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## **Interculturality in ELT**

**Janice Bland**

Welcome to the anniversary issue of *Children's Literature in English Language Education*!

To celebrate ten years of the journal, editors Janice Bland, David Valente and Susanne Reichl sent out a Call for Papers to invite contributions on 'children's literature as intercultural catalyst in English language education'. In response, the articles in this issue deal in diverse ways with topics from this ever more relevant area of English language teaching (ELT). The journal *Children's Literature in English Language Education* has from the outset been highly international. The contributions in this issue are from very different cultural contexts: Japan, Spain, India, Argentina, Portugal, Norway, France, Germany, the USA and the UK (take a look at <http://clelejournal.org/news/> for a complete list of contributions published in CLELE over the last ten years). ELT is all about communication in English – increasingly understood as a lingua franca that belongs to vastly diverse areas of the globe – therefore it makes complete sense for a journal focusing on ELT to attract contributions with experiences from different corners of the world and a wide range of cultural contexts, settings and ideologies.

The issue of interculturality is garnering more and more attention in education research and ELT scholarship. Until very recently, the study and learning of English was often associated with BANA countries – Britain, Australasia and North America – see the CLELE editorial 'The global reach of children's literature and ELT – from BANA countries to the majority world' (Bland & Mourão, 2018). But this association with just a few English-speaking countries strongly encouraged 'native-speakerism', an English native-speaker hegemony that seriously undervalued cultural identities in hugely different cultural contexts where English is spoken. The concept of interculturality is characterized by its plurality. It relies on a fluid notion of culture and cultural diversity and rejects the idea of whole nations embodying frozen one-dimensional expressions of culture. This is important as it still happens, both in ELT and children's literature, that stereotypes are reinforced exactly when we are hoping to avoid essentialist thinking – the tendency to see the essence of cultural groups or even whole nations as fixed for all members of that group in all places and at all times. The notion of culture is anything but static, it is vibrant and dynamic.

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Even cultural expressions that in different ways are ubiquitous across nearly all cultural groups – such as story, art and music – constantly shift and transform, while still remaining universally characteristic of human cultures.

UNESCO (2017, p. 8) defines interculturality as signifying ‘the existence and equitable interaction of diverse cultures and the possibility of generating shared cultural expressions through dialogue and mutual respect’. The terms ‘tolerance’ and ‘respect’ are nearly always connected to the umbrella term of interculturality, but the notion itself is not fixed throughout global academic discourse. This is, then, very far removed from the older, (un)comfortably familiar phenomenon of discussing anecdotes and images of, say, London or New York in ELT coursebooks, a practice that is more likely to reinforce stereotypes than challenge unexamined beliefs (e.g., who determined what cultural phenomena to include and exclude?) and respect otherness. The coursebook authors who wrote the texts and chose the photos are probably situated within the value system of the country publishing the teaching materials, severely limiting the opportunity to extend the range of diverse, often marginalized voices and experiences in the classroom.

With children's literature – also a polysemous notion – we have wider opportunities to expand the range of voices, or as Kathy Short puts it (2011, p. 50) to extend ‘children's life spaces through inquiries that take them outside the boundaries of their lives to other places, times, and ways of living’. As the contributors to this issue show, entering carefully crafted storyworlds can be very effective for exercising empathy and theory of mind while renegotiating ideas and perspective-taking by journeying through story. The enormous breadth of choices of literary texts (the complexity of text selection for ELT is a recurring theme in this issue) lends children's literature in the classroom a depth that coursebook snapshots of other cultural contexts, forever frozen in their ‘foreignness’, cannot possibly achieve.

The first article, ‘Picturebooks as Vehicles: Creating Materials for Pedagogical Action’, contributed by Valente and Mourão, focuses on intercultural citizenship education and professional development with picturebooks scrupulously selected for the purpose. The paper records the highlights and challenges of an in-service and pre-service development course which formed part of an Erasmus+ project. The detailed descriptions and reflections on the course, which took place in different European settings, provide rich evidence for the reader of the

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complex, exacting and demanding nature of quality teacher development.

The next article deliberates on widening children's horizons: 'Opening Windows to the World: Developing Children's Intercultural Understanding through Picturebooks in Japan'. Authors Hasegawa, MacFarlane, Sedaghat and Masatsugu share with us their explorations in different Japanese settings: a preschool, a state primary school and an out-of-school picturebook read-aloud group. As with the previous paper, picturebooks are carefully selected to support a deeper understanding of aspects of the children's own and others' cultural identities. For, as the authors report, 'Japanese schools are becoming more culturally diverse [and] it is increasingly important for educators to give learners opportunities to learn about cultural diversity and engage with different cultural groups'.

The contribution that follows is by a team working in a library-based organization, Bookworm, in Goa, India. The team leaders Thomas, Rao and Noronha, together with their 11- to 15-year-old students, contemplate complex themes around ideological control and persecution sparked by a reading of *The Book Thief* (2005). 'Reading Risky Texts – Using a Guided Reading Approach to Introduce Interculturality and Ideology in India', demonstrates how a multimodal approach may lead to an in-depth reading of a young adult or crossover novel against the landscape of contemporary Indian politics.

The setting of 'Storytelling Projects on Native American Children's Literature for Primary English Education: A Case Study' is teacher education in Alicante, Spain. Here, the author Miralles-Alberola recounts a pedagogic experiment that allowed student teachers to explore very different texts from the canonical books typically used in English language education with student teachers in the Spanish context. Introducing a spectrum of Native American children's literature to her student teachers, the author evidences how tools to create course syllabi for critical literacy and intercultural citizenship were developed.

The last article in this special issue focuses on 'Integrating Environmental Awareness in ELT Through Picturebooks'. The recent wildfire devastation in Argentina has been catastrophic, and authors Cad, Liruso and Requena exemplify an approach that introduces ideas about environmental citizenship already in the ELT primary context. As human activity causes damage to the environment on a global scale, and developing human relations across borders is key for an increase of global respect for nonhuman nature, it is possible to create strong arguments for

addressing the anthropogenic impact on the environment – and promoting much needed solutions – within the area of interculturality.

Also related to the matter of this issue, Alan Pulverness contributes a book review of *Compelling Stories for English Language Learners – Creativity, Interculturality and Critical Literacy* (Bland, 2022). In his review, Pulverness highlights the dialogic aspect of story, that engagement with story can support interculturality and diversity competence, 'through engagement with a wide diversity of voices from other times and other places'.

Reviews editor David Valente introduces the Recommended Reads for this special anniversary issue, highlighting how the reads chosen by Gail Ellis, Sandie Mourão, Janice Bland and Griselda Beacon 'put forth a compelling argument for literature as a vehicle to expand cultural boundaries and learners' intercultural perspectives in ELT'. The recommendations feature works for children and adolescents by the great English illustrator and author, Raymond Briggs, who passed away in August 2022, as well as the outstanding author Salman Rushdie, who was viciously attacked in the same month but thankfully survived, both of whose writings problematize the challenging issue of power relations and (often quiescent) ideological stances in fantastic ways (in all senses of the word). Finally, the Recommended Resource, contributed by Kirsten Birsak de Jersey, focuses on the open access teaching resources known as ICEKits, which were created for use with children aged 5-12 years in connection with the recently completed project *Intercultural Citizenship Education through Picturebooks in Early English Language Learning* (ICEPELL), which is also the setting for article 1.

Many thanks to all who have contributed to this issue!

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