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Reading Involvement, Multimodality and Challenge

Janice Bland

Welcome to *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, issue 12.2!

At Nord University, currently the sponsor of this journal, a conference took place on the Bodø Campus in northern Norway in May 2024. This was the conference 'Reading for in-depth English Learning: Texts in and beyond the classroom' (RidEL), with the following two strands –

- ⇒ teacher education for in-depth English language learning with children's literature,
- ⇒ interculturality, diversity and critical literacy in English language learning with children's literature (see <https://site.nord.no/ridel/>).

Beginning with this issue, and continuing into 2025, *Children's Literature in English Language Education* is publishing papers from the conference, as well as pertinent book reviews and Recommended Reads that featured at RidEL. The first three papers in this issue, from the USA, Denmark and Germany, originate from the RidEL conference.

Multimodality in textual communication is not new, even though the forms of multimodal representation have evolved. For centuries, literate and illiterate audiences have, for example, 'read' pictures, sculpture and symbols in sacred monuments, interpreted dance and drama, and listened to storytellers, who add gesture, facial expression, expressive prosodic features and sometimes song to their oral language in order to interconnect with their audiences (see 'creative teacher talk' and oral storytelling, Bland, 2022, pp. 63-66). Around two centuries ago, printed books became more affordable (at least for the middle classes in industrializing countries), due to printing presses powered by steam, mechanical typesetting, large-scale wood-pulp paper production, and railways for distribution. But just one century later, pictures were increasingly flourishing again as a vital means of communication, along with music, gesture and brief written

intertitles, when silent cinema seemed to 'speak' to vast immigrant populations with little money and often lack of skills in the language of the host countries. Since then, multimodal phenomena have further proliferated with print-based texts such as picturebooks and graphic novels, as well as multifarious screen-based texts and live communication through combinations of visual, audio, gestural and spatial means.

Meanwhile, educationalists have been advocating for at least three decades for an expanded range of literacies children need to acquire. Margaret Meek's (1993) call for multiple literacies was an early assertion of literacy as a dynamic spectrum of competences: 'Our teaching will have to begin with the understanding that the complexities of literacy are linked to the patterns of social practice and social meanings. From now on there will be multiple literacies' (p. 96). Connected to this, challenge is seen as a critical aspect of language education today. This is indicated by various edited volumes that include 'challenge' in their titles, for example Janet Evans' (2015) *Challenging and Controversial Picturebooks: Creative and critical responses to visual texts*, Bland's (2018) *Using Literature in English Language Education, Challenging reading for 8-18 Year Olds*, and Ommundsen, Haaland and Kümmerling-Meibauer's (2022) *Exploring Challenging Picturebooks in Education, International perspectives on language and literature learning*.

Crucially, the challenge could also refer to discovering how we are manipulated by text, a manipulation that is not always deliberate on the part of the author but no less problematic. For me, two examples of probably non-deliberate but nonetheless dangerous manipulation are John Boyne's (2006) *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* and Hannah Gold's (2021) *The Last Bear*. Boyne's children's fiction is set on the periphery of and within the Nazi concentration camp, Auschwitz. It has been taken up by very many teachers as an emotional introduction to the Holocaust, even though it is well recognized as historically inaccurate, as it diminishes the barbarism against Jewish people and other cruelly targeted groups. Research among secondary school students 'found that the story by John Boyne regularly elicited misplaced sympathy for Nazis' (Sherwood, 2022). Gold's chapter book about a girl and a polar bear friendship presents an unreliable and dangerous message to children about wildlife and the environment of the arctic circle. The polar bear is portrayed as a real animal rather than a fantasy creature, yet its behaviour is not that of a starving polar bear (an extremely dangerous large carnivore) as it befriends the child rather than devouring her. An important aspect of eco-friendly literature is a respectful betrayal of the non-human

environment accompanied by meticulous research, and the book fails in these respects. In this sense, Jamie Oliver and his publisher were undoubtedly right in taking the decision to withdraw his recent children's book that, lacking careful research and consultation with a sensitivity reader, stereotyped First Nations and their painful experiences (Dervisevic, 2024). Decoupling active reading involvement from uncritical reading immersion is a challenge, but attention to critical literacy is an imperative step in the quest for respectful cultural and environmental representation in storytelling.

With his paper 'Developing Metamodal Awareness', Frank Serafini, who was a keynote speaker at the RidEL conference, expresses the essential role of active and critical reading in the face of the proliferation of multimodality and 'the constantly changing nature of what is meant by the term *text*' (p. 2). In this first article, Serafini discusses the indispensability of developing metamodal awareness in young readers, across three dimensions: textual, semiotic, and critical. This need for more active and critical participation in multimodal literacy events has arisen due to today's complex communicational environment and what Serafini terms 'myopic views of linguistically dominant frameworks' (p. 14).

The next paper in this issue, 'Visual Thinking Strategies for Reading Engagement: Adapting Lessons from Denmark to English Language Learning', contributed by Shaun Nolan, continues the focus on multimodality. Nolan introduces a research project on the effectiveness of Visual Thinking Strategies in promoting reading engagement. The early emphasis on children's reading engagement in Denmark is striking – Nolan reports that 'the first appearance of the term *laeselyst* appeared in the school syllabus for Danish as a school subject in 1984' (p. 28). The following paper, 'English Language Learning in Elementary School by Means of Digital Storytelling: The StoryTimE-Project', contributed by Theurer, Eisenmann, Kindermann and Pohlmann-Rother, draws on a digital storytelling approach. This article describes a pilot study that aimed to activate young learners' own English language production through collaborative story creation using tablets.

Young adult (YA) fiction refers to fiction that is recommended for 12- to 18-year-olds (<https://www.ala.org/yalsa/best-fiction-young-adults>), and thus often includes content unsuited to children younger than 12. Nonetheless, there are generally vast differences in reading interests and abilities of a 12-year-old and an 18-year-old. In-depth learning – developing the relationship

between classroom teaching and the complexity of real life – is often considered vital in ELT (for example Bland, 2022; Fullan et al., 2019), and insisting on a narrow canon of YA literature for older teens (16- to 18-year-olds), is likely to be just as constraining as insisting on a very narrow range of UK and US canonical texts in secondary-school settings. Upper secondary school and teacher education in Austria is the context of the fourth paper, ‘Young Adult, Classics and Fiction for Adults: What First-Year Student Teachers of English Choose to Read’. In this contribution Melissa Kennedy reports on her study of student teachers’ own reading interests when reading for pleasure, which found university students preferred fiction for adult readers rather than fiction marketed for adolescent readers, and many also favoured literary classics. According to Kennedy, the range of books the student teachers chose ‘can be seen as indicative of the fluidity of identity-making that these students are themselves experiencing’ (p. 83).

The Recommended Reads spotlight four multimodal texts that could facilitate in-depth English learning. The chosen books have been selected by the following contributors: Colin Haines on the graphic novel *The Magic Fish*, Heidi Haavan Grosch on the picturebook *Daniel Finds a Poem*, Jade Dillon Craig on the animated film *Wish*, and Alyssa Magee Lowery on the wordless picturebook *Hike*. Finally, we have three book reviews in this issue, spotlighting volumes that are important in different ways for the theme of reading involvement, multimodality and challenge in English language education.

Many thanks to all who have contributed to this issue!

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