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Perspectives on Children's Literature in English Language Education

Michael C. Prusse

In children's literature scholarship, the candid yet contentious metaphor of 'book people' versus 'child people' (e.g. Hintz, 2020; García-González, 2026) persists. Although this figure of speech has frequently been criticized as stereotypical and certainly does not describe the scholarly community in an entirely accurate fashion, it serves as a rough depiction of how the focus shifts when literature created for children is scrutinized with specific lenses. While research that concentrates on the properties and contents of the books (or other media designed for a child audience), irrespective of their potential application in classrooms, may be identified as the primary goal of the 'book people', the other party is mostly concerned with investigating how children and other readers from various age groups genuinely interact with the content and the properties of such literature (or other media) in diverse educational settings. These two points of view may assume contrasting positions, but there is a great deal of overlapping middle-ground between them. A journal like *Children's Literature in English Language Education* clearly orients the scope of its contents towards the second pole of children's literature research and specifies the context even further by opting for a particular segment of the educational spectrum. This is expressed by means of the second half of the journal's name – 'in English language education' and, consequently, encompasses another distinct camp, the 'language people'.

Traditionally, children's and young adult media in the English-speaking world have had a close link to education, as Mallan (2017) outlines in her contribution to the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, because 'both children's literature and education share a socializing agenda'. Ideologically, this makes sense, because the purpose of texts created for young readers, listeners, and watchers of the relevant age groups, in line with the general goal of schooling, almost unanimously is to transmit certain values. Even when such media are created purely for entertainment, unwittingly they still transport cultural assumptions prevalent in society that are ingested during consumption. This process cannot be purely didactic, because otherwise children's and young adult media would not be consumed with such evident enjoyment. William Golding,

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elucidating on his own narrative strategies in *Lord of the Flies* (1954), argues in 'Fable' that a serious storyteller like himself 'is didactic [and] desires to inculcate a moral lesson' (1965, p. 85). If writers want their readers to swallow the bitter moral pill, according to Golding, a sufficient quantity of sugar-coating is needed. In *Lord of the Flies*, for instance, this is achieved by presenting the moral lesson in the guise of an adventure tale. This perspective on texts for young people is only noticeable when writers are acutely aware and reflective of their role.

Generating enthusiasm by whatever means is essential, as Johnson (2024, p. 4) expounds, because the benefits of reading children's literature at an early age are relevant for language and literacy development. As a result, any analysis in educational contexts needs to clarify, 'how children's literature can bring pleasure to children while also helping them to become knowledgeable citizens of the world' (Leland et al., 2023, p. xii). In a recent comment on picturebooks, Oliver Jeffers similarly argues that such media exert 'their power as a form of storytelling and world building for our young ones' (Jeffers, 2026, p. xiv). While it must not be forgotten that picturebooks 'are meant for readers of all ages' (Zbaracki, 2024, p. 35), they essentially serve as educational tools, both in formal settings such as schools and in more informal constellations in families. Thus, in addition to furthering 'language acquisition, reading comprehension, vocabulary, story patterns, fluency, writing skills and a positive attitude toward reading' (Johnson, 2024, p. 4), texts for children and young adults are typically intended to support them in the process of internalizing the customs, norms, and values of the contemporary society in which they grow up. In other words, 'children's literature performs a specific function *in* education' (Mallan, 2017). The effects of this are further complicated in the setting of an English language teaching classroom, because here intercultural aspects come into play in addition to the dominant position assumed by English in the contemporary media landscape.

In such discussions, there is the danger that some scholars may lose sight of the children themselves, and, in such cases, their perspectives are frequently not included in the picture. A rebellious character like the protagonist of *I Want to Be a Cowgirl* (Willis, 2001) proclaims in the image showing her in the classroom, 'I don't want to be a schoolgirl with my head inside a book' (Willis, 2001, np.). Her protest neatly connects to the constant clashing of contrasting views regarding the purposes of education (and, inherently, the role of children's literature in it). This certainly remains an ideological battlefield with conflicting notions of how children are to be

socialized into their communities. Should adults generally prescribe the conventions (for instance, by means of carefully curated reading) that children must adopt to succeed in the society they have been born or migrated into or, by contrast, should educators perceive children as individuals that ought to develop freely and without constraints? This discussion is not new in children's literature research. One of the key points was already taken up by Nodelman (1992) in his application of postcolonial criticism to developments in children's literature scholarship, specifically the suppression of colonized voices: 'It's fairly obvious that our descriptions of childhood similarly purport to see and speak for children, and that we believe them to be similarly incapable of speaking for themselves' (1992, p. 29). The scholar further raises the point of whether adults 'colonize' children by deciding for them what narratives they ought to encounter, both in family settings and in school. He also insists that the stories eventually selected serve the purpose of regulating children's behaviour, making them 'more passive, more docile, more obedient' (Nodelman, 1992, p. 30). This argument is resumed in a recent contribution on epistemic injustice by García-González when she criticizes 'the persistent assumption that children have little to say about literature' (2026, p. 207). She proceeds to argue that the exclusion of children's perspectives is due to the hierarchy between education that perceives literature as instrumental and the literary approach that focuses on 'aesthetic purity' (García-González, 2026, p. 208) while relegating pedagogical aspects to the sidelines. Ultimately, such debates simply reveal the complexity of how narratives can be read and understood in different contexts and from different positions. Clearly, as Jeffers points out, art has always also a political component, adding that 'It reminds us of hope, beauty, meaning and connection' (2026, 4 November).

In English language teaching (ELT) classrooms, literary texts might secure those feelings of community that frequently suffer in an environment that increasingly encourages children and young adults to withdraw into individual 'bubbles', where there is no room for differing opinions, conflict or contradiction. Creating reflective classroom communities is one of the tasks for teachers when using children's literature in English language teaching. Teachers faced with this challenge might want to remember an experience related by Jeffers (2026, 4 November), when regarding the audience during his latest reading tour. Like the audience at his author readings, children in English language teaching classrooms ought to be 'listening to the same story, laughing at the same moment, recognising something of [them]selves in one another. That doesn't fix everything. But it

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matters'. Such an experience of communal sharing in their English lessons might draw learners out of their comfort zones and could easily inspire them to become more interested in stories and, ultimately develop a taste for reading themselves. When teachers succeed in captivating their students' minds in the classroom by means of an entrancing narrative, they enact the first steps of establishing a reading culture, and this certainly constitutes a relevant and encouraging perspective.

In this edition of *CLELE*, the first critical perspective on teaching children's literature in English language education is provided by Julia Stakhnevich, who proposes complementing established practices of introducing diverse picturebooks into ELT classrooms by harnessing a 'multicultural interpretive lens'. This lens is based on Bishop's eminent metaphor of texts as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, on how readers' interpretations are shaped by the culture they have grown up in, on how the artefacts themselves construct meaning, and on how the relevant text centralizes, marginalizes or ignores perspectives and experiences. The author validates it by means of applying it to an example and uses Aaron Becker's *Journey* for this purpose. This wordless picturebook does not explicitly distinguish itself by focusing on multiculturality but features 'visual and narrative features capable of supporting multicultural inquiry'. Stakhnevich's careful analysis recognizes the importance of the interplay between an evocative picturebook and a critical reader who perceives that 'representation is not the same as cultural understanding'.

While English undoubtedly dominates in several parts of the world as the *lingua franca* of the present times, it is still in the process of extending its reach and is taught in many contexts and in various settings. Yet the interplay with other languages nevertheless remains a decisive issue. In an insightful instance of working with picturebooks with pre-primary English learners in a Croatian kindergarten, Klara Jurić uses David McKee's picturebook series of *Elmer* to stimulate a full-bodied narrative experience that includes scaffold-supported retelling, describing illustrations, and three-dimensional play activities that invite her learners to reconstruct the text. She argues that this setting permits the children in her kindergarten class to assume agency and to develop increasing narrative competencies, both in Croatian and English.

A further perspective on using children's literature in the ELT classroom and the close connection between picturebooks and education is offered by Tomáš Kos in his case study on 'Integrating Storytelling and CLIL in Primary English Teacher Education'. Set within university-based pre-service teacher education, the author describes how two specific courses, part of the

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teaching-degree programme, impact the professional development of one individual student. Prior to the case study, the student teacher professed to an unfamiliarity with teaching, low confidence in interacting with children and in implementing pedagogical practice, as well as having little familiarity with picturebooks in educational contexts. By means of selected interview passages, the contribution documents how the student teacher, after an awkward beginning, gradually accumulates both knowledge and skills, and how she begins to develop techniques to apply picturebooks in CLIL teaching sequences more effectively. The findings of the study also underscore the relevance of picturebooks to link content and language learning while engaging learners in developing empathy, intercultural awareness, and cross-curricular learning.

The penultimate contribution to this issue is the book review by Anke Zondag, who discusses the volume *International Perspectives on Literature in ELT*, edited by Fatma Abubaker, Mark Carver, and Hana El-Badri. As the title proclaims, this collection offers a range of perspectives on teaching literature in ELT from various settings around the globe. Finally, the perspective of the Recommended Reads for English language teaching in this edition reflects aspects of sustainability and the living world. This section is introduced and presented by Alyssa Magee Lowery, who also recommends one picturebook herself, namely *Aviary Wonders Inc*. The other contributions come from Sunny Man Chu Lau, who endorses *Stolen Words*, Meghan Brown, who champions *Life After Whale* and Nina Goga, who writes on *Save Our Forest!*

Last but not least, the editorial team would like to thank everybody who made this issue possible. It is also the moment for us to express our gratitude to Jade Dillon-Craig for her contributions to CLELE as a member of the editorial team over the past two years. It has been a great pleasure to work alongside her. Both her enthusiasm for children's literature as well as her consideration when supporting contributors in the editing process were an immense asset for the team. Fortunately, Jade has agreed to continue to support the journal by acting as a peer reviewer. At the same time, the editorial team has also been extremely fortunate, because after this farewell, we may now extend our heartfelt welcome to Sunny Man Chu Lau from Bishop's University in Quebec, Canada, an experienced scholar, editor and researcher, who has joined the editorial team as a new member. We are very much looking forward to continuing the editorial work for CLELE with her on board and to continue to share with our readers manifold perspectives on children's literature in the context of English language education.

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