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## The Use of Children's Literature in ELT in Brazil

**Dilys Karen Rees, Danilo Neves Pereira and Layssa Gabriela A. e Silva Mello**

### Abstract

This article presents activities in which texts from children's literature are used in English language teaching (ELT) in Brazil. These activities were used in classes of differing age levels and in two different types of school setting. Critical interculturality and languaculture are first presented as the theoretical basis of our pedagogical practice. Following the theory, three different activities using texts from children's literature are then presented, demonstrating how texts such as these can aid in the teaching of an additional language. The first two activities were undertaken in a public school with young learners, the third activity was implemented in a language centre with adult students. Through these activities, the students were able to increase their grammatical and lexical knowledge of the English language as well as to interact with the languacultures of the texts. In this way, the English language classroom becomes an interculturally critical space in which learners can recreate their understanding of the target language.

**Keywords:** ELT classroom, critical interculturality, languaculture, children's literature

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### **Introduction**

English is taught in many contexts and settings in Brazil. It is the foreign language that is usually taught in the public schools and it is the language most sought after in language centres (British Council, 2014; Jareta, 2015). In public schools, the teaching of English encounters many problems such as large classrooms, issues with student behaviour and discipline, and the shortage of time within the curriculum dedicated to the teaching and learning of foreign languages (Rees & Urzêda-Freitas, 2015). In language centres, English is often taught strictly following a textbook, centering mostly on pedagogical language and activities that focus on the development and enhancing of students' communicative skills. In this milieu, we are part of a research group at the Federal University of Goiás in Brazil; our team is composed of Dr. Dilys Karen Rees and researchers Danilo Neves Pereira and Layssa Gabriela A. e Silva Mello. Our main objective in this group is to think about new paths for the teaching of English and how intercultural learning intersects with literature, post-colonial education, and foreign language education.

The basis of our work in the classroom is that of critical interculturality, which we define as a space of encounter and of re-creation which opens up new alternatives, categories, and horizons. In other words, our praxis as foreign language teachers adds to, but also challenges, the current reality of Brazilian education as we move forward into an intercultural approach to the teaching of English and foreign language literatures in Brazil. Thus, at the core of our praxis lies the concept of critical interculturality and the need to help our students become active readers who are able to read and respond to not only the foreign language and its cultures, but also to the literary text itself.

Our definition of critical interculturality stems from the discussion of the metaphor of the third place in Kramsch (1993) along with the discussion of the third place in relation to the

literary text in Matos (2012, p. 19). According to Kramersch (1993), learning and studying a foreign language and literature is always an intercultural encounter between the cultures and languages of the students and the cultures and languages expressed in the foreign language text. Kramersch (1993, p. 236), therefore, focuses on the spaces, the 'interstices' created between the cultures and languages or linguistic varieties the students know and the new cultures and languages and varieties they are coming into contact with in the study of the target language and literature.

Going deeper into this discussion, Matos (2012, p. 20) considers specifically the fictional space of the literary text, '[t]he fictional space of reading is taken as a useful entry-point into the problematic of cultural otherness'. In our point of view, cultural otherness includes the new language items that the student comes into contact with in the literary text as well as any specific cultural norms that are a part of the fictional world created in the text. We use the term languaculture as defined by Risager (2007) to take into account the personal individual aspect of all language acquisition. In Risager's words, '...languaculture is both structurally constrained and socially and personally variable. It is thus a bridge between the structure of the language and the socially constituted personal idiolect' (2007, p. 172). Languaculture has three dimensions: the semantic-pragmatic dimension, the poetic dimension and the identity dimension (Risager, 2007, p. 172). The first refers to the rules of the language and the bridge to the interlocutor who, in certain social situations, may choose how to use these rules. For example, within the rules of politeness, the interlocutor has a range of choices, from 'If it's not too much bother, would you mind opening the window?' to 'Please open the window'. The second refers to the capacity that language has for rhyme, rhythm and figurative language. The third refers to choices interlocutors may make to establish identity, such as choosing a certain variety of language and eschewing another. Thus, the student readers have their languaculture and as they read and interact with literary texts, they encounter other languacultures in the target language. Going back to Kramersch's findings (1993), the reading of a literary text is a vivid construction of a third space between the languacultures of readers and text.

Also crucial to this discussion is Iser's contribution to a reader-response approach to the teaching of literature at large. Iser (1978) reflects critically on the assumptions that the reader simply 'receives' a literary text out of which they have to make sense. According to Iser (1978), the reader is responsible for re-creating the literary text as literature is not a fixed stabilized, ever-the-same, artistic monument: the literary text can only be realized in its fullest capacity once it is read by a reader. The reader must therefore encounter the literary text, make sense of it based on their own personal past experiences, and then understand the literary text so that what is now understood can help redesign entirely what was known prior to the reading of the text. In a way, we believe that Iser's ideas on the reading process can establish a very fruitful dialogue with Kramsch's concept of third place and our views of teaching English and foreign language literatures interculturally as the reading process necessarily entails the encounter between reader and text and between student and foreign language culture.

With regard to how we define 'children's literature', we acknowledge the current ongoing discussions around the term and we point out that we agree with Schneider (2016, p. 22), who states that '[c]hildren's literature is created for and read by children, adolescents, and adults. Children's literature is high art, extraordinary writing, and everything in-between'. To lend cohesion to this article, we will be discussing three classroom experiences with children's literature in English language education in Brazil, in line with the theory outlined above. We chose to avoid the terms English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) because we understand that frequently students are learning English as an additional language with which they can navigate the world. The term ELT is more practical because it does not assume that our students will use English as a foreign language only, that is, only in Brazil as a language that is a pedagogic subject or used on the Web. Neither do we assume that they are learning English as a second language having only one language in their linguistic repertoire.

This work on the use of children's literature is part of our ongoing research on the different uses of literary texts in the English language classroom. Two of these experiences are with young learners in a public school and the third is with students in a language centre. The

setting and the students in each experience will be described in greater detail (using pseudonyms throughout) in the sections that follow.

Using literature in the language classroom is considered to be a challenge by many teachers. We begin by presenting a classroom experience in which we use a poem in order to encourage our students to develop their writing skills. Then we go on to discuss a classroom activity using a short story to help our students improve both their speaking abilities as well as their critical thinking skills. Finally, we present an activity carried out at a Language Centre in a public university in Brazil using a novel in order to foster intercultural communication. All of the experiences shared in this article should give teachers and researchers alike some insights into the teaching of literature in the language classroom.

### **Reading and Writing Poetry: An Experience with Young Learners**

For the first exercise, an illustrated book by the American author Shel Silverstein was chosen to be used in a classroom activity with 6<sup>th</sup> graders in a Brazilian public school. The group was formed by 20 students who were mostly 11 years old. Most of the formal learning process of a foreign language starts at this grade in Brazilian education, so it is only natural that they speak Portuguese in class very often and know very little of the target language. Even though they are distracted and talk a great deal, they always do the activities proposed by the teacher and generally show interest in learning new languages.

The book *Where the Sidewalk Ends* was first published in 1974, and since then, it has been considered a classic poetry collection which is both funny and profound. Therefore, we chose five of Shel Silverstein's poems because we found them adequate for our students' needs and age. We hoped to teach new vocabulary and encourage students to use the dictionary and then produce their own poems inspired by the ones they had already read.

As teachers of English in Brazil, we have realized that all too often students do not know how to use the dictionary. Frequently, while reading in a foreign language, our students find words they do not know and upon looking up their meanings on the dictionary, they fixate on the first definition that they can find, thus forcing their own meanings into the text, often

misinterpreting. However, as students start learning a foreign language in 6th grade in Brazil we understand that it is part of our job to help them learn how to use a dictionary correctly. Therefore, prior to reading in the classroom, the teacher taught her students how to use a dictionary and how to find the right definition for the right contexts. Five poems were selected for use in class. The language in the poems is very simple and they are all illustrated which also helps comprehension.

One of the poems used in this class was 'The Planet of Mars' (Silverstein, 2004, p. 93):

THE PLANET OF MARS

On the planet of Mars

They have clothes just like ours,

And they have the same shoes and same laces,

And they have the same charms and same graces,

And they have the same heads and same faces...

But not in the

Very same

Places.

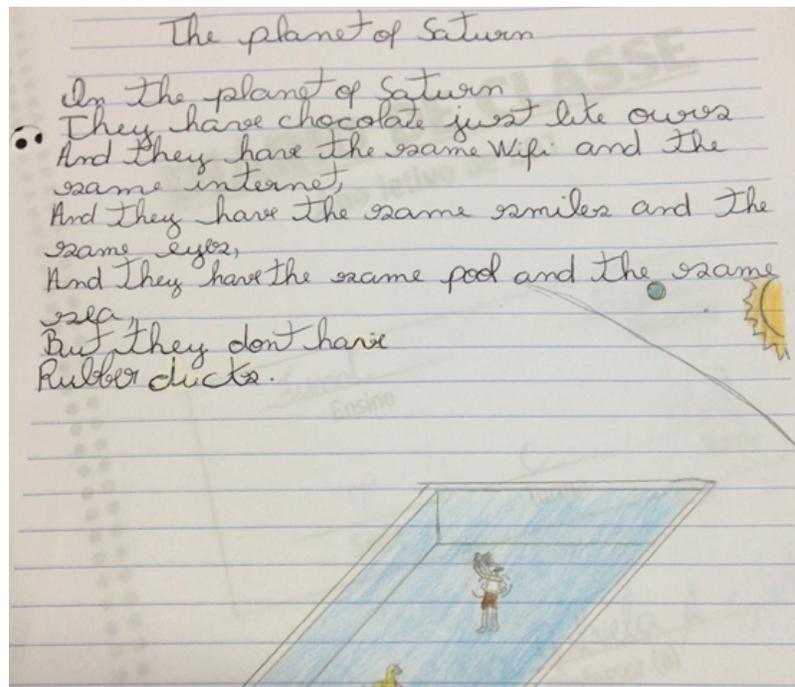
The illustration that accompanies this poem is of a man whose head is attached where his bottom would normally be. The figure is ludicrous especially as the man has a big smile on his face. Younger readers tend to enjoy this type of illustration and find it very amusing.

For this exercise, each student was randomly given one of the five poems and asked to find three classmates who had been given the same poem. These students laughed and talked as they did this. In groups, they had five minutes to discuss the poem. If they did not know a word, they were allowed to use the dictionary. All students' parents are advised by the teacher to buy the Oxford bilingual dictionary for Brazilian learners of English and the learners bring the dictionary to all English classes because they are encouraged to use it while doing the activities. However, some of the students forgot to bring their dictionaries and asked to use their smartphones instead, which was allowed. The teacher went around the classroom helping the

students look up unknown words in the dictionary and aiding them in figuring out which dictionary definitions best fit the text. Next, they shared what they understood of the respective poems with the other groups. Due to their low level of proficiency in English, the discussions were carried out in Portuguese. The students were also asked to discuss their ideas about the illustrations that accompanied each poem. The students found the illustrations funny and many said that the drawings in the book helped them to understand the poem better.

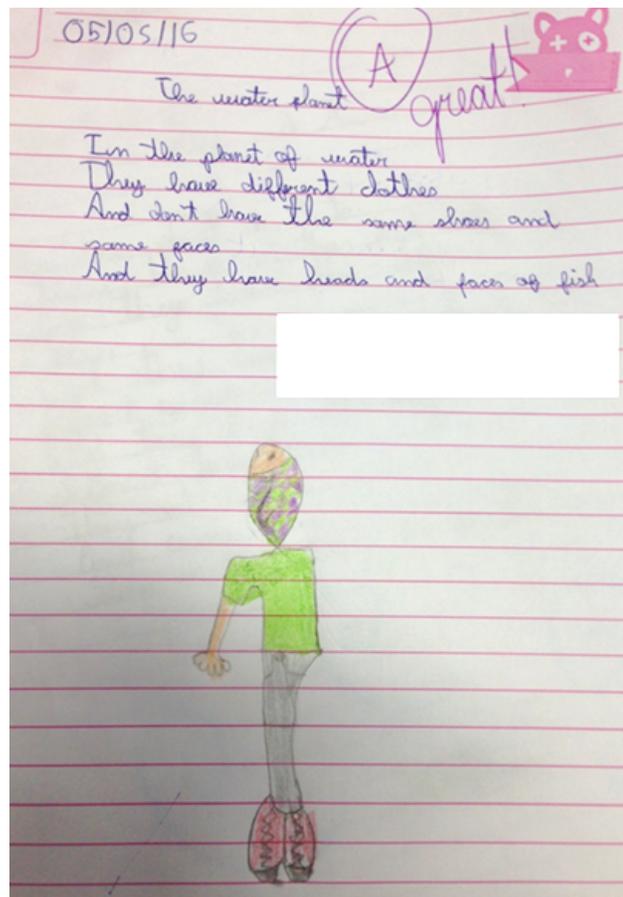
Finally, the students were asked to create poems based on the ones they had read. They also had to illustrate them. At first, the students were reluctant to do the activity because they were afraid of writing in English. However, despite their initial refusal, they ended up getting involved and producing their own poems. They would often call the teacher over to help them find the correct words to use. We selected two poems by the students that were based on their reading of Shel Silverstein's poem 'The planet of Mars':

Figure 1. Group production – young learners from a Brazilian public school



In this poem, the students state, 'And they don't have rubber ducks'. This was a puzzle for the readers in the class until the group explained that one of the students fondly remembered this object from his childhood. It was the student's grandmother who gave it to him and he used to play with it. Because of this sentimental memory, the duck became part of their poem. Thus this reader responded in a very personal way and added the duck not only to the poem, but to the drawing of a pool which has a child and a rubber duck.

Figure 2. Group production – young learners from a Brazilian public school



At this level, the learners are only familiar with the present simple tense. As can be seen in both group productions, they were able to create well-formed sentences using the affirmative and negative form in the present simple as in the sentence, 'In the planet of water/They have

different clothes'. Our students were able to read a text in English, engage in an intercultural dialogue both with the written text and the drawings by Shel Silverstein and create their own languaculture in order to properly respond to the text and task at hand (see Risager, 2007). The production of a literary text enabled our students to appropriate the English language for themselves (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996), and, in this way, the English language migrated from being a school subject that has to be studied and mastered to being a language of personal expression and response.

**'The Dishonest Friend' retold by W. H. D. Rouse: A Dialogue between the Students'**  
**Languaculture and the Text's Languaculture**

The short story 'The Dishonest Friend' was taken from the book *The Giant Crab and Other Tales from Old India*, first published in 1897 by the British headmaster and classical scholar William Henry Denham Rouse, born in Calcutta in 1863. Rouse was also well-known for his retelling of ancient tales for children.

It is relevant to mention that Brazil has been going through a difficult moment in politics since August 2016 when President Dilma Rousseff was impeached and the vice president, Michel Temer, became President. He has since been accused of participating in corruption scandals involving money laundering and racketeering. It is considered to be one of the biggest corruption scandals in Brazilian history. Due to this scenario, topics such as justice and honesty are extremely pertinent for use in the classroom. Below we present our experience using this text in 2107 with a group of twenty 8<sup>th</sup> grade students of a Brazilian public school. These students were 13- and 14-year-olds. The group was heterogeneous, with some learners having achieved an intermediate level of proficiency, but with others at a basic level of proficiency. The students at this level speak more English in class than in previous years but sometimes the students or even the teacher use Portuguese in order to be understood.

The short tale 'The Dishonest Friend' presents two friends in India, one of whom takes a trip and leaves his friend in charge of his plough while he is away. The friend sells the plough and keeps the money. On returning from his trip and asking for the plough, the first friend is

told that it has been eaten by a rat. The cheated friend decides to bide his time. The next day, he takes the son of the friend that lied about the plough out for a walk. On returning, the child is not to be seen and the father is told that a hawk carried off the child. In order to solve this conflict, they go to court. The judge, hearing the story, understands what has happened and resolves the conflict. He tells the father: ‘ “If you find the plough that was entrusted to you, perhaps your son may be found too.” The man was much annoyed at being found out, but, willy nilly, he had to give the plough back. Then his son was brought back safe to him again. And he began to see that honesty is the best policy’ (Rouse, 1897, p. 33).

Figure 3. Extracted from ‘The Dishonest Friend’

(Rouse 1997, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36039/36039-h/36039-h.htm#ch6>)



As a warmer, pictures were projected of three ploughs. The first image was that of a manual plough that would be pushed by a person. When the first image was shown, the students did not recognize it and this caused some discussion and speculation as to what the object was. Next, an image of a horse-drawn plough was projected which the students recognized immediately. A discussion of when this plough was used and if there were places in Brazil that still used it ensued. Finally, an image of a tractor plough was shown and the students immediately recognized it and mentioned the tractors and mechanization that exists on the farms around our city (our region in Brazil is agricultural with soybeans, corn, and other crops). This data was collected via field notes.

Next, a picture of a judge was projected. The students were asked if they had ever been to court and if they knew how to address a judge. All of the answers given were in Portuguese, 'Vossa Excelência', but they did not know what to say in English. The students were asked to pay attention to this information in the story. In addition, the students were asked to mention words that could characterize the concept of a justice system and they stated, 'It is something right, correct' (Marc); 'It is related to the law' (Mary). Then they were asked to mention words to characterize the Brazilian justice system and they stated, 'It is slow' (Vic); 'The power is in the hands of a few' (Duda); 'Corruption' (Ibrahimovic). Even though all of the students had never been to court, their answers to this activity show their negative perception about the Brazilian justice system. When we asked them why they used all these negative adjectives, they said, 'Because Brazil is a mess' (Hugo), 'It takes a long way [*sic*] to be punished and in most of the cases, people are not punished' (Julie).

The students were then asked to sit in a circle, and each of them read a part of the story out loud with regular stops to check comprehension and answer questions. After reading the story, the students were asked their opinion of the text. One student mentioned, 'I liked the story because it tells the importance of being honest' (Julie); another said, 'I liked it because I learned some expressions that I didn't know and I learned that sometimes translating the sentences word by word doesn't make sense' (Brumélia). Only one student stated that he did not like the story. According to him, the end of it should be different, 'It would be much better if at the end, the

big rat appeared in the court and ate everybody' (Ibrahimovic). In his response, Ibrahimovic creates a very humorous ending to the story that subverts the moral tone of the tale.

Brumélia's answer to this activity showed an expansion of her languaculture as she began to realize that learning English was not a matter of mere linear translation from Portuguese. Her concept of language acquired a new vantage point through the reading and discussion of this tale. In addition, as students discussed the concept of justice with the story of a dishonest friend, their languaculture expands to allow them to imagine the concept of honesty and its recognition as opposed to having a mere cultural outlook of cynicism that stems from stories regarding the Brazilian system. The story read in class, though fictional and simple, nevertheless allows for a new languacultural perspective on justice and honesty.

Finally, the following handout was given to the students and they were asked to sit with a friend and complete the answers and hand them in.

#### **'The Dishonest Friend' – Handout**

1. Summarize the short story.
2. How could you describe an honest person?
3. What pronoun did the man use to refer to the judge in the short story? And in Portuguese, which pronoun would you use to refer to the judge?
4. Why do you think the judge tells this to the man: 'If you find the plough that was entrusted to you, perhaps your son may be found too'?
5. What would you do if you were in the first man's place? Do you think you would take him to court too?
6. Find in the text an English proverb and then translate it.

These questions were used as they were based on the steps of the discussion that had previously taken place in the classroom. Each question referred back to a topic discussed, but also provided the student with the opportunity to add to the ideas brought up in the classroom and respond to the texts individually and creatively.

### *Anne of Green Gables and Anne with an E:*

#### **Interculturality in an Intermediate English Classroom**

*Anne of Green Gables*, by Canadian author Lucy Maud Montgomery was first published in 1908, and has since become a classic of Canadian literature as well as in children's literature worldwide. The novel presents the story of Anne, a young orphan girl who was adopted by Marilla and Matthew Cuthbert, two elderly siblings who live together on a farm on Prince Edward Island. Initially, the Cuthberts were expecting to adopt a young boy to help Matthew on the farm, but instead, they receive a red-haired girl who, slowly but surely, grows on them, making her way into the Cuthbert family until she eventually becomes their adopted daughter. Since its publication, the book has been adapted to many different media, such as movies, cartoons and, most recently, a CBC original series aired on Netflix named *Anne with an E*. This series was written and produced by Moira Walley-Beckett, and the first season was aired in 2017.

In this paper, we argue that children's literature in different media can be used not only to teach grammar and vocabulary, but it can also give the floor to many intercultural discussions on topics such as prejudice, adoption, the concept of family in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and sexism. These issues are constantly being questioned and reflected upon critically in *Anne of Green Gables* and are interesting topics that can be used to promote classroom discussions. In addition to intercultural discussions, we also believe that to work at the intersection of children's literature and their remediations can be beneficial to our students as they are invited to analyze the differences and similarities between these literary texts. Here we will focus on how we used *Anne of Green Gables* (1908/1987) and the CBC/Netflix series *Anne with an E* (2017), to discuss beauty patterns and to teach adjectives to our intermediate level English class.

The intermediate class in which we undertook this project is formed by 15 students whose ages range from 17 to 35. Most of them are university students who have decided to take English language classes in our university's language centre. They have all studied English for at least two years in addition to English classes in the general school system and should be at an intermediate level. Our choice for teaching an excerpt of *Anne of Green Gables* in this group was based on the fact that the language of the text and the level of the discussion afforded by the text were suitable to our students' linguistic level. In other words, we chose to teach a specific part of the novel selected with regard for our students' abilities to read, understand and discuss the literary text. We intend to have our students read the entire work in future classes as we believe that children's literature has much to offer the language class, especially if discussed from an intercultural perspective.

We started the class by asking our students to discuss the question 'How much has your appearance changed since you were a child?' with a partner. This brief discussion worked as a warmer exercise and introduced the topic of that class. Later, we told our students that we were going to watch a snippet taken from the first episode of *Anne with an E*, entitled 'Your Will Shall Decide Your Destiny'. In the scene that we showed our students, Mrs Rachel Lynde, a friend of Marilla's, is first introduced to Anne. During their introduction, Mrs Lynde criticizes Anne's appearance, especially because the girl is 'skinny and homely', and has freckles on her face and hair 'as red as carrots'. Consequently, Anne gets angry at Mrs Lynde and calls her a fat, clumsy, unimaginative, old woman before she runs away in a fit of temper.

After watching the scene, the students were asked to discuss why Anne got so angry and why she had felt so offended by Mrs Lynde's comments. After that, we opened the discussion and promoted a short debate on prejudice, and the prejudice red-haired people suffer in countries where English is spoken. The reason why we proposed this discussion was because red hair is, in fact, considered beautiful in Brazilian culture; therefore, we assumed that our students would be led to thinking about beauty patterns as they dealt with another culture.

Speaking from within an intercultural vantage point, our students faced the Anglo-Canadian culture depicted in the snippet and were also invited to reflect on their own Brazilian

culture, taking their debate to a third ontological space, as proposed by Kramersch (1993), in which their Brazilian culture is faced with the culture of the other. After this discussion, we discussed briefly how beauty is a social construct, never fixed, but ever-changing, depending always from culture to culture.

Following this discussion, we proceeded to ask our students to read the excerpt from the book equivalent to the scene they had just watched. After reading the excerpt and looking up in the dictionary whatever words they did not know, they were asked to find all the adjectives used in the text. Then we continued and explained the function of adjectives and had the students describing the characters they had just read about. They were also asked to write a short anonymous response paragraph to the activity they had just done in case they wished to let us know what their experience with the activity had been like. Four students wrote their responses and turned them in the next day.

Our experience teaching this text was enriching to us as English teachers, as well as to our students, as learners of a foreign language and foreign cultures. As we had first surmised, our students did not understand why Anne would feel upset by having her hair called red. To them, initially, having red hair was something to be proud of because red hair, in their own culture, is considered beautiful and rare. Only through discussion and reading the original excerpt from the book did my students understand that being red-haired and having freckles could be considered ugly in another culture.

According to some of the response paragraphs, the students enjoyed their experience of watching the series and reading the excerpt from the book.

I discovered something about red-haired people that I didn't know, this was very relevant. I also appreciate activities with audiovisual materials, because I think that helps me to learn better. Finally, it was a good exercise. (Marcela)

I really liked the activity because the approach mixed the TV series and the book on the same subjective [*sic*]. Talking about 'appearance standards' is always difficult, but every single time the people choose the same example, like: black people, native

Americans, models, artists, talking about redheads was totally new for me.

(Anonymous)

The snippet from an episode was shown and it was helpful for understanding the context of the scene [...] It was important to know some cultural things like: what is beautiful in one country isn't in another one. (Eleven)

The episode made me interested by [*sic*] the series. (Anonymous)

Based on our students' responses, we feel that not only did they engage in a discussion about prejudice, beauty patterns and Anglo-Canadian culture, but we can also conclude that they enjoyed watching the series before reading the excerpt as it helped them better understand what they were about to read – an unabridged literary text deeply immersed in another culture. Teaching the novel combined with its remediation gave the students a tool with which to make sense of what they were about to read, aiding them in grasping details that would have otherwise have been left unnoticed. Again, revisiting Kramsch's theory of a third space and intercultural foreign language learning, we understand that our students appreciated the fact that we tried to bring together the literary text and the series because it created a unique third space of interpretation, a virtual space created at the intersection of two different types of art, from which they could better understand a cultural situation that was strange and different for them. Thus they were able to expand their cultural horizons through an interculturally critical moment.

Their responses are interesting because they index the benefits of teaching literature alongside other media, in this case the CBC/Netflix series, and the relevance of working with children's literature from a perspective that seeks to connect it to other linguistic and discursive genres.

### **Final Thoughts**

In conclusion, in this article we shared some of our experiences regarding the use of children's literature in ELT and proposed an intercultural approach to the teaching of children's literature.

We started off by presenting our theoretical perspective concerning the teaching and learning of English in Brazil, then delved into the theoretical tenets of our teaching philosophy, thereby including the works of Kramersch (1993), Risager (2017) and Matos (2012). Then we proceeded to share some of our experiences teaching poems by Shel Silverstein, the short story 'The Dishonest Friend' by W. H. D. Rouse, and an excerpt from the children's book *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery.

Through this brief glimpse, we hope to have shown the relevance of children's literature for English language education generally. By having students read children's literature, teachers can help them not only learn about structures of the English language (such as grammar and vocabulary), but also about the work of art itself, the text types (poems, narrative, film), the languaculture expressed in the literary text, and many social issues that are presented in children's literature, such as the questions of honesty and justice. In short, this paper contributes to the ongoing discussion propelled by Matos (2012) on the importance of reading literature interculturally, and Schneider's (2016) discussion on the relevance of children's literature by showing how it can be, and actually is used in Brazil in an ELT educational context.

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