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Stories and Authenticity of Experience

Janice Bland

Welcome to the May 2020 issue of *Children's Literature in English Language Education*! Stories have often been described as excellent for language learning – a tool for holistic teaching in the sense of language fully embedded in a meaningful context, while also acknowledging the centrality of narrative for the whole child. Literary texts offer stories that can also widen horizons through new or differently perceived content, supporting intercultural

awareness and learning about others' perspectives, and so helping to develop effective theory of mind (ToM). The development of ToM, a continuous learning process throughout childhood and adolescence, gradually leads to the understanding that others have thoughts, feelings and beliefs that are different from one's own. This educational process leads to the capacity to infer others' mental states and develop a *theory* of another person's thinking and feeling, to develop a *theory* of mind. ToM can be influenced and developed, according to Slaughter (2015, p. 171): 'One environmental variable that is crucial for theory of mind development is the regular exposure to language and conversations about mental states'. Literary texts that include complex characterization, write Kidd, Ongis and Castano, 'can be an exercise in advanced ToM [...by prompting] readers to represent and engage with characters' nuanced mental states' (2016, p. 43).

At a time when we are threatened globally by the health crisis of COVID-19, with its devastating impact particularly on vulnerable social groups and peoples, the building of empathy and understanding becomes ever more central to education. Referring to the Coronavirus pandemic, the need for international cooperation and trust is emphasized by the United Nations Development Programme (2020): 'We must rebuild trust and cooperation, within and among nations, and between people and their governments'. If English is understood as a lingua franca, ELT should be able to support bridge building, while narrative is able to support empathy building. A literary apprenticeship throughout the school years, which the *CLELEjournal* champions, can be a strong support for the development of ToM (Bland 2020, pp. 73-74). This is hugely significant, for 'we don't need to actually live through an event to gain the perspective of someone else's experience. We can identify a potentially disastrous or beneficial event because we can recognise these through story' (Hunte & Golembiewski, 2014, p. 73).

Skela has examined EFL textbooks and revealed the absence of literature, despite 'the proven benefits of using literature in EFL' (2014, p.113). He questions whether 'this neglect of literature is justified or whether literature should be reconsidered for its specific role in culture teaching' (p. 132). However, there is a conundrum in that ELT school curricula

frequently stipulate literary and cultural input from ‘English-speaking countries’. This is a vague concept in the current times, when, as Bertoldi & Bortoluzzi (2019, p. 16) write, ‘English is seen in its “plural” identity of language often directly experienced through media and social media even in countries where it is not the official language of communication’. If we restrict the stories we teach to those originating in English-speaking countries (whatever that means), it can be difficult to avoid what seems to be a kind of Anglo-Saxon cultural colonialism, including the ‘internally-colonized aboriginal peoples’ (Coutts-Smith, 1991, p. 7). EFL course books, for example, often fall into the trap of depicting the ‘undifferentiated native’ (Coutts-Smith, 1991, p. 15), where the *stereotyped* individual is far more likely to be an Aboriginal Australian or a kilted Scot, for example, than the less often stereotyped white Australian or English man or woman (Ahmed & Narcy-Combes, 2011; Bland, 2016, pp. 45-48).

Many works of children’s literature, including the refugee stories in four different formats contributed in this issue’s Recommended Reads by Sónia Ferreirinha, Heidi Haavan Grosch, Liz Hibberd and Rebecca Warren, are the result of extensive research, empathy and commitment, rather than direct personal experience. This does not diminish their value as training for ToM:

The very fact that Theory of Mind can be applied to real people as well as fictional people means that on a profound level, fiction provides an equally ‘real’ milieu for the human brain to develop emotionally and express its full humanity. (Hunte & Golembiewski, 2014, p. 74)

Still, in order to make sure to avoid any unintended emphasis on ‘the element of strangeness itself, the element of *exoticism*’ (Coutts-Smith, 1991, p. 12, italics in the original), the teacher could accompany a literary text of the refugee experience with, for example, a Ted Talk delivered by a speaker with a refugee background, for ‘it is important to extend the range of voices and experiences in the classroom’ (Bland & Mourão, 2017, p. ii). There are many Ted Talks to choose from, compelling stories of refugee experience, representing the many

millions who have been displaced by climate change, social and political instability, economic crisis and war.

Taraneh Matloob Haghanikar's paper, 'The Ethnicity of the Implied Author and the Implied Reader in Multicultural Children's Literature', looks at the contentious issue of whether outsiders to a cultural group can, as writers, achieve cultural accuracy and authenticity. As Matloob Haghanikar writes, this has 'long been the subject of stirred literary debates' (p. 10). Nonetheless, she finds an interesting way into this debate by examining whether the concepts of the implied author and the implied reader are able to contribute more nuanced insights. She uses Meghan Nuttall Sayres' *Anahita's Woven Riddle* and *Night Letter* as a case study on the portrayal of Persian culture by an author from the USA.

It is interesting that it is relatively seldom considered whether those who author, illustrate and publish ELT course books, which are almost ubiquitously used in schools, create culturally accurate and sensitive texts, illustrations and photos of the diverse ethnicities, different communities and cultural groups portrayed in the books. This is all the more problematic in that for students (and also for teachers?) 'the textbook represents an authoritative source of information whose truth value often goes unquestioned' (Skela, 2014, p. 122). Course books for language learning, just like any texts, will have an ideological impact on the reader (Gray, 2016, p. 99).

Maria Eisenmann and Theresa Summer, with their paper 'Multimodal Literature in ELT: Theory and Practice', introduce five pedagogical principles for integrating multimodal texts in ELT that will support language learners in developing 'vital multimodal literacy skills' (p. 71). This paper also reflects on the authenticity of texts, and how the learners themselves can authenticate a text through their engagement and motivated interaction with the text. Instead of relying on the pedagogical dialogues often found in course books for language learning, the authors argue that choosing 'a genuine or authentic text that is relevant to the learners' world' (p. 61), will allow learners to interact more meaningfully with the story.

Britta Padberg-Schmitt studies the opportunities of audiobooks in her paper, 'Increasing Reading Fluency in Young Adult Readers Using Audiobooks'. The author reports

on a case study on self-selected extensive reading and extensive listening which produced very promising results, including achieving the goal that 'reading fluency and the *joy of reading* could be developed in a hesitant, challenged reader' (p. 45).

Sandie Mourão has contributed a comprehensive review of the new edition of *Children's Picturebooks. The Art of Visual Storytelling* (Salisbury & Styles, 2020), detailing the updates in the second edition, and whether it might be relevant for the language learning classroom. This review ends the 8.1 issue of the *CLELEjournal*, with its particular focus on multimodal and multicultural texts.

Many thanks to all who have contributed to this issue!

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