

Cultural Identity, Belonging, and Narrative Voice in *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*: A Multimodal Analysis

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국문초록

본 연구는 줄리언 무어(Julianne Moore)의 그림책 *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*를 대상으로 문화적 정체성, 소속감, 그리고 서사적 목소리가 어떻게 구성되는지를 분석하였다. 아동의 시점으로 서술되는 이 작품은 특히 외국인 어머니-자녀 관계를 시각적으로 다양하게 재현함으로써 문화적 차이와 일상적 다문화 경험을 효과적으로 보여준다. 이 연구는 멀티모달성 서사 분석을 통해 어떻게 내용의 언어적 표현과 타이포그래피, 시각적인 특성들이 상호작용하며 의미를 구성하는지를 분석하였는데, 그림책에서의 목소리는 언어적 서술만을 통해 실현되는 것이 아니라, 다양한 기호 양식들의 조합을 통해 구성된다는 것을 확인해주었다. 또한 문화적 차이를 갈등 중심이 아닌 일상적인 가족 상호작용을 통해 재현함으로써, 독자의 공감과 다양한 해석을 유도하였다. 본 연구는 멀티모달성을 풍부하게 갖춘 영어 그림책의 활용이 외국어 학습 과정에서, 시각적 문해력과 문화적 다양성에 대한 이해를 증진하는 효과적인 자료가 될 수 있다는 것을 보여준다.

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1 Introduction

Picturebooks have increasingly been recognized as complex multimodal texts that extend beyond early childhood literacy. Constructed through the interaction of linguistic, visual, spatial, and typographic resources, picturebooks require readers to integrate multiple semiotic modes in order to construct meaning. Within this context, picturebooks that address cultural identity and belonging offer rich opportunities for examining how meaning is negotiated through everyday experiences rather than overt explanation.

This study aims to introduce *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*, an English-language picturebook written by the well-known actor Julianne Moore and illustrated by the professional illustrator Meilo So. It is an English picturebook about multicultural family experiences and children's perspectives on having a mother from another country. Published in 2013, this book presents the themes of motherhood and cultural belonging in an insightful way. Drawing on the historical context of the United States as a nation shaped by immigration, the narrative reflects the experiences of earlier generations of mothers who lived as foreigners, as well as those of families who later immigrated from Europe, Africa, and more recently Asia.

2 Literature Review

1) English Picturebooks

English picturebooks that combine visually rich illustrations with engaging texts and address contemporary themes have increasingly been recognized as effective educational resources for developing English literacy (Choi, 2014; Park, 2016; Sipe, 2011). Reading and writing skills, as core components of literacy, are particularly important for the acquisition and application of new information. Picturebooks also require readers to engage in integrative meaning-making practices that extend beyond linear reading. This multimodal complexity has positioned picturebooks as valuable objects of analysis in studies of visual literacy and discourse-level comprehension.

For generations exposed from an early age to diverse visual media through computers, the internet, and platforms such as YouTube, English picturebooks can play a significant role in fostering visual literacy alongside linguistic competence. The influence of English continues to expand both in a globalized world and in digital environments. Given that more than 60 percent of online information is produced in English and that English functions as a primary means of communication among speakers in over 200 countries, efforts to enhance English literacy are essential for accessing and effectively using global information.

2) Multimodality and Meaning-Making in Picturebooks

Multimodal discourse analysis perceives meaning as emerging from the interaction of multiple semiotic resources, rather than being conveyed solely through language. Along the same lines, recent scholarship has increasingly conceptualized picturebooks as multimodal texts in which meaning is constructed through the interaction of linguistic, visual, spatial, and typographic resources (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini, 2010, Sipe 2011). Serafini (2010) argues that visual and spatial features—including layout, framing, and the use of white space—are central to how readers construct interpretations of a character’s perspective and stance. According to Sipe (2011), “words and pictures do not have just one type of relationship with each other, but many” (p. 238). He further explains that these relationships “are not merely present independently, but are related to each other in complex ways, in the same way a biosystem consists of a complicate set of relationships” (p. 240). Rather than serving merely as illustrations of written language, images, layout, color, and typography function as semiotic modes that shape interpretation and guide readers’ attention.

3) Cultural Identity, Belonging, and Narrative Voice

From a sociocultural perspective, identity and belonging are understood as relational and discursively constructed from a sociocultural perspective (Norton 2013; Norton & Toohey, 2011).

Norton (2013) claims that language use is fundamentally related to identity, with learners constructing and negotiating recognition and legitimacy through their engagement in discourse. Multicultural picturebooks provide accessible yet conceptually rich contexts for exploring these processes, particularly in English education settings. By presenting cultural difference through everyday experiences rather than abstract explanations, such texts support empathetic engagement and critical literacy (Kuo, 2014). Picturebooks that foreground multiple voices and visual representations of diversity, thus, offer valuable resources for examining how learners interpret identity, difference, and recognition through language and image.

Narrative voice in picturebooks is not confined to verbal narration but is distributed across text and image (Nodelman, 2008). First-person narration, particularly when voiced by children, plays a crucial role in positioning readers affectively and ethically. Voice becomes a means through which identity is negotiated, recognition is sought, and belonging is articulated. Nodelman (2008) highlights that picturebooks often construct meaning indirectly, requiring readers to infer perspective and stance from what is shown as well as what is said. In multimodal texts, voice is constructed through evaluative language, visual focalization, spatial positioning, and typographic variation, allowing readers to engage with perspectives that may differ from their own.

3 Methodology

1) Research Design

This study employed a qualitative multimodal discourse analytic approach to examine how cultural identity, belonging, and narrative voice were constructed in *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*. Multimodal discourse analysis allowed for systematic examination of how meaning was produced through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes, including language, image, typography, and spatial design. This approach was particularly suited to picturebook analysis, where verbal and visual elements operated interdependently rather than hierarchically. This study contributes to English education research by illustrating how multimodal picturebooks can function as sophisticated semiotic resources for discourse-level literacy and empathetic engagement.

2) Analytical Data

This study examined the English picturebook *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*, written by Julianne Moore and illustrated by Meilo So. Published in the United Kingdom in 2013, the book was written by Moore in reflection on her own mother, who immigrated to the United States as a foreigner and raised her there. Julianne Moore is an American film actor who has been actively working since her debut in 1991. She is also the author

of several children's books centered on the character Freckleface Strawberry. Moore is introduced simply as a "New York Times bestselling author" on the cover of the book, a description that foregrounds her literary credentials rather than her celebrity status. A reader encountering the picturebook without prior knowledge of the author may not recognize her primarily as an actor until consulting the back-cover biography. This positioning reflects Moore's established professionalism within children's literature. The illustrations, created by Meilo So—who was born in Hong Kong and currently lives in the United Kingdom while raising her daughter as a foreign-born mother—visually embody lived experiences of migration and motherhood.

Text and image present the theme of the "foreign" mother in a manner that is both affectively grounded and pedagogically meaningful. While the narrative draws on the experiences of earlier generations of immigrant mothers in the United States, it also resonates with families who later migrated from Europe, Africa, and Asia. Beyond its American context, the picturebook speaks to broader questions of multicultural family education and offers insight into the evolving future of increasingly diverse societies, including contemporary Korea.

3) Analytic Framework

The analysis attended to the interaction of three primary semiotic resources:

(1) linguistic features, including first-person narration and evaluative expressions;

(2) visual representation, such as color use, character depiction, and facial expression; and

(3) typographic variation, which signals shifts in voice and language.

Particular attention was paid to how visual salience and contrast guide readers' attention and shape interpretive sequencing, as well as how typography functions as a marker of voice differentiation. Through this framework, narrative voice was treated not as a purely linguistic construct but as a multimodal achievement emerging from the orchestration of multiple semiotic resources.

Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive analysis of all scenes, this study prioritized close reading of selected scenes that foreground issues of cultural difference, recognition, and belonging. By analyzing selected scenes, the study aimed to demonstrate how voice was realized not solely through verbal text but through the interaction of typography, visual salience, and image-text relations. These selected scenes provided a range of multimodal configurations involving mother-child interactions, public visibility, and everyday social contexts.

4 Discussion

My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me portrayed the emotional lives of parents who were treated as outsiders due to differences

in language, physical appearance, and everyday practices, along with the children raised within such families. Along the same line, the narrative was a children's voice reflecting on cultural difference, acceptance, pride, embarrassment, and love within families where mothers came from other countries. It revealed how the picturebook transformed experiences of otherness and discrimination into a universally resonant and emotionally accessible narrative, emphasizing difference not as deficiency but as variation.

1) Cultural Identity by (In)visibility

One of the most salient features of the picturebook, *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*, was its use of visual contrast to guide readers' attention and shape interpretive sequencing. Across multiple scenes, mother-child pairs positioned in the foreground were rendered in vivid color and detail, while surrounding figures were depicted in muted gray or simplified lines.

The image shown in the <picture 1> was the most symbolic scene throughout the book. An East Asian mother and her daughter remove their shoes and bow in greeting. Beside them, a boy with three kiss marks on his face stands as his mother gently touches his head, while two children smile nearby. In contrast, background figures are rendered in muted gray tones, appearing almost shadow-like.



<Picture 1> Scene 3

Scene 3 Text:

She makes me do stuff foreign ways. She says that “it’s polite.”

I HAVE to tell her all the time that she’s not always right.

“I don’t HAVE to take my shoes off.”

“I WON’T BRING SOUP TO SCHOOL.”

“Other kids don’t kiss three times, Mom,

I MEAN it, it’s not cool!”

The image of <picture 2> depicts a tall mother wearing an elaborately decorated turban and a vivid scarf, ascending steps while holding her daughter’s hand. Facing them, a visually similar mother-child pair looks on, rendered in muted gray tones, echoing the treatment of background figures in the previous scene.



<Picture 2> Scene 4

Scene 4 Text:

Some people say we look alike.

Others wonder: “What’s HER name?”

I get so upset when they say,

“Why don’t you look the same?”

This contrast established visual salience that draws attention to difference, yet the narrative context prevented this difference from being framed negatively. Instead, the visual prominence of mothers who wear distinctive clothing or display culturally marked practices positioned them as visible without being marginalized, allowing readers to engage with difference as noticeable but normalized.

2) Cultural Belonging by Mother–Child Relationship

Beyond its linguistic features, *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not*

to *Me* engaged with complex and philosophical themes such as racial diversity and the awareness of minoritized identity.



<Picture 3> Scene 7

The image of the above <picture 3> presents a kitchen scene shared by three generations: grandmother, mother, and daughter. While the grandmother, neatly dressed in an apron, chops ingredients at a cutting board, the mother smiles as green noodles emerge from a pasta machine, and the young girl pinches her nose in response to the unfamiliar smell.

Scene 7 Text:

We eat funny kinds of foods sometimes.

I love it.

It takes GROSS.

My Grandma made it, she taught my Mom.

I PUT IT ON MY TOAST!



<Picture 4> Scene 6

The image of the above <picture 4> depicts a soccer game featuring the boy who previously received three kiss marks. His mother cheers for him in an unconventional manner, drawing the attention of the surrounding children.

Scene 6 Text:

She calls me foreign nicknames,

WEE ONE,

liebchen,

bebe.

I tell her all the time

“Those words sound so crazy!”

Several scenes illustrated how cultural difference became visible in public spaces and how children negotiated their relationship toward “foreign” mothers. The kitchen scene revealing three generations highlighted cultural transmission through everyday

practices, such as food preparation. The unusual green dough, handled lovingly by the mother but viewed with hesitation by the child, became visual metaphor for cultural inheritance—both familiar and strange, intimate and negotiable. Similarly, in the soccer game scene, the mother’s use of a foreign language to cheer for her son contrasted with the focused expressions of the other children, visually staging the tension between private affection and public exposure. The repetition of the word “Mom” in multiple languages—including Mutti, Mamma, Mummy, Maman, and non-English terms such as eomma and okāsan—functioned as more than a display of linguistic diversity in the book. It signaled the recognition that the concept of “mother” carried meanings that extend beyond language itself, encompassing affective, cultural, and relational dimensions.

3) Narrative Voices by Typography

Another distinctive feature of *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me* was the varied use of typography throughout the picturebook. Different fonts were employed to signal shifts in speaker and language, visually representing changes in voice and linguistic background. As a medium that combines text and image, the picturebook thus conveyed both linguistic meaning and emotional resonance through its typographic as well as visual design.

She took a BOAT to get here!

SHE DIDN'T KNOW THE WAY.

She came here with my Opa.
It took them days and days.

She's different than the other Moms
Because she's not from here.
There's lots of stuff about her
That sometimes seems so weird.



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<Picture 5> Scene 2

The image of the above <picture 5> depicts the interior of a home, where framed photographs show scenes of arrival by boat, a man and a young girl, and a married couple. In the kitchen, a young boy is shown drying his hair while standing beside his mother, situating personal memory within a domestic space.

SHE TALKS A LITTLE FUNNY.

She has an accent: it is French!

*She had to learn a new language here
Because her words weren't making sense.*

She has some funny sayings
That are hard to understand,
Unless you are from Scotland,
Italy, or Japan.



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<Picture 6> Scene 5

The image of the above <picture 6> shows children inside a building that appears to be a Saturday school, while outside a group of mothers wearing diverse clothing styles stand together in conversation. Typography further contributed to the construction of narrative voice by signaling shifts in speaker and language. The use of varied fonts visually represented multiple voices and linguistic backgrounds, reinforcing the plurality of perspectives embedded in the text.

These multimodal configurations constructed narrative voice as

relational rather than individual. Voice emerged through gestures, gaze, spatial positioning, and typographic variation, rather than through explicit commentary on difference or discrimination. This indirect approach allowed the picturebook to address complex social meanings inviting readers to participate in meaning-making through inference and affective engagement.

5 Conclusion

This study has examined how cultural identity and belonging are constructed through multimodal resources in *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*. Through analysis of selected scenes, the study demonstrated that voice in the picturebook emerged not solely from linguistic narration but from the interaction of typography, visual salience, and image-text relations. The child's perspective, combined with diverse visual representations of mothers and families, framed cultural difference as a lived, relational experience rather than a problem to be resolved. By depicting moments of visibility, embarrassment, affection, and everyday negotiation, the picturebook invited readers to engage empathetically with perspectives shaped by migration and multicultural life.

Rather than simplifying social experience, *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me* demonstrates how picturebooks can function as sophisticated semiotic resources that support advanced

literacy practices and critical reflection. This book offers conceptually rich yet linguistically accessible opportunities for EFL learners to engage with issues of identity, belonging, and cultural diversity.

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ABSTRACT

Cultural Identity, Belonging, and Narrative Voice in *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*: A Multimodal Analysis

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This study examines how cultural identity, belonging, and narrative voice are constructed through multimodal resources in Julianne Moore's picturebook *My Mom Is a Foreigner, But Not to Me*. Written from a child's perspective and illustrated through visually diverse representations of mother-child relationships, the book foregrounds experiences of difference, recognition, and everyday multicultural life. Adopting a qualitative multimodal discourse analytic approach, this study analyzes how linguistic features, typography, and visual salience interact to construct meaning across the selected scenes. The analysis demonstrates that voice in the picturebook is not realized solely through verbal narration but emerges through the orchestration of multiple semiotic modes. By representing cultural difference through ordinary family interactions rather than overt conflict, the picturebook invites empathetic engagement and discourse-level interpretation. This study contributes to English education research

by illustrating how multimodal picturebooks can function as sophisticated semiotic resources for developing literacy, visual awareness, and understanding of cultural diversity.

| **Key Words** | Multimodality, Cultural identity and belonging,
Diversity