'Why does that lighthouse have a speaker on it?' : The Multimodal, Multilingual and Multicultural Potential of Arabic Picturebooks

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The work presented in this article arose from a small-scale project in the west of Scotland and was funded by the University of Glasgow. Three researchers and a visiting scholar worked with two local educators to examine the impact of using internationally available Arabic picturebooks for language and literacy learners in multilingual classrooms.

Introduction

The current era has been described by Vertovec as one defined by 'super-diversity' (2010: 86). This is evidenced in the populations of school-aged children, where over 149 home languages have been recorded in Scottish schools and 8.3% of children use additional languages at home such as Polish, Urdu, Scots, Punjabi and Arabic (SG, 2016). Statistics in England show that around 20.1% of primary-aged pupils use a language other than English at home (DfE, 2016: 10). While the diversity of pupil populations is rising, this is not reflected in the linguistic and ethnic make-up of teaching populations which remain white, female and monolingual (SG, 2016: 13; DfE, 2017: 9), particularly in the primary sector. To meet the diverse needs of pupils, we suggest that teachers need to consider how they can draw on the multimodal, multicultural and multilingual potential of picturebooks.

Rationale for Using Arabic Picturebooks

The research team were fascinated by a range of well-crafted Arabic picturebooks and wondered how children studying in Scottish schools would make sense out of the narratives. Our rationale for selecting Arabic picturebooks was based on the understanding that they had the potential to provide safe and equitable spaces for children to engage critically and reflect on their literacy skills using visuals. Children who were unable to decode the Arabic print would be able to interact with the visuals of the texts, making meaning from the pictures and the spatial placing of any Arabic text. Anyone able to decode the Arabic writing would be afforded an additional mode for meaning making. Adopting collaborative critical reading strategies would allow readers to jointly construct meaning from the multiple modes in the texts. These strategies could include collaborating with peers and more knowledgeable others who read Arabic, using online translators and print-based Arabic graphemes to English grapheme charts. The quality of the images allowed children from different linguistic backgrounds to negotiate meaning, and draw on their cultural funds of knowledge to interpret the narrative.

Forty years ago, Edward Said challenged western constructions of Arabic culture in his book *Orientalism.* He argued that the colonial west had constructed their understandings of Arabic language and culture through a distorted lens that viewed them as backward, uncivilized and dangerous. The post-colonial turn that began to challenge this view has been eclipsed by a trend in Western children's literature that understands the region through representations of war, terror and political troubles (*Sami and the Time of the Troubles* by Florence Parry Heide). Therefore, our second reason for selecting these texts was connected to a prescient need to challenge the ways in which Arabic culture and ethnicity had become negatively entangled with Islam (Gozdecka, Ercan and

Kmak, 2014). Current cultural scripts emerging from the western media present one-sided narratives that provide a narrow view of a complex culture and language. This critique moves beyond Said's, for the Western gaze is no longer on the strange and exotic, instead it is involved in a far more problematic project of silencing the everyday experiences of a language and culture in favour of a master narrative of violence, terror and oppression.

We deliberately selected authentic children's literature from Egypt, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates that had been written and illustrated by authors who lived and worked in the countries, producing narratives that avoided western essentialist views. These texts did not overtly challenge dominant narratives, instead they showed that thought provoking texts can be used in language and literacy classrooms to extend children's knowledge and understanding of Arabic culture and language. The texts used were *Amma Osha* (*Aunt Osha)* by Fatima Sharafeddine, illustrated by Hanan Qa'ee and *Al Kannas (The Street Sweeper*) by Mathilde Chevre. We shall refer to these texts using their Arabic titles, in order to preserve their linguistic authenticity.

Amma Osha

In this picturebook, we are introduced to Aunt Osha, a kind elderly lady who loves to talk: "She talks and talks and talks and … talks some more." We see her navigate spaces such as the street, the marketplace and pages of children's books accompanied by an orange fox who is never mentioned in the text. She walks confidently and blithely, occupying a central or elevated position while her talk causes disruption and chaos all around her. To represent her talk, the illustrator uses triangles of newsprint, which are shown emerging from her mouth and covering the spread. At each turn, she is told, 'Stop talking, Aunt Osha!" until one day, she does stop. In the beginning, the people of her community are relieved but after six days they start to wonder, 'Where is Aunt Osha?' When they visit her in her room, they find her 'alone, sick and sad.' She is in her bed, in an isolated position in the lower corner of an otherwise empty spread. To cheer her up, her visitors begin to sing to her, the words coming from their mouth this time. This cheers up Aunt Osha who starts to smile and later joins them in their song and dance. Once again, Aunt Osha talks and talks. In the final spread, the illustrator gives us a backstage view into the making of the book as we see Aunt Osha, cutting up newspapers into triangles to prepare for all the talk she intends to do the next day. *Amma Osha* presents a light-hearted story that touches on issues such as the pain of being silenced, the need to accept others despite perceived flaws and the importance of community solidarity.

Aunt Osha, whose name is a diminutive of Aisha, wears a colourful abaya and head scarf. While the setting is not mentioned in the text, there are several elements of the background in the illustrations that help us to locate the story in an Arabian Gulf country, more specifically, the United Arab Emirates. These include the palm trees, the mosque, traditional Emirati houses, and the Dubai skyline (including the iconic Borj Khalifa).

Al-Kannas

The Streetsweeper transports us to another Arab city, Cairo in Egypt. The picturebook is written and illustrated by Mathilde Chèvre, a French scholar of Arabic children's literature who has lived in Cairo and Damascus for extended periods of time. The text was originally written in French and is beautifully translated into Arabic by Myriam Rizkallah. Through its poetic text and illustrations, we are provided with an intimate portrayal of the city with its chaotic skyline and urban landscape, its soundscape of car horns and calls to prayer and the characters that populate its streets. The street sweeper lives on the rooftop of a building and we witness his daily ritual of descending from his room into the street, greeting his neighbours (the building caretaker, the juice, sandwich and coal

sellers and the television repairmen) and having a typical Egyptian breakfast in the form of a foul (fava bean/broad bean) sandwich. He then begins his work, sweeping away the dirt and dust that descends on the city from the desert that surrounds it. As he does so, he collects secrets, pieces of papers that he cannot read due to his illiteracy: 'He likes all sorts of paper: newspaper clipping, museum admission tickets, office correspondence, short love notes, pages torn from student's notebooks, pieces of dictation…' We see samples of these secrets in one double spread in the story. While he cannot read these papers, that does not stand in the way of his authorship as he uses them to come up with his own stories. These stories captivate a little girl called Louisa who lives in the same building. He becomes a male Scheherazade as his stories draw Louisa to the rooftop, night after night. Before long, she is joined by others, including many of the people he greets in the morning on his way to work. This book plays with the distinctions and porous boundaries between orality and textuality, literacy and authorship while presenting a loving and nuanced homage to a complex and vibrant Arab city.

Could insert images of front covers here.

Working with the Books

We were invited to use these texts by two teachers: a primary school teacher who wished to extend her ten-year-old monolingual children's knowledge of world languages and a secondary school EAL teacher who wanted to evaluate the impact of using texts written in the home languages of her students. These teachers were willing to get involved because current Scottish policy encourages knowledge building about world languages. The implementation of the *Language Learning in Scotland: A 1 + 2* Approach (SG, 2012) provides a framework based on the mother tongue + 2 additional languages, which means many schools are looking for creative ways to expand children's knowledge of languages spoken around the world. The project also coincided with the First Minster's Reading Challenge, which offered schools opportunities to create personalised reading journeys for all primary-aged children.

We worked with the primary-aged monolingual children first, refining our text selections and strategies for use with the multilingual secondary-aged children. The strategies used with both groups included:

- walking and talking through the books with a focus on personal, global, textual, compositional (colour) and critical dimensions;
- listening to the stories in Arabic and English;
- annotating favourite pages and adding pages that expand the themes found in the story.

Walking and Talking through the Books

Starting with the front cover, the pupils, guided by the researchers, went through the books page and page, discussing and asking questions about the content of each spread. The monolingual children evidenced competent and sophisticated understandings of how books worked, identifying the title, blurb and right to left directionality of the Arabic print. They were intrigued by the Arabic letters and saw shapes in them that looked like the English graphemes with which they were familiar. As they walked and talked their way through the texts, they could use the visuals to determine how the characters were feeling and arrive at retellings of the text that resembled the narratives intended by the author. The class teacher reported that the children used the knowledge gained through these textual readings to identify with the language and cultural concerns of the main character in Robinson and Young's *Mohamed's Journey*, the narrative of a young boy fleeing

from Iraq. During the multilingual readings, it was agreed that the text would be covered so that the entire group could focus on the visuals, ensuring no child had linguistic privilege. The group were able to use their world knowledge and understand the cultural symbols within the book, referring to geographical landmarks in Dubai and the practice of using henna to decorate hands.

Annotating Selected Pages

The annotation activities slowed the children down and allowed them to carefully examine the visuals. We used a series of questions and prompts (Farrell, Arizpe and McAdam, 2010)) that invited the children to speculate, comment and label under three broad areas:

- Experiential responses – who, what, where, when, why?
- Interpersonal – adding voices, relating to own life, other texts, recording emotions and feelings.
- Compositional – thoughts on colours, symbols, lines, gaze of characters, symbols.

The multilingual children were able to discuss the Arabic origins of the text and make text to life links to the Arabian cultural landscape and Arabic dress, sharing their intercultural knowledge with children with little experience of the region. The monolingual children did not have such a cultural repertoire at their disposal and asked questions of cultural symbols they did not understand. One annotated question, asked why a lighthouse (mosque) had a speaker on the outside (on the minaret). These cultural points of curiosity laid the foundations for the children to explore the books as cultural windows to the world.

Extending Reader Responses

We invited the multilingual children to respond to the textual fragments contained within the two texts, asking them to think about Amma Osha's cut up triangles and the way in which they represented her talk; and the street sweeper's collected textual fragments gathered from the street and displayed in one spread. We invited them to create their own collages of talk and a class collage of texts written in their own language. The children created these collages with enthusiasm, often including examples of the ways in which they talked with friends and family around the world using technology. Phones and phone apps such as WhatsApp, Skype and Facetime were all important in their out of school lives. We had hoped the children would bring in textual fragments from home to create the class collage of treasured texts, but the children were much more inventive, using their phones to find images of text they wished to recreate, such as book covers.

Insert image 3 and 4 here

Reading Multilingually

To complete the reading sessions, we brought in a collection of texts drawn from the language backgrounds of each child. We formed reading pairs, enabling each child to read a text in their home language to a child who was unable to read the verbal text, but was able to make sense from the visuals. The children were pleased to be able to share their knowledge of their home language and use English to discuss the predictions made by their classmates regarding the visual narratives. This final task prompted a class discussion of where texts in other languages could be accessed and allowed each child to see their home language being privileged.

Insert image 5 here

Evaluation of Project

The primary-aged children were engaged in working with the texts and showed a high degree of ingenuity in working out how to translate the texts, with one child suggesting we could use a photocopy machine to copy the visuals and trabslate the text. The secondary-aged children who used Arabic as a home language were able to share their linguistic skills and interpret the texts. They registered a preference for the response strategies which moved their dialogue beyond the narratives of the text. We noted that the texts operated as safe spaces for generating confidence, curiosity, intercultural dialogue and allowed the children to voice a desire for engaging with multilingual texts in schools and beyond.

Intercultural dialogue

The books provided the space for children to explore cultural differences, to interrogate cultural symbols that were new to them, and to share their cultural knowledge with their peers. For instance, through the books, the children opened conversations around the meaning of mosques and headscarves. One pupil noticed that in his country (India), women wear headscarves as well. Morning prayers were new rituals that some of the children learned about while discussing images of the minarets and the mosque. The visuals, which triggered pupils' comments and shared experiences, gave the children a common ground where they could chat with one another in an attempt to make meaning of the various cultural pieces of knowledge that completed or contributed to the stories of the books.

However, we also realized that, while exchanging cultural statements about different objects and places from the stories, some of the pupils felt more privileged than others. Knowing how to navigate from one set of cultural symbols to another was an advantage that not all pupils had, which was why it was important to use the Arabic texts to pave the way for international texts in a variety of languages. We accessed these multilingual texts through the Glasgow Life Schools Library collection, and attempted to choose monolingual rather than bilingual picturebooks.

Desire for Multilingual Texts

As a group, we were struck by the acceptance and willingness of the monolingual children to enjoy the process of exploring a text in another language, and the ways in which they wanted to know more about how language worked. The multilingual children expressed a desire to be able to access texts in their own language. One child picked up *Amma Osha* and explained that he had not physically held a book written in his language for several years.

There is much work to be done to create access to multilingual texts. One challenge is the identification of authentic quality literature that, in the case of picturebooks, includes a visual text that intrigues rather than alienates readers that do not speak the language. Teachers can draw on their own linguistic knowledge, that of multilingual colleagues or individual experts and organizations active in the field of children's literature internationally such as the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY) and International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). Both of these associations publish bi-annual lists of books from all over the world in the form of the IBBY Honour List and "The World Through Picture Books" resource respectively. Schools and libraries can draw upon books originally appearing in other languages but that are available in English (as rare as they may be) through websites such as www.outsideinworld.org.uk or translated editions of books originally written in English. Another major challenge is acquiring these books, for they are not readily available in bookshops, libraries and through book distributors. It may be worthwhile for

schools and libraries to explore other means of buying books or through collective demand to convince bookshops to diversity their offerings.

Since the completion of the project we have been involved in many events to promote the project of a multilingual library for Scotland. These have included a multilingual picnic on the lawn of the School of Education at the University of Glasgow and invitations to members of the public to share their stories of multilingual reading at our Facebook page called 'Our Stories of Reading'. We have also hosted a Palestinian author whose novel *Code Name Butterfly* is available in English translation through Neem Tree Press. In her meeting with students and children of various linguistic backgrounds in Glasgow, an excerpt from her book was read in both English and Arabic and the children were also free to ask her questions in either language. These efforts are part of a larger project that we, teachers and researchers, can take on if we want to develop inclusive pedagogies. If we expect our pupils to open their minds and hearts towards their multilingual peers, then we can help them to understand how they can engage with new words, images, scripts, artefacts and narratives - one picturebook at a time.

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Useful Websites

International Board on Books for Young People : http://www.ibby.org/

International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions : https://www.ifla.org/

Outside in world: Exploring World Books: www.outsideinworld.org.uk

Images

Image one: Cover of Amma Osha

Image two: Cover of Al Kannas

Image three: Example of child's collage in response to Amma Osha

Image four: Example of class collage showing examples of multilingual texts.

Image five: Example of two children reading a book in Manadrin