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Critical Narrative Literacy

Michael C. Prusse

It is a great pleasure for me to introduce this issue of *Children's Literature in English Language Education*. Continuing from the last edition, it contains further contributions that originated in presentations given at the *Reading for in-depth English Learning: Texts in and beyond the classroom* (RidEL) conference, organized by Janice Bland in Bodø in May 2024. These texts are supplemented by articles on various research projects that are not linked to last year's congress in Norway.

The notion that both teachers and students in the English language teaching classroom need to develop what could be called 'critical narrative literacy' is not entirely innovative. Moreover, in an age where it is hard to keep track of all the literacies that appear to be mushrooming everywhere, the idea of referencing another one might well be judged as unwarranted. Already, there exists a general clamour for schools to address numerous literacies and to assist students in learning to acquire them. This is particularly the case with AI-literacy, IT-literacy, and information and media literacy in general. The latter is deemed particularly relevant in citizenship education because it aims at enabling students to detect fake news. Next to these commendable efforts, an awareness of the affordances and limitations of narrative media must be counted similarly essential in order to raise new generations of global citizens and to qualify them to critically examine narrative perspectives and their underlying cultural discourses.

Narrative in and across several media formats is at the heart of English language learning, both inside and outside the classroom, and its potential influence is critically eyed from both extremes of the political spectrum. One consequence are the numerous calls for censorship of books, particularly in libraries. In a recent contribution to *The Guardian*, Alison Hicks (2025) justifiably bemoans the fact that social media algorithms remain unchecked and can continue to encourage bullying, instigate eating disorders or champion misogyny while, at the same time, librarians receive letters about removing specific books from their shelves. This issue is also addressed by Caroline Rabalais (2025) who opens her article on censoring young adult literature in (school) libraries in the United States with the sentence: 'Freedom to read is directly related to one's freedom to learn' (p. 1).

This freedom is particularly relevant in school, albeit also in English language teaching classrooms, because social media algorithms tend to wrap their users into filter bubbles and do not invite them to discover different, contrary or new perspectives. Such a variety of input is essential, even if the potential influence of narrative on young minds remains disputed. The proponents of the positive power of storytelling, such as Jonathan Gottschall, argue that it habituates young learners to the culture and customs of a society. Narrative ‘defines the people. It tells us what is laudable and what is contemptible. It subtly and constantly encourages us to be decent instead of decadent’ (Gottschall, 2012, p. 138). He continues by saying that ‘fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is designed to persuade through argument and evidence’ (Gottschall, 2012, p. 150). In this instance, he agrees with Philip Pullman (2017), whose thoughts run along similar lines: ‘Novels and stories are not arguments; they set out not to convince, but to beguile’ (p. 323). If readers are indeed enchanted by the stories they read, this may have a marked effect, specifically if those narratives do not provide diverse viewpoints. In her TED Talk about the dangers of a single story, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) reflects on the challenges of this when reminiscing about her childhood reading and noting ‘how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children’.

Other critics, unsurprisingly mostly those who investigate fiction for adults, are more sceptical: ‘Cognitive science cannot predict what the social consequences of narrative will be’ (Armstrong, 2020, p. 168). They are not convinced by the idea that fiction influences personality to a greater degree. Paul Armstrong (2020) argues that as a reader he is confronted with ‘doubling processes whereby my world is brought into relation with a world it is not, and this is not a cause-effect relationship’ (p. 7). The ambition to use fiction as a vehicle to influence readers is rejected by Rita Felski (2008) who contends that blending ‘revolution in art with revolution in life is a peculiarly modern mistake, guaranteed to inspire absurdly high hopes of the transformative energies of texts’ (p. 109). Hence, the belief that pro- or antisocial effects can be swayed by means of stories is not unanimous. And yet, in her TED Talk Adichie (2009) emphasizes how her personality has been shaped by her reading: ‘All of these stories make me who I am.’ A similar sentiment is expressed by the indigenous Canadian writer, Thomas King (2003): ‘The truth about stories is that’s all we are’ (p. 2). This means that educators must choose sagaciously when they introduce narratives into the English language teaching classroom. As King (2003) points out,

narrative possesses an ambivalent power: 'For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world' (p. 10).

One purpose of *Children's Literature in English Language Education* is to provide a forum for multiple perspectives on stories and storytelling in connection with English language teaching and, as such, propagate the critical reading of stories by English teachers, so that they can encourage their learners to assume multiple perspectives on the world while also asking them to investigate those texts critically: Who is in power? Whose perspective is privileged? Who are the role models? Why do people behave in certain ways? By doing so and by creating safe classrooms that sustain lively discussions and in-depth reflection, they will contribute to raising a generation of critical readers who will hopefully grow up to become responsible citizens and thoughtful caretakers of the planet for tomorrow. Aspects of these considerations resurface in several of the contributions that readers will find in this issue.

The first article is authored by Sunny Man Chu Lau, Nayr Correia Ibrahim, and France Destroismaisons – all three of them were presenters at the 2024 RiDEL conference. They share the impression that ELT frequently contents itself with focusing on vocabulary comprehension 'or grammar usage rather than on learning and using the language to make meaning and reflect on matters and issues that have significant social consequences on the students' lives' (p. 4). In their text, 'Promoting Reading for In-Depth Learning for Critical Literacy and Interculturality', they introduce the Reading for In-Depth Learning (Ridl) framework (<https://site.nord.no/ellil/reading-for-in-depth-learning/>) and expound on its theoretical roots. The framework projects four dimensions (textual, critical, personal, creative and transformative), which are explained in detail before the contributors proceed to provide a practical illustration of how teachers could make use of the framework and its dimensions by applying these to a meticulous unit plan for the picturebook *We are Water Protectors* (2020).

In 'Authenticity in Representation: A Critical Analysis of Illustrations in Picturebooks for Elementary School Students', Anika Shah investigates how Muslims are depicted by non-Muslim illustrators (she consciously concentrates on the images and disregards the verbal text). Her contribution is based on critical race theory and on what she, as an academic Muslim reader, notices while contemplating the images. By means of detailed scrutiny and with great sensitivity, Shah exposes the problem that Western artists often do not conduct sufficient research into Muslim

communities and ways of life. The unfortunate result of this failure is a tendency to perpetuate certain stereotypes, because illustrators do not sufficiently grasp cultural and religious customs of diverse and heterogeneous Muslim societies. This could be remedied by establishing a strategy of relating counter-stories that question the dominant narrative. Ultimately, Shah insists on picturebooks that 'serve as genuine, unbiased mirrors and authentic windows' (p. 46) for all children.

Sarah Nesti Willard and Fawzia Gilani-Williams contribute an insight into picturebooks from the United Arab Emirates that are used for educational, especially safeguarding purposes. In their article, 'Child Empowerment and Safeguarding in the UAE: The Role of Picturebooks for Emirati Children', they describe the local evolution of educational picturebooks that are designed to support children's rights in the United Arab Emirates. The two contributors are involved in a governmental project to provide reading materials for this purpose and have authored and illustrated some of the picturebooks they discuss. They register 'a pressing need for publishers to contribute to this genre, ensuring that more safeguarding books are available in schools and libraries' (p. 71). Their approach is based on bibliotherapy and aims at creating resilience and independence when children are confronted with neglect or abuse and encourages perseverance in the young readers to pursue their goals in accordance with Emirati culture.

The challenge of literary reading in lower secondary schools in Switzerland is at the core of the contribution by Sabine Binder and Liana Pirovino, which they address by means of design-based research and by cooperating with an experienced teacher. Their captivating study is based on a language proficiency test and on two teaching sequences of short literary texts, followed by carefully crafted writing activities with the students. These written products generated the data that was subsequently analyzed. The key elements regarding text interpretation refer to higher-level inferencing, the identification of key vocabulary, and a development of empathy. Their results reveal that literary comprehension does not consistently correlate with linguistic achievement (as many teacher educators, at least in Switzerland, still believe), and that it is 'precisely the emotional connection' (p. 98) that frequently permits even learners with limited linguistic skills in English to demonstrate remarkable literary abilities.

Dolores Miralles-Alberola also featured as a presenter at the RiDEL conference in Bodø, and with her article, 'A Pedagogical Framework for North American Indigenous Multimodal Texts

in English Language Teaching', she wants to encourage teachers to experiment with a selection of multimodal texts by Métis and other Indigenous authors across the North American continent. In her contribution, she relies on the Connect Experience Question Respond (CEQR) method, which she explains in detail, and like the authors of the first article, she also refers to the Ridl framework. Miralles-Alberola proposes classroom projects that use an action-oriented approach and are inspired by Indigenous narratives. Such projects can encourage students, for instance, to investigate their relatives and their ancestry, and to register the effects this might evoke on their feelings of belonging, community and identity. She firmly believes that the incorporation of 'Indigenous multimodal texts in education is a transformative step toward advancing social justice' (p. 127).

At the end of this issue, the book review covers a publication by Nicola Daly that addresses questions of language, identity and diversity in picturebooks, as perceived from Aotearoa New Zealand. Afterwards, the Recommended Reads section, introduced by Alyssa Lowery, presents a rich selection of intercultural narratives that are suitable for in-depth learning and that manage, in her words, a successful balancing act of grave and challenging 'themes with the enduring hope that arises from human connection, community, and resistance' (p. 139). In this spirit, Sissil Lea Heggernes endorses the bilingual picturebook *Hear My Voice/Escucha mi Voz* (2021) by Warren Binford and Michael Garcia Bochenek, Tara McIlroy focuses on Hiromi Kawakami's teen novel, *The Nakano Thrift Shop* (2017), Nayr Ibrahim analyzes an English/Arab picturebook, *The Boy and the Wall* (2005) by Amahl Bishara and, last but not least, Alyssa Lowery herself advocates Winifred Conkling's *Sylvia & Aki* (2013).

Finally, there are two farewells: Susanne Reichl, after editing numerous articles and contributing generously to the quality and the success of this journal, has stepped down from the editorial board. A passionate editor, widely read in children's and young adult literature, she provided a clear, critical voice in editorial meetings. The remaining editors are sad to see her leave but, this is the silver lining, Susanne will continue to support CLELE as a peer reviewer. Secondly, the whole editorial team would like to express their deepfelt gratitude towards Joel Guttke, who has served as a fast and reliable copyeditor for the past years. After passing his doctoral exams, he will now move forward with his academic career. All the editors are going to sorely miss his efficient and friendly feedback that helped enormously in the publishing processes of CLELE.

And as the very last matter of this editorial, I would like to thank all who have contributed to making this issue possible!

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