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The Picture Books of Allen Say: Instructing ELLs in Language Learning and Cultural Exchange

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Abstract

Many of the picture books by Japanese American writer and illustrator Allen Say depict the lives of individuals who find themselves acclimatizing to a new culture. From either moving from Japan to America or America to Japan, Say portrays characters who struggle with but succeed in appreciating both cultures. The picture books of Say, then, may be useful for English language learners (ELLs) who are interested in cultural exchange. Unique to ELLs, however, is the use of Say's work as approachable content, as it uses illustrations and relatively concise prose most likely aimed at young L1 English speakers. As such, Say's picture books are worthy texts for improving both the English proficiency and cultural awareness of ELLs.

Key words: Allen Say, picture books, English language learners, cultural exchange

Allen Say is a Japanese American author and illustrator of award-winning children's picture books, which includes the Caldecott Medal recipient *Grandfather's Journey* and the Oregon Spirit Book Award recipient *Erika-San* (Gregorio, 2022). Born in Japan, Say immigrated to the United States as a teenager, with his work consequently dealing with "themes showing his love of both countries" (Temple et al., 1998, p. 97). Whether about a Japanese man immigrating to America in the Meiji era or an American woman immigrating to Japan in the modern day, Say's books have explored themes of multiculturalism and, specifically, the cultural differences individuals experience when moving between the two countries.

In this article, I want to explore the potential for Say's picture books to be used in an educational setting with English language learners (ELLs). The introduction of picture books into English education seems especially pertinent in countries such as Japan, where English education has become compulsory for increasingly younger students (Kochiyama, 2016). Additionally, in alignment with standards of a MEXT survey (Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Policy, 2011, p. 3), foreign language activities are in Japanese elementary schools with the goal of "[cultivating] cogitation, judgment, expressiveness and other abilities" as globalization continues.

Yet, while Say's work has value as a resource for English education in Japan, I believe what makes it such a valuable resource for Japanese ELLs is what makes it a worthwhile resource for ELLs in other countries. Specifically, Say's picture books have value in settings that touch upon intercultural and language instruction. In turn, I will explore the importance of Say's work for ELLs in learning about cultural exchange and, later, as a tool for building upon their English proficiency. Lastly, I will give three example activities to illustrate the utility Say's work can have in a class for ELLs.

Cultural Exchange in *Grandfather's Journey* and *Erika-San*

Grandfather's Journey and *Erika-San* show cultural exchanges between Japan and America as characters from either the former or the latter adjust to their different surroundings. From the Japanese perspective, Say gives readers a look into his grandfather's

experiences when moving to America as a young man. His grandfather, while coming to appreciate America and even starting a family there, eventually returns to Japan to be reunited with the landscape that he missed from his childhood.

Once again, his family settles with him in Japan, and Say's grandfather finds himself missing America, much like he missed the landscape of Japan, and wishing to visit it one more time in his lifetime. Unfortunately, he does not get this opportunity, but Say himself later repeats his grandfather's journey by immigrating to America. In closing *Grandfather's Journey*, Say (1993, p. 31) articulates his appreciation for each culture—feelings that his grandfather likely shared in his life as well—by saying, "The funny thing is, the moment I am in one country, I am homesick for the other." Additionally, we see Say (1993, p. 12) commenting on the diversity his grandfather witnessed in America when "He met many people along the way. He shook hands with black men and white men, with yellow men and red men." That said, it does not comment further on this categorization of ethnicities.

Next, in *Erika-San*, Say tells the story of Erika, a young American woman who grows up wishing to live in Japan. As a child, Erika's grandmother read to her various Japanese picture books and folktales. Also, during her time in America, Erika had some Japanese friends who taught her Japanese, which she also studied through American middle and high school. After graduating university, Erika moved to Tokyo to teach, but found the city too crowded. When she moved to a remote island in Japan, she found herself happier, especially when given the opportunity to lead a tea ceremony with one of her Japanese co-workers, whom she later marries.

The Approachability of Say's Work for ELLs

Both *Grandfather's Journey* and *Erika-San* utilize illustrations, relatively concise text, and similarly straightforward narratives, making them worthwhile material to be read by ELLs of appropriate levels. Specifically, these picture books may be aimed at ELLs at the CEFR levels A1/A2/A2+, with such levels being described, respectively, as being able to "respond to simple statements . . . on very familiar topics," engage in brief social exchanges, and, lastly, "give short, basic descriptions of events and activities" (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 173). Alternatively, we may categorize Say's work as being suitable for productive beginner ELLs.

In *Teaching Beginner ELLs Using Picture Books: Tellability*, Ana Lado (2012, p. 42) describes the category of picture books for these ELLs as those that "[contain] no more than 500 words total, with up to 100 new words to be taught." Additionally, this category is aimed at ELLs who "can add and combine ideas from book-based activities into longer sentences and discourse," but these ELLs still "need extra time to respond when they transfer visual information to verbal and oral to written" (Lado, 2012, p. 42). That said, the level of English proficiency noted here is not necessarily about the age of the learner. Rather, it refers to the skill level itself, as even adult ELLs, such those from refugee backgrounds, may be beginner ELLs (Playsted, 2019).

When looking at *Grandfather's Journey*, we can see passages that potentially introduce new words for beginner ELLs. For example, when describing his grandfather's travel to America, Say (1993, p. 5) writes, "He wore European clothes for the first time and began his journey on a steamship. The Pacific Ocean astonished him." Japanese ELLs at the productive beginner level would most likely need to be taught "steamship," "Pacific Ocean," and "astonished," but Say's accompanying illustration helps ELLs make the connection to the new vocabulary by showing the steamship, the surrounding ocean, and the character's facial expression.

Given that ELLs are assumed to be at around the productive beginner level for the above example, instructors (and students) may show concern with the amount of new vocabulary introduced in such a small passage. In other words, one may worry that ELLs will experience, as described by the affective filter hypothesis, anxiety and loss of self-confidence—thereby limiting the ability for ELLs to acquire the targeted language (Krashen, 1982). However, if we look further at *Grandfather's Journey*, we can see passages that should encourage ELLs of the appropriate level. Namely, in the opening of the book, which happens to be the passage preceding the introduction of "steamboat," "Pacific Ocean," and "astonishment," Say (1993, p. 4) writes, "My grandfather was a young man when he left his home in Japan and went to see the world." This passage would seemingly allow ELLs of the necessary level to have meaningful input while proceeding to the next page, which offers an appropriate increase in difficulty.

This process of vocabulary building begins to resemble the acquisition of language stressed in the input hypothesis, which, while focusing more on grammar in the following, Krashen (1981, p. 126)

describes as when "Children progress by understanding language that is a little beyond them. That is, if a child is at stage *i*, that child can progress to stage *i* + 1 along the 'natural sequence' . . . The child understands language containing structure that is a bit beyond him or her with the aid of context." As previously mentioned, the illustrations of Say could function as this contextual aid for ELLs.

However, instructors should be mindful that more challenging texts may increase the foreign language reading anxiety of ELLs, with less difficult texts potentially decreasing this anxiety while still improving their reading comprehension (Bahmani & Farvardin, 2017). Similarly, Yang et al. (2021, p. 95) argue that the comprehension of ELLs may benefit from reading at the stage *i* – 1, but also note that reading at the stage *i* + 1 "could enhance overall reading motivation and promote self-efficacy" for ELLs. Lastly, on the relation between the motivation of ELLs and challenging material, Hitoshi Mikami (2023, p. 42) states that an L2 learner's perception of success "in high-pressure and test situations tend to be more motivated about, comfortable with, and confident about L2 reading," which may further support the potential for *i* + 1 material to bolster the motivation of ELLs.

Class Activities to Utilize Say's Work

With the cultural and linguistic benefits Say's work understood, instructors might ask how they can introduce the material to a class of ELLs. What follows will be three activities for ELLs, briefly described, as applied to *Grandfather's Journey* or *Erika-San*. The three activities used here have been taken from Linda Hoyt's (2009) *Revisit, Reflect, Retell: Time-Tested Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension*. Specifically, there are the activities "partner read and think," "the character and me," and "student-created dictionaries."

Partner Read and Think

In this activity, students work together in pairs to recognize and define difficult or novel vocabulary words—allowing students to "engage at several levels of comprehension and [encourage] language use as partners navigate a selection" (Hoyt, 2009, p. 16). Instructors can first model the lesson by reading aloud some passages, stopping at difficult words, and attempting to infer the possible meaning of those words. For those interested in using recorded readings of Say's work by native English speakers, one can find read alouds readily and freely available on YouTube. After modeling the activity alone, students are asked to get involved with the instructors' reading aloud to spot difficult words and discuss their potential meaning as a class. This sort of guided reading can be especially beneficial for ELLs, as these read alouds aim to "generate discussions to support comprehension and vocabulary" (Malo-Juvera, 2011, p. 175). Finally, students work in pairs to read aloud passages, spot their own challenging words, and attempt to define them together.

The Character and Me

Given the short length of the texts, students can have the opportunity to practice spotting and briefly articulating themes in English. Students may begin to spot similar themes throughout, for example, *Grandfather's Journey* and *Erika-San*. In each story, both protagonists find themselves in unfamiliar cultures and come to miss their respective homes while growing to appreciate a new culture.

For this activity, specifically, students observe the traits of fictional characters and relate it to themselves. This can be accomplished through the steps of *1*) students describing themselves, *2*) students describing the character, and, finally, *3*) comparing and contrasting themselves to the main character. As Hoyt (2009, p. 42) notes, "A Venn diagram works well for this activity." Instructors should consider making worksheets with a Venn diagram in place, or students may draw it themselves. Importantly for ELLs, it allows them to practice connecting ideas in English.

Related to image association and language learning, Hoyt (2009, p. 42) suggests that "students find it especially appealing if you have photocopies or digital pictures of the reader and the character and make them available to paste onto the page." With this additional material provided by instructors, such as printed out pictures of the characters, students can enhance the visual connection between the characters and their noted traits. Here it is important to recognize such picture books as "complex multimodal texts" where "Meaning is created when modes interplay with each other" (Sherif, 2022, p. 85), with Say's illustrations and text providing such interplay. That is, beyond "language and talk," learning may also take place when students engage with "symbolic representations such as pictures, diagrams or drawings" (Filliettaz et al., 2013, p. 156). The disparity is further expressed by Gunther Kress (2000, p. 339), as he raises the distinction between images and writing with the former being "spatial and

nonsequential" while the latter is "temporal and sequential."

Student-Created Dictionaries

Similar to the "partner read and think," students focus on English vocabulary in this activity. The difference between this activity and "partner read and think," however, is that students choose and systematize words as opposed to analyzing words directly from the text. The criterion here is that students must select words related to a chosen topic that comes from the text. For example, if the topic is "travel," students can write down any previously taught words that fit this category, thereby creating a "travel dictionary." This could include previously learned words such as "car" and the newly learned word "steamboat" from the text. Whether written by students or created as a worksheet, the topic (for example, "travel") will be placed at the top of the sheet, while two columns run alongside each other. One column would be for the relevant words and the other for the definition. Students would be tasked to write the definition of each word, with either assistance from a partner or bilingual dictionary. By the end of this activity, students should have an alphabetically arranged list of these words with their definitions beside them.

While this activity shows promise, I would add an accommodation to it for beginner ELLs. Specifically, I think it would be appropriate for students to write the definition in their L1, as "Dictionary construction requires . . . use of academic vocabulary" (Hoyt, 2009, p. 179) and, so, some words may prove too difficult to define in the L2. Yet, regardless of the definition itself is written in the L1 or L2, this activity will "provide powerful content review while helping students understand the structure of a dictionary" (Hoyt, 2009, p. 179).

Conclusion

While only a small representation of Allen Say's overall body of work, both *Grandfather's Journey* and *Erika-San* provide ELLs the means to engage with questions of exchanges between Japan and America as well as intercultural exchange broadly. Additionally, the work of Say may be appropriately challenging for ELLs by building a connection between English passages and pictures as well as not being too intimidating to ELLs due to its use of images and language aimed at young native English speakers. Of course, the benefits of Say's work for ELLs would be better understood after observing their use in a classroom. However, this paper has aimed to show ways in which Say's work could be used in such setting.

For ideas on how to apply Say's work in a class, a few sample activities were given that may encourage ELLs to build on their English proficiency while simultaneously engaging in themes of cultural exchange. For the latter, ELLs can observe this through Say's characters as they deal with the interaction between American culture and Japanese culture. From this, the work of Say has value for ELLs in intercultural instruction as well as language learning. Instructors should, then, consider introducing it to those students with the appropriate level of English proficiency or an interest in cultural exchanges, especially between America and Japan.

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