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Bamberg Studies in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (Ba-TEFL) provides a forum for the exchange of information, ideas, and research findings among teachers and researchers interested in TEFL. The contributions address the concerns of practising teachers and learners across all school types and aim to share relevant findings and spread innovative and research-based teaching ideas.

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Queer picturebooks for primary ELT: Suggestions for teaching practice

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Abstract

This contribution offers a list of queer picturebooks considered potentially suitable for primary ELT (English Language Teaching). The list emerged from six qualitative interviews with primary school teachers conducted in the context of a small-scale research project. During the interviews, the teachers provided insights into their practices and perspectives on the usage of queer picturebooks in the German primary EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom.

Keywords: gender, diversity, picturebooks, primary education, teacher interviews

1. Introduction

The usage of picturebooks as a form of children's literature has become a widespread practice in ELT since the Communicative Approach in the 1970s (Bland & Mourão 2016: 2). The potential of picturebooks lies in their authenticity, their motivational character, and the interplay of pictures and words to convey a compelling story (Mourão, 2015: 214). In consideration of current academic publications, "picturebook" will be spelled as one orthographic word to reflect the compound nature of the medium itself (Bland 2018: 271). Although picturebooks are frequently used in the EFL classroom, scholars argue that queer picturebooks are rather absent from EFL classrooms in primary schools worldwide (Smolkin & Young 2011: 217; Skrlac Lo 2019: 18; Young 2019: 6; Mokrzycki 2020: 44). The term "queer" is chosen here as an umbrella term to address all individuals with non-categorical gender identities and sexual orientations (Kang et al. 2017: 11).

With the omission of queer identities in picturebooks, many children are unable to find themselves or their loved ones reflected in the stories of these books (Crawley 2018: 65; Young 2019: 61; Mokrzycki, 2020: 38; Naidoo & Lynch 2020: 31). Scholars in the field (Crawley 2017: 28; Smolkin & Young 2011: 217; Skrlac Lo 2019: 17) advocate for the inclusion of queer picturebooks and allude to Bishop (1990: 9-11) who describes children's literature as "mirrors" and "windows". They function as "mirrors", as they allow readers to recognize themselves in the stories of the books, and "windows", as they show the world others live in (Bishop 1990: 9-11). These "mirrors" and "windows" are therefore missing for the LGBTQ+ community. Accurate representation is vital as prejudices against queer individuals prevail in society. Research should particularly address primary school education as perceptions of gender begin to form in childhood (Martin & Szykrybalo 2002: 918; Coats 2018: 122). Importantly, picturebooks can be utilized in the EFL classroom to foster an understanding of gender diversity at an early age and create a safe and welcoming environment for all learners from all family backgrounds.

2. Queer picturebooks: Compilation of suggestions

The list of queer picturebooks was developed to combine theory and practice with the intention to support teachers in their selection of queer picturebooks for the EFL classroom. The list is based on multiple scholarly articles and the general criteria of the interviewed teachers for the selection picturebooks for the EFL classroom. Consequently, it features picturebooks recommended by teachers and scholars alike.

According to scholars in the field (Young 2019: 67; Madalena & Ramos 2022: 15), the representation of queer identities in the stories of young children's literature is vital to foster empathy and an understanding of the LGBTQ+ community. The list of queer picturebooks aims to provide insights into the umbrella term "queerness" (Kang et al. 2017: 11) by showcasing a variety of different identities. In the list of queer picturebooks, themes are included that address which facet of queerness will be explored in the content of the picturebooks such as "gender identity" or "sexual orientation". The potential to foster empathy for the queer community through the compelling stories of the picturebooks was highlighted by scholars (Young 2019: 67; Madalena & Ramos 2022: 15) and the teachers, who were interviewed, alike. Therefore, the list of queer picturebooks also includes meaningful themes that can be explored with queer picturebooks such as "self-acceptance", "self-expression", and "empathy".

The interviewed teachers highlighted vocabulary acquisition as the main criterion for the selection of picturebooks in the EFL classroom. Thus, it was crucial to include lexical fields in the list of queer picturebooks that could be addressed in the EFL classroom based on these picturebooks. The lexical fields "family", "clothing", "colors" and "hobbies" were most prominent as many queer picturebooks center around a child protagonist, support by their family, and the child's expression of gender identity and sexual orientation through their preference for certain colors, clothing, and hobbies. Additionally, these lexical fields can be explored through the illustrations of the picturebooks suggested.

For the list of queer picturebooks, high quality picturebooks were chosen, which were recommended in scholarly articles and by organizations such as *the American Library Association*. Therefore, the list of queer picturebooks (see appendix) includes further resources such as scholarly articles that offer in-depth analyses, and an overview of the awards these picturebooks won. Here, the *Stonewall Book Award*, awarded by the *American Library Association* (www.ala.org), focuses on positive examples of queer children's literature. Additionally, the website *PEPELT* (www.pepelt21.com), which is run by experts in the field of ELT, is listed as another resource. The website highlights multiple queer picturebooks and provides suggestions for the inclusion of these picturebooks in the EFL classroom.

3. Using queer picturebooks in primary ELT: Approaches and aspects to consider

The way queerness can be addressed in picturebooks ranges from implicit indications to more explicit explanations. In this regard, the list of queer picturebooks includes a variety of picturebooks that address queerness in different ways. More implicit queer picturebooks offer an opportunity to address gender diversity in a rather conservative environment (Madalena & Ramos 2022: 144), while explicit queer picturebooks encourage the visibility of the queer community (Young 2019: 65). With the aid of the list of queer picturebooks, teachers can decide on a picturebook depending on their individual group of learners.

Madalena and Ramos (2022: 146) define picturebooks that implicitly address gender diversity as "any narrative where the protagonist does not meet the expectations of others" such as in *Not Every Princess* by Jeffrey Bone and Lisa Bone (2014). These picturebooks are described as "purposefully ambiguous" (Malcom & Sheahan 2019: 921) and foster an environment of acceptance (Madalena & Ramos 2022: 146). Crisp and Hiller (2011: 197) argue that characters, even if they are not explicitly described as female or male within the picturebook, can still be identified as their gender by pronoun use within the text and gender-coded illustrations. As an example, a female-coded character is depicted wearing a dress, while a male-coded character is shown wearing a tuxedo (Crisp & Hiller 2011: 197). Many queer picturebooks make use of these gender-coded implications to show the character transgressing gender norms. Malcom and Sheahan (2019: 924) note that picturebooks often depict "boys who like to wear dresses, though they are not clearly identified as transgender". A large body of picturebooks addresses transgender identity in this way, such as *Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress* by Christine Baldacchino (2014), *Julian Is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love (2018), and *My Shadow is Pink* by Stuart Scott (2021) (Madalena & Ramos 2022: 146). In *My Shadow Is Purple* by Stuart Scott (2022), a child is depicted wearing a combination of a tuxedo and a dress to

allude to the child's genderfluidity. Another aspect that is often portrayed rather implicitly in picturebooks is homosexual relationships, for instance, by showing relationships solely through the picturebook's illustrations. This might also include a "family doing things that families (stereo)typically do, with no reference to gayness" (Sunderland & McGlashen 2013: 476). Picturebooks that implicitly address homosexuality are *Aalfred & Aalbert* by Morag Hood (2019), *Families, Families, Families* by Suzanne Lang (2015), *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005), and *Grandad's Camper* by Harry Woodgate (2021).

Picturebooks that explicitly address queerness, however, focus on gender diversity by utilizing "explicative texts and often thorough explanations of various concepts linked to gender diversity" (Madalena & Ramos 2022: 146), or sexual orientation by "involving an explicit explanation of 'gayness' by a parent or child, including the word gay" (Sunderland & McGlashen 2013: 476). Books that address transgender identity more explicitly are *I am Jazz* by Jess Herthel and Jazz Jennings (2014) and *When Aiden Became a Brother* by Kyle Lukoff (2019). In the EFL classroom, gender diversity and sexual orientation can be addressed implicitly or explicitly through the stories in picturebooks. The interpretation of these stories, which is based on the interaction of pictures and words, provides opportunities for meaningful in-class discussions (Mourão 2015: 203). These discussions can be elicited by lexical fields with the aid of the picturebooks' illustrations. Mourão (2015: 208) recommends that these lexical fields can be used to engage learners in more meaningful discussions as "language related to clothes, physical descriptions, personalities and emotions which can lead nicely to discussing how we choose our friends, what we do with our friends and what friendship is [...]". In these conversations, children can challenge their assumptions of gender, sexual orientation, and different family structures, and develop an understanding of diversity (Kim 2016: 325; Madalena & Ramos 2022: 15; Whitmore and Angleton 2017: 58). Further, these conversations can foster empathy and an environment of acceptance within the classroom (Madalena & Ramos 2022: 15). This approach to literature goes beyond language acquisition and "offer[s] the possibility of emotional engagement" (Gray 2021: 2).

4. Conclusion

The inclusion of queer picturebooks is a step towards a more pluralistic canon of picturebooks in the EFL classroom. In this regard, the list of queer picturebooks presented in the appendix of this paper offers suggestions for a range of picturebooks that depict a variety of gender identities and sexual orientations. These picturebooks reflect the diversity of the society we live in and provide "mirrors" and "windows" for learners as they see themselves and others portrayed in the stories of these picturebooks (Bishop 1990: 9-11).

In general, this list of queer picturebooks aims to support teachers in their selection of more diverse and inclusive picturebooks. These books are meant as suggestions to enrich learning environments and encourage teachers to make thoughtful decisions for their individual groups of young learners. In primary ELT (and beyond), these books can help foster meaningful in-class discussions about gender and sexuality and create a safe and welcoming environment for queer identities. The inclusion of queer picturebooks opens up opportunities for teachers to "create democratic curricula that invite young readers to explore gender notions and challenge gender stereotypes from an early age" (Kim 2016: 326). Therefore, teachers can foster empathy and an understanding of diversity in their classrooms.

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Picturebooks

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Appendix: Suggestions of queer picturebooks for primary ELT

| Theme | Books | Lexical fields | Additional resources and further information |
|--|--|---------------------------|--|
| Transgender identity gender identity, queerness, self-expression, and self-acceptance, empathy | <i>Julián Is a Mermaid</i> (2018) by Jessica Love, Candlewick Press | Clothing, family | PEPELT (www.pepelt21.com), Klaus Flugge Prize 2019, Stonewall Book Award 2019, Mokrzycki (2020), Madalena & Ramos (2022) |
| | <i>William's Doll</i> (1972) by Charlotte Zolotov, Harper | Family, hobbies | Ghosn (2002), Stonewall Honor Book 2015, Sciurbia (2017), Whitmore & Angleton (2017), Malcom & Sheahan (2019) |
| | <i>Morris Micklewhite and the Tangerine Dress</i> (2014) by Christine Baldacchino, Groundwood Books | Clothing | Sciurbia (2017), Coats (2018), Whitmore & Angleton (2017) |
| | <i>My Shadow Is Pink</i> (2020) by Scott Stuart, Independent Publishers Group | Clothing, hobbies, family | - |
| | <i>When Aiden Became a Brother</i> (2019) by Kyle Lukoff, Lee & Low Books | Family, hobbies | Stonewall Book Award 2020 |
| | <i>I am Jazz</i> (2014) by Jessica Herthel & Jazz Jennings, Dial Books | Family, hobbies | Madalena & Ramos (2022) |
| Gender fluidity gender identity, queerness | <i>My Shadow Is Purple</i> (2022) by Scott Stuart, Larrikin House US | Colors, hobbies | - |
| Sexual orientation queerness, sexual orientation, self-expression and self-acceptance, empathy | <i>Grandad's Camper</i> (2021) by Harry Woodgate, Simon & Schuster | Family | Stonewall Book Award 2022 |
| | <i>Families, Families, Families</i> (2015) by Suzanne Lang, Random House Books for Young Readers | Family | PEPELT (www.pepelt21.com) |
| | <i>And Tango Makes Three</i> (2005) by Justin Richardson & Peter Parnell, Simon & Schuster Children's Publishing | Family | Smolkin & Young (2011), Alter & Frisch (2018), Coats (2018) |
| | <i>Aalfred & Aalbert</i> (2019) by Morag Hood, Peachtree Publishing Company Inc. | Family | PEPELT (www.pepelt21.com) |
| (Gender) diversity self-expression and self-acceptance, empathy | <i>Not Every Princess</i> (2014) by Jeffrey Bone & Lisa Bone, Magination Press | Hobbies | Malcom & Sheahan (2019) |