

# Children's Story Books: Introducing Cultural Hybridity, Shaping Intercultural Sensitivity for Foreign Language Young Learners (An Observation to Gramedia Books in 2017)

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**Abstract**—This paper intends to share the potential of the children's story book in introducing cultural hybridity and shaping intercultural competence for young learners. By grounding upon the data obtained from observing the children's book stories published by Gramedia and sold in its book store, it is found that shaping of the early. It is found that the aspects related to the words used in the story, setting used, characters' attributes and subject matters of the story may contribute to the encounters and interactions of Indonesian children, in this case considered as foreign language young learners, with foreign cultures which mark the opportunities in early engaging with hybridity, and later shaping early intercultural sensitivity.

**Keywords**— *Children's book story, hybridity, intercultural competence, young learners*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Last April 2018, IKAPI as the formal association of publisher in Indonesia launched the data concerning the sale of TB Gramedia, the biggest book store networks in Indonesia. IKAPI claimed that children's book occupied the top of the sale list for the period of 2013/2014. The sale recorded that, in 2013, children's book reached 10.979.584 in numbers and, in 2014, it showed a little decreasing in number, however remaining significant, that is 10.952.234 in total. In terms of title, children's story book, according to IKAPI, contributed 6.944 in 2012 and 4.701 in 2013 to the total title in TB Gramedia [1]. It means that it is 22.31 % title for 2013 and 23.64 % from the title received in 2014. These phenomena highlight the crucial existence of children's book in the sale which seems to have the relationship with the growth of the middle class people who concern with the children education. It is, then, supported by the fact that children's book constitutes the most selling ones, followed by books of religion and fiction.

Such sale facts interpretively reveal the huge access of children to the world through the story book that they read.

It could be the story of their own world, own culture, own society, other culture, and other society as well as communities. Story books are the windows to see the world with its people and experiences. Thus, the buying potentials of the books may lead to the question of the role of those books in bringing children as the main readers of such book toward the awareness of cultural diversity and fusion. Reading children's book story accompanied with its picture, sometimes so-called pictorial books, provides children as young learners with the opportunities make sense of themselves and the world of diverse society and community. In the context of intercultural engagement and language learning, for instance, such books increases children's general knowledge, understanding about the world, and promotes language acquisition [2]. It makes them crucial in the process defining cultural identities and awareness for children including in their learning process. The dialectic interaction of the stories and children contributes to the bridging the understanding of the world both of oneself and of the environment outside of oneself. Its role can be viewed as a supportive meaning-making environment for child readers [3].

The fact that children's story books in Indonesia are on the top rank of the sale suggests that these story books can be potential accesses of shaping the cultural perspective of Indonesian children at least at its early phase of learning. If children are the major consumers of the story book, it reflects that there are many Indonesian children absorbing the contents of the books; their stories of people, habits, environments, fashions. These are accompanied by their packaging including the colors, characters and setting as well as the costume. All of these aspects are certainly cultural. It is from stories that one learns many of cultural assumptions and norms. This point out that children read story book will encounter with cultural dimensions whether it comes from their own culture or from foreign culture. It is this meeting

that defines their early interaction with the culture of not their own. They identify the world outside their own. They begin to develop intercultural sensitivity that is sensitivity to the viewpoints of people in cultures other than one's own [4]. This is not apart from the special packaging of the children's story books which are colorful, funny and easy words as well as full of pictures; they can easily enter the world of children. The books meet the children's interest, and, later, bring the acceptance toward world culture. That is why the children enjoy the encounter as the pleasurable reading adventure.

In context of cultural hybridity, such circumstance drives the assumption that the reading of children's story books particularly the foreign ones brings the possibility of early encounters with different cultures in the young age. Hybridity involves the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities, cross-cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries [5]. The reading of the story book translated from foreign cultures, which constitutes of the effect of the globalization, signals the meeting with that particular cultures. In the simple words, the reading of the children's story books signifies an early step to the identification of foreign cultures which possibly fuses with children's own culture. It then might be defined as introducing cultural hybridity to children, which later encourages early intercultural competence. Here it refers to the ability to accommodate cultural differences into one's reality in ways that enable an individual to move easily into and out of diverse cultures and to adjust naturally to the situation at hand [6]. This infact suggest that exposing children to different cultures, norm, and behaviors promotes less ethnocentric attitudes and behaviors, and greater intercultural efficiency [7]. Within such context, the early cultural hybridity and intercultural competence mat derive from the interaction with the story books that offers children with the culture of diverse countries and societies.

Hence, it can be synthesized that the exposure of the children to foreign story books depicts the open space for the exposure to a new culture and understand it as well as manage it, even in the early phase of young learners. This paper tries to share the assumption that the children's story book could introduce cultural hybridity and intercultural competence for Indonesian young learners particularly in the context of foreign language learning.

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study is descriptively qualitative in nature. It mostly relies its analysis based upon the documentation; pictures and words. The data are taken from the result of the observation on the collections of children's story book published and sold by Gramedia. The choosing of Gramedia collection due to information of IKAPI, the primary organization of book publishing in Indonesia, that TB Gramedia occupies the highest rate of the sale for this children's story books in Indonesia [1]. This study focuses only on the western included translated story books sold in the year 2017. As an observational, the study simply identifies the title and skims pictorial content of the books. They are then coded into relevant category of findings.

## III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Nowadays the children's story book is identical to the pictorial story book which characterizes the use of images in its storytelling. The stories are presented along with the pictures in its every scene or page. It usually serves colorful and interesting pictures to illustrate stories. This pictorial storytelling dates back to the earliest cave wall paintings, the true picture book harks back to a mere 130 years ago, when artist and illustrator Randolph Caldecott (1846-1886) first began to elevate the image into a storytelling vehicle rather than mere decoration for text [8]. Popova continued that Caldecott's work heralds the beginning of the modern picture book. He devised an ingenious juxtaposition of picture and word, a counter point that never happened before. Words are left out but the picture says it. Pictures are left out but the words say it. It marks the invention of the picture story book which know today particularly for children.

The children's story books in Indonesia mostly present foreign figures and characters. The observation carried out in the TB Gramedia both in its store and online sale displays the dominance of the foreign story books which are translated into Indonesian. For instance, it can be easily met the title related to series such as the Smurf Series, Lucky Luke series, the Crazy Family series, The Happy Family series, The Gorilla series, The Asterix series, The Disney Series, the Sisters, Jeremy and many other similar titles. Among these foreign affiliated title, it is only few Indonesian tittle namely Pangeran Series which is not discussed further in this study. In the observation of the children's story book in TB Gramedia, it is found that some elements of the story books that potentially introduce young learners with cultural hybridity and intercultural competence namely

### A. *The words used in the story*

If language is the embodiment of culture, the words applied in a certain context will reflect the culture of the speaker. Language serves as an instrument for man to communicatively participate in socio-cultural arena. Man conveys his notion by utilizing the language expression

rooted and agreed in his culture and society. This explains that language acts as a medium for social interaction. When language is used in context of stories, it is bound up to culture in multiple and complex ways. This indicates that expressions used in the language bear the representation of its culture. The dictions applied in the children's stories guide to the contact with culture. By observing the children's story books in TB Gramedia which seems to be dominated by foreign titles, for instances; the Smurf series, the Sisters series or Lucky Luke series etc. It can be inferred that the choice of these words are related to the Westerns culture. The words "Smurfs, Lucky Luke, Sisters, Happy, Family, Crazy" do not commonly belong to Indonesian vocabularies.

#### *B. Setting used*

Besides word choices, the setting of the stories may also reflect the introduction of a new culture to Indonesian Children. The existence of certain locales and time in the story is not apart from cultural atmospheres surrounding that context of interaction or tradition. A certain location is only found and meaningful in certain context of culture. It is believed that a location or place or habitation shapes the making of a culture. People's culture can be different due to their living area. City people develop urban culture while the villagers establish rural culture. This implies that a setting of place can be a hint of cultural phenomena. In other words, a place found in the story is presumably bounded to a culture.

Such cases seem to be figured out in the children's story books displayed in the store. The use of the foreign words is followed by the description of the place or location which is not typically Indonesian. The presentation of the log cabin such as in the tale of the three wolves, pig ranches, Circus arena, thick woods of the giant oaks or the palace and snow as that of the Snow White series depicts the penetration of the Western culture into the children's stories. These locations are cultural. They give clues of what culture they belong to. Indonesian has a different description from of a log cabin, ranches, and palace or woods. In addition to location, the setting of time may also be an indication of cultural aspects represented in the children's stories. An incident happens in winter time, for example, points out the seasonal time which is not experienced in Indonesia.

#### *C. Characters' Attributes presented*

Similar to the setting, the characters of the children's story books also imply cultural attachment. How the characters are presented in their physical attributes can be a trace of their culture. A particular culture tends to have a certain type of appearance. It is defined as a part of a cultural identity. People of Eskimo and People of Hawaii exhibit different clothing tendencies. It suits to the culture in which they live. In simple proposition, the appearance is filled with the cultural content as well. One may recognize other's culture by observing their attributes of the appearance. The same is true with the appearance of the characters of the children's story books. In addition to the colorful printing and design, the characters of the stories are also illustrated in the attractive ways to the eyes of children. Their appearances are served in the manner of the culture of

the story. Interpretively, the children's familiarity to the appearance of the characters that they meet in the reading activity signifies their familiarity to the culture where the characters are from.

#### *D. Subject matters of the story presented*

The observation toward the children's story books in TB Gramedia disclosed that the subject matters or topics told in the children's story books are rarely focused on Indonesian realities. This is, of course, undeniably correlated with the numbers of the translation story book. As matter of fact, considering that these books are intended to the Indonesian children as readers, there is an expectation of hoping to find the topics which are closely links to Indonesian experience. Yet, this expectation is apparently unfruitful. The topics such as *Legenda Mighty Eagle* from *Angry Birds Series* flourish the story books. The discussion on these topics does not only predict the direction of the story but also suggests the aspect culture. The mentioning of *Eagle*, instead of *Elang* or *Rajawali*, is cultural choice. Indonesian children in their reading, in this case, will be engaged with the culture where *Eagle* is defined differently than merely "seekor elang". It can be stated that the topic distributes a cultural phenomenon.

Each book comes with its typical story, theme, setting and message which are loaded with the cultural dimensions. The presentation of this dimension can be implicitly and explicitly detected. When setting is clearly referred to a real location, it leads to an explicit association of certain tradition and culture of the place. The characterization seems to be another cultural clue in the sort of interaction. This points out to an implicit understanding of the cultural background. For the case of children readers for children's pictorial story books, they will identify points of culture. The intense interaction might drive them to know different cultures and recognize cultures as ones belong to their own culture.

In terms of the word used of the children's story books, it serves the perspective that they are English words. They carry out English cultural values both implicitly and explicitly. Interpretively, children's acquaintance with these English words may bring the contact to the English culture. The questions of what the words refer to and in what context they apply can be the issues coming to the head of the children. It can be so since those words are rarely heard in Indonesian language. The meeting with these words in the reading activity portrays the meeting with foreign culture. This further indicates that the seeds of hybridity lie at this point. The interaction of Indonesian children with English culture leads the potentials of their absorption of that particular culture in the early phase of their lives. Thus, the more children spend their time with the foreign content of the story books, the more it gives spaces to the recognition and acknowledgment of that culture. Predictively, this circumstance provides the baseline for the shaping of the cultural hybridity as the children grow. This early encounter may foreshadow the coming hybridity among Indonesian and Western culture.

For the setting used, the inclusion of the western typical settings confirms the cultural aspects which constitute

the parts of children's menu in their reading activity. The children are offered to digest cultural portions of not their own. Despite their understanding of the foreign culture, children have already encompassed cultural settings. They may not yet formulate their response to that culture. However, it is impossible to deny the fact that they have already made their contact with the culture. This can be one of the tracks to more contacts to a foreign culture within which cultural hybridity possibly occurs.

About the characters' appearances, they are mostly dominated by those of Western looks. Viewing at the covers of the book, one can directly find, for example, a character with cowboy dressing equipped with a revolver at his belt. It is Lucky Luke. Not to mention, Asterix with his blue-white short pants with the background of the Greek fleet or Princess with her beautiful gowns. All of these costumes do not exist without cultural values. Hence, reading these stories, children are driven to associate with cultures of the figures of the story. In relation to the hybridity, this constitutes a moment for children to commence their interest to other culture. Since the children commonly value the heroes or heroines in the story, they become attached to their characters' performance. They even identify themselves with the heroes including their attributes. The identification with the characters of the story may be headed for the preference to its culture which then possibly establishes a dialectical interaction with Indonesian culture.

The subject matters of the story implies that children are introduced to the new knowledge of culture by objects and topics which is not as one of their cultural issues. In connection with cultural hybridity, this could be a signal that children's story book is the moment when children make their first contact with other culture and shape their definition of their cultural identity. More readings mean more exposures. The intense interaction with foreign children's story book within a frame of globalization leads them to the introduction to a new culture which might be unlike to their own. At this point, children unconsciously experience a sort of dialectic cultural contacts which influence their response to their cultural identities. They can accept, refuse, adapt, combine and develop certain identities depending upon their exposures. It is related to the notion that hybridity always implies an unsettling of identities. It is precisely the encounters at the border where self and other, the local and the global, Asian and Western meet [9].

### 1) *Introducing Cultural Hybridity*

According to Dave and Walsh, one of the wonderful things about stories is that they have meaning for everyone, both children and adults, who hears or reads them, no matter what his or her age [10]. A book as children's story book carries out a certain meaning in accordance with the reception of its readers. In the case of the child readers, the meaning is conveyed through a special presentation. It seems that the package of the books is designed colorful and light. The language used seems to be different from that of adult readers. The choice of words is certainly appropriated for children as the intended readers, the main consumers. These aspects come to the child readers in one package, not

to mention its variety of subjects. The stories emerge in all of different varieties presenting a bit of drama, humor or exaggeration for spice, and fun attached with a particular moral lesson. More importantly, such dimensions are not free of cultural values. Although it seems to be only the children's book, it remains part of grand scheme of the culture from which it rises. Its existence reflects perspectives or tendencies living in the culture of the author or the publisher. The ways of life and traditions together with communicative expressions become parts of the stories. At this point, the children's book defines its contribution to the shaping of culture and its role in the cultural contact as well.

The interaction of the children with books may lead to the early interaction of two or more cultures; the way to cultural hybridity. Dave and Walsh further synthesized that whether they are children's stories or adult novels thousands of words long, stories have great power in defining and shaping culture (10). Within this proposition, assuming that each child's book brings about cultural values, the reading of the books can be an access to a certain culture. This implies that children reading the story books will come across with cultural values within which the story takes place.

The identification of these four aspects reveals the possibility of Indonesian children in their purity to have contact with foreign cultural values at the early phase of their life. This seems to be relevant with Kraidy's synthesis, in terms of hybridity, affirming, "the boundaries between "domestic" and "foreign" cultural influences are not always clearly demarcated " (5) . This refers to the fact that the children have engaged themselves with foreign culture facilitated by the story books. If the story manifests a certain foreign culture, children will then meet the culture in their reading. Such cultural encounter at least chips in the notion of mixed or fusion. It takes back to the Bahktian's argument of organic hybridization which refers to the unintentional, unconscious, everyday mixing and fusing of diverse cultural elements, as for example in language. It is further explained, as quoted by Stockhammer [11], that this can have culturally productive effects, because unconscious hybrids 'are pregnant with potential for new world views, with new internal forms for perceiving the world in words'. In simple words, the intensive interaction of children with story books may result in the unconscious appropriation of foreign culture as if it was their own. It is advocated Stockhammer's view that cultures evolve historically through unreflective borrowings, mimetic appropriations, exchanges and inventions'[11]. The other tendency links with the idea of intentional hybridity which refers the result of using conscious contrasts and oppositions in an antithetical movement where, within a single discourse, one voice is able to unmask authoritative discourse [11]. It is also explained that with intentional hybridity two points of view are not mixed, but set against each other dialogically. In other words, the interaction of Indonesian children with story books which are dominated by foreign stories seems to open the path to the larger form of culture dialogical relation and negotiation including the shaping of hybridity.

## 2) *Shaping Early Intercultural Sensitivity*

In the frame of early intercultural sensitivity, the four elements presented in the children's story books apparently lays important foundation for children as young learners to solve problems, think through topics and learn to communicate early [12]. The young learners truly become empowered to learn as they begin to interact with the story [12]. They are encouraged by the cultural related contents of the story which drive the children to recognize words, objects, characters and places as well as issues of distinct culture. Hence, it leads them to the flexibility in adapting to new cultures and persons[13]. It transforms as early phase for sensitizing intercultural attitude. This attitude is crucial to learn foreign language, English, for instance. Familiarity to products of other cultures bridges the willingness to subject to rules of other language. The children's story books, therefore, can be defined to provide young children as learners with an access to literature and culture that they may not otherwise experience[14]. It serves a natural platform for oral and written language acquisition. Then, since they are rich of cultural knowledge and information, the children's story books may function as a simple textbook which constitutes important mediators in transferring intercultural information to foreign language learners and they also act as an authentic source to improve the learners' knowledge of different aspects of the target language[15][16]. This confirms that the level of proficiency attained in a foreign language at particular stage is also influenced by the intensity of exposure that the learner has to the target language in its culturally natural settings [17].

In spite of its imaginary world, Maru further synthesized that a story book presents a full and colorful setting in which character(s) from variety of social, cultural and regional backgrounds [17]. Within this context, young foreign language learners discover the way of how people of different culture speak and behave in different settings. In addition, children's story books regarded as authentic resources are valuable for children; in terms of providing a motivating, meaningful context for language learning, since children are naturally drawn to stories, and presenting natural language, language at its finest, as well as fostering vocabulary development in context [18]. To summarize, the children's story books for foreign language learners are helpful not only to introduce and adapt new cultures but also to facilitate them to the intercultural sensitivity which are pivotal for language acquisition. This can be the path to be interculturally competent which means knowing about culture, social attributes, and thought patterns of different groups of people from other countries along with their languages and customs [15]. The exposure with children's story books supplies opportunities to foreign young learners with chances to develop educational experience[19] and intercultural sensitivity as well.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The presence of the children's story books in the market synthesizes that Indonesian children have opportunities to make their contact with foreign culture in their young age.

Considering that the stories are mostly filled with the cultural values of their producers, it raises the possibility that this early cultural encounter contribute to the introduction of cultural hybridity and intercultural sensitivity. Both aspects are detected by the vocabularies used, settings, character attributes and subject matters. These aspects are then helpful for the childrens as foreign language young learners to develop cultural knowledge which is necessary for language competence. It emphasizes that children's story books are valuable sources of cultural knowledge and, later, platforms for early foreign language learning.

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