

English Language Education and Ideological Issues: Picturebooks and Diversity

Janice Bland

Abstract

This paper considers ideological dimensions of language education, and the contribution picturebooks narrating diversity and illustrating minority perspectives can make to this important aspect of English Language Teaching. It is argued that both representation of language and representation of the world must be taken into consideration in diversity-sensitive, intercultural education, and that children's literature offers this opportunity. Criteria for a selection of texts featuring children in minority and refugee situations are suggested. Cultural identity, multifaceted subjectivity and agency – concepts important in children's literature scholarship – are discussed, as these ideas are significant for understanding the situation of protagonists in minority situations both in the stories and amongst language learners in the classroom. Furthermore, with reference to Byram's five-stranded model of intercultural learning, it is suggested that elements of intercultural education can be elicited through stories – either illustrated and modelled by the protagonists themselves or recognised, through empathy, by the young language learners. This is exemplified by the picturebooks *Thunder Boy Jr.*, *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*, *How Smudge Came*, *I Hate English!* and *My Name is Sangoel*.

Keywords: language education, diversity, ideology, identity, agency, subjectivity, empathy, refugee narratives

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Introduction

Despite the plethora of acronyms that refer to learning and teaching English in school settings, none seem to adequately cover English teaching as language *education*, including not only language as a subject but also the representation, in textbooks or other materials, of the world. The concept of language education embraces wide teaching aims that are socioculturally as well as pedagogically significant. English as a lingua franca does not belong to individual national cultures, but this does not mean it can be divorced from the many cultures it has touched and continues to touch: 'As ELT professionals, we are never just teaching something called English but rather involved in economic and social change, cultural renewal, people's dreams and desires' (Pennycook, 2016, p. 30). When considering the suitability of materials for English language education, both the representation of language and the representation of the world must be taken into consideration (Gray, 2016, p. 100-103). The latter, ideological aspect – the representation of the world and its people – is still far too infrequently examined.

Regarding the materials we choose for the classroom, ideological matters can be difficult to detect and pin down, for as Nodelmann and Reimer assert 'ideology works best by disappearing, so that people simply take their ideological assumptions for granted as the only, whole, and unquestionable truth' (2003, p. 80). An ideology close to that of the reader appears invisible, and yet can be highly manipulative: 'Ideologies can thus function most powerfully in books which reproduce beliefs and assumptions of which authors and readers are largely unaware' (McCallum & Stephens, 2011, p. 360).

Materials for English language teaching (ELT) are increasingly examined as influential and potentially student-manipulating *cultural artefacts* rather than as mere *curriculum artefacts* (Gray, 2016, p. 99). If we accept that materials for language education are significant cultural artefacts with an ideological impact on our students, our research into meaning-making in language classrooms will also draw on areas such as cultural studies, literary studies, postcolonial studies, cognitive criticism and critical pedagogy. One of the ways of potentially avoiding too many reductive topics in the language classroom is through discussion of literary texts. Paran considers that using literary texts in language education may be categorised as a weak form of Content and Language Integrated

Learning (CLIL), for 'the objectives are language objectives, but the content is not incidental but rather highlighted, focused on and discussed' (p. 321).

When teaching literature – whether as a subject in its own right or in the language classroom with children and teenagers – children's literature scholarship is highly relevant. This is particularly so when we see intercultural education and respect for diversity as central to language education, as a critical scrutiny of children's literature and ideological issues has characterised much influential research in recent decades (e.g. Bhroin & Kennon, 2012; Dixon, 1977; Hollingdale, 1988; Nodelmann, 1992; Reynolds, 2007; Stephens, 1992), due to the 'massive cultural influence' (Hunt, 2001, p. 2) that children's literature is said to exert. With the increased movement of people between countries – 'because of a shortage of labour in certain sectors, to be with their families, or as refugees to escape war, civil unrest, poverty or fear of persecution' (Simpson, 2016, p. 178) – developing an awareness of ideological issues in texts used in language education should now surely belong to teacher education.

Of course, our language learners have always brought culture with them into the classroom – the 'common imaginings' (Kramsch, 1998, p. 10) of their generational, family, social class, ethnic and national cultures. In this article, culture is understood as meanings and practices ranging beyond national cultures, to include, for example, family, social class and school cultures. Intercultural understanding should now, I argue, also encompass intra-cultural learning, 'sociologically speaking there is no difference in principle between inter- and intra-cultural communication' (Byram, 1997, p. 41). This is surely particularly relevant for language education twenty years later, as language-learning settings become increasingly diverse, heterogeneous, plurilingual and multicultural – children having often crossed borders themselves before entering our classrooms. Student teachers need to be sensitised to the 'representation of the world and the *mis*representation and/or erasure of specific categories of people and the consequences this may have for students' (Gray, 2016, p. 97, emphasis in the original). The misrepresented or Othered in texts – the marginalising of individuals, their cultures and sub-cultures – but equally the hidden or apparently absent ideology of materials used in classrooms, must receive critical attention and be made visible – whether the materials were specifically published for language teaching or not.

The Representation of the World and Ideological Messages

Contemporary international and intra-national complexities require education for intercultural competence, 'i.e. the ability to put yourself into others' shoes, see the world the way they see it, and give it the meaning they give it based on shared human experience' (Kramsch, 2016, p. 42). Intercultural competence calls for an approach to language education 'that takes into account the actual, the imagined and the virtual worlds in which we live' (Kramsch, 2011, p. 366). Narratives are an important pedagogic medium, they metonymically represent cultures of the language learner's own world or cultures unfamiliar to the learner. They act as mirrors as well as windows – as the imagined world reflects a new light onto the familiar. Stories support humankind's drive to construct coherence and meaning and they can take the reader on educational journeys: 'Storytelling is central to humanity because it is through narrative that we learn about ourselves and prepare ourselves for the future in an evolutionary sense' (Hunte & Golembiewski, 2014, p. 75).

However, children in minority and refugee situations are regularly disadvantaged in their reading and participation in storyworlds – usually lacking mirrors of their own cultural identity: 'When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when images they see are distorted, negative or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part' (Bishop, 1990, p. ix). As Tschida, Ryan, and Ticknor maintain (2014, p. 28): 'Scholars of children's literature have long stressed the need for turning a critical eye to the stories we tell, who is doing the telling, and who gets left out'.

Sherman Alexie, award-winning author of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), and of the first picturebook introduced in this article, speaking on NPR's *Morning Edition* on May 23, 2016, eloquently shared the life-changing moment when he, as a young child, first found himself reflected in a book:

My life changed dramatically, and started to change dramatically, when I read *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats. I was 4 or 5 on the reservation, and it was the first book I ever read with a brown-skinned character – this, you know,

inner-city black kid wandering the snow-blanketed city all by himself. And the book spoke to me in a way few books have ever spoken to me throughout my life. But in that instance, I had this recognition of another human being in the world, fictional as he was, but that there was another person in the world who was like me. [...] I reached across the fictional and the real barriers and boundaries to connect my heart to him. And that's why I'm here now. That one book made me a writer.

Diversity in Picturebooks

Literary texts reflecting diversity are enriching and enlightening for majority children as well as those being Othered, rendered invisible or suffering the pain of human migration. Important questions to ask when selecting picturebooks to reflect diversity and practise intercultural understanding would include:

1. Is the language and content accessible for the target group?
2. Do the pictures add meaning to the story?
3. Does the characterisation in words and illustrations encourage empathy?
4. Is the story compelling, e.g. exciting, humorous, surprising or moving?
5. Can the children relate to the narrative – is the import of the story significant for them as individuals so that they will wish to revisit it?
6. Is the representation of the world and of people accurate and respectful?
7. Does the story encourage a questioning stance and genuine communication?

Picturebooks that authentically reflect cultural diversity can move even young readers towards flexibility of perspective. This is in contrast to the rather monolithic and often stereotyped input on other cultures provided in many school textbooks for ELT (Ahmed & Narcy-Combes, 2011). Particularly the often-essentialised illustrations in textbooks are influential for cultural transmission, consequently 'it is in TESOL textbooks published in the west for the world market that we find a major instrument for cultural transmission and a source of concern for the effect which stereotyped images may have' (Clarke & Clarke, 1990, p. 36). In picturebooks, the pictures are a vital component of the

storytelling, and they frequently provide gripping access to empathetic characters as well as individualised cultural details. They thus involve the affective dimension of children's learning while – at least in all good quality picturebooks – avoiding essentialising. They are also physically present and frozen in time – strongly drawing the reader/holder into the storyworld. Ultimately the pictures may transform into dynamic mental images that remain in the reader's repertoire of experience, anchoring ideas, concepts and feelings along with new language – increasing retention of both the language and the message (Bland, 2015b). Writing from the perspective of situated cognition studies, Gee (2001, p. 715) maintains:

meaning in language is tied to people's experiences of situated action in the material and social world. Furthermore, these experiences (perceptions, feelings, actions, and interactions) are stored in the mind or brain, not in terms of propositions or language but in something like dynamic images tied to perception both of the world and of our own bodies, internal states, and feelings.

Contemporary and innovative creators of literature on serious themes are increasingly turning to visual narratives, and picturebooks on important topics can make a breadth and depth of understanding achievable. My considerations on picturebooks in this article take into account the minimal English-language repertoire available to young learners – by which I mean children learning English from the ages of six to twelve – in English language education.

Marginalisation as Topic in the ELT Classroom

Clarke & Clarke (1990, p. 39) maintain that EFL even more than ESL textbooks seem to adopt 'a policy of avoiding cultural issues [with the result that these] "culture free" texts and texts of interest to people of many nationalities, and other vain attempts to de-culture content, rest on lowest common denominators rather than diversity within and across cultures'. The 'blandscape' identified by Clarke & Clarke (p. 39) in internationally published EFL textbooks aims at the widest possible world market. However, more

recently, due to the influence of critical pedagogy and intercultural education as a central competence in language education, the cultural identity of groups around the world where English is spoken as a first or second language – including marginalised groups such as indigenous peoples – has become a topic in some EFL textbooks; this is the case for instance in EFL textbooks published in Germany. The illustrations, however, still all too often offer stereotypes. For example Australian Aboriginal peoples and indigenous peoples of the Americas are frequently portrayed wearing historic clothing with stereotypical physical features and no eye contact to the reader. A detailed picture of contemporary indigenous life-worlds is seldom offered. In contrast, the range of topics in picturebooks reflects a rich landscape of diversity, and stories are told of individual personalities from within disempowered and marginalised groups.



Figure 1: Groups excluded from/or marginalised within education (UNESCO, 2009, p.7)

The Unesco chart (Figure 1) identifies groups that are marginalised or excluded from education. The picturebooks introduced in this article, in order of accessibility in an ELT setting, tell moving or humorous stories that feature individual children negotiating their subject positions in the world, often not unlike young language learners themselves. The protagonists are members of minority groups, such as refugees, migrants, indigenous peoples and children with disabilities. The stories tell how they manage to maintain or

increase their agency and negotiate their subject positions (their socially situated identity) despite their difficulties.

Subject Positions, Agency and Cultural Identity

In approaches to language education that view learning as sociocultural practice, it is recognised that social context and relations of power play a strong role in matters of language learning, cultural and social identity, agency and motivation. Norton and McKinney state, 'a fully developed theory of identity highlights the *multiple positions* from which language learners can speak, and how sometimes marginalized learners can appropriate more desirable identities with respect to the target language community' (2011, p. 73, my emphasis). Wallace (2004), for example, describes the varied subject positioning of heritage-language students with respect to their identifying with two cultures: their heritage language community and the mainstream culture.

The concepts of identity on the one hand and multiple subject positions on the other are frequently distinguished in children's literature scholarship (see e.g. Stephens, 1992). This distinction differentiates identity and selfhood: our need to identify with different groups (e.g. cultural identity), our sense of self, and the negotiable nature of our subject positions. For how we position ourselves and are positioned in relationship to others is determined to some extent by an imposition of a certain ideology on us subliminally; for example, an individual is partly constructed at different times through media, peer groups, social class, ethnicity and gender expectations. Thus our agency is limited to a greater or lesser extent by the subject positions offered to us by others.

The concepts of multifaceted subjectivity and agency are helpful and relevant for education discourse on marginalisation or Othering. As subjectivity and agency are multiple, context dependent and subject to change, it makes sense to study the subject positions of protagonists in stories. They may provide a model for similar negotiations and struggles for agency amongst language learners in English language education. Furthermore, while intercultural learning can be exercised through children's reading of, and empathising with, different lives in many different settings, the protagonists themselves can also be shown to model elements of intercultural leaning. I will illustrate

this with reference to Michael Byram's model that encompasses five interrelated elements or factors supportive of intercultural interaction (see Figure 2).

	<i>savoir comprendre</i> skills of interpreting and relating to Otherness	
<i>savoirs</i> knowledge of self and Other and of processes of interaction	<i>savoir s'engager</i> critical cultural awareness, education towards world citizenship	<i>savoir être</i> critical attitudes of curiosity and openness towards Otherness while relativising self
	<i>savoir apprendre/ faire</i> discovering and interacting, sustaining sensitivity to the Other, acting as mediator	

Figure 2: Factors in intercultural education modelled on Byram (1997)

In narrative and particularly children's literature, for example the picturebooks introduced below, it is often the negotiation of individual subject positions and individual agency that form the central tensions and conflict. In picturebooks for young readers, protagonists in minority situations often have to struggle to maintain agency and resist unwanted subject positions, as well as – frequently – to uphold their cultural identity. Their struggles elicit empathy and engagement, while their tenacity can be celebrated and enjoyed by the reader.

Picturebooks Reflecting Individual Stories from within Minority Groups

1. Narratives of Indigenous Peoples: *Thunder Boy Jr.*

The first picturebook I have chosen reflects a minority culture in the US, and yet is emphatically upbeat – the struggles of the young hero, Thunder Boy Smith, are presented both in the pictures and in the language with life-affirming humour. Sherman Alexie's

Thunder Boy Jr. introduces the reader, through colourful words and powerful pictures (Yuyi Morales), to a vibrant Native American family.

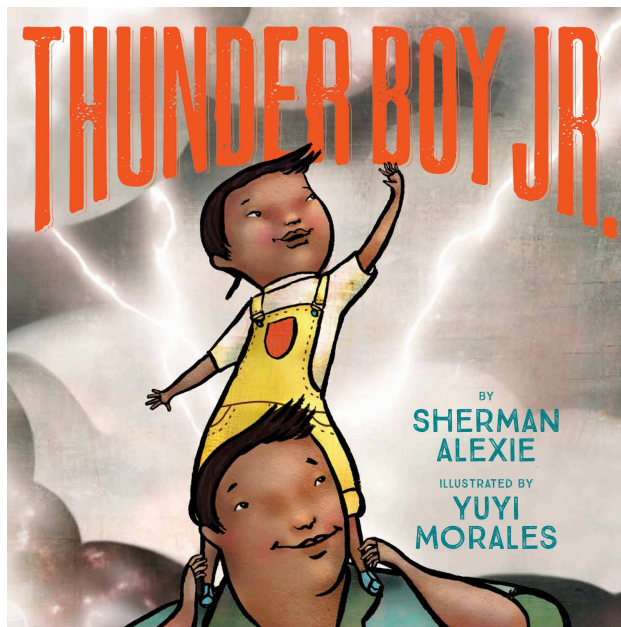


Figure 3: Front cover of *Thunder Boy Jr* (Alexie & Morales, 2016)

The small hero, a twenty-first century Native American according to the author (Alexie 2016b), is busily working on his agency – we follow his story as he invents names for himself that should express his vivacious sense of self. He was named after his dad, Thunder Boy Smith Sr.

People call him **BIG THUNDER**.

That nickname is a storm filling up the sky.

People call me

LITTLE THUNDER.

That nickname makes me sound like a burp or a fart. (Alexie, 2016, unpaginated)

Young language learners will enjoy this use of language – scatological humour is particularly popular with children as they understand it to be ‘naughty’. This adds to the

fun of the book: 'Just as intense emotion is an elementary force setting the tone for many a successful children's book, so is humour' (Tabbert & Wardetzky, 1995, p. 3). The little boy's spirited temperament also empowers him – his characterisation is humorous due to the subversion of the pattern that small is powerless – and not only the dynamic illustrations but also the typographic creativity support his demand for agency. His speech bubbles are frequently filled with shouting capitals, such as '**I WANT MY OWN NAME**'. Thunder Boy's emotions are expressed in words, in symbolic pictures (a wolf, a bear and a snake recur on several pages), in colours and even in the shape and outline of his speech bubbles.

However, it is Thunder Boy's humour that helps young readers respect the child with the unusual name. While he reveals his hatred of his name to the reader, he loves his father and fears to upset him by disclosing his dislike of their shared name. His frustration at this predicament is vividly expressed on one double-page spread by a howling wolf, a hissing snake and a growling bear. This is a picturebook that could be suitable for 7 – 9-year-old language learners, depending on context, and the respect they may feel for Thunder Boy could be considered a facet of intercultural understanding. In Byram's terminology, this has been called *savoir être*, an attitude of openness and critically valuing self and the Other (Byram 1997, pp. 34-35).

Thunder Boy Smith goes on to create new and wonderful names for himself, which are also energetically illustrated, for example:

I love playing in the dirt,
so maybe my name should be
MUD IN HIS EARS.

and

I dream of travelling the world,
so maybe my name should be
FULL
OF
WONDER.

Humour is supplied by the gentle carnivalesque of Thunder Boy's wishing to determine his own name, creatively and innovatively, and reject his given name. Although the expressive illustrations and bold typographical creativity suggest conflicting emotions, the humour of the story is the prevailing mood: 'The best antidote to the anxieties and disasters of life is laughter; and this children seem to understand almost as soon as they are born' (Opie 1992, p. 14).

Thunder Boy's playing with names suggests many creative and fun opportunities for inventing new personality names with young language learners. Thunder Boy does not want to hurt his father, which causes his dilemma and the tension. But all is happily resolved in the end – and will not be revealed here – with the ingredients of a strong and loving father-son relationship.

2. Invisible Minorities: *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*

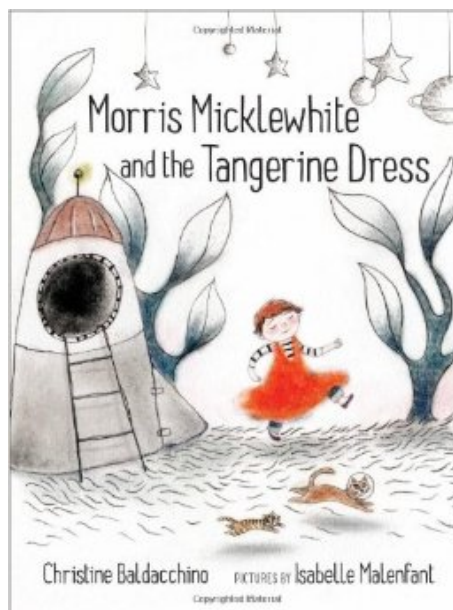


Figure 4: Front cover of *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress*
(Baldacchino & Malenfant, 2014)

Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress (2014) is a beautifully written story by Christine Baldacchino that deals with gender identity, bullying and individualism. Again, the protagonist Morris Micklewhite is a strong and unique character. He lives with his

mother Moira and Moo the cat: this is a picturebook with plentiful phonological language patterns such as alliteration, rhythmical repetition and onomatopoeia. Morris loves to wear a tangerine dress from his class 'dress-up center', and he 'takes turns wearing all the different shoes, but his most favorite ones go click, click, click across the floor'. The stunning artwork, by illustrator Isabelle Malenfant, emphasises the colour tangerine, which reminds Morris of 'tigers, the sun and his mother's hair'. When his friends make fun of him,

Morris pretends he can't hear their words
over the swish, swish, swishes,
crinkle, crinkle, crinkles,
and click, click, clicks he makes when he walks.

Morris pretends he can't hear their words, but he can. (Baldacchino, 2014, unpaginated)

Idiomatic formulas like 'he takes turns', 'the boys make fun of Morris' and 'his shoes go click, click, click' are highly useful – the story and illustrations help to make such idiomatic language salient and therefore more easily noticed. At the same time, children may warm to the theme of individuality and, finally, acceptance. After spending some initially sad days at home with his mother, reading, dreaming and then painting a wild and wonderful picture, Morris's amazing imagination helps him regain his strength and agency. When he returns to school, he decides to build his own spaceship when the boys will not let him play on theirs. Soon they join in Morris's game of make-believe, for he is able to show them 'the best astronauts were the ones who knew where all the good adventures were hiding. Morris smiled. He already knew that.' In the context of intercultural understanding it could be suggested that Morris models *savoirs* – knowledge of self, Other and individual and societal processes of interaction (Byram 1997, pp. 35-37).

It is not unusual for picturebooks to be really more meaningful for an older age group than the publisher suggests. *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* might be most useful for the upper primary-school level, both for native speakers of English and language

learners. It is frequently this age group (e.g. 9-11-year-olds) that first adopts a heteronormative binary understanding of gender identity – younger children would probably not even think of bullying a child who loves cross-dressing. As stated above, it is important for children and young adults to find themselves reflected in the books they read. Thus language education should avoid relying entirely on ELT materials and their ‘relentlessly heteronormative view of human relations in which lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) characters are rendered invisible’ (Gray, 2016, p. 103). As mentioned in the introduction, invisible ideology, such as heteronormativity, does not mean absence of ideology.

3. Narratives of cChildren with Disabilities: *How Smudge Came*

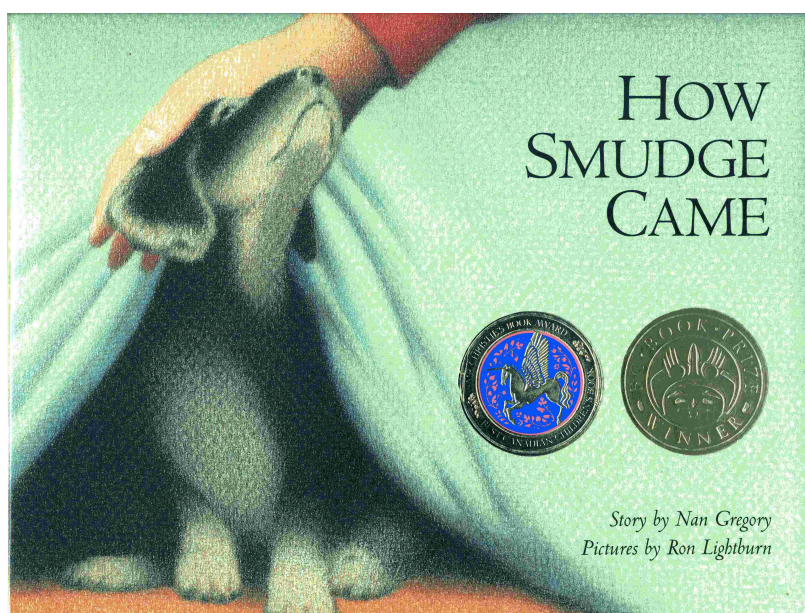


Figure 5: Front cover of *How Smudge Came* (Gregory & Lightburn, 1995)

Written by Nan Gregory and illustrated by Ron Lightburn, *How Smudge Came* (1995) is about a girl who really suffers from lack of agency, for she lives in a group home with strict, unbending rules. When she finds a stray puppy in the pouring rain, she takes it home with her:

IF THERE'S ONE THING CINDY KNOWS,

this is no place for a puppy.

Up goes the puppy, tucked into her bag.

Home goes Cindy. (Gregory & Lightburn, 1995, unpaginated)

The story is told from Cindy's point of view – even to the extent of employing language that seems to be idiosyncratic for the way Cindy thinks – her inner speech. The next opening shows Cindy softly sneaking upstairs to her room:

IF THERE'S ONE THING CINDY KNOWS,

it's don't let anyone see.

The repetitive, brief verbal text means this picturebook is very accessible for young language learners (e.g. 10 – 11-year-olds) – supported by softly luminous coloured-pencil illustrations, which are very much in character with the poignant story – painting the feelings that Cindy cannot quite express in words. After several pages, we see Cindy's face and the characteristic features of Down syndrome. By now we know her to be a responsible but love-starved young woman, 'Puppy sleeps under Cindy's covers. If there's one thing Cindy knows, this is her best friend.'

Cindy, who is a cleaner in a hospice, takes the puppy with her to work next day. Jan, a blind and terminally ill young man discovers the little dog Cindy is hiding, and likewise feels the joy of petting him – they name him Smudge. There are tragic scenes when the puppy is discovered and taken away to the SPCA (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). With Jan's help, however, there is a convincing and happy resolution (which will not be revealed here). It might be claimed that Jan models *savoir s'engager* – critical cultural awareness, the most pivotal educational element of intercultural competence (Byram 1997, pp. 44-47). The dying man saw Cindy's need, her struggles for agency, and the intolerant behaviour of Cindy's carers – and found a solution that was empowering. Can *savoir s'engager*, as the central educational goal of intercultural and intracultural competence, be approached with picturebooks such as these? Much of the meaning is in the pictures, which are physically present as the children think and talk,

providing a sensory anchor for exploration more effective than words alone (Perkins, 1994, p. 83), stimulating personal engagement as well as community access. This encourages young learners to look at the behaviour of the adults in charge of the home critically, and to consider whether their positioning of Cindy as a totally dependent subject was in fact a case of bullying.

4. Newcomer Narratives: *I Hate English!*

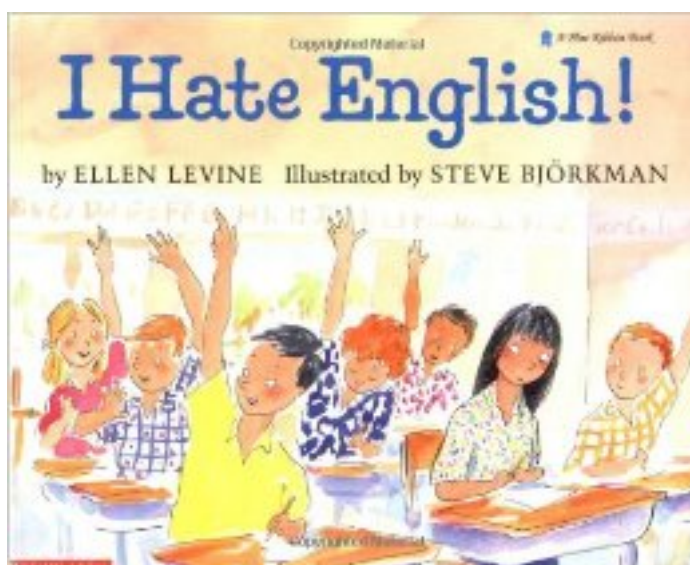


Figure 6: Front cover of *I Hate English!* (Levine & Björkman, 1989)

I Hate English! (1989), with words by Ellen Levine and pictures by Steve Björkman, tells the story of Mei Mei, whose family moved from Hong Kong to New York. Mei Mei suffers culture shock through the move – the picturebook focuses on Mei Mei's fear of losing her cultural identity and her consequent refusal to speak English. Although Mei Mei is welcomed in New York, she suffers from the sense that the subject positions available to her are diminished:

Mei Mei was smart in school.

In *her* school in Hong Kong.

In Chinese. (Levine & Björkman, 1989, unpaginated)

The story is compelling, and involves language learners both cognitively and affectively – all on a level that young language learners (e.g. 11 – 12-year-olds) can typically manage. Steve Björkman's illustrations show local cultural details – of school life in New York and the Chinatown Learning Center – at the same time offering an exploration of exile that is globally relevant. Interpreting the words and the pictures, young learners will discover that it is Mei Mei's fear of losing her Chinese identity that causes her anxiety and nightmares. This reflective, reading-between-the-lines aspect of intercultural competence has been called *savoir comprendre*, skills of interpreting and relating to others (Byram, 1997, pp. 37-38).

Gradually Mei Mei learns to engage with the language around her, continuing to explore and value Chinese while she acquires English. The picturebook offers an introduction to language awareness – the beauty of the Chinese characters Mei Mei loves to draw is emphasised both in words and in the illustrations.

Mei Mei loved Chinese.

Especially writing.

Fast strokes,

short strokes,

long strokes –

the brush, the pen, the pencil – all

seemed to fly in her hand. But that was

Chinese. (Levine & Björkman, 1989)

The glimpses of Chinese included in the book may remind teachers that all first languages (L1s) must be valued while children are learning English. In Europe as in the US, very many classrooms are multicultural. Plurilingual education involves the teacher valuing the children's L1 as a learning resource and vehicle for learning – not only the majority language such as German in Germany and French in France – also minority and heritage languages:

Plurilingual and intercultural education covers the languages and cultures which are present in school but neither recognised nor taught, the languages recognised by the school but not taught, and the languages taught. (Beacco, Byram, Coste & Fleming, 2009, p. 3)

In addition, the language of the picturebook, typically for a well-written literary text, is characterised by phonological patterns of rhythm and alliteration, lexical repetition ('fast strokes, short strokes, long strokes') and lexical chains ('the brush, the pen, the pencil'). These features are important both for comprehension, and for enabling language learners to notice language patterns. It has been shown that children are able to make use of formulas 'as a database for hypothesis testing' (Myles, Hooper and Mitchell 1998, p. 359). The usage-based approach to second language development focuses on the productive and receptive use of language and emphasises the importance of frequent input with repetitive, salient language. It has been argued that patterns, regularities and foregrounding in texts may well provide an implicit focus on form, as slow release grammar (Thornbury, 2009, p. 4), or template for the future with young learners (Bland, 2015a).

5. Refugee Narratives: *My Name is Sangoel*

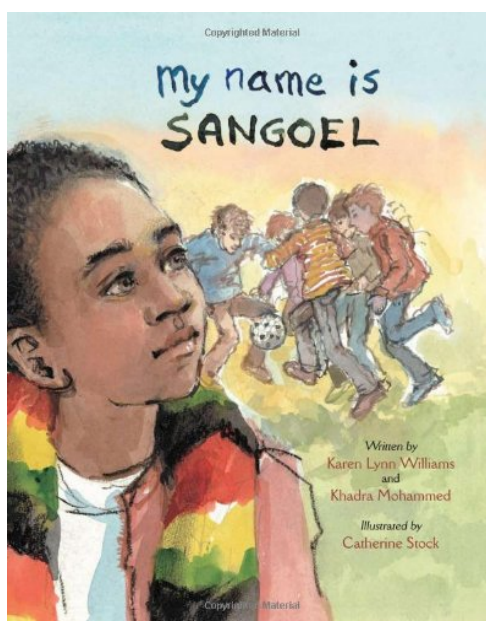


Figure 7: The front cover of *My Name is Sangoel* (Williams, Mohammed & Stock 2009)

Karen Williams and Khadra Mohammed's *My Name is Sangoel* (2009) tells the story of a Sudanese boy, Sangoel, who manages to maintain his Dinka cultural identity while reaching out to his new American community at the same time. The story opens in a refugee camp where Sangoel is staying with his mother and younger sister, after their father was killed in the war. The detailed illustrations by Catherine Stock provide fascinating contrasts and booktalk opportunities – pictures of the crowded refugee camp in bright sunshine are followed by images of the very different climate, the confusion, the traffic and unfamiliar technology as the family is resettled in the US: 'The TV was a box with real people inside. Lili cried when Sangoel turned it on. She cried again when he turned it off' (Williams, Mohammed & Stock, 2009, unpaginated).

The verbal text of this picturebook is not repetitive and is also too long for many young learners in English language education contexts. Sangoel is only eight, but acts thoughtfully and responsibly, so that it is unlikely the picturebook would appear too childish for children in the upper young-learner age group (e.g. 12-year-olds). It would certainly help them understand the life of a refugee, and that all children have a right to pride in their heritage. There are many picturebooks on the theme of refugee's names, which is often all they have left of their homeland and an important part of their cultural identity:

'Don't worry,' the Wise One said as Sangoel prepared to leave the refugee camp. 'You carry a Dinka name. It is the name of your father and of your ancestors before him.'

The old man hugged him, and Sangoel could feel the bones in his thin arms. 'Remember, you will always be a Dinka. You will be Sangoel. Even in America.' (Williams, Mohammed & Stock 2009)

The conflict intensifies when Sangoel fears he must change his name, as nobody in his new environment can pronounce it. However, he devises a clever way to immediately help his classmates and teachers learn his name – it is at the same time a plan full of good humour, and one that is copied by other children in his class that have 'unusual' names. I will not reveal Sangoel's plan – I recommend the reader to read the picturebook – but I will divulge that, fittingly, meaningful pictures are involved.

Sangoel masterfully displays his agency and does not relinquish his uniqueness – rather he helps his classmates to express theirs. It could be said that Sangoel models *savoir apprendre/faire* – skills of discovery, interaction and sustaining sensitivity to others (Byram 1997, pp. 37-38). He demonstrates that, although a newcomer, he is able to change perspective as well as assist his classmates in broadening theirs.

Conclusion

This article has concentrated on the value of picturebooks for teaching themes of diversity and inclusion in the English language classroom with young learners, and teaching that minority groups are made up of unique individuals with manifold subjectivities as well as their cultural identities. Referring both to children's literature scholarship and ELT scholarship, the paper has emphasised that all texts are ideology-laden, just as our mental representations of experience are 'value-laden, perspective-taking movies in the mind' (Gee, 2001, p. 715). For this reason, when choosing texts for language education, it makes sense to include minority experiences from around the world, so that no one particular perspective is dominant. Heart-warming stories elicit an engaged response, and empathising with characters in compelling stories is important for initiating the pleasure of literature (Krashen & Bland, 2014, p. 8).

This is pedagogically valid in itself, for 'recent research into the nature of the human brain pleads an evolutionary advantage to our capacity for narrative' (Hunte & Golembiewski, 2014, p. 73). Furthermore, these stories contribute to the acquisition of intercultural competence: experiencing the commonality of human experience, exploring cultural identities and the ability to change perspective. Byram's five-faceted model of intercultural competence helps to identify, I suggest, how these picturebooks can elicit features of intercultural understanding with even young learners, and can also elicit recognition of models of reaching-out behaviour by protagonists in the stories introduced. Narrative helps in equipping young learners with knowledge and values to participate as active citizens (Oxfam, 2006), encourages questions and develops critical thinking skills. The verbal text can be at the same time manageable for language learners, while also poetically rhythmical. Finally, the eloquent pictures of first-rate picturebooks help create

an archive of mental images in our memory – increasing retention of the language, the characters celebrated in these books, and their message.

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