Gail Ellis and Tatia Gruenbaum



SPOTLIGHT ON ....PICTURE BOOKS

# Why engaging intentionally with picturebooks about real life matters

**Gail Ellis and Tatia Gruenbaum**

In 1990 Rudine Sims Bishop penned the well-known quote which compares books to mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors. She explains that books are mirrors when readers see their own lives reflected in the pages; windows when they allow readers a view of lives and stories that are different from their own and sliding glass doors when readers feel transported into the world of the story and empathise with the characters.

This view positions literature as being able to broaden our thinking by better understanding who we are, experiencing realities beyond our own and becoming aware of our unconscious biases. It allows children to identify, imagine and develop empathy and this is something we as ELT teachers and educators can build on to support Global Citizenship Education (GCED), which, in a nutshell, refers to educating a 'global citizen [who] understands how the world works, values differences in people, and works with others to find solutions to challenges too big for any one nation' (UNESCO, 2025).

## Literature in the ELT classroom

By drawing on literature to portray diverse characters in multifaceted roles we can use literature in the ELT classroom to:

- create awareness and stimulate critical thinking of our own values and worldviews, but also those of others throughout the world and throughout history,
- reflect on our communities in order to debunk myths and break down stereotypes and misconceptions,
- share stories of resilience and resistance to promote allyship and contribute towards an inclusive, secure and supportive classroom space,
- support children in considering points of view beyond their own, so they come to recognise that their own perspective is one of many ways to view the world. This can encourage children to question societal norms and embrace individuals for who they are rather than predefined stereotypes,
- stimulate children's engagement and their relatability to the characters and the narrative.

Picturebooks, as a form of children's literature, are widely used as a high-quality flexible resource by teachers in pre-primary and primary classrooms and to a lesser extent with secondary learners. Picturebooks operate on many levels satisfying learners of different ages and at different stages in their English language learning and introduce learners to English in a natural and authentic way as the language is not sequenced or graded. This provides exposure to rich, authentic language and a natural and meaningful context for language use and brings multimodal representation into the classroom.

## Diversity in picturebooks

The current diversity in picturebooks offers an entry point to explore the world and its people from the past to the present. Themes found in more recent publications are sometimes referred to as challenging, difficult, serious, taboo, tough or controversial, for example, death, depression and war. Indeed, these topics may not comply with our notion of childhood and what we think is appropriate for children in terms of suitability of subject matter and visual language. However, inclusive-minded picturebook makers and publishers are creating picturebooks which reflect realities such as economic disparity, same-sex friendships and parents, discrimination, disability and neurodiversity. Picturebooks about real life provide a more nuanced perspective of the world we live in and allow teachers to move away from a 'safe and cosy' traditional canon of picturebooks, or the conventional topics found in mainstream coursebook materials and go beyond language teaching alone and embrace their wider professional remit.

Today children can read about experiencing homelessness, relying on food banks and turning to crime and bullying to survive or save face (see Ellis and Gruenbaum, 2023). They can join other children in becoming *Rainbow Allies* (2024) when Cari and Lauri's pride flag was stolen from their porch. Children can march with *The Undefeated* (2019), a picturebook which documents the years of slavery and the civil rights movement or follow those who recite *Freedom, We Sing* (2020), in search of protection and peace. They can meet Kate who lives with an extra chromosome and finds confidence when she goes *Out into the Big Wide Lake* (2021). Children can learn to understand children whose sounds are signs made by their *Dancing Hands*, whose feelings are *GREY* (2024) and whose words might stumble and stick as in *I Talk Like a River* (2020), just like the water in a river bubbles and churns over rocks. And children can learn about hope and courage in stories of loss, destruction, persecution, flight and migration.



## To explore picturebooks about real life or not?




While picturebooks about real life reflect children's lived experiences, they are explored less often in the ELT classroom for the following reasons. On the one hand, there are the increasingly diverse teaching and learning contexts to consider, and on the other hand, there are the skills and competencies required by the teacher to mediate such picturebooks. These reasons may create constraints such as hesitation, discomfort, reluctance, or a fear of negative repercussions. However, the inclusion of picturebooks about real life in the ELT classroom is debatable. As teachers and educators in today's diverse society, we must ask ourselves whether we can truly promote inclusivity and allyship if we omit picturebooks that reflect not only our students' lives but also those of their teachers. Picturebooks which reflect real life can also be linked to articles from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in order to raise children's awareness of their rights and responsibilities. For example, picturebooks on economic disparity can be linked to articles #9, #19, #24, #26, #27, and #40; LGBTQ-inclusive picturebooks illustrate #2, #12, #13, and #19; and those on persecution, war, and immigration are #2, #14, #22, #30, #38, and #39.

## Framing and mediating picturebooks about real life

In our view, the question lies in how picturebooks about real life can be framed and mediated in the ELT classroom to support a purposeful and meaningful learning experience. We propose the following suggestions:

**1.Picturebook selection**

Selecting a picturebook for the ELT classroom, means choosing a book where the language, subject matter, illustrations, concepts and its appropriacy suit the needs and interests of a particular group of children, contribute to the lesson objectives and offer cross-curricular links. This includes navigating variety, taking representation into account and considering learning opportunities. When selecting picturebooks about real life, teachers additionally need to ensure that the words and pictures are accurate and believable, and that the characters are realistic. They also need to analyse the words and the pictures to ensure they include a clear message of hope and allyship, avoid stereotypes and are written in a bias-free manner. They then need to decide when to incorporate the picturebook into their teaching plan. See the next suggestion.

**2.Teaching moment**

Often teachers feel inspired to include a picturebook about real life but are not sure at what moment during the school year to do so. The United Nations List of International Days and

Weeks can offer a useful starting point to decide when to include selected picturebooks. For example, 3 December offers the opportunity to use a picturebook to mark the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. Suitable suggestions and resources can be found on the Words & Pictures Library website, including lessons based on signed video read-alouds. Likewise, the United Nations World Philosophy Day on 20 November might offer an entry point to creating an LGBTQ-inclusive ELT classroom by discussing the question 'What is Love?' before introducing a picturebook on the friendship between two boys (Gruenbaum, 2025).

**3.Preparation**

Picturebook-based ELT includes a preparation phase to ….

- find a point of entry to ignite interest and curiosity and to stimulate prior knowledge which will enable the children to connect the information in the story to their own lived experiences,
- pre-teach key language items and explain unfamiliar cultural or contextual details,
- become familiar with topic-specific vocabulary, non-bias language and the use of person-respecting terms. The Inclusive Language Guide published by Oxfam offers a helpful starting point. We also recommend reading up on guidelines for speaking to children about social identities to ensure their safety in the classroom. For example, HumanKind Ministries has published guidelines on how to speak to children about homelessness.

**4.Teaching approach**

Picturebooks about real life, like real life, can be tough. This requires adopting a teaching approach which:

- reflects the spirit and philosophy of the UNCRC where learning is a shared process between children and teacher respecting the equal status of children as subjects of rights and their right to an opinion and facilitates their agency and active participation. For further guidelines, see Ellis and Gruenbaum, 2023.
- provides a secure and supportive learning environment and positive, inclusive classroom climate which is conducive to exploring different lived experiences and encourages empathy and understanding. It also requires additional awareness and sensitivity (emotional and linguistic) on behalf of the teacher and children and being aware of the social and emotional needs of individual children to ensure everyone is respected and learns with and from each other. If using picturebooks which address the topics of war, migration or the Holocaust, we recommend the 'safely in and safely out' teaching approach (Echoes & Reflections, 2023). See also Gruenbaum, 2025, which builds on this approach as well as the 5-Step Approach in Ellis and Gruenbaum, 2023.
- uses developmentally appropriate practices and age-appropriate materials and focuses on the positive and hopeful elements of a picturebook narrative.
- allows time for reflection at the end of a lesson as well as reviewing at the beginning of the next. Allow children to voice their opinions and reflect on their learning and to choose how they express themselves. This can be verbal and can be in the target language or in their own language(s) or through drawing, acting out, mime, constructing models, puppets, etc. (See Ellis and Ibrahim, 2016).

## Final thoughts

We hope this short article has fulfilled its purpose of highlighting the value of engaging intentionally with 'tough topic' picturebooks about real life and why including them in the ELT classroom matters. Moreover, we hope this article provides a starting point for how you can contribute to real-world understanding in a pedagogically meaningful and appropriate way. Using picturebooks about real life and a teaching approach which is embedded in a children's rights perspective are the first steps to an inclusive ELT classroom. And that is a very good reason why they matter.

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**Gail and Tatia** were co-founders of PEPELT 2018 – 2023 with Sandie Mourão and Anneta Sadowska and are co-founders of the Words & Pictures Library, an open-access educational platform for picturebook-based English Language Teaching (ELT) launched in 2024.

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