

Online

The story continues...

How digital multilingual story books can be used to decolonise (language) learning and provide a start point for exploring the Sustainable Development Goals. By **Leandro Paladino** and **Christina Richardson** with **Agustina Merlotti, Laura Rodríguez** and **Emiliano Tisano**

EAL *Journal* readers may remember being introduced to beautifully illustrated open access multilingual digital storybooks in an article by Bonny Norton and Liam Doherty in Spring 2020 (issue 11). Norton and Doherty (2020) considered the potential for using the multilingual digital storybooks website in linguistically diverse classrooms in the UK (<https://global-asp.github.io/storybooks-uk/>). Inspired by the power of these to promote inclusion, *EAL Journal* editor, Christina Richardson worked with a group of trainee language teachers (MFL) to explore how they could be used in inclusive classrooms.

Manion and Younie-Gillham wrote accounts of how they worked with two stories, one in German (Andiswa, Fussball Star) and one Spanish 'Cocinando'. Manion (2020) highlighted how Storybook UK addressed universal values and how her chosen story addressed issues of gender inequality. Younie-Gillham (2020) meanwhile commented on the value of these stories in engaging learners from diverse backgrounds.

In her keynote speech at the NALDIC conference in November 2020, Norton shared two important research findings: firstly, that Global Storybooks helped learners not only become familiar with different languages but also to value and appreciate their own. Secondly, where parents see their

own languages represented on the website, they feel that their languages and identities are valued. These findings are echoed in the discussion of the digital storybooks below and in teachers' accounts of using them.

The reading of multicultural texts has the power to stimulate learning through an anti-racist lens; they have the potential to serve as powerful, practical tools to instigate vital conversations and they can also be used to demonstrate and model what it means to challenge and deconstruct hegemonic structures.

The importance of developing and affirming a sense of cultural identity is widely recognised in EAL literature. Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) conceptualises books as 'windows and mirrors.' 'Windows' when they offer perspectives of worlds of others, and when lighting is just right, those windows can serve as 'mirrors' reflecting human experiences such that people connect their own lived experiences to a wider human experience.

In this article, we continue to explore the wider potential of multilingual digital storybooks. Deputy editor, Leandro Paladino asked three teacher colleagues working in bilingual contexts in Argentina to share how they have worked with Global Storybooks in their classrooms. It became clear that using this resource was enabling teachers to think critically about representation and cultural

identity in their chosen texts as illustrated in Laura's account of using the story 'Hair' and to think about issues of equity and social justice as foregrounded in Agustina and Emiliano's discussions of 'Sakimo's Song' and 'Decision.'

Teachers sometimes wonder how they can contribute to pupils' home language maintenance without speaking different languages themselves. This series of stories may be one such way. Each story can be listened to alternately in the languages of different pupils in the same classroom, fostering a respect for multilingualism while making sure the pupils are not deprived of access to learning simply as a result of not understanding the language in question: they are already familiar with the story's content, and the pictures are once again used as a link to prior understanding.

Text and audio format

Each story comes in text and audio format allowing for bilingual and multilingual access and discussion. The collection is arranged in 5 levels in increasing linguistic complexity. Translanguaging activities could be facilitated by teachers of different languages, or bilingual teaching assistants. The same story can be used in one language in school and another at home, helping pupils to scaffold both content and language while benefiting from the perception of alignment between home and school. Changing from one language to another for each same story is a simple click on a button at the top of the specific story page on the website.

As the examples below show, the strength of the collection is not only

“The same story can be used in one language in school and another at home.”

a result of its intrinsic linguistic merit as well as on its multilingual usefulness, as well as on the focus it places on universal values.

Laura Rodríguez is an English teacher in a public secondary school for adults from disadvantaged backgrounds in La Plata, Argentina. Below, she gives her feedback on the book series and more specifically the story on which she focused:

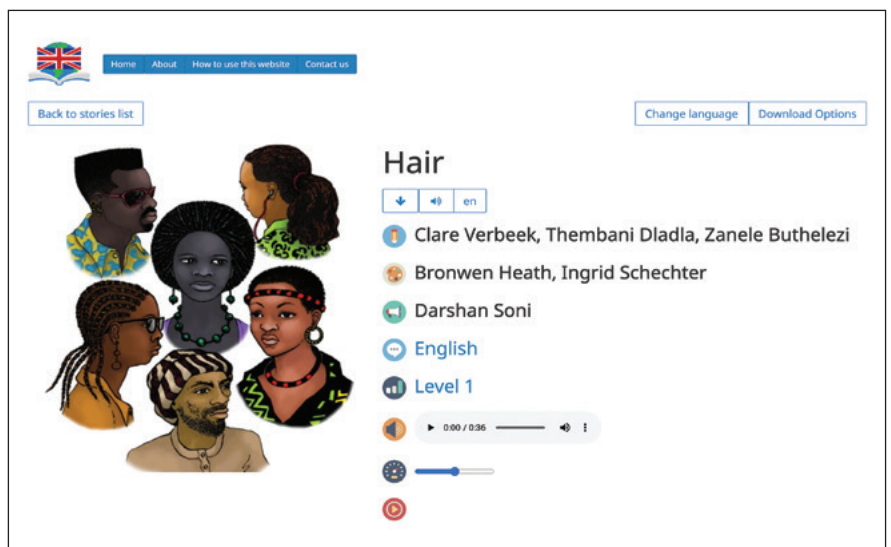
The Global Storybooks project has the potential to promote literacy, multilingualism, tolerance and peace. I selected the Level 1 story Hair for a class of adult beginners in a secondary school in Argentina. As a warm-up, we talked about hair and how important it is for people's identity. Students read two articles in Spanish about historical facts related to male hair and a social movement asserting naturalness for African women. Following this, they listened to the story and matched each character with their corresponding hairstyle. To check answers, we read the story aloud and shared comments. As a follow up, we talked about family and friends. With background music, they produced their own version of the story, including local names and illustrations.

Laura Rodríguez.

A recent survey from Dove CROWN research in 2021¹ reported that over half of Black pupils have experienced discriminatory treatment regarding hairstyles. Emma Dabiri, author of 'Don't touch my hair', has campaigned extensively for the inclusion of hair in the Equalities Act. Studying stories such as these could serve as a provocation in anti-racist conversations tackling issues impacting students.

Agustina and Emiliano work in a private multilingual school in the same city and used a different story with their 3rd and 4th graders (9 and 10-year-olds, respectively). They made the following observations:

With my third graders I used a story



Laura's class worked with 'Hair' – a level 1 story

from Level 3 Sakima's song, about a boy who goes blind but is very special in a number of other ways, including how beautifully he sings. I initially worked a lot with the images; the story made an impact on the pupils, who made comments like "there's nothing wrong being blind; maybe he sings better because he's blind", or "if the father's boss is rich, why do Samika's parents not have money?" I coordinated a mini-project with the Spanish teacher, with whom the pupils wrote a postcard to Samika inviting him to Argentina. I later explored the genre of the postcard, having each kid write one for Sakima to send home: "yes, Sakima's blind, so we can write for him". The project finished with an exploration of the Braille reading system, and with a visible thinking routine (a system used in my school), "Colour-symbol-image", in which each pupil had to choose a colour, a symbol and an image that reflected Sakima's story and world.

Agustina Merlotti.

In my case, I used Decision from level 2, about a poor village where each village member ends up realising that by working together, they can all contribute to the improvement of their home. We first activated previous knowledge with "Our ideas about Africa", and then we took turns at working with the French teacher: she started with half the group, doing the story in French (a language the students are only beginning to study), and I started with the other half group,

doing the story in English. We were gladly surprised to see that the pupils seemed to understand the story equally well regardless of the initial language, given the prior activation of ideas and the use of the pictures.

In our case we did not use the audio but now I am thinking about asking the Portuguese teacher if she would like to use the story. The work allowed the pupils to see other realities than their own, and helped to enhance the cross-language links that the school aims to foster.

Emiliano Tisano.

These multicultural, multilingual, multi-modal stories arguably provide accessible and inclusive engagements through which to address the UN Sustainable Development Goals of 'No Poverty' and 'Reduced Inequalities'.

It would be naïve to believe that books can make all the changes we hope to see in the world, but they do have the power to initiate and cultivate important intercultural understandings. As Rudine Sims Bishop states, "When there are enough books available that can act as both mirrors and windows for all our children, they will see that we can celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us human." ■

Leandro, Agustina, Laura and Emiliano are English Language teachers working in public and private contexts in La Plata, Argentina.

Would you like to contribute stories to the collection, from your country, culture or language? You can help advance the storybooks project by writing to c.richardson@naldic.org.uk

References

Bishop, R. S. (1990, March). Windows and mirrors: Children's books and parallel cultures. In California State University reading conference: 14th annual conference proceedings (pp. 3-12).

Footnotes

¹<https://www.stylist.co.uk/beauty/hair/dove-crown-uk-fund-end-hair-discrimination/471133>