchern. In Y. Akbaba

- & C. Wagner (Eds.), *Die Schule der Migrationsgesellschaft im Blick* (pp. 69–89). Springer.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-37847-9_4
- Braselmann, S. (2023). I'm not racist! – Addressing racism in predominantly white classrooms with cooperatively designed multimodal text ensembles. In C. Ludwig & T. Summer (Eds.), *Taboos and controversial issues in foreign language education: Critical language pedagogy in theory, research, and practice* (pp. 168–180). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003220701-19>
- Braselmann, S. (2024a). Addressing the effects of racism in English language education with graphic novels. *AAA – Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 48(2), 187–211.
<https://doi.org/10.24053/AAA-2023-0011>
- Braselmann, S. (2024b). A self-reflexive and critical approach to de-centring whiteness in teacher education: Teaching English with black American young adult literature. *Anglistik*, 35(2), 55–79. <https://doi.org/10.33675/ANGL/2024/2/8>
- Cook, D. A., & Bryan, N. (2024). Introduction. In D. A. Cook & N. Bryan (Eds.), *Critical Race Theory and classroom practice* (pp. 1–10). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003172253-1>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory*. 3rd edition. New York University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479851393.001.0001>
- Derman-Sparks, L. (n.d.). *Guide for selecting anti-bias children's books*. Social Justice Books. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from <https://socialjusticebooks.org/guide-for-selecting-anti-bias-childrens-books/>
- Derman-Sparks, L., & Edwards, J. O., with Goins, C. M. (2020). *Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves*. 2nd edition. Naeyc.
- DeZim Institut (2022). *Rassistische Realitäten. Wie setzt sich Deutschland mit Rassismus auseinander?* Rassismusmonitor. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from [https://www.rassismusmonitor.de/fileadmin/user_upload/NaDiRa/CATI_Studie_Rassistische-Realit%C3%A4ten/DeZIM-Rassismusmonitor-Studie_Rassistische-Realit%C3%A4ten_Wie-setzt-sich-Deutschland-mit-Rassismus-auseinander.pdf](https://www.rassismusmonitor.de/fileadmin/user_upload/NaDiRa/CATI_Studie_Rassistische_Realit%C3%A4ten/DeZIM-Rassismusmonitor-Studie_Rassistische-Realit%C3%A4ten_Wie-setzt-sich-Deutschland-mit-Rassismus-auseinander.pdf)

- Dolan, A. M. (2014). Intercultural education, picturebooks and refugees: Approaches for language teachers. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 2(1), 92–109. <https://clelejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Dolan-Intercultural-Education-Picturebooks-and-Refugees.pdf>
- Edinger, S. (2022). 'Ich bin anders als du. Ich bin wie du.' Diversität im Bilderbuch an einem Beispiel. *Online Journal for Research and Education*, 18, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.53349/resource.2022.i18.a1005>
- Ellis, D. (2020). Foreword: Building empathy through children's literature. In Swartz, L. (Ed.), *Teaching tough topics. How do I use children's literature to build a deeper understanding of social justice, equity, and diversity?* (p. 7). Pembroke Publishers.
- Ellis, G., & Brewster, J. (2014). *Tell it again! The storytelling handbook for primary English language teachers*. British Council. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/pub_D467_Storytelling_handbook_FINAL_web.pdf
- Ellis, G., & Gruenbaum, T. (2023). *Picturebook lesson series. Exploring social justice*. British Council. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/2023-06/Picturebook_lesson%3Eseries-Exploring_Social_Issues.pdf
- Ellis, G., & Mourão, S. (2021). Demystifying the read-aloud. *English Teaching Professional*, 136, 22–25.
- Furnes Sindland, L. K., & Birketveit, A. (2020). Development of intercultural competence among a class of 5th graders using a picture book. *Nordic Journal of Modern Language Methodology*, 8(2), 113–139. <https://doi.org/10.46364/njmlm.v8i2.785>
- Grace-Williams, M. (2020). Challenging racism: Developing children's critical racial literacy. In L. Swartz (Ed.), *Teaching tough topics: How do I use children's literature to build a deeper understanding of social justice, equity, and diversity?* (pp. 26–39). Pembroke Publishers.
- Heggernes, S. L. (2022). Intercultural learning through Peter Sis' *The Wall*: Teenagers reading a challenging picturebook. In A. Ommundsen, G. Haaland & B. Kümmerling-Meibauer

- (Eds.), *Exploring challenging picturebooks in education* (pp. 163–182). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003013952-12>
- Kaminski, A. (2016). *The use of singing, storytelling and chanting in the primary EFL classroom: Aesthetic experience and participation in FL learning*. PhD thesis Swansea University. Retrieved April 1, 2025, from <https://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa54359>
- Kalpaka, A. (2015). Was heißt eigentlich... Rassismus? In Stiftung für die Internationalen Wochen gegen Rassismus & GEW (Eds.), *Die Internationalen Wochen gegen Rassismus machen Schule* (pp. 7–9). Stiftung für die Internationalen Wochen gegen Rassismus.
- Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World.
- Ludwig, C., & Summer, T. (2023). *Taboos and controversial issues in foreign language education. Critical language pedagogy in theory, research and practice*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003220701>
- Matz, F., & Römhild, R. (2024). Critical language education for peace: On the significance of communicative agency for education for human rights, peace, and sustainable development. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 8(1), 1–26.
- Mitchell, J. (2022). Back to race, not beyond race: Multiraciality and racial identity in the United States and Brazil. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 10(22), 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-022-00294-0>
- Mourão, S. (2015). The potential of picturebooks with young learners. In J. Bland (Ed.), *Teaching English to young learners: Critical issues in language teaching with 3–12 year olds* (pp. 199–217). Bloomsbury. <https://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.3159.1044>
- Mourão, S. (2022). Interpreting and mediating a wordless picturebook in pre-primary early English language learning. In A. Ommundsen, G. Haaland & B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (Eds.), *Exploring challenging picturebooks in education* (pp. 60–78). Bloomsbury.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003013952-6>
- Nikolajeva, M. (2013). Did you feel as if you hated people? Emotional literacy through fiction. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 19(2), 95–107.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13614541.2013.813334>

- Nikolajeva, M. (2018). Emotions in picturebooks. In B. Kümmerling-Meibauer (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to picturebooks* (pp. 110–118). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315722986-12>
- Ortaçtepe Hart, D. (2023). *Social justice and the language classroom. Reflection, action, and transformation*. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474491778>
- Reckermann, J. (2020). Dealing with diversity in English children's books in the heterogeneous EFL classroom. *PraxisForschungLehrer*innenbildung*, 2(4), 134–157.
<https://doi.org/10.4119/pflb-3501>
- Reckermann, J., & Matz, F. (2021). Something happened in our town: Mit jungen Lernenden über Black Lives Matter und Rassismus sprechen. *Der Fremdsprachliche Unterricht Englisch*, 173, 13–19.
- Riccucci, N. M. (2022). *Critical Race Theory. Exploring its application to public administration*. Cambridge University Press <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009122986>
- Römhild, R. (2023). Learning languages of hope and advocacy – human rights perspectives in language education for sustainable development. *Human Rights Education Review* 6(1), 9–29. <http://doi.org/10.7577/hrer.5192>
- Römhild, R., Marxl, A., Matz, F., & Siepmann, P. (Eds.) (2023). *Rethinking cultural learning. Cosmopolitan perspectives on language education*. WVT.
- Rösch, B. (2019). *Grundschule Schwarz weiß? Denk- und Handlungsansätze für eine rassismuskritische Grundschule. Mit einem kritischen Blick auf Kinderbücher*. Schneider Hohengehren.
- Scales, P. R. (2023). *Banned books for kids: Reading lists and activities for teaching kids to read censored literature*. American Library Association.
- Sussex, M. (2020). *Kulturelle Identitätskonstruktionen von Kindern. Eine qualitative Studie im Englischunterricht der Grundschule auf der Grundlage des ABC's of Cultural Understanding and Communication*. Peter Lang.
- Swartz, L. (2020) *Teaching tough topics: How do I use children's literature to build a deeper understanding of social justice, equity, and diversity?* Pembroke Publishers.

- UN General Assembly resolution 44/25 (1989, November 20). *Convention on the rights of the child*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>
- Valente, D. (2022a). Scaffolding in-depth learning: Picturebooks for intercultural citizenship in primary English teacher education. In D. Valente & D. Xerri (Eds.), *Innovative practices in early English language education* (pp. 259–283). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-12922-3_13
- Valente, D. (2022b). Picturebook Materials Development. In ICEPELL consortium (Eds), *The ICEGuide: A handbook for intercultural citizenship education through picturebooks in early English language learning* (pp. 53–58). Retrieved April 1, 2025, from https://icepell.eu/docs/ICEGuide_digital.pdf