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Developing intercultural competence through picturebooks: The case of *The Silence Seeker* and *The Island*

The fact that Norway is a multicultural country is potentially enriching but also challenging. Developing children's intercultural competence is therefore an essential task for teachers. In a master's thesis written at Østfold University College (Veddegjerde, 2022), the aim was to find out to what extent the multicultural picturebooks *The Silence Seeker* (Morley & Pearce, 2009) and *The Island* (Greder, 2007) are suitable for developing intercultural competence in the ESL primary school classroom. The study has a strong focus on visual literacy and the interplay between words and illustrations in picturebooks. Because the visuals tell stories by showing, students need to learn how to read illustrations in addition to written text. The study also investigates how young students can experience stories in picturebooks from a *living through*, rather than a *learning about* perspective, by putting themselves in others' situations and seeing things from other viewpoints (Arizpe et al., 2014, p. 311). Furthermore, the study explores how multicultural picturebooks provide *mirrors* in which students can see themselves and identify with characters and situations in the stories, and *windows* through which they can see others and imagine how others live and feel (Stewart, 2015). Two teaching projects for grades 6 and 7 were developed for the study, based on the theory of visual literacy and reader-response.

During the last decades, there have been several interpretations of intercultural competence and one of the suggested definitions is adapted to educators, to help them incorporate the concept into daily teaching (Byram & Wagner, 2018). This definition highlights intercultural competence as a combination of attitudes, knowledge, understanding and skills, realized through action, either individually or with others (Byram & Wagner, 2018).

The research question for the study was:

Could the high-quality multicultural picturebooks *The Silence Seeker* and *The Island* be used to develop the ability of young students to see the world from different perspectives, identify with other people and to think critically?

The rationale for using the picturebooks *The Silence Seeker* and *The Island* is based on their suitability for teaching intercultural competence in the primary school ESL classroom. Both selected books fit the category of multicultural literature, as they tell the stories and reflect the life experiences of underrepresented groups, such as refugees and asylum seekers (Iwai, 2019). Additionally, both *The Silence Seeker* and *The Island* provide opportunities to enter the worlds of literary characters by seeing things from their perspectives (Louie, 2005), and both picturebooks offer characters with whom the students can identify and situations they can recognize (Colby & Lyon, 2004). Also, through the stories about the stranger in *The Island* and the two boys, Joe and the Silence Seeker, in *The Silence Seeker*, students can learn something new about themselves and others (Colby & Lyon, 2004). Furthermore, both *The Silence Seeker* and *The Island* are well-known award-winning picturebooks of high quality (Bista, 2012).

The picturebook *The Silence Seeker*, selected for the teaching project for 6th grade, is about a young boy, Joe, who lives in a big city. One day Joe meets a new boy sitting on the doorstep outside his building. Joe's mother tells him that the new boy is an asylum seeker, but Joe misunderstands her, hearing silence seeker instead. Joe decides to take the new boy around the city to look for silence, but everywhere they go there is only noise. The next day the new boy has disappeared, and Joe thinks he has left to look for silence elsewhere. The misunderstanding between Joe and his mother is never clarified.

The picturebook *The Island*, selected for the teaching project for 7th grade, is about a small island community. One day a stranger is washed ashore on the beach and no one knows who he is or where he has come from, and even though he is naked and unarmed, the islanders consider him a threat. The islanders treat the stranger more like an animal than a human being and put him in an abandoned goat pen with nothing to eat or drink. The islanders claim that the stranger will destroy their lives on the island and imagine that he is a dangerous killer. There is only one man, the fisherman, who wants to help the stranger, but the other islanders threaten to

set his boat on fire if he does so. The story ends with the islanders pushing the stranger back into the sea and building a fortress around the island. They decide to never again eat the fish from the sea because it comes from the same sea that brought them the stranger, and they even shoot down passing seabirds so that no one can find their island again.

The study has a strong focus on visual literacy. The term ‘visual literacy’ was first coined in 1969 (Debes & Williams, 1969). At the time, however, the term was very extensive and often misleading, embracing too many underlying concepts, and the need for a more palpable definition was evident (Avgerinou & Ericson, 1997). Visual literacy has since been defined in a less complex, and perhaps more comprehensible way, as “the ability to construct meaning from visual images” (Giorgis et al., 1999, p. 146). In picturebooks, illustrations carry meaning alongside the text, and the readers’ ability to read pictures is as important for text comprehension as the words (O’Neill, 2011). In the selected picturebooks, the characters’ emotions are depicted through facial expressions, body postures and actions (Prior et al., 2012) and through basic visual elements, such as colours, lines and perspectives (Giorgis et al., 1999). An important thing to remember when teaching visual literacy to young students is that even if they have prior knowledge of how to use some visual elements, like facial expressions, body postures and characters’ actions, for students to take full advantage of visual information and clues in a text, they must be taught visual literacy (Prior et al., 2012). Preferably, visual literacy training should be organized as pre-reading activities, however, instruction and repetition could also be given during a teaching project.

In addition to visual literacy, reader-response theory forms the basis of the study. Reader-response theory is based on the idea that the readers’ experiences of the stories in a particular context are as important as the authors’ motives and the text itself (Iser, 2000). When a story is told through the interaction between text and illustrations, leaving gaps to be filled by the readers, students participate more actively in the story-making, thereby promoting emotional development, such as the ability to feel compassion and empathy (Driggs Wolfenbarger & Sipe, 2007). When using literature to enhance students’ intercultural competence, the focus would be on aesthetic reading, since intercultural competence is more than acquiring knowledge about another culture. In aesthetic reading, the reader must “draw on more of the experiential matrix”, involving personal emotions and connections to the world (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 271).

Multicultural literature has great potential when it comes to developing intercultural competence, which is well accounted for in theory. The significance of including this kind of literature is described in an article by Louie (2005), where he points out that using multicultural literature in the ESL classroom could develop students' empathetic responses. For students to be able to understand people from various parts of the world, sometimes with other cultural values than their own, education should contain literature that reflects different cultures (Louie, 2005). Furthermore, multicultural literature "provides a gateway through which readers can enter into the characters' world from the vantage point of the author" (Louie, 2005, p. 566). To encourage students to engage more fully in the reading process, there is a need for characters and situations with which they can identify, and through this recognition the students are given "opportunities to celebrate who they are while learning about others" (Colby & Lyon, 2004, p. 26). Another goal when using multicultural literature is to "step away from one's self-centered approach of interpretation and work with others' beliefs and values to explain what others think and do", also called 'decentring' (Louie, 2005, pp. 567–568). However, to help students understand the complex, multicultural world in which they live, only reading the picturebooks would not be sufficient. Talking, writing and responding to multicultural literature during the reading process would also be necessary to facilitate self-expression and to provide opportunities for discussing beliefs and attitudes regarding the literature they have read (Louie, 2006).

In the two teaching projects made for the study, there are suggestions for how *The Silence Seeker* and *The Island* can be used to develop intercultural competence. Firstly, in addition to teaching basic elements of visual literacy, such as colours, lines and perspectives, and how to read facial expressions, body postures and actions, they outline some pre-reading activities. Such activities are meant to create curiosity and engagement before presenting the stories and to help the students relate the story content to their own lives. The purpose of pre-reading activities is also to awaken prior knowledge, key vocabulary and key concepts (Ellis & Mourão, 2021). An example of a pre-reading activity from one of the teaching projects is that the teacher asks the students to close their eyes and listen for sounds in the room, before leading them into the thoughts of one of the characters in *The Silence Seeker*, in an attempt to envision what he can see and feel. Secondly, the projects suggest some while-reading activities, mostly featuring a read-aloud. In the read-aloud, the teacher reads the selected picturebook to the class while the

pages are shown on a digital board, enabling the students to see both text and pictures at the same time as they can see and hear the teacher reading and mediating the picturebook (Ellis & Mourão, 2021). Thirdly, the projects provide detailed presentations of post-reading activities, such as various writing and drawing tasks, creating ample opportunities for uncovering conflicts and different values, facilitating discussion, reflection and change of perspectives. An example of a post-reading activity used with the *The Island* is where the students are asked to write a piece in the island's local newspaper, pretending to be one of the characters living on the island, sharing and arguing for the chosen character's opinions of the stranger. For this task, the students are given copies of some of the illustrations from the *The Island* showing how the islanders envision the stranger. Students should be encouraged to base their interpretations of the characters' opinions on both words and pictures, to remind them that words and pictures communicate in different ways: words are diegetic, communicating by telling, and pictures are mimetic, communicating by showing (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006). Another example of a post-reading activity, this one used with *The Silence Seeker*, is to have the students write Joe's and the Silence Seeker's thoughts in bubbles added to copies of some of the illustrations from the picturebook. The teacher should choose illustrations that stimulate reflection, such as one of the opening pictures where the two boys are sitting on the doorstep, or where the boys are observing the "down-and-outs", eating sandwiches under a big tree, or the picture where Joe is sitting in his bed at night, watching the noisy city. In this exercise, the students need to use what they have learned about reading and interpreting visual elements.

One of the goals when reading and exploring *The Silence Seeker* and *The Island* in the classroom is to give the students opportunities to recognize universal feelings, such as anger, fear, sadness, love, joy and shame, through the characters in the stories. As the visuals in picturebooks tell stories by showing, moods and emotions in the narratives are reinforced, contributing to the recognition of universal feelings, and thus promoting intercultural competence. When students respond to the selected picturebooks in creative processes, the purpose of developing intercultural competence will be achieved. Besides, when reading aesthetically, the likelihood of connecting emotionally with the text is greater. Furthermore, the study shows that reading multicultural picturebooks of high quality, combined with dialogues, visual literacy training, and structured activities where the students respond to the literature in a creative process, may serve this purpose well. Using the multicultural picturebooks *The*

Silence Seeker and *The Island* – combined with classroom activities and tasks based on visual literacy and reader-response theory – provides opportunities for dialogue that uncovers varied opinions and conflicts, thus promoting critical thinking and actions based on ethical reflections. Hence, the selected multicultural picturebooks provide excellent material for promoting intercultural competence in the ESL primary school classroom.

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