Integrating Postcolonial Culture(s) into Primary English Language Teaching

Grit Alter

Abstract

This article argues in favour of using picturebooks to extend the limited view of cultural learning that is entailed in textbooks for teaching English at primary school. A critical view looking into textbooks for primary English education reveals that despite the general recognition of postcolonial literatures and cultures, target culture input almost only refers to the UK and the USA. Furthermore, the information students receive is over-generalising and stereotypical and does not pay tribute to the diversity of postcolonial cultures. This paper suggests that postcolonial literatures can be shared with primary English learners to broaden their perception of the English-speaking world. In view of the marginalized representation of these literatures and thus their respective cultures in ELT, this paper suggests closing the gap by using picturebooks from the Inuit and from Kenya and India. A comparison of two picturebooks from each geographical area reveals that one of these needs to be seen critically for its representation of cultural identity, whereas the other can be recommended for enhancing intercultural learning. As a conclusion, the article offers guiding questions of how to select postcolonial literature picturebooks to afford access to diverse cultures.

Keywords: picturebooks, postcolonial literatures and cultures, ELT, critical literacy, intercultural communicative competence

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Integrating Postcolonial Literatures and Cultures into Primary School English Language Teaching

Since Michael Byram's seminal publication on intercultural competence (1997), the development of intercultural competence (ICC) has taken centre stage in foreign language education, in particular the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. European guidelines, such as the *Common European Framework of References* (Council of Europe, 2017) or national documents such as Germany's curricula for primary and secondary ELT (for example MSW, 2008, p. 10), see ICC as a foundational principle of ELT and identify it as a main objective of teaching and learning English.

One way of ensuring the development and integration of intercultural competences in classroom practices is by including references in textbooks to countries and cultures in which English is one of the main and official languages. Teachers and students need to be provided with material through which they can extend their knowledge of other cultures and on which they can base intercultural, socio-cultural and ethical reflections. A look into textbooks for lower intermediate and advanced students used in Germany shows that these include numerous references to cultural contexts other than the UK and the USA; however, textbooks for primary schools mainly focus on the UK and the USA and offer rather superficial and stereotypical content. While the textbooks mentioned in this article are generally available through local and online distributors, no information could be obtained on where these textbooks are actually in use. Schools and school districts in Germany can decide for themselves which material they use and for how long.

This article argues that postcolonial literatures in the form of picturebooks – as these are appropriate for primary language learning – can broaden learners' awareness of English-speaking countries and their diverse cultures and invite them to explore these further. Postcolonial literature refers to literature of countries that were colonized, mainly by Europeans. This paper discusses picturebooks from Kenya and India and also about the Inuit in Canada, thus exemplifying the broad scope of postcolonial literatures and the variety of cultures they

represent. Implementing these multimodal texts allows teachers of English in primary education the possibility of '"opening up" […] cultural and literary perspectives' (Eisenmann et al., 2010, p. vii) beyond the UK and the US.

The article uses *The Gift of the Inukshuk* (Ulmer & Rose, 2002) and *A Promise is a Promise* (Munsch, Kusugak & Krykorka, 1988) from an Inuit context, *A Country Far Away* (Gray & Dupasquier, 1991) and *Mama Miti* (Napoli & Nelson, 2010) about Kenya, and *India ABCs* (Aboff & Moore, 2003) and *Monsoon Afternoon* (Sheth & Jaeggi, 2008) from India to show how teachers can mediate cultural encounters in primary ELT. If selected with care, reading picturebooks can enhance primary-aged children's intercultural communicative competence by developing empathy and making them curious about further English-speaking places around the world.

Postcolonial Literatures in Primary ELT

Cultural learning has been at the centre of attention for the last few decades, not least since the Graduate School of Understanding Otherness at the University of Gießen, Germany began researching processes and paradigms in this field (for example, Bredella, 2002; Bredella & Christ, 1993; Bredella & Delanoy, 1999). However, as Klippel (1994) notes, learning English has always included cultural and literary perspectives. Already in the early eighteenth century, scholars regarded the ability to speak and understand a modern foreign language as the key to participating in a foreign culture (p. 272). More recently, the view of cultural representations has broadened to include those beyond the UK and USA. Volumes such as *Cultural Studies in the EFL Classroom* (Delanoy & Volkmann, 2006) and *Teaching New English Cultures and Literatures* (Eisenmann et al., 2010) entail reflections and ideas for including cultures 'beyond the "core" countries and issues' (p. xi) in the intermediate or advanced ELT classroom. These include Canada, Native America, New Zealand and Australia, South Africa, India, the Caribbean, and South-East Asia from a cultural and literary perspective (for example, Feurle, 2010; Glaap, 2010; Lindner, 2010; Nieragden, 2010; Rau, 2010).

Such a broad consideration of postcolonial literatures, in Germany at least, is almost only present in upper intermediate and advanced classrooms. Textbooks for these levels in Germany usually include one unit per year about a specific postcolonial culture, for example, Canada in Year 7 (Schwarz, 2007), Australia in Year 9 (Edelhoff, 2011), South Africa in Year 10 (Claussen et al., 2005), or India in Year 10 to 12 (Weisshaar, 2009). Those units cover the target cultures, while developing students' linguistic, cultural and literary competences. Students learn vocabulary that is specific for these regions, are familiarized with cultural and/or historical phenomena, are exposed to content information, often read literary texts from the respective regions and are encouraged to relate their own experiences to the target culture.

Although ICC is one of the main teaching objectives of primary ELT in Germany as well (for example, MSW, 2008, p. 10), textbooks for this level largely focus on developing skills. If cultural context is included, this mainly refers to the UK and the USA, and on occasions Australia. *Ginger 4* (Hollbrügge & Kraaz, 2009) is an exception, for together with the UK and the USA, it invites primary-age children to join Ginger, the protagonist of the textbook, for trips to Canada, Australia, South Africa and India, and each country is represented on four to five pages. It thus raises students' awareness about further target areas, offers insights into these and invites them to relate to the target cultures individually.

The general widespread neglect of postcolonial literatures by primary ELT is rendered problematic because it limits students' perceptions of the English-speaking world to the UK and the USA. This reflects the area-studies approach of the 1970s and 1980s, which mainly focused on facts and figures of the two 'core' countries of English (Delanoy & Volkmann, 2006) when postcolonial literatures and thus their respective cultures were – and apparently still are – pushed to the periphery. However, it is paramount to 'decolonize the mind' (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986) as early as in primary education and to raise children's (and their teachers') awareness of the diversity of the Anglophone world.

The Potential of Picturebooks in Primary ELT

Scholars have repeatedly argued in favour of the benefits of using literature in ELT, often focusing on its cultural dimension (for example, Bredella, 2002; Fäcke, 2006; Freitag-Hild, 2010; Richter, 2000; Surkamp & Nünning, 2008; Volkmann, 2010) and its potential for fostering the multiple dimensions of ICC. Pupils extend their knowledge of other cultures; they develop an open and respectful attitude toward other cultures and apply their cognitive and attitudinal skills and competences to real-life contact situations. Literature can thus be highly beneficial for initiating cultural learning as it offers insights into other cultures by inviting students to engage in the perspectives and experiences of members of these cultures. Thus, the combination of literary and cultural learning lays a foundation for increasing students' empathy, tolerance and respect for others (Bland, 2013; Thaler, 2008; Surkamp & Nünning, 2008). Based on its interpretational openness, literature additionally offers an incentive for meaningful and authentic communication and creative follow-up tasks.

This potential of literature in ELT can also be applied in primary classrooms. Here, picturebooks offer primary-aged children the benefits of literary input despite their basic competences in English. As Elsner states, stories and picturebooks transport fragments of authentic cultures into classrooms, they stimulate imagination and invite primary children to identify with the protagonists and thus immerse themselves in the plot (2010, p. 119). Bland (2013) maintains that picturebooks are particularly beneficial for primary ELT as these negotiate meaning through a multimodal design and, when compared to many textbooks, the verbal mode provides authentic language input and formulaic sequences which primary-aged children can 'acquire whole if there are sufficiently frequent retellings or re-readings of the story' (p. 153). The visual mode often offers access to other worlds and life experiences and can foster ICC when carefully mediated by a teacher who encourages curiosity and discussion. Thus, picturebooks that are even slightly more complex are accessible and comprehensible for primary children, even if they need the support of the common classroom language (Butzkamm, 2011) to communicate their views around the texts.

Postcolonial Literatures in Primary ELT

In view of the line of arguments above, the following sections discuss different picturebooks that could extend the focus to postcolonial literatures and transport marginalized cultures from the periphery to the centre of primary ELT. One less successful picturebook will be discussed for each geographical region, and it is then contrasted with a picturebook from the same region that is considered more promising for balanced cultural reflections. The books presented offer incentives for reflecting on various aspects of culture and intercultural learning with primary children. As described above, picturebooks rely on both the visual and verbal text, therefore children may very well enjoy either, leafing through these books by themselves, or reading them together with the teacher. The purpose and method of using the picturebooks depends on the teaching objectives. If the aim were to offer reading for pleasure, while simultaneously showing the images, children of an A1 level would be able to understand the main idea of the picturebook and could respond to listen-and-show-tasks in which the teacher names items on a page and children repeat and point at these. In order to lead children to talk about the books in English, children could be asked to give their opinion of the book, for example 'I like the book because …' and selecting such reasons as 'it is funny', 'it is nice', or 'it is surprising'. These statements may be expanded to allow children to give reasons, for example, 'the illustrations are beautiful' or '[main character] is like me' or to identify elements of the visual and verbal modes and suggest their significance. It is also possible to engage the children in expressive readings of the book in which they have to use their voice, gestures and facial expressions in a meaningful way, develop dramatic adaptation of selected scenes or ask children to predict how the story may continue.

For more extensive verbal responses and cultural reflections, students certainly need to be on a slightly higher level. However, in view of teaching English with support of the common classroom language, teachers could still include more complex reflections in their lessons. This should also be considered when children like to share and compare experiences with their own and other cultures and make meaningful connections.

Inuit Children's Literature

When selecting picturebooks to enhance ICC in primary English education, teachers need to be sensitive to the image of the cultural group that the text depicts. This should neither be shallow nor stereotypical but offer deep insights and reliable information to avoid leaving a distorted or erroneous impression. One cultural group, whose image has often been distorted by popular media's (false) representation, includes the Inuit cultures of the circumpolar region, or, in view of the example texts selected below, from Canada (Watson, 2000).

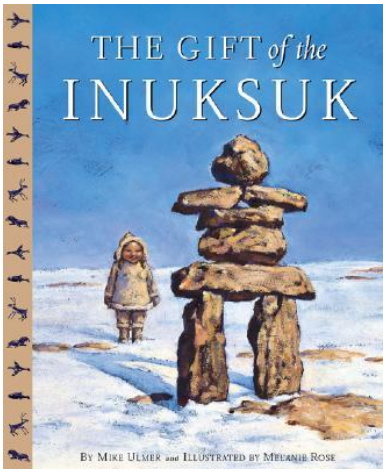

Figure 1: Front cover of *The Gift of the Inuksuk* (2002) by Mike Ulmer and Melanie Rose

The picturebook, *The Gift of the Inuksuk*, written by Mike Ulmer (2002) and illustrated by Melanie Rose, is an example of a text that demands a critical reading. This picturebook is suitable for learners with an English level of A2, when teachers support the reading process accordingly. It tells the story of how the Inuksuk, a pile of stones that looks like a person, may have become a central symbol of Inuit identity. In this story, an Inuk girl, Ukaliq, places stones on top of each other to guide her father and brothers home after their hunting trip. The book not only creates a highly romanticized image of the Inuit culture, but also neglects the current existence of Inuit identities. For instance, on the last page of the book, the snow is gone, Ukaliq and her family have disappeared and all that is left is the Inuksuk, standing strong to 'wait for

paddlers and canoeists' and 'greet travelers along highways' (Ulmer & Rose, 2002, unpaginated).

Regarding topics such as the First Nations and Native Americans, who have a long history of stereotypical media representation (Lutz, 1985), it is essential that children are exposed to texts that refrain from establishing a temporal and spatial gap to the present or a romanticized image. Yet books that offer distorting images of cultures, such as *The Gift of the Inuksuk,* can still be useful as they invite teachers to mediate by engaging children in critical reading and thinking. A comparison of different books could be highly productive here. *The Gift of the Inuksuk* can therefore be contrasted with *A Promise is a Promise* (Munsch, Kusugak & Krykorka, 1988), which lends itself well to primary ELT. In 1988, Annick Press published *A Promise is a Promise*, resulting from a collaboration between Robert Munsch, an educator and writer, and Michael Kusugak, an Inuit story-teller; it was illustrated by Vladyana Krykorka. Although the book is more than 20 years old, the twenty-seventh print in 2009 indicates its major success. Munsch and Kusugak base the story on an Inuit tale about the importance of trust and obedience in a harsh and life-threatening landscape. The story revolves around a young heroine, Allashua, who is caught between the need to obey her parents and the temptation to independently make her own decisions, namely going fishing in the cracks of the sea ice. The illustrations are very colourful, but also scary. The sea monsters are held in almost aggressive blues and greens and stand in contrast to the warm reds and yellows in which in the clothes of the family are drawn. It may be interesting for students to know that the illustrator based the faces of the protagonists on authentic photographs from trips to the Northwest Territories (Munsch n.d.). *A Promise is a Promise* is suitable for children with an English level of A2.

The introductory scene sets the conflict of the story. Allashua's wish to go fishing is contrasted by her mother who forbids her to do so in the cracks of the sea ice, for the Qallupilluit live under the ice and 'grab children who aren't with their parents' (Munsch, Kusugak & Krykorka, 1988, unpaginated). Allashua's reassurance that she will not go to the ocean but only to the lake, and that 'a promise is a promise', creates tension as readers can make educated guesses that Allashua might not keep her promise. This guess is also visually coded in

Krykorka's ingenious illustration that does not reveal Allashua's face; readers only see her from the back while she speaks to her family. Their hopeful and trusting faces make the impact of Allashua's betrayal and her eventual lie even stronger. When she sets out to go fishing, she does indeed go to the sea ice. Being a brave and self-confident girl, she even provokes the Qallupilluit to come and catch her. When she does not see any reaction, she is sure that the Qallupilluit do not exist at all.

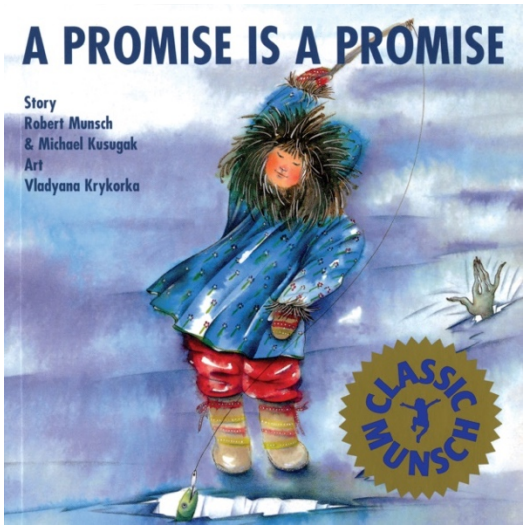

Figure 2: Front cover of *A Promise is a Promise* (2009) by Robert Munsch, Michael Kusugak and Vladyana Krykorka.

It is only in this situation of boldness in which Allashua's face is revealed. After having caught a few fish, she happily and proudly shouts that she is 'the best fisherman in the world'. In this incident, however, the Qallupilluit appear and pull her under the ice. They eventually let go of her when she promises to bring her younger siblings to the ice as well and the girl returns home where her father finds her at the front door almost frozen to death. Only after Allashua is warmed under a blanket and with a cup of tea does she tell her parents what has happened. As her promise cannot be broken, the mother develops a plan to save her children. This involves inviting the Qallupilluit to their house where she distracts them with dancing, while Allashua

and her siblings go to the sea ice and call for the Qallupilluit. The Qallupilluit hear the calling and run down to the sea, followed by the parents. However, as the Qallupilluit promised never to catch children while they are with their parents, they can no longer take the children with them. Their promise is a promise, too. Finally, the family goes fishing in the cracks of the ice together, as this is now safe for everyone.

It is false bravery that gets Allashua into a dangerous situation and her mother's wit as well as Allashua's true bravery that later save her and her siblings. If Allashua had kept her first promise though, she could have prevented her family from this threat. For primary-aged children, this book lends itself to thinking about stories or morals that are told in their own cultural communities and to reflect upon their use. Once again, if this seems challenging in the foreign language, the classroom language can enable a reflection upon intercultural aspects in the common classroom language.

A Promise is a Promise avoids romanticizing life in the North, unlike *The Gift of the Inuksuk.* Instead, it points to its dangers and sheds light on the importance of family ties, reliability and trust. The book introduces an Inuit culture that is able to survive in the North; one that relies on communities and knowledge that is passed on from generation to generation. Through the plot and illustrations, the book offers a much more balanced image of Inuit culture and gives the Inuit their own voice through the use of their own language (*A Promise is a Promise* is also published in a bilingual English-Inuktitut version). Within a narrative space, such a book activates folk traditions, has the potential to remove the Inuit from the periphery, and offers readers a balanced encounter with cultural identities. Using such a children's book can serve as a starting point for learning about Inuit culture, exploring life in the North and supporting readers in challenging a biased and simplified image of the Inuit and becoming aware that neither their culture nor their language are part of the past.

Children's Literature about Kenya

The verbal text in *A Country Far Away* by Nigel Gray and Philippe Dupasquier (1991) tells the story of two boys' daily routines. Following the pattern on the front cover illustration (Figure

3), the verbal description appears in the middle of each page and, above this sentence, the readers encounter a visual showing the experience of an African boy and below the sentence, the experience of a Western boy. For foreign language learners, the book may be appropriate for those at around an A1 level.

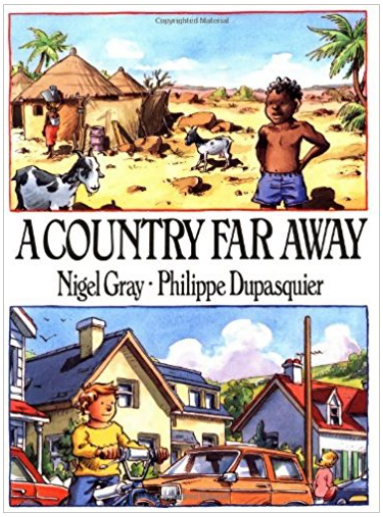

Figure 3: Front cover of *A Country Far Away* (1991) by Nigel Gray and Philippe Dupasquier

The two settings are shown as rather different - the African boy lives in a small rural village and the Western boy in a modern suburban town. The verbal text consists of short clear sentences such as 'Today was an ordinary day. I stayed at home' (Gray & Dupasquier, 1991, unpaginated) or 'I helped my mom and dad'. The African boy's home is depicted with round clay huts on dry sandy ground with a few palm trees next to a river and the Western boy lives in a large two-story house with a front and back yard and a car in a seemingly middle-class neighbourhood. While helping his parents, the African boy is shown watching goats, carrying water on a beam across his back and climbing up palm trees to pick coconuts; the Western boy is shown washing his parent's car, vacuuming the living room and mowing the lawn. Although the book does not contextualize either visualization in terms of a concrete cultural background or geographical location, the depiction of the African boy is stereotypical and decidedly

underdeveloped. The book was first published in Great Britain, and then in the US, so one could assume a primary readership of European and North American children. They might identify the Western boy's surroundings as similar to their own and see the African boy's world as a stark contrast to their own. The culture of the other is depicted as less developed, less educated and less modernized compared to the standardized West, thus provoking stereotypes and a superficial perception of an over-generalized African culture.

The illustrations in this book equate Africa with poverty, manual labour (washing clothes in the river, working the land barefoot with handheld devices) and a very basic infrastructure (no school building, but sitting outside under a tree, riding home on a donkey, milking goats by hand). An uncritical reading may solidify an understanding of Africa as a place of illiteracy, where children do not wear shirts and shoes, for while the Western family has books on the shelf, the African family does not have electricity and relies on physical work. Thus, the generalizations that children may have are consolidated; the diversity of African countries is ignored, as are its various levels of technological and socio-cultural development. On top of this, the frames providing windows into the boys' surroundings are in different colours: a red outline frames the African boy's world and a blue one frames the Western boy's world. In a Western colour-coding, red signals increased attention, danger and also elements that are wrong, which could imply that the African boy's experiences are lower in standard and in hierarchy. Similar to the less successful picturebook on the Inuit, readers are likely to come to the end of this book with confirmed stereotypical, yet false, impressions of Africa.

In comparison, Donna Jo Napoli's *Mama Miti* (2010), illustrated by Kadir Nelson, offers children a balanced and authentic perspective of Wangari Maathai, the woman who started the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. This movement aims at conserving the environment by planting trees and empowering women to provide for their families based on sustainable use of natural resources. This picturebook is enjoyable for language learners at an A2 level.

In the story, various women visit Wangari asking for help - they are either in need of food, firewood, wood to build a house or a fence, or come to ask for medicine. Wangari has the same advice for each of these women, to take seeds and plant different trees, and use the berries,

branches or leaves for their needs. As one can read in the afterword, Wangari used her traditional knowledge of nature and her university education to spread ideas of sustainable development, ecology and natural resources.

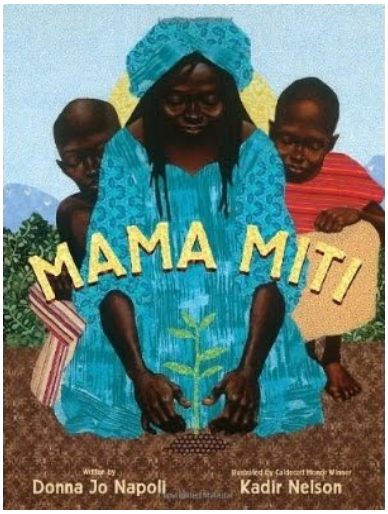

Figure 4: Front cover of *Mama Miti* (2010) by Donna Jo Napoli and Kadir Nelson.

Since its establishment in 1977, the 'Green Belt Movement, a national grassroots organization to combat deforestation of Kenya' (Napoli & Nelson, 2010, unpaginated), has planted more than 51 million trees and trained over 30,000 women in forestry, food processing and bee-keeping (The Green Belt Movement, 2012, p. 4; Stock, 2013, p. 496). In 2004, Wangari Maathai was the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. This book not only moves Kenya as an English-speaking country into the centre of ELT, but also highlights the story of a woman who changed the ecological and political landscape of Kenya and other African countries.

With this book, primary children are given a non-fictional reading experience that can boost their motivation to learn something about the Kenyan woman who has served as a role model for many others. By exploring the Green Belt Movement website, learners can look at pictures of tree planting in Kenya and get a more detailed impression of the places where this

movement is active. As a result, children extend their knowledge of geography and biology, of sustainable ecology and the multiple uses of trees. To connect the Green Belt Movement with their own experiences, they could think of the function and use of trees or other plants in their own communities. Also, the illustrations need to be included in reading the book, as these offer additional insights into Kenyan culture. For instance, these are created with oil paints and printed fabrics on gesso board[1], which reflect the aesthetics of African cultures that are rich in fabrics and colours (Napoli & Nelson, 2010, unpaginated).

Children's Literature about India

ABC books aim at offering information and facts about a certain topic with each letter of the alphabet introducing another aspect of this topic. Authors establish cohesion through the overall topic rather than through a fictional plot or narration. Usually, each letter is presented on an individual page, accompanied by an illustration depicting the element the letter describes. For ELT, such books are beneficial as children are familiarized with the alphabet and the pronunciation of the single letters in a meaningful context.

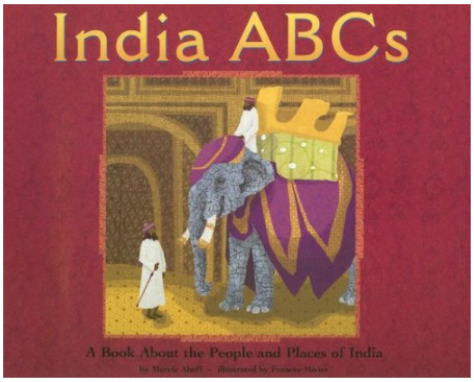

Figure 5: Front cover of *India ABCs* (2003) by Marcie Aboff and Frances Moore.

India ABCs by Marcie Aboff (2003), illustrated by Frances Moore, is an example of such a picturebook. Using a country such as India, Aboff needed to be selective in view of the content

because only one term can be used for each letter. However, this makes selecting socio-cultural, geographic or historic content even more significant as the decision to include one aspect, excludes others. Yet some of these choices in *India ABCs* can be disputed. For example, choosing 'B is for British India' (Aboff, 2003, p. 5) sustains a strong colonial perception of the country, whereas, especially for children, I would argue that a Bengal Tiger or references to the modern Bollywood cultures might have been more appealing. Bollywood is included, under 'N' which 'is for New Hollywood' (p. 17). I suggest that this not only diminishes Bollywood culture, but also uses the 'real' Hollywood as standard and a point of reference. Here, Nilgiri or Nagaland may have presented children with more insights into the diverse countryside India offers. Instead of offering insights into India's modern manifold culture, the book relies on stereotypes and cliches that are not seen as engaging. The style of the illustrations in this book is similar to *Mama Miti* (see above). Frances Moore chose oil paints and printed fabrics on gesso board on which different textures shine through. For example, in 'H is for Himalayas' (p. 11) a floral ground is visible, and in 'I is for Indus Valley' (p. 12) and in the wooden ground of the illustration of Mother Theresa in 'W is for winners' (p. 26). This technique offers depth and a vibrancy to the illustrations. Yet while the illustrations are mostly colourful, they appear at times gloomy − toned down by a grey-like glaze. Also, the many visible faces in the book are hardly ever smiling, for example the dancers in 'O is for Odissi' (p. 18). Both of these aspects leave the reader with the impression that India is a rather somber even bleak country. While this may certainly challenge the stereotype of a lively and exuberant India, the book itself does not point to the problematic aspects of society. For example, the untouchables (p. 24) and quarry workers (p. 20) are shown in the illustrations, but the text does not refer to the critical issues involved, e.g. their living and working conditions.

An alternative choice might be *Monsoon Afternoon*, written by Kashmira Sheth and illustrated by Yoshiko Jaeggi (2008), which also takes readers to India. This picturebook tells the story of a nameless boy who cannot find anyone to play with. Only his grandfather, Dadaji, which means 'elder brother' in Marathi, has time for him. While making paper boats to sail in the old washtub in the garden, observing ants, watching the peacock, swinging on the roots of

the banyan tree and tracking mud into the house, the little boy learns that his grandfather also did these very same things when he was a child. The story follows a linear plot and is quite straightforward. Yet, it offers an approachable insight into the daily life of an Indian village at the beginning of the monsoon season, as well as the loving relationship between a grandson and grandfather. This picturebook has the potential to motivate children to engage with India on the one hand, and with their own cultures on the other. They could think about activities they do in their free time when the weather is not so nice and they do not have anyone to play with.

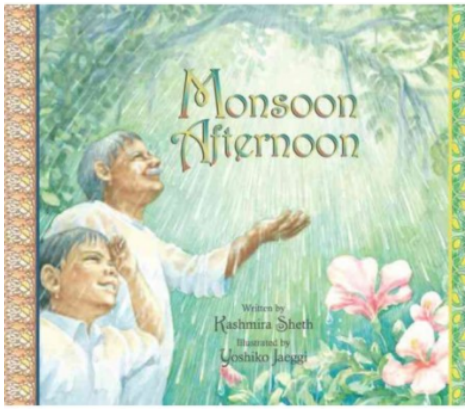

Figure 6: Front cover of *Monsoon Afternoon* (2008) by Kashmira Sheth and Yoshiko Jaeggi.

The soft water-coloured illustrations trigger a number of sensory responses. As a reader, one could almost hear the rain in the puddles, feel the mud under one's feet or the wind in one's hair or smell the mangos the boy picks from a tree. Accordingly, children can collect things they could smell, hear and taste in the different episodes of the pair's small adventures. In interdisciplinary or cross-curricular teaching units related to geography, children could, for example, collect more information about the monsoon season and create posters. *Monsoon Afternoon* very successfully moves a postcolonial culture to the centre of English language teaching and provides many opportunities for extension activities as such, inviting children to encounter a different culture and feeding their interest and fascination for this and other cultures.

Selecting Postcolonial Literatures for Primary ELT

As the selection of picturebooks demonstrates, postcolonial literatures and cultures afford opportunities for integrating intercultural learning beneficially into primary English. Additionally, the example of *Mama Miti* highlights how teachers may implement novel concepts such as global education. Reflections that focus on stylistic features such as the colours and their meaning move beyond developing ICC, and allow children to enter a first stage of analysis and interpretation. Despite these benefits, the reference to successful and less successful postcolonial literature picturebooks has shown that these need to be selected carefully. As such, when selecting books for intercultural learning scenarios, it is of utmost importance to be aware of the messages that are included in these texts. While advanced learners have the ability to critically reflect and decode stereotypical or shallow depictions, younger learners may take the content and message of picturebooks for granted and not question what they read. As McKenzie (2003) states:

> images [in terms of representation of cultural identities] usually replicate the popular social values and moral attitudes of the time and of the culture, often without the realization that the child is unconsciously absorbing these values and attitudes from the images presented. (pp. 201-202)

Certainly, younger learners should read picturebooks for pleasure; they should engage with texts positively and establish a life-long curiosity about and love for reading. However, this still allows space for critically engaging children with literary texts with the support of critical mediators, in this case teachers, who are able to raise children's critical awareness of cultural (mis)representations. A reflection on (changing) visual depictions can be a starting point that primary language learners are able to understand.

Beyond that, teachers need to pay attention to various aspects of the picturebook:

1) How specific is the book in identifying the cultural background of the protagonists? The more precise the contextualization, the easier it is for children to locate the culture and become aware of the diversity of a certain region. While *Mama Miti* locates the story in

Kenya, *A Country Far Away* only differentiates between a Western world and Africa, thus depicting both as a homogeneous mass, despite vast differences in both regions. This may cause children to develop superficial and generalizing ideas of cultural groups and the places they live in.

2) How does the picturebook depict protagonists from a specific culture? Neither the verbal nor the visual text should offer a stereotypical, superficial or condescending treatment of the protagonists and their environment. Neither should the illustrations ridicule or reduce the protagonist with certain markers (e.g. size of the nose, lips, and certain accessories they are often shown with) that are exaggerated and which were often used to draw conclusions about a people's character traits. It is essential that children encounter others as realistic individuals *and* in their respective contexts. The children in *A Country Far Away*, for example, appear highly stereotypical, not wearing shirts and having exaggerated facial features. Particularly in the school scene, the illustration of the teacher is racist.
3) Does the book discriminate against race, class, gender, sex, age, ability or any other dimension of identity? One way of determining this could be to check in what kind of role men, women or the elderly are presented. Often, fathers still mainly appear in positions of power and authority while mothers are caregivers. The elderly are often confined to lying in bed or sitting in a chair without moving much, and taking care of children. Next to *Monsoon Afternoon* in which the grandfather is rather active and shares his grandson's adventures outside, *Once Upon a Time* by South African writer Niki Daly (2003) is a wonderful exception about an elderly lady who is adventurous, highly agile and dances through the book. Teachers may also look for books that include people characterized by physical or mental diversity or homosexual couples to broaden children's perception of different ways of life and forms of happiness.
4) Does the narrative structure provide children with an exciting reading experience? Also in postcolonial literature, it is important that picturebooks offer children a strong plot with believable characters and credible personal growth. Solutions need to be

appropriately linked to the challenges protagonists face and developed in a logical manner. Illustrations and information need to be historically and culturally accurate so that children can enjoy authentic insights into other lifestyles. When Allashua breaks her promise, for example, readers know what the consequence could be, but tension is created because they anticipate whether something bad and dangerous is really going to happen to her in *A Promise is a Promise*.

It may be surprising that this list does not include authorship. This is a conscious decision because authorship does not indicate the quality or authenticity of the picturebook, as is visible in *Mama Miti*. Although the author herself is not from Kenya, the book could not be labelled biased or even stereotypical because the context is clearly defined and the writing process commented on in the afterword. At the same time, *The Gift of the Inuksuk* serves as an example in which authorship does influence the quality of the book. Whether or not authorship is decisive for assessing the book's quality depends on how the authors and illustrators engage with the culture they depict, how they position themselves to the topics they reflect and how they contextualize their creative process.

Checking the criteria mentioned above could help teachers identify problematic aspects in a picturebook. Yet if picturebooks are less successful in presenting the diversity of cultures and identities, these may still be useful for a critical reading. In view of *The Gift of the Inuksuk*, for example, teachers could offer children incentives to discover how the last pages change and raise their awareness of the problematic implications this neglect of cultural identity has. It is highly relevant that teachers do not ignore such issues as they appear in books that otherwise seem appropriate for classroom application. Critical guiding questions and focusing children's attention on what and who is represented and who is excluded can support them in handling inappropriate representations of cultures and identities. It is imperative to offer primary students a learning environment in which they can recognize that cultural diversity is appreciated and that mutual understanding and respect for alterity and diversity are valued.

Conclusion

The discussion above suggests that picturebooks from postcolonial cultures can be well used to extend the cultural representations offered in primary school textbooks for teaching English. This not only allows for intercultural learning scenarios at the early stages of education, but also for communicative teaching approaches. Depending on the teaching aim, it may be advisable to rely on the support of the children's common classroom language; however, a careful selection of methods and language scaffolding enables children to develop their receptive and productive language skills gradually. Beyond finding methods and activities, the selection of appropriate picturebooks is paramount for balanced cultural encounters, and so is the reflection of inappropriate representations of culture and identity.

This paper could only introduce a limited number of motivating texts, and it is certainly worth exploring other picturebooks from other places. This continuous search and inclusion of postcolonial literatures, bringing opportunities to access different cultures in the primary ELT classroom can then enhance primary-aged children's perception of the diverse English-speaking world in which they may use their English language competence.

[1] A hard compound of plaster of Paris and glue, used as a base for painting and sculpture

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