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The Plurality of *English Subject Pedagogy* – a Complex Research Field

Janice Bland

In this issue of *Children’s Literature in English Language Education* journal, the articles focus on children’s literature in ELT in European school settings, namely in Germany, Norway and

Sweden. The article contributors are university teacher educators, supporting student teachers in learning their craft as ongoing English teachers. This field within the wide area of teacher education is called *engelsk fagdidaktikk* in Norway, *engelska ämnesdidaktik* in Sweden and *Englische Fachdidaktik* in Germany. In international literature, the term *didactics* is rather seldom used due to the historical negative connotations of ‘didactic’ in English-speaking countries, with the result that ‘didactics has a negative valuation in the Anglo-American mind’ (Hamilton, 1999, p. 135). Instead the term *English subject pedagogy* is more likely to be employed. According to information on the Department of Education website, University of Oxford, subject pedagogy is a research area that ‘relates to developing, understanding, and evaluating the effectiveness of research informed ways to promote powerful pedagogical practices in different subject areas and across levels of education (including teacher education)’. Rindal and Brevik (2019, p. 9) demarcate this academic field ‘as research, theory and applications relevant for English as a school subject. This includes research and applications in primary and secondary school, as well as in higher education, including teacher education for future teachers of English’.

The recognition that the field of subject pedagogy is central to teacher education is steadily growing (Niemi, 2016, p. 29). But there are still problems worldwide regarding the recognition of subject pedagogy as a research field, particularly in English for young learners in grades 1–7 (Bland, 2019). This is not helped by the lack of a universally accepted name for the field, and the point that teacher educators at university are sometimes ‘cut off from their central mission, the world of schools and the work of teachers’ (Moon, 2016, p. 8).

English subject pedagogy is characterized by many kinds of plurality, including: multiple approaches to teaching language, literature and interculturality, multiple Englishes and English literatures, multimodality and multiple literacies, multiple sociocultural identities of learners in the classroom, language learners’ multiple cognitive styles and learning strategies, as well as plurilingualism and multiple educational needs. The *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages* (Newby, Allan, Fenner, Jones, Komorowska & Soghikyan,

2007) describes seven areas that are essential to research and reflect on in teacher education for language teachers:

1. Context, including the curriculum and the educational contribution of the school subject
2. Methodology, including the *how* of teaching speaking, writing, listening, reading and intercultural learning
3. Resources, including a critical consideration of coursebooks and other media, library and internet access and use
4. Lesson planning, including identifying learning objectives
5. Conducting a lesson, including content and interaction with learners
6. Independent learning, including project work, extra-curricular activities and learner autonomy
7. Assessment of learning, including designing assessment tools

Although this list does not cover the full breadth of English subject pedagogy, it highlights the centrality of context and the plural nature of teacher education, and ‘that education is in fact a highly complex phenomenon’ (Byram, 2020, p. 165). Subject pedagogy is a multi-faceted field requiring multi-disciplinary expertise and interdisciplinary research (Sjøberg, 2019). Consequently, it is a field that is inherently characterized by plurality, diversity and dialogue. Many voices are necessary for effective dialogue, in order to introduce new perspectives in a dialogic process, each responding to and building on the other, while developing understandings of complex issues. Interdisciplinary challenges that are best approached dialogically, such as interculturality, diversity, literacy, language debates and environmental problems, are often addressed both in English subject pedagogy and children’s literature research, the two fields that this journal represents.

Unfortunately for education, social media has the tendency to close down all-important *exploratory* social interactions. Online exchanges tend to be uncritically cumulative rather than critical, exploratory, and dialogic. Yet it is important to increase exploratory dialogue in order to actively listen to other voices and ideas expressed, expand understandings and the

potential for change. Dialogic learning focuses on increasing awareness rather than knowledge accumulation – as knowledge will always be based on a limited selection of evidence. At the same time, making informed choices is more important than ever, and education needs to support students' developing agency, and their trying on other perspectives until this becomes, over time, 'a habit of mind that can help students acknowledge that other ways of understanding the world do exist and are worth considering or at least recognizing, even if they choose not to agree with those perspectives' (Thein, Beach & Parks, 2007, p. 55).

The Recommended Reads in this issue, introduced by David Valente, showcases the opportunity to decentre whiteness in ELT and focus on children's ethnic identities that too often remain invisible in the classroom. True to the concept of many voices, and also #ownvoices, the authors of this issue's Recommended Reads, as well as the contributors Amanda Jane Hawthorne, Rashi Rohatgi, Mauricio Souza Neto, Jacob Vinodh Philip and Laura McWilliams, together represent the plurality of voices that contribute both to the world of children's literature and to ELT.

The first article in the issue, contributed by Nayr Ibrahim, interrogates the monolingual paradigm – the imaginary that there can be a single native language representing a national community. Ibrahim investigates the representation of cultural and linguistic diversity in the bilingual picturebook, *Marisol MacDonald Doesn't Match / Marisol MacDonald no combina*, and considers its potential for teaching language awareness as well as multilingual-multicultural awareness. The paper argues that the intercultural English lesson must become 'a trampoline for critical discussions about cultural and linguistic diversity, making languages visible, welcome and a factor in children's well-being' (p. 31). Ibrahim also refers to the interesting concept of transknowledging, which might help to redress the power asymmetry in education. The plurality of languages in our classrooms is complemented by the rich, but so often unrecognized, funds of knowledge that minoritized students bring with them. Kathleen Heugh maintains (2019, n/a) that teachers who take on board both 'translanguaging and transknowledging especially for students from Indigenous, minority, and refugee communities

are likely to strengthen inclusion, social cohesion and the wellbeing of all students (both the migrant or minority students and the more settled mainstream students)'.

Annett Kaminski's paper deals with a multisensory approach to English learning in the primary classroom, involving singing, taking part in an obstacle course in the school gym and art work. The multi-session teaching and cross-curricular activities are inspired by Catherine Rayner's picturebook *Augustus and His Smile*. Kaminski writes that most communication 'can be considered multimodal, in the sense that meaning is not only transmitted by use of a single mode but more often than not several different modes, such as sound, music, image, gesture and movement' (p. 42). The multiple skills required for such an inherently plural approach, and the many *puzzle pieces* – mentioned by several contributors in this issue – that belong to effective and motivating ELT, are a reminder of the plurality of skills that teaching English to young learners requires (Bland, 2019; Ellis & Knagg, 2013; Enever, 2013; Jin & Cortazzi, 2018; Rich, 2018; Rixon, 2017).

A plethora of content-focused and language-focused activities abound in Sharon Ahlquist's study on embedding language development tasks in ELT based on Roald Dahl's chapter book, *The Magic Finger*. Ahlquist documents how, with task variety through individual, pair and group work, many children appeared to have spoken more English through their engagement with an authentic book. Also here, variety and plurality are pivotal, and the author's conclusions point to even more opportunities for a range of tasks around the text to enhance the 'affective, linguistic and cognitive benefits from working with authentic literature in the young learner classroom' (p. 83).

Christine Hélot has contributed the book review of *Children's Literature in a Multiliterate World*, edited by Nicola Daly and Libby Limbrick. Decentring from one's own perspective is once again key in this work, nourished by a life-long love of reading. Emilia Luukka's Recommended Venue contribution on The Finnish Institute of Children's Literature, highlights in addition the breadth and richness of the field of children's literature scholarship.

Many thanks to all who have contributed to this issue!

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