

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INDONESIAN REALISTIC PICTUREBOOKS FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND INDONESIAN CULTURE TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** Picturebook, one of the genres of children's literature, has a crucial role to promote children's language development and cultural awareness. Imported or adapted picturebooks are widely available in Indonesia; however, Indonesian picturebooks in English—written and illustrated by Indonesians about Indonesian children—are scarce. While it is very beneficial to use those imported and/or adapted picturebooks for the teaching of English, the cultural content of those books is problematic if we want to instil Indonesian culture on our young learners. Currently there are many story books about fables or folktales but realistic story books for children are not available. Realistic picturebooks are of high importance due to their potentials for teaching young children about actual events in their lives, especially related to issues of culture and multiculturalism. This paper will explore the importance of Indonesian realistic picturebooks and why the policy makers should encourage the publication of these kinds of books for young learners.

**Keywords:** *picturebook, realistic picturebook, multiculturalism, language development, culture, young learners*

### Introduction

This paper elaborates the importance of realistic picturebooks in the teaching of English to Indonesian young learners. English has been becoming more and more important as a medium of communication in international context and in Indonesia, the teaching of English to young children has become increasingly important as well. In a way, teaching English to young learners means to prepare them to take part actively in international communication in the future years. In this line, it is important for teachers and policy makers to think about the materials being used in the classrooms. Among many ways of teaching a language, reading picturebooks to young children and telling them stories are important ones. Some scholars in language teaching agree that reading picturebooks to young children is crucial for promoting their language and literacy skills (Hasson, 1991; Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Holdaway, 1979; Jiménez, Filippini, & Gerber, 2006).

Drawing on the above scholars' ideas, we need to seriously consider using picturebooks to teach English to our young learners. Even though many Indonesian parents start reading to their children before those children start schooling, I assume that parents do not read story books written in English. I suggest that picturebook reading to young children be done in preschool (PAUD), kindergarten, and at least in the first three years of elementary school. As Hasson (1991) suggests, the sooner children are read to the better. The role of teachers in educating these young learners is very crucial because they not only teach English language but also promote students' cultural awareness. By using Indonesian realistic picturebooks written in English, we may accomplish two goals at once: teaching young children English and Indonesian culture.

To organize this paper, right after this introduction I discuss the potentials of children's literature. This discussion serves as the foundation why we need to use children's literature to teach English to our young learners. In the next section, I discuss picturebooks as one of the genres of children's literature. I need to lay out why picturebooks are important for children. The next section deals with Indonesian realistic picturebooks, in which I discuss at a glance the lack of this genre in Indonesian children's literature. The next section discusses the importance of Indonesian realistic picturebooks in the context of pluralism and multiculturalism. The last section contains suggestion and recommendation.

### The Potentials of Children's Literature

In addition to promoting language and literacy skills, children's literature has the potential to teach children about cultures and cultural values (Bradford, 2009; Hunt, 1994; Lee, 2011; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003; Price, 1997). Nodelman and Reimer believe that one of the crucial roles of children's literature is to shape children to be productive individuals in society. The authors create stories based on the cultural values of their society and thus through their stories, authors of children's literature instill their society's cultural values on children. Hunt (1994) emphasizes the educational values of children's literature because it reflects ideology and didacticism. Authors' ideology or their beliefs and values determine what kinds of books should be written for children.

Children's literature contains simple language so that it will make it easy for children to learn new words and memorize them. Interesting or good stories help children develop their understanding about simple concepts. In the U.S., for example, the Dr. Seuss books are very popular and widely used for teaching young

children because of the simplicity of the language. In addition, most of the Dr. Seuss books were written in rhymes so that children are interested in them and can remember them easily. On the other hand, in Indonesia, teachers of English have not seriously taken the advantage of children's literature to teach English. Instead of using children's literature, teachers use books having too much emphasis on language forms and functions. While these kinds of teaching materials are important, they are less interesting or not engaging, which are crucial elements in the teaching of young children.

From the cultural perspective, the teaching of English for young children in Indonesia is problematic. My observation so far has revealed that young children learning English, both in and out of school, are more familiar with non-Indonesian cultures. Schools or English courses encourage students to celebrate Valentine's Day, Halloween, and Thanksgiving Day, for example, not celebration related to their daily lives. I do not suggest that such celebrations are not important. They are important in the sense that by doing those activities we introduce other cultures to our young children. However, we need not forget that we also have to teach them about our own cultures. Therefore, I suggest that since children's literature is educational and influential, teachers of English for young children need to consider using children's literature as the teaching materials. Picturebooks are one of the genres of children literature we need to take into account in this matter. This brings me to the discussion of this genre in the following section.

### **Picturebooks**

Even though there are many kinds of picturebooks (Norton & Norton, 2011; Stewig, 1995; Temple, Martinez & Yokota, 2011), for the purpose of this paper, what I mean by "picturebooks" are picture story books or books that contain written texts and illustrations that develop a strong story line. The combination of pictures and words easily attracts children's attention and interest. For the spelling, I follow Lewis (2001), Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), Sipe (2008), Sipe and Pantaleo (2008) who choose "picturebook" as a compound word, meaning that picturebooks are literary texts that have two equal components, i.e. words and pictures, and that the two form a synergy (Nodelman, 1988; Nodelman & Reimer, 2003; Sipe, 2008) that creates meaning.

### **Indonesian Realistic Picturebooks**

In general, children's literature in Indonesia falls into various genres. While I do not know exactly what books teachers use in the English classrooms, both in and out of school, and whether teachers make use of children's literature in the teaching of English, my observation in some major bookstores in Semarang reveal that Indonesian legends and folktales in the form of picturebook are widely available. Picturebooks translated and/or adapted from other cultures are also widely available, not to say in excess. Written in Indonesian language, these kinds of books have foreign cultural content and the characters do not look like Indonesians. In addition, bilingual picturebooks are abundant, whether they are about numbers, alphabet, children's adventures, etc. What is missing, however, are Indonesian realistic fiction. Before discussing this genre in the Indonesian context, it is useful to look at the concept of the term "realistic fiction" first. Temple, Martinez, and Yokota (2011) suggest that contemporary realistic fiction

... brings the same moral challenges as other types of fiction. But it presents these challenges in a here-and-now setting and in a way that says "Hey—this is happening. You or somebody near you could be going through these very experiences" ... Contemporary realistic fiction is derived from actual circumstances, with realistic settings and characters who face problems and opportunities that are within the range of what is possible in real life. It differs from historical fiction in that it is set in contemporary times; the stories could take place in the world as we know it today... Realistic fiction is not real fantasy. There are no animals that talk; no anthropomorphized machines; no ghosts, giants, or supernatural happenings (p. 294)

Based on the above concept of realistic fiction, I would say that we do not have realistic picturebooks for our young children, let alone written in English by Indonesian authors and illustrators. As I have mentioned, we do have Indonesian legends and folktales written in English by Indonesian and foreign authors. For example, we need to appreciate Bunanta and MacDonald (2003), MacDonald and Valério (2006), Sierra and Ruffins (2000), and Terada and Smoyer (1994) for disseminating Indonesian folktales to international public. There is no doubt that these books are important and can be the English teaching materials for our young children. In every nation, advanced and developing, legends and folktales are crucial for teaching children about traditions and cultural values (Lee, 2011; Price, 1977). But, unfortunately, we do not have Indonesian realistic picturebooks written in English by either Indonesian authors/illustrators or foreign authors/illustrators. Like legends and folktales, realistic fiction, including realistic picturebooks, can be tremendous sources of teaching both language and cultural values. We need to teach our young children about the current issues, provide them with real problem solving, and prepare them to deal with possibilities in the future.

## The Importance of Indonesian Realistic Picturebooks

One of the advantages of teaching English to our young children is that we can teach them about the diversity of Indonesia. On one hand we are proud that the world knows that Indonesia is identical with pluralism, either in ethnicity, culture, or language. On the other, this also worries us that it has the potential to make this nation crush if we do not handle this issue wisely and carefully. I suggest that teachers of young children start teaching them about the importance of living together as a nation, of respecting each other despite our differences, either in terms of ethnicity, cultures, religion, or language. It is true that we always do our best to instill “Bhinneka Tunggal Ika” values on our children. However, children need to see the reality. By this I mean that diversity or pluralism or multiculturalism does not always do us good. There were times we had problems. Children need to see these problems and how to solve them. Indonesian realistic picturebooks written in English is one alternative to show our children that diversity is beautiful, that being different from other fellow citizens is fine, and that social, cultural, and linguistic problems can be solved. I would love to see realistic picturebooks where children from every ethnicity in Indonesia are represented, where children can see and read about their fellow children having different backgrounds. In these kinds of books, the habits, what is appropriate and inappropriate for children from a certain ethnicity, what is good and bad, the do’s and the don’ts can be revealed so that they have good understanding about their fellow children from different cultural, linguistic, and religious backgrounds. In the end, this revelation will make children respect each other. It will be great if there are picturebooks about children from diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds living together and experiencing conflicts but in the end they solve the conflicts and live together in harmony.

I believe that this is an area that we need to take into account when teaching English to our young children. With simple and clear language and good (and appropriate) pictures—depending on the age and grade level of children we teach—this kind of picturebook can have tremendous impact on their understanding of and respect to other children from different backgrounds. By using this kind of picturebook, we can teach the concept of respect, understanding, diversity, multiculturalism, pluralism, etc.—which are a must in building the harmonious Indonesia—in English. It is not that the way we teach our young children is not great right now, which it is, but what I propose here is one alternative that will make a difference in our children’s lives in the future. We need to prepare our children to be world citizens by mastering English and understanding different cultures in the world but we also need to prepare them to be good Indonesian citizens. While other teaching materials are necessary, Indonesian realistic picturebooks has the potential to make that come true.

## Suggestion and Recommendation

It is time for the Department of Education to review the teaching materials used by teachers of English to our young learners. I suggest that the use of children’s literature in general, and especially Indonesian realistic picturebooks, get serious attention from the policy makers. Because currently we lack Indonesian realistic picturebooks, it is advisable that the policy makers encourage publishers of children’s literature in Indonesia to work on this theme. For the teaching of English, realistic picturebooks written by Indonesian authors/illustrators can be published in English exclusively or bilingually—in Indonesian and English.

For authors and illustrators, the readings of foreign realistic picturebooks—for example picturebooks published in the United States of America—is of useful reference. Like Indonesian society, U.S. society is also diverse. Realistic picturebooks portraying children from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds are abundant. My readings of these books inform me that the U.S. government takes the diversity and plularism issue very seriously and makes children’s books an important tool to create understanding and respect among these children. It is also advisable that teachers of English for young learners in Indonesia read a lot of children’s literature to gain enough background knowledge so that the teaching of English can be more interesting to children.

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