



Michael C. Prusse & Nikola Mayer (Eds.)

***This is My Story: Biographical and Autobiographical
Narratives in English Language Teaching***

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Reviewer: Sissil Lea Heggernes

Introduction

Donat Bräm's cover illustration of *This is My Story* humorously depicts the potential for miscommunication through differently shaped speech and thought bubbles. The illustration foreshadows the centrality of perspective-taking throughout the volume, a thread that Daniel Ammann continues in his Foreword as he untangles the elements of powerful storytelling and the role of personal experience. He claims the key word is relevance and posits that 'there is no need to draw a clear line between fiction and nonfiction' (p. 8). Then, with the idea of humans as storytelling animals, Prusse and Mayer's introduction explores people's fascination with reading and telling stories. The editors show how stories can be linked to an author's vocation and an activist stance. As stories confront readers with new perspectives, they are essential for learning, particularly in English language teaching, where widening perspectives can help enhance pupils' narrative competence and enable them to slide through the proverbial glass door.

Chapter-by-Chapter Walkthrough

'To teach or not to teach Shakespeare', that is the question. According to the first chapter, the answer is to engage pupils in the historical lacuna of Shakespeare's biography through formats targeted towards a young audience. Susanne Reichl eloquently demonstrates the relevance of time travel stories about Shakespeare for ELT, arguing that the void around his biography can stimulate pupils' curiosity. These stories are essentially 'coming of age' adventure stories in which a young

protagonist is sent on a mission to save Shakespeare for future generations. In so doing, they overcome challenges, grow, and gain agency. The suggested activities for ELT can help to foster pupils' sense of identity, literary and language learning.

Britta Viebrock's chapter demonstrates that film literacy requires critical and aesthetic competences. Critical competence is particularly central when watching biographical films that may blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. Viewers' lack of contextual knowledge can lead them to believe that biographical films are 'real', as was the case when Viebrock's pupils watched the award-winning New Zealand film *The Dark Horse* (2014), directed by James Napier Robertson. The commercial impact on filmmaking is consequently a vital part of critical film literacy. Viebrock suggests useful tasks to develop critical and aesthetic competences based on her model of film literacy but does not report on the activities she carried out with her pupils or their English development. Nevertheless, the chapter provides a clear rationale for including biographical films to develop film literacy in ELT.

In the next chapter, Daniel Becker and Frauke Matz account for the differences between analogue and digital storytelling, with a focus on the YouTube format *Storytime*, which 'blurs the boundaries between author and viewer' (p. 60). This requires a multiliteracies pedagogy, which moves learning from a competence-based to a process-orientated focus. By drawing on Kalantzis and Cope's (2005) learning-by-design model, they suggest how English language pupils can engage with digital storytelling and develop their active participation and criticality. Next, Nicole Frey Büchel's chapter on women's scientific autobiographies for secondary ELT follows. Her fascinating analysis of three scientific autobiographies reveals how the narrative structure of a coming-of-age novel is used to make a feminist statement. Such novels traditionally include a male protagonist, but here the same structure describes the upbringing and professional development of female scientists. Büchel convincingly demonstrates how animals and plants can represent identity and be 'object[s] of scientific interest' (p. 75). Lastly, she suggests activities, such as writing scientific autobiographies with an animal as the protagonist. Creating literature can make it easier for pupils to convey personal issues, Büchel states, as they can make use of analogy, and her suggestions may help teachers plan interdisciplinary projects and motivate pupils to choose STEM subjects.

Michael C. Prusse's chapter discusses the biographies of migrants and refugees and how to navigate the challenges of representation. Prusse approaches the topic with a focus on colonial fiction, such as Kipling and Conrad. Then building on a corpus of refugee stories, mainly by Western authors and illustrators, he thoughtfully engages with the issues of representation and authenticity. Rather than seeking simple answers to difficult questions, Prusse provokes readers to reflect on the potential victimization and glorification of refugee protagonists. A central question is whether it is 'not in the very nature of fiction that it imagines the world from perspectives that differ from the ones of its authors or readers' (p. 98). The question remains as to whether authors of the 21st century will be judged as harshly by future readers as colonial writers are today.

While some earlier chapters outline activities in rather broad strokes, Nikola Mayer's chapter includes several well-designed activities such as avatars crafted with a graphic memoir design toolkit. These activities are applicable in the classroom and can help to enhance pupils' multimodal literacy. At the outset, Mayer investigates terminology related to graphic memoirs and outlines an interesting theoretical background on comics. Subsequently, she demonstrates how pupils can gain a deeper understanding of themselves and others, in addition to genre and format awareness, through creating and analyzing their own graphic memoirs. I would include this chapter in the curriculum for my pre-service English teachers and recommend it for in-service teachers and scholars who want to expand their understanding of working with multimodal texts.

Next, three modern graphic novels act as the point of entry for Lynn Williams's chapter. These stories all feature protagonists' attempts at better understanding their environments and themselves. Such themes can be linked to work 'with (auto)biographical storytelling in the upper secondary ELT classroom' (p. 127), and Williams shares rationales for using graphic novels and highlights key features that pupils should learn about. The presentation of such features could have been enhanced with examples from the graphic novels in the following part of the chapter. Here, Williams shows how the focal graphic novels can be used in upper secondary ELT classes to raise pupils' awareness of identity and self.

After several theoretical contributions, it was refreshing to read a chapter on a classroom project. The aim was to demonstrate how young English second language pupils engaged with picturebook biographies. Laura Loder Buechel presents activities selected according to anti-bias criteria with lesson plans and classroom materials mapped to social justice standards. Buechel

argues that by reading widely about the world and building on pupils' previous knowledge, they can develop their reading skills to a greater extent than focusing on 'deciphering, decoding and reading strategies' (p. 139). The chapter raises interesting questions about stereotyping and tokenism which may be challenging for children to discuss in English, and as Buchel acknowledges, engaging with activism is perhaps more accessible through the language of schooling.

The penultimate chapter draws on classroom data to exemplify how a high-quality picturebook can support children's abilities to identify different perspectives in a foreign language. Regula Fuchs and Kristel Ross describe the affordances of the narrative structure and picture-text interanimation in *The Snail and the Whale* (Julia Donaldson & Axel Scheffler, 2004) for language learning. They also provide a useful framework that can help teachers to conduct picturebook read-alouds in the classroom. The transcripts of teacher-pupil dialogues from Swiss classrooms are of particular interest, as they reveal how teachers scaffolded third and fifth graders' attempts to express their ideas. However, a sharper focus could have provided more in-depth discussion of how teachers can support young pupils' language learning through stories. Nevertheless, the authors' insights into young pupils' dialogues around picturebooks are valuable for readers.

Finally, the volume comes full circle with an essayistic chapter by Erik Altorfer, who returns to the questions of truth and fiction, the role of stories, biography and autobiography through the experiences of young, budding writers. Altorfer's reflections on the nature of (auto)biographical writing link the works of celebrated writers to his experiences during writing workshops for young writers, many from refugee backgrounds. The powerful descriptions of the struggles of young refugees when reconciling a perceived duty to tell the truth with creative experimentation when fictionalizing their lives are illuminating. Altorfer reveals how writing based on personal stories can be therapeutic, empowering, and identity-forming, while also contributing to the development of an activist stance.

Final Thoughts

The power of stories and storytelling in ELT is convincingly argued throughout this volume. Based on reports from my student teachers and in-service teachers, this argument still needs to be made. Whether due to time constraints or doubts about the value of stories for learning, pupils who are

learning English still read authentic stories more rarely than the texts in ELT coursebooks. Moreover, teachers need increased guidance in the myriad of ways to engage pupils in multimodal texts, which is central to most of the chapters in the book. As such, this volume is a very welcome and accessible contribution that offers readers a sound balance of practical and theoretical insights.

Reference

Kalantzis, M., & Cope, B. (2005). *Learning by design*. Victorian Schools Innovation Commission.

Sissil Lea Heggernes is an Associate Professor at Oslo Metropolitan University, Norway. Her PhD study from 2021 explores English second language students' intercultural learning through texts, with a particular focus on the role of picturebooks. Her research interests include children's and young adult literature, intercultural learning, critical thinking, reading, dialogic learning, and language teachers' professional development.