Life Skills and Literary Texts about the First World War

Torunn Synnøve Skjærstad

Abstract

This article addresses how literary texts about the First World War opened spaces for the life skills of critical thinking and empathy in an English language classroom in a lower secondary school in Norway. It reports on parts of a study conducted in a 9th grade English class, where the learners read four texts, prose and poetry – *The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha* (Foreman, 2013), 'The Soldier' (Brooke, 1914/2014), 'Does it Matter?' (Sassoon, 1917/2014) and an excerpt from *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* (Boyne, 2017) – and responded to them in an individual assignment. As its point of departure, this article considers the implementation of the interdisciplinary topic Health and Life Skills, one of three topics introduced in the current Norwegian National Curriculum, the 2020 Knowledge Promotion. It draws on the idea that responding to literary texts about history facilitates critical thinking and expressions of empathy. Judith Langer's theory of building envisionments was employed to describe how the learners engaged with the texts. The findings indicate that the two prose texts proved particularly fruitful to help learners think critically and empathetically about some of the demanding and challenging aspects of life in times of war. To dig deeper and more critically into the literary texts, further teacher involvement and integration of historical information when working with the texts and responses are needed in order to balance historical knowledge and the learners' immediate response to the texts.

Keywords: critical thinking, empathy, English language teaching, First World War poetry, health and life skills, interdisciplinarity, literature about history

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Introduction

This article addresses how literary texts about the First World War opened spaces for life skills in an English subject classroom in a lower secondary school in Norway. It takes its inspiration from the topic Health and Life Skills, which is one of three interdisciplinary topics that were introduced in the current Norwegian National Curriculum, the 2020 Knowledge Promotion (LK20). Because of 'societal health challenges' (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2017), not least the reported mental health issues among children and adolescents (Bru et al., 2017; Stoltenberg, 2015), the topic was introduced to help young people 'learn how to take adequate care of their own lives' (NOU, 2015, p. 27). The understanding of Health and Life Skills expressed in LK20 draws on the international debate and research on life skills in school (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2016).

In the curriculum for English in LK20, it is suggested that dealing with life skills 'takes place in the encounter with texts' (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). There is a widely held recognition that responding to literary texts offers affective affordances as well as providing new and different perspectives on life (Eco et al., 1992; Felski, 2008; Iser, 1978; Langer, 1994, 1998, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). Langer (2011) even suggests that responding to literary texts can 'help us sort out our own lives' (pp. 19–20), and she advocates that literary encounters can foster critical perspectives, empathy and a deeper understanding of oneself and others. Consequently, in this article, the learners' encounters with literary texts are related to the life skills of critical thinking and empathy. Empathy as a construct has not been strictly defined, but here, expressions of empathy are understood as learners caring about characters and relating to and understanding their historical situations (Eisman & Patterson, 2022; Endacott & Brooks, 2013).

This article reports on parts of a study conducted in a 9th grade English classroom. The study spanned a period of five weeks and fourteen English lessons, and the 14-year-old learners engaged with four literary texts: *The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha* (Foreman, 2013), 'The Soldier' (Brooke, 1914/2014), 'Does it Matter?' (Sassoon, 1917/2014) and an excerpt from *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* (Boyne, 2017). The learners discussed each text in turn in recorded learner-led group conversations and the findings from these conversations have been discussed in a previous article (Skjærstad, 2023). The learners then spent the final two lessons responding to all four texts in one individual assignment, and their responses comprise the data reported on in this article.

The choice of literary texts about the First World War was motivated by several considerations: as a topic the war offers an 'interdisciplinary network' (Redmann & Sederberg, 2017, p. 55) of stories about the past and iterations of dilemmas humans have faced for generations. Moreover, the war caused an unravelling of stability in societies across the world that had a significant impact on people's perceptions and portrayals of war and life (Strachan, 2023); and literary texts about the First World War have been suggested as particularly suited to stimulate in-depth reflections on life (Davison, 2017; Myers, 2017; Redmann & Sederberg, 2017). By investigating the learners' individual responses to the literary texts, this paper addresses the following research question:

> How can literary texts on historical topics open spaces for the life skills of critical thinking and empathy in the English language classroom?

Life Skills

Life skills are a complex set of psychosocial competences comprising a person's ability to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (OECD, 2015, 2018; UNICEF, 2019; WHO, 2023). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) explains that in school, a focus on life skills is necessary in order to help young people develop resilience, self-regulation, respect and an appreciation of other people's views and ideas, and to learn how to cope with rejection and failure (OECD, 2018, p. 2). Life skills in education are thus everyday competences concerning a person's overall health and well-being, but even though this is a global understanding, the choice of what life skills are important to teach, to whom and with what approaches depends heavily on context (DeJaeghere & Murphy-Graham, 2022, p. 2). For example, in Rajasthan in India, life skills concern teaching girls about bodily integrity while contemplating caste norms (Madsen, 2023, p. xiv).

A study by Gabhainn et al. (2010) addresses the value and quality of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) that was introduced in Ireland in 2000. Pupils, parents, and teachers, a total of 1730 participants, were asked about their perception of the role of SPHE and the contribution the subject made to student learning, educational experience, and health. The participants saw life skills in school as valuable, but recognized a need to develop mechanisms that will foster more active engagement and development of learners' life skills. Gabhainn et al.'s findings underscore the need to have concrete suggestions for how to operationalize developing life skills to ensure a purposeful integration in an educational context.

In Norway, the broad and general nature of life skills in school has been criticized as vague and the topic's implementation has been disapproved by some. Madsen (2023) even suggests it is the result of 'an ongoing trend [...] where citizens are increasingly being held accountable for their health and happiness' (p. i), finding its lack of concretization and the proposed operationalization immensely problematic. Scholars have found Health and Life Skills in LK20 to concern life choices and their consequences for mental and physical health, to deal with feelings and thoughts and how to express them, and to develop knowledge of different ways of life, attitudes, sexuality, and interpersonal and personal relationships (Brevik et al., 2020; Lauritzen, 2021; Madsen, 2023; Uthus & Øksnes, 2020). These general descriptions reportedly make it challenging for teachers to feel confident in how to operationalize and focus on life skills in the classroom (Brevik et al., 2023; Dagsland, 2021; Madsen, 2020, 2023; Vedvik, 2020).

Literature and Life Skills

To the best of my knowledge, no peer-reviewed research has been conducted in Norway on literature and life skills in the subject of English, an observation made by other researchers as well (Brevik et al., 2023, p. 24). Even though this article focuses on how literary texts about history may facilitate spaces for critical thinking and empathy, some research sheds light on more general aspects of developing life skills with literature.

In a study by Abdelhalim (2015), the effectiveness of integrating children's literature in developing life skills and language learning strategies was examined. The study looked at ninety fifth grade primary learners in an English language program in Egypt. The results showed that when literary texts were used to expose the learners to different life experiences and challenging life situations, the learners practised their cognitive, personal, social, and linguistic skills. Abdelhalim emphasizes that stimulating and encouraging learners' reflective and critical thinking through teacher-led activities and reflective questions about the literary texts prompted in-depth reflections and helped the learners empathize with characters in the stories. Other researchers have reached similar conclusions, that literary texts concerning feelings, emotions and relatable issues help learners critically reflect on life (Bland, 2023; Christiansen, 2023; Ritivoi, 2016), especially when they are helped to be 'emotionally transported into the stories' through thought-stimulating questions (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013).

A study conducted by Lauritzen (2021) looked at literature as teaching material for the implementation of Health and Life Skills in the Norwegian language classroom. Even though Lauritzen assesses the potential of life skills and literature in a first language acquisition context, while this article concerns a second language context, I believe aspects of Lauritzen's findings are transferable and relevant. Lauritzen (2019) found empathy and mental health to be at the core of life skills and stressed that 'empathy may predict mental health issues, and fiction can encourage empathy' (p. 127). Based on interviews with 13 teachers from upper secondary schools in Norway, Lauritzen found that literary texts with a focus on life skills created possibilities for learners to develop their ideas, thoughts, and reflections. The findings in her study suggest that the literary texts created spaces where experiences of dichotomies, stereotypes, typecasting and the externalization of problems could be introduced and investigated while the learners maintained a safe and inclusive space by avoiding examining, or at least explicitly talking about, their own feelings and traumas (Lauritzen, 2021, p. 10).

Critical Thinking and Empathy with Literary Texts about History

To facilitate the development of critical thinking and empathy, researchers have suggested that literary texts about history offer cognitive and emotional potential. In a study conducted by Davison (2017), a teaching sequence about the First World War that was intended to foster historical empathy and participatory citizenship was assessed. Davison understands empathy as an affective and cognitive concept, where one must balance critically addressing historical contextual information and caring about what happened in the past. The focus in Davison's study is on working with historical records in history lessons. However, he suggests that using literary texts about history may be a way of connecting with and entering the past. The learners in his study became interested in learning more about the First World War when introduced to this period in history through different materials, and the literary texts stimulated being curious about what life had been like and what others had experienced. Other studies have also found that literary texts about history can facilitate expressions of empathy, interest in others' conditions and sociocultural contexts and an understanding of the past, present and future (Colăcel, 2016; Mar et al., 2009; Schwieler & Ekecrantz, 2017; Vaughn, 2011).

Another researcher who has provided insight into reading literary texts about history for purposes central to developing life skills is Ingemansson (2007, 2011), who looked at 10- to 12-year-olds' development of historical consciousness in encounters with literary texts about

the Viking Age. I find the premises of her research particularly relevant for two reasons. First, Ingemansson (2011) provides a perspective on what these types of texts may bring to the classroom, namely a focus on what she calls 'timeless, human phenomena' (p. 114). Second, she defines historical consciousness to include critical thinking skills, awareness of oneself and others in history and the present, the development of empathy and the understanding of different worldviews (Ingemansson, 2007, pp. 23-27). Ingemansson (2007) reminds us how a learner's context and interests are significant when reading and responding to any literary text, but she finds that when working with texts about history, building knowledge of the past is also significant in helping learners access and engage with textual characters' contexts and situations (p. 99).

To investigate how learners think critically about the past and how they empathize with others in responses to literary texts, I find that Langer's theory of building envisionments provides a useful theoretical framework, and it is to this framework I now turn.

Langer's Theory of Building Envisionments

Langer (1998, 2011) suggests modes and stances as a way of understanding encounters with and responses to literature. Let us look at modes first. Langer (2011) proposes two modes of reading – *maintaining a point of reference* and *exploring horizons of possibilities* – and explains that together they are the primary focus of the reader in a textual encounter (p. 26). These modes are 'socially situated in that they're related to the activity a person is engaged in and why they're doing it' (Langer, 1998, p. 17). The first mode, maintaining a point of reference, is how reading is guided by our overall knowledge of the topic at hand. We use this topic as a reference in building our understanding of the text, and what shapes our understanding is guided by what we already think and know about the topic. The second mode, exploring horizons of possibilities, is more of 'a reconnaissance mission where we are after something, but we don't know exactly what' (Langer, 2011, p. 28). Langer (1994) clarifies that this mode 'explores emotions, relationships, motives, and reactions, calling on all we know about what it is to be human' (p. 204) in expanding the readers' breadth of understanding by interrelating and searching beyond what they already know. Langer (1994) suggests that we shift in and out of both modes and explains the shift this way: 'Readers clarify ideas as they read and relate them to the growing whole; the whole informs the parts, as well as the parts building towards the whole' (p. 205). Because we shift in and out of both modes when reading, the two modes

provide the reader with alternative vantage points from which to approach texts and build fuller understandings of them.

In addition, Langer uses the term envisionment to refer to the world of understanding a particular person has at a given point in time. She presents a model of five stances, which she describes as 'a recursive, mobile, and sometimes co-occurring set of strategies' which readers make use of in their interaction with texts (Langer, 2011, p. 24). Not all of the stances are necessarily used for any individual reading, but they should be seen as dynamically interrelated with the two modes. In the part of the study reported on in this article, Langer's second and third stances are relevant. She explains them in the following way:

> *Stance 2: Being inside and moving through an envisionment*. In this stance, we rely on personal knowledge, the text, and the social context of our reading to nourish ideas and engage thinking.
>
> *Stance 3: Stepping out and rethinking what you know*. In this stance, we allow our developing understanding, our text-worlds, to add to our own knowledge and experiences. Here, we move from the text-world to transform and negotiate what the ideas we are shaping mean for our own lives, ideas, or knowledge. (Langer, 2011, pp. 17–19)

These two stances are applicable to the present study because helping learners develop life skills is a complex undertaking that involves opening doors for them to build understandings based on their own lives and their social contexts.

In addition, Langer reminds us that the reader is influenced not only by their immediate encounter with the text, but by the context and questions in which they read and respond, a point that has been made before (Fish, 1980; Iser, 1978). The context of this article is the English language classroom and reading and responding to literature has been found to be particularly well suited for and at the core of language learning (Rosenblatt 1978/1994). To recognize how the texts shape, guide and suggest new possibilities to the reader, and to identify what I see as aspects of life skills in the literary texts used, the next section provides a brief introduction to the four literary texts the learners read and responded to.

The Literary Texts

The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha is an illustrated prose text based on the true story of Henry Friston, a 21-year-old seaman, who was sent to Gallipoli in May 1915. The battle of Gallipoli

was a failed campaign in the First World War in which the Allied soldiers suffered under extreme weather conditions, brutal combat, and primitive and rough conditions (Macleod, 2004). There, Henry Friston found a tortoise and named him Ali Pasha after the Ottoman Albanian ruler, a name 'that would remind him of home' (Foreman, 2013, p. 72). The children's book is authored by Michael Foreman and illustrated with archival photographs and the author's own watercolours. It draws on Foreman's conversations with Henry Friston. The story is about friendship, family, heroism, missing in battle, the trauma of combat, and how we look back and make sense of our experiences.

'The Soldier', written by the officer Rupert Brooke in 1914, is a patriotic and idealistic sonnet, reflecting the glorification of war that was typical in England in the early phase. The poem expresses the conviction that to die fighting for England is meaningful and honourable because it serves the greater good of the nation.

As a contrast to 'The Soldier', Siegfried Sassoon wrote 'Does it Matter?' in 1917. It is an anti-war poem that describes the long-term physical and mental injuries caused by the war. Using critical rhetorical questions, the poem challenges ideas of heroism and patriotism by expressing the bitterness of young, wounded veterans, who are the victims of war.

Stay Where You Are and Then Leave by John Boyne (2017) is a children's novel. It follows 9-year-old Alfie Summerfield in his search for his father who enlisted at the outbreak of the war in 1914 and did not come back. The excerpt in this study is the first chapter, where Alfie looks back on the day his father left. It describes the arguments for and against enlistment, the importance of family and the trauma caused by missing someone and not knowing what is happening to them in times of war.

Method

In this section, I present the ethical considerations made, the participants, the process of text-selection, the stages of collecting the data and the process of coding. Before any teachers or learners were approached, permission was sought and granted from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT). The names used for learners and the teacher are pseudonyms.

Teacher Anna and her 9th grade class were recruited through my professional network. Anna has been a secondary school teacher for more than twenty years and teaches Norwegian

and English. The class comprises 22 pupils in English lessons, of whom 19 gave their consent to be a participant.

The process of choosing the literary texts had several stages. First, I compiled a broad selection of literary texts about the First World War. The texts' potential and suitability for the lower secondary classroom were then discussed with teachers in my professional network at several informal meetings. This led to the selection of nine texts, and a pilot using those nine texts was carried out at a different school. The last stage involved discussing findings from the pilot, planning and decisions with Anna, to arrive at the four literary texts used in this study. Anna thought *The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha* would be an exciting book to try with her class and that it differed, in a positive way, from the kinds of texts her pupils usually read in English. She believed working with the 'The Soldier' and 'Does it Matter?' with a focus on interdisciplinary issues would be a different context than what her learners were used to, and she wanted to see how using poetry this way would play out in her class. Anna believed the excerpt from *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* would engage her pupils. She was familiar with Boyne's 2006 novel *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* about the Second World War and thought his work would be well suited for her English class.

The study spanned a period of five weeks and 14 English lessons. Prior to reading and responding to the texts, the learners were asked what they remembered about the First World War, a topic they had recently worked on in Social Studies. They admitted that they knew and remembered little about the war, and they said they had not reflected on why or how the conflict might be relevant for them or society today. The learners then read each text in turn together with Anna and me in class. Anna and I provided as little interpretive input as possible and only answered questions about vocabulary or showed on a map those places that were mentioned in the texts. After we had read a text, the learners discussed the text in recorded learner-led group conversations using a set of questions as a guide. The poems were dealt with together. There were three sets of conversations and questions, and the findings from these conversations have been discussed in a previous article (Skjærstad, 2023). The learners then spent the final two lessons of the study responding individually to an assignment, responses which taken together comprise the data reported on in this article. Sixteen of the learners submitted their responses: 11 written texts and five audio files.

The design of the assignment was inspired by the studies of Davison (2017) and Redmann and Sederbergs (2017). I drew on their interdisciplinary approaches to literary texts

about history, focusing on how open questions about history and literature can activate learners' prior knowledge and stimulate individual interpretations and a willingness to share them. Consequently, it was important to provide an assignment that would give the learners opportunities to draw on their own lives and interests, and yet guide their responses towards thoughts and ideas about the texts and the historical past. They were therefore given the following instructions:

> You have now read *The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha*, 'The Soldier', 'Does it Matter?', and an excerpt from *Stay Where You are and Then Leave*. You are now going to answer one of the questions below.
>
> 1. What can you and we, as a society, learn from the texts you have read on the First World War?
> 2. Based on the texts you read, what are your thoughts about the First World War?
>
> You can decide if you want to write a text or record your answer. It is important that you explain your answer!

Five learners recorded their answers, the recordings lasting from 4,5 to 7 minutes. 11 learners submitted a written text, spanning from 76 to 555 words. They all chose the first question. The recordings were transcribed following the ethical suggestions of Cohen et al. (2018, pp. 523–524). The learners wrote and spoke in English only. Because authenticity was sought and meaningful content was of interest, errors and mistakes were not corrected in the transcriptions or the written texts. However, in this article, linguistic errors in quotes from the learners are corrected using brackets for the sake of making sense of the examples provided.

Through thematic analysis based on conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006), codes were inductively generated from the learners' responses and themes were identified. Altogether, 14 coding categories were labelled and by combining these, two central analytical themes emerged: learning from the past and mental health. The theme 'learning from the past' concerns assumptions about the past, comparisons between the past and the present, and lessons of history. The theme 'mental health' concerns impact of war on mental health, the importance of friendship, family, and a safe environment for sound mental health, and ideas about how to consider other people's mental health.

Findings

Learning from the past

In the theme 'learning from the past', the learners provided assumptions about life during the First World War and made simple comparisons between their own lives and those of people in the past. They also considered how we may learn from past mistakes. Many of them were concerned that we should avoid war by learning about some of the horrible aspects of warfare, but few examples were offered, nor were thorough explanations given. When they did give explanations, these were quite unembellished, much in line with how Marie reasoned: 'we shouldn't let it happen again because so many people died and got hurt'. Olav was one of the few who offered a view that looked at the bigger picture and took a critical stance, explaining that today's society disappointed him because of a flawed focus. There are wars today, he said, but people are 'discussing changing the word use in old movies [...] and not like the real problems in the world'. Prior to writing his text, Olav had mentioned the controversy over the rewrites of Roald Dahl's books in class (Morris, 2023). Olav's text therefore gave voice to his frustration that we have failed as a society in learning and acting on the important lessons of war.

Further, the learners provided quite simplistic and even incorrect views on what they thought life in the past had been like. One example came from Elizabeth, who believed children 'had to take care of themselves and work at home and help [out]' during the war instead of spending time with friends or going to school. Margit said that she was certain children during the war were quite pleased about not going to school. Several learners had ideas about direct combat, and an example came from Olav, who believed that the war was fought 'with humans and some guns', adding that warfare has progressed technologically since then. Lilly provides another example of this: 'now we have a lot of newer technology and we have evolved and now we have gotten smarter', believing that we as a society have developed more advanced and intelligent ways of conducting warfare and living life in general.

Other assumptions of dubious correctness concerned the causes of the war. Jenny, for example, thought the war was 'kind of a revenge war', and Lilly expressed the opinion that 'even [though] the Second [World War] was bigger, we were less prepared' for the First World War. These statements were categorized as assumptions, because they did not seem to be based on the literary texts or the instruction the pupils had had about the First World War, nor did the learners expand on what they meant or where they had these understandings from.

Further, several of the learners expressed the view that society today, and also in the past, should be and should have been appreciative of those who fight and fought for their country. Several of the learners emphasized that this was a particularly important lesson to learn from past mistakes. Georg provided an example typical of the compassionate feelings some of the learners seemed to share, namely that those 'fighting for our freedom and our independence should be more appreciated', because 'people should be very thankful for living in peace'. As an extension of this, the learners engaged with the complexity around the issue of enlistment. They recognized that conflicting feelings had gripped those who left their families and friends for war, but the learners were firm in their conviction that enlistment was a necessity to maintain peace and freedom.

Another issue that many of the learners addressed touched on the role of pressure from society, and they saw this as a cause for why men went to war. An example came from Else, who said that we should be careful about downplaying the influence of peer pressure on our decision-making and that we should feel for people who find themselves under the influence of such powerful social mechanisms. However, some learners thought that to conform was actually a brave thing to do, as when Rolf believed that Alfie's father in *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* was courageous for doing the same thing as his friends. An additional point was made by Arthur, who introduced the idea that those unable to fight, for whatever reason, may find society's expectations particularly challenging, that society might think 'they probably don't care about their country'. Overall, the learners were able to highlight that war can be experienced differently from person to person, and that learning from past generations could help us remember that and help us to do better.

Mental health

In the theme 'mental health', the learners focused on the importance of relationships and safe environments for sound mental health, and they focused particularly on trauma caused by war. The learners not only mentioned mental health to a greater extent than any of the other sub-categories identified in the analysis, but their comments were also more elaborated. An example is the emphasis many placed on being treated with respect and the necessity of talking to someone when facing challenges. In general, the learners considered damage to mental health to be just as bad as physical injuries, and Rolf even suggested that '[mental] damage hurts almost more than visible damages.' Several of the learners seemed to recognize that many

factors play into mental health, as when Astrid explained that 'friendship and mental health and physical body damage [and] missing someone is all connected'.

Within this theme, some of the learners emphasized that we should always, no matter the situation, be careful about assuming anything about other people's mental health. They stressed the importance of being considerate about others, their mental health in particular. Martha provided an example, when she explained that we should be careful about saying 'that we know what others have been through' and stressed that we must talk to others and try to understand their situation before making judgements about their behaviour. Another example of this came from Rolf, who explained that just because we cannot see someone's pain, it does not mean they are not hurt. In such statements, the learners were empathetic regarding others, and they demonstrated an awareness of how complex and delicate it is to talk about and consider others' mental health.

The four texts were referred to several times and actively used to provide examples and justifications when the learners addressed the theme of mental health, the two prose texts more frequently than the poetry. This theme therefore differs from 'learning from the past' in terms of the learners' in-depth engagement with the literary texts. The friendship between Henry and Ali in *The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha* was often mentioned to support the importance of friendship in hard times. Several of the learners believed that Henry survived the war with seemingly fine mental health because of the tortoise. Examples came from Harald, who explained that 'the turtle [*sic*] becomes friends with the soldiers and kind of makes their life a little bit easier', and Margit, who explained that Henry 'just cared about the turtle [*sic*] instead of caring about [whether] he's going to die or live', helping Henry maintain a focus on something nice. *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* was frequently mentioned with regard to how traumatizing losing family members must be, and Rolf explained the momentous impact of this by saying that 'if something happens to his father when he was gone the little boy [Alfie] would be sad for the rest of his life'.

Even though the prose texts were referred to the most, the poems were referenced to show how mental injuries can be just as bad as physical ones. Both poems were mentioned, but more learners engaged with 'Does it Matter?' than 'The Soldier' and many answered the rhetorical questions in Sassoon's poem. Astrid explained that it does indeed matter 'if you have lost a leg or became blind or got scared' and she found it harmful for someone's mental health to be dismissed based on the kind of injury caused by war.

Discussion

In this section, the findings are discussed to address how literary texts on historical topics open spaces for the life skills of critical thinking and empathy in the English language classroom. First, I consider which aspects of the four literary texts about the First World War used in this study encourage critical thinking and empathy. Second, using Langer's theory of building envisionment, I reflect on the learners' engagement with the modes of reading, maintaining a point of reference and exploring horizons of possibilities. I address how engagement with the modes provides insight into the interdisciplinary challenge of finding the right balance of, on the one hand, providing and working with historical information and, on the other, attention to the learners' immediate response to the texts. Then, I focus on the learners' envisionments through the second and third stances of Langer's model, being inside and moving through an envisionment and stepping out and rethinking what you know, and address the relationship between what the learners communicated, the role of personal experiences, and the critique on life skills in schools.

The findings indicate that all four texts allowed the learners to recognize different perspectives, but *The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha* and the excerpt from *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* were particularly accessible and relatable to the learners. The prose texts engaged the learners in issues about enlistment, mental health, and relationships. An example is how many of them referred to Alfie's father enlisting in *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* and how they expressed empathy not only for the father – considering what finding oneself in his situation might feel like – but also for Alfie and what it must have felt like for him seeing his father leave for the war. These are issues that Ingemansson (2011, p. 114) would likely describe as 'timeless, human phenomena', matters that humanity has grappled with for generations. However, mental health, relationships and serving one's country are issues 'The Soldier' and 'Does it Matter?' raise as well, yet the learners did not use the poetry when exploring these matters to the same extent as the prose texts. Even though one can hardly disagree with Ingemansson, that relationships and mental health may be viewed as timeless phenomena, I believe we need to extend our understanding as to why the prose texts engaged the learners the way they did. Here, Felski (2004) might offer insight. She explains that literary texts about history may invite a certain 'remoteness and distance' which accommodates reflecting on and critically considering 'one's everyday existence' particularly well if the texts balance the context of the characters and the readers' contexts (Felski, 2004, p. 34). I consider *The Amazing*

Tale of Ali Pasha and the excerpt from *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* to offer a remoteness and distance not only to the First World War, but also to its impact on mental health and relationships. I believe this distance enabled the learners to consider their own contexts in relation to the characters' contexts in a less confrontational manner than the poems allowed. Thus, this balance of contexts in the prose texts may encourage learners to relate to and feel for the literary characters and for the learners to consider and perhaps think a little more critically about their own situations and experiences and the characters' ones.

With the exception of two or three instances, the learners did not explicitly provide examples from 'The Soldier' and 'Does it Matter?' to address challenging issues of war and life. However, in the research leading up to this study (Skjærstad & Munden, 2022), we found that the poems indeed have the potential to 'open a space for critical thinking and awareness, both about the First World War and about contemporary issues relating to war and its consequences' (p. 180). Because the poems were written in 1914 and 1917 and are not aimed at the adolescent reader, using them requires an explicit focus on the historical context and the condensed and relatively advanced language to make them accessible to the learners as spaces for critical thinking and expressions of empathy. This highlights an interdisciplinary challenge of using literary texts about history in the English language classroom, namely, how to balance the role of historical information and the learners' immediate response to texts. Using Langer's modes of reading, I now turn to look more closely at this challenge and how it might be dealt with in the classroom.

The findings show that the learners did not use historical information about the war as a reference point, instead they engaged with the issues of mental health, friendship, and lessons of war. These issues can be interpreted as 'a point of reference'-mode of reading since the learners used their knowledge of these topics to shape their ideas; but, nonetheless, the First World War is the overarching topic of the four literary texts. The learners drew on what they thought life must have been like during the war and therefore demonstrated engagement with the second mode also, exploring 'different perspectives, feelings, intentions, [and] life situations' (Langer, 2011, p. 28). However, Langer emphasizes that readers shift in and out of both modes, but the individual voices of the learners have not been analysed and therefore I cannot discuss if or how the learners shifted between the modes. While the findings from the group as a whole show engagement with both modes, I believe deeper engagement with both modes of reading may be encouraged with a fuller understanding of the historical topic at hand.

This would facilitate a more informed point of reference with regard to the First World War, but also richer horizons of possibilities exploring motives, emotions, actions and reactions.

When designing the study, it was assumed the learners would remember more, considering that the First World War had been the topic in a three-week sequence in Social Studies only two months previously. When the learners, prior to the reading of the literary texts, admitted that they knew and remembered little about the war, we should have modified the design and integrated more historical information in the lessons. Reading literary texts in the English language classroom should encourage different ways of thinking and suggest 'new perspectives on the world and ourselves' (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). When opening spaces for critical thinking and empathy with literary texts about history, historical information should play a different role than what it did in this study.

We know that to provide and work with historical information outside the history classroom challenges disciplinary boundaries and accommodates interdisciplinary learning (Redmann & Sederberg, 2017; Schwieler & Ekecrantz, 2016; Vaughn, 2011). In Davison's (2017) study, entering the past requires not only that learners imagine the past through the use of literary texts, but also that they identify their relevant prior knowledge about historical events. However, to introduce and work with historical information prior to reading may run the risk of steering learners' responses, perhaps limiting the openness of their thoughts and ideas. I therefore suggest integrating historical information when working with and digging deeper into the immediate responses.

In the context of an English language classroom, I believe it is important to highlight that integrating historical information when working with literary texts about history is not done for the sake of seeking historical accuracy. Instead, historical information should be integrated to facilitate critical thinking and expressions of empathy. Here I find support in Bal and Veltkamp (2013), who explain the relationship between historical accuracy and critical thinking. They explain that readers negotiate believability rather than historical accuracy in encounters with literary texts about historical events. With believability they mean whether the text establishes verisimilitude or not, if the feelings and actions of the characters in response to the situation they are in seem believable and realistic to the reader. For 9th grade learners in an English language classroom to negotiate the believability of a literary text about the First World War and to engage critically with the voices and empathize with the characters, they need information about the sociocultural and historical context. To accommodate and acknowledge

learners' thoughts and ideas about a literary text is not only seen as a main purpose of the subject of English (The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2019), but is also recognized as a means to foster interest in reading and general engagement with literature (Langer, 2011; Rosenblatt, 1978/1994). However, how we understand the past shapes the way we understand the present and it is therefore necessary to address and deal with misconceptions about history as they could be harmful and even dangerous for our democracy and society (Davison, 2017; Schwieler & Ekecrantz, 2017). I believe there are several fruitful ways to accomplish this in the English classroom.

One way of approaching this could be to consider what we understand as history. Rather than providing a lecture prior to reading and responding to the literary texts, it might be more valuable to address questions about believability and what history is together with the learners. For example, in class, it could be discussed what makes stories believable, the difference between historical accuracy and believability, what might be understood as history, and what we need to know about history to address believability. Based on these conversations and the learners' input, seeking the historical information identified as necessary might be a way to create engagement with the past and to initiate critical discussions on misconceptions and false beliefs about history and past lives. This would allow the teacher and the learners to explore stories about the past together and yet permit learners to read and respond based on their own interpretations and ideas.

Another way to facilitate further critical thinking and empathy alongside learners' immediate response to texts could be to seek and discuss historical information after initial responses. Historical information should not be added as detached information but used to negotiate and contextualize the literary texts and the learner responses. To operationalize this, I build on suggestions by Vaughn (2011). To include and critically address additional literary and factual texts about history to expand learners' reference points may allow richer conversations about the past and past lives. By digging deeper into the historical context and asking questions about what life was like might accommodate what Vaughn (2011) emphasizes, that 'in some cases, we don't necessarily come to an answer but recognize the importance of asking the questions and beginning dialogue' (p. 65). This could be a relevant approach particularly when working with poetry about history to expand references and to explore further horizons.

Additionally, to balance the inclusion of more historical information and learners' immediate responses further teacher guidance and influence are needed. This does not require a higher level of historical knowledge of the teacher but should be viewed as an approach to facilitate working more in-depth – individually, in groups and as a class – with literary texts about history, the historical context and learner responses. A suggestion on how to operationalize this could be to bring in statements or beliefs from the learners' responses into the classroom. For example, the teacher could anonymize and provide the statement from Lilly, who suggested that people in society today are smarter than people during the First World War, or from Jenny, who described the First World War as a 'revenge war', or Margit, who believed children during the war were pleased about not going to school. Learners could then argue for and against the truthfulness of these statements while researching and negotiating further historical information to build richer understandings of the historical context to offer informed ideas and opinions.

Lastly in this discussion, I focus on the learners' envisionments through the second and third stances of Langer's model, being inside and moving through an envisionment and stepping out and rethinking what you know, and I address the connection between personal experiences and the criticism of the implementation of life skills in schools. Scholars have found that life skills in the classroom run the risk of becoming a form of quasi therapy or life coaching (Lauritzen, 2021; Madsen, 2020), but a significant finding in the part of the study reported on in this article was that learners avoided self-examination or taking a personal point of departure when talking about mental health or relationships. We know that young people are especially interested in how to maintain their mental well-being in general (Bru et al., 2017; Stoltenberg, 2015) and through upholding friendships and being liked by peers in particular (Helland & Mathiesen, 2009, p. 40). Because these are issues raised in the literary texts, they have the potential to encourage the adolescent reader to share personal stories and experiences about mental health and friendships. However, out of the 16 submitted answers, none of the learners did. Instead, they used examples from the literary texts. One example is how they referred to the friendship between Henry and Ali Pasha and its importance for Henry's mental health. Working with literary texts about historical topics in the English language classroom can therefore be seen as a rewarding approach to talk about and reflect on human challenges and demands, catering to the curricular demands of life skills in school, without excessively focusing on how to master life.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into learners' life skills of critical thinking and empathy in their encounters with literary texts about the First World War. Langer's (2011) theory of building envisionment enables us to observe how learners maintain a point of reference, explore horizons of possibilities, rely on personal contexts, and step out to rethink their ideas in these encounters. The findings indicate that *The Amazing Tale of Ali Pasha* (Foreman, 2013) and an excerpt from *Stay Where You Are and Then Leave* (Boyne, 2017) are particularly well suited for creating openings for life skills in the English language classroom. The part of the study described in this article shows that using literary texts about the past written for children and adolescents today, can be particularly useful to help learners think critically about some of the demanding and challenging aspects of life and to gain experience in empathizing with others. To make further interdisciplinary use of these types of literary texts, poetry about history in particular, a stronger focus on integrating historical information and further teacher guidance is needed.

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