The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners

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Learning through literature

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17

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Introduction

English language *and* literature teaching to young learners has received far too little attention to date from applied linguists and scholars of children's literature. This is surprising, for English language teaching (ELT) as a primary-school subject and as a teaching medium is expanding rapidly on a global scale, and both language and content are involved in all holistic, content-based approaches to language education. This chapter is based on the assumption that waiting until language learners are old enough to include adult literature in the language-learning setting creates a delay in students' development in the literacy spectrum, affective and cognitive development, as well as intercultural learning, that may be difficult to reverse. Additionally, literary texts offer contextualised access to stretches of authentic discourse that sensitise learners to grammatical relations and the semantic associations of words as well as formulaic sequences; and should be included in the input as early as possible (Hoey 2004, Kersten 2015), due to the implicit learning mechanisms and tolerance of ambiguity that characterise young language learners (Bland 2015b, Murphy 2014).

The rationale for teaching with children's literature includes perspectives from applied linguistics, as literary texts can support learners in the development of rich lexical representations and can promote creative reading and writing in English (Maley 2013). However, children's literature offers a valuable study in its own right, as well as an educational benefit – by means of windows into other worlds (Bishop 1990), intercultural understanding (Bland 2016), aesthetic pleasure (Nodelman and Reimer 2003), visual literacy (Arizpe et al. 2014), critical literacy (Bland 2013) and, an important skill in an increasingly rapid world, deep reading (Nikolajeva 2014). This chapter focuses on using English-language literary texts that were not published for ELT or any educational context specifically, and are aimed at children, not teenagers or adults. My examples of using literature in the classroom are taken from ELT settings with young learners, mostly in Europe.

Historical perspectives

Before the development of communicative language teaching (CLT) syllabuses, canonical English literature for adults had a privileged place in language teaching (Hall 2015,

p. 2). CLT signalled a move away from English literature to a more functional focus on oral communication. However, since the cultural turn in the last decades of the twentieth century, the understanding of literature has been re-conceptualised to become broader and pluralistic – the study of a wide variety of texts. Both for adults and children we now refer to world literatures in English, and the inclusion of literature in ELT may embrace postcolonial and migrant literature in an almost overwhelming array of formats. It is now understood that literary texts form a gateway to new perspectives and intercultural awareness – in the case of English through the many literatures in English from nations throughout the world. Further still, attention has shifted from a literary product to the communicative process of reception: 'Analysis has been extended to all texts as cultural products, with the notion of culture seen as increasingly dynamic and co-constructed interactively, as an emergent and specifically linguistic process rather than as a completed product' (Carter 2015, p. 316).

With the coming of the digital age it became clear that literacy in a wide sense is of pivotal educational concern, with the understanding that 'the complexities of literacy are linked to the patterns of social practices and social meanings. From now on there will be multiple literacies' (Meek 1993, p. 96). The need for a wider understanding of literacy is ever more apparent in the twenty-first century, with the hugely influential role of unsubstantiated claims often made through texts on social media, and the dangers of 'a culture where a few claims on Twitter can have the same credibility as a library full of research' (Coughlan 2017). Consequently many educators, particularly among those responsible for teacher education of ELT with young learners and teenagers, refer to multiple literacies – not only learning to read and write (functional literacy), but also learning to use the Web wisely and skilfully for information (information literacy), learning to read the aesthetic nature of a literary text (literary literacy), learning to read all texts critically and understanding their manipulative power (critical literacy) and also reading pictures for information both deeply and critically (visual literacy). The habit of literature is considered to be a social good, as an opening to lifelong learning – teaching multiple literacies in English as well as in the majority language extends opportunities for achieving a citizenry that reads to expand their knowledge of the world. At the same time, there is huge interest now in all teachers (also in countries where English is the majority language) being able to work on literacy development with linguistically diverse children – as plurilingualism in classrooms becomes increasingly common and pluricultural competence increasingly respected. Nonetheless, the move towards including children's literature in language education with young learners follows several huge strides behind the larger development over the last fifty years that Enever (2015, p. 13) calls 'a general trend worldwide towards introducing the teaching of additional languages from the very earliest phases of compulsory schooling'.

Children's literature is notoriously difficult to define, and furthermore is changing rapidly. Whereas the picturebook has been gaining in popularity for primary ELT for several decades: 'a journey that began with the communicative language teaching approach in the 1970s' (Mourão and Bland 2016, p. ii), the story app – sometimes called a digital picturebook – is a newly developed multimodal format. The concept of multimodality 'characterizes any kind of text which draws from language, sound, music, images or other graphic elements in various combinations' (Wales 2011, p. 279). This definition would include most texts on the Web as well as film, so that children's out-of-school reading and listening is increasingly multimodal and very often in English. This is hugely advantageous for second language acquisition – yet suggests all the more the need for some in-depth critical literacy with literary texts in the classroom.

I will distinguish a number of formats of children's literature, with some examples of when and how they are employed in ELT in various European countries. It is useful to distinguish format from genre: 'Genre is a fluid category, of course, but it refers primarily to *the type of story content* the reader will experience – historical fiction, fantasy, romance, and so on – rather than to *how* that story will be delivered. And the *how* is exactly what the format is all about' (Oziewicz 2018, p. 30).

Multimodal formats of children's literature

Picturebooks. This is the format that is currently perhaps best known and most widely used in ELT with young learners. Indeed the picturebook seems to have become the default young-learner narrative format, as studies focusing on story-based pedagogy for young learners (e.g., Ellis and Brewster 2014, Hsiu-Chih 2008 and Yanase 2018) most often refer to picturebooks rather than other forms of narrative, such as chapter books, graded readers or oral storytelling. The picturebook has received in-depth critical attention from literary and education scholars, to the extent that it has been called 'one of the richest and potentially most rewarding of literary forms' (Hunt 2001, p. 291). Usually fiction but including non-fiction, whether a traditional or postmodern narrative (such as when the pictures and words tell somewhat different stories), the picturebook is essentially defined by the interaction between the words and pictures as being vital to the meaning. This leads to complex opportunities for discovery and interpretation of meanings that are created by the combination of pictures, verbal text, creative typography and design, as well as 'the drama of the turning of the page' (Bader 1976, p. 1). Consequently, to emphasise its compound nature, the format is now frequently spelled as a compound noun: *picturebook*. As an artefact rich in meaning and dialogic opportunities, the picturebook can offer ideal matter for ELT with young learners, and increasingly scholars working in this area of ELT encourage teachers 'to select picturebooks at the more complex end of the picture-word dynamic, so that learners are challenged to think and fill the gaps between the pictures and the words' (Mourão 2016, p. 39).

Graphic novels

This format is swiftly gaining attention due to a sudden surge in high quality, seriously themed, award-winning graphic novels in recent years. Whereas the picturebook is mostly, but not exclusively, aimed at children in primary or even pre-primary school, the graphic novel is more likely to be shared with higher grades. However, the format is also popular with young learners due to the similarity of graphic novels and comics. Sarah Garland's graphic novel *Azzi in Between* (2012) can, for example, be shared with children aged eight and nine in an ELT context in Germany (Bergner 2016). Although the graphic novel format is particularly fluid, variously sharing features with comics, the picturebook or with film (Oziewicz 2018), it is generally a novel-length narrative distinguished by the inclusion of panels, gutters, speech balloons and captions. The size and shape of panels and gutters – the space between panels – are significant. It is due to these gaps, 'a silent dance of the seen and the unseen' (McCloud 1993, p. 92), that active participation is required as students mentally construct the relationships between the stopped moments of each panel. They close these gaps in their imagination, in shared booktalk or, for example, in creative writing. Many educators have now discovered the value of the graphic novel: 'Teachers use graphic novels because they *enable* the struggling reader, *motivate* the reluctant one, and *challenge* the

high-level learner' (McTaggart 2008, p. 32, emphasis in the original). The potential of the graphic novel in the ELT classroom similarly stretches from a support for reluctant second language (L2) readers to a challenge for high-level L2 readers (Ludwig and Pointner 2013).

Story apps

The story app is a new format that is neither a book nor a film but has some similarities with both. As Al-Yaqout and Nikolajeva (2015), referring to picturebooks, write: 'Tapping, touching and tracing become embodied actions to reading and viewing that enhances the user's affective engagement'. Story apps take these interactive elements in a different direction with reader-activated animation, music and background noises as well as audio narration that can be activated by the reader. Integrated choices and tasks activated by the learner clicking on an action hotspot ensure high involvement, and sometimes feedback is given on the action taken.

In a recent study with 8 to 11 year-old young learners using story apps in pairs in an ELT extensive-reading setting, the researchers identified 'four main elements that helped the students derive meaning from the texts: audio narration, animation and sound, vocabulary support and readers' participation and co-creation' (Brunsmeier and Kolb 2017, pp. 7–8). The young learners had control of the reading process – the opportunity to hear the story narrated aloud, while reading along quietly and deciding on the pace of the storytelling. As such, story apps seem to be highly useful for extensive, autonomous reading – which is particularly difficult in ELT with young learners – as well as extensive listening. However, the action hotspots, offering for example a game or reader-activated vocabulary support, also caused distraction. Such action hotspots frequently 'trigger childrens' curiosity but lead them away from the story without contributing any useful information to the plot' (Brunsmeier and Kolb 2017, p. 14).

Performative formats

Playground and nursery rhymes

Always popular with young learners, there is a wealth of material for rhythmic and participatory pleasure in the ELT classroom to satisfy children's need for rhythm and pleasure in rhyme. Playground rhymes – shared amongst children at play, and consequently often with rather 'naughty' content – may be counting-out chants, skipping and clapping songs, jokes and riddles. Well-known contemporary poets, such as Roger McGough and Michael Rosen (Children's Laureate 2007–2009), have successfully emulated the strong rhythms, fun and naughtiness of playground rhymes, with their vibrant poetry for performance that may also plunge into serious themes – highly meaningful for teachers as well as their students.

Nursery rhymes are usually short, popularly transmitted poems that are familiar worldwide in English-speaking countries in families, pre-school and primary school. With their vivid characterization of comic characters – often helped by lively illustrations – they aid visualization of language. An example of a favourite anonymous nursery rhyme is:

> Hey diddle, diddle!
> The cat and the fiddle,
> The cow jumped over the moon;
> The little dog laughed

> To see such sport,
> And the dish ran away with the spoon.

The rhyme seems nonsensical, yet in its few brief catchy lines, it creates not only a vivacious personification of the animals, the musical cat, sportive cow and the laughing dog, but also invites the listener to infer a love story to the personified dish and the spoon. However – in the true spirit of children's literature – the fun is due not only to the pleasure of playing with words, but also to the images that often stay in children's memory long after they have forgotten any particular illustration.

These archived mental images are initiated by the humour of pictures children have seen – 'Hey diddle, diddle' illustrators invariably show the dish and spoon running away hand in hand, the dog laughing merrily, the cow mid-jump over the moon, a moon that is traditionally given a smiling face (see Figure 17.1). Clearly visualization of language is strongly supported: mental images that develop while listening or reading may enter an archive of images in memory along with the verbal text (Bland 2015d). The larger-than-life characters may become lifelong friends, and this in itself is a useful introduction to the pleasure of story. The Web provides both rhymes and images that are in the public domain. It may also supply invented interpretations that are not supported by scholarship. Nursery rhymes are more important to children as language play – and for L1 and L2 literacy development – than for any historical meanings (see also Bland 2013, pp. 156–187).

Oral storytelling

Oral storytelling is an important vehicle for ideas generally, and a specific skill for teachers of English with young learners. Stories have been used with all age groups to pass on ideas, organise information and lighten the dark long before most children had the opportunity to attend school and learn to read and write. Young learners in ELT contexts usually learn to read English fluently a number of years after they have acquired functional literacy in the majority language. At school they will hopefully also have the important opportunity to learn functional literacy in their home language, which can differ from the majority language in many contexts worldwide. English may then be the third or even fourth language – and the time allotted to ELT very brief. This time is well spent in the earliest years of ELT by listening to and interacting with stories well told, before the children are reading in English.

The stories we tell to young learners are intrinsically motivating; they are often connected to 'the warmth of early childhood experiences' (Cameron 2001, p. 160). Short oral tales are, for example, fables, legends and folk tales from around the world. One of the defining characteristics of what was once *only* oral literature – tales told by word of mouth – is that there is no one 'correct' or authoritative version (Zipes 2004, p. 118). Nonetheless we know stories from folk literature now mostly through their written expression, for example, the numerous versions of fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm, or reimagined and remediated as film, such as the ubiquitous Disney versions.

Yet, storytelling in the classroom is not the same as sharing a book or film – oral storytelling can and should be moulded to the particular audience – shaped by the needs of the listeners. However, the standard story patterns and formulaic language (such as: Once upon a time, little cottage, wicked wolf, deep dark woods) must remain unchanged. Audience participation is anticipated – young learners join in with the reassuring and comforting repetition: 'Whatever its pedagogical benefits, repetition is also a source of enjoyment. Witness the pleasure of repetitive rhythmic patterns in music and language'

Figure 17.1 Illustration by Edward Cogger of the anonymous nursery rhyme *Hey Diddle Diddle* (circa 1885, public domain)

(Nodelman 2008, p. 233). Repetition is important as a support for the teacher-storyteller and crucial for the listener – especially when the story is in a foreign language. Oral tales cannot sustain the complexity of written literature with regard to language, characterisation, setting and theme. Additive language is used, avoidance of complex sentences, familiar stock characters, iconic settings with few details and recurrent themes and triples (such as three brothers or sisters, three wishes, three attempts). This characteristic helps young learners to predict, and it activates their prior knowledge of the creatures of tales, such as witches, monsters and trolls. It also compels children to listen carefully to confirm or disprove their hypotheses, and it helps them to notice new ideas. The use of scaffolding such as pictures, puppets and realia is very helpful in oral storytelling in ELT settings. However, I suggest creative teacher talk is the most important technique of the teacher-storyteller:

> The teacher-storyteller employs a varied paralanguage involving expressive prosodic features (pitch, tempo, volume, rhythm – including dramatic pauses), exuberant intonation, gasps, and, where suitable, even sighs. Some storytellers employ exaggerated gesture and facial expressions, while others have a quieter style. This will also depend on the story and the age of the young learners; the younger the child, the more the storytelling (and classroom discourse generally) should resemble repetitive child-directed speech.
>
> *(Bland 2015c, p. 190)*

Michael Morpurgo, award-winning author of children's literature, locates the importance of stories in the area of intercultural understanding:

> without stories, and without an understanding of stories, we don't understand ourselves, we don't understand the world about us. And we don't understand the relations between ourselves and those people around us. Because what stories give us is an insight into ourselves, a huge insight into other people, other cultures, other places.
>
> *(Morpurgo 2014, n.p.)*

Plays

Children's drama has long played a role in ELT as offering an opportunity to perform language, using whole-body response to support students in learning to trust and enjoy their linguistic resources and extend their repertoire (Fleming 2013). Unscripted drama conventions such as freeze-frames, speaking objects, questioning-in-role and teacher-in-role provide context-embedded, stimulating language-learning opportunities and are now well established in ELT (Bland 2015a, Farmer 2011). It is rather more difficult to locate play scripts suitable for young learners to act out, as task-based, multisensory, embodied learning. David Wood, an acclaimed playwright for children, considers: 'Plays for very young children to perform need to involve a large group or a whole class (. . .) without giving any one child too much responsibility' (1994, p. 9). This is even more the case when children are playing roles in ELT – many roles with short, rhythmical lines and very short scenes that can be rehearsed separately, as well as, ideally, a well-known story, are called for. The following extract from a Christmas story script gives an idea of these characteristics:

Janice Bland

knock, knock, knock

Cat:	Not **another** knock at the door!
Horse 1:	Quiet cat!
Horse 2:	We have space for more.
Pig 1:	Hallo, would you please let us in?
Pig 2:	It's so cold.
Piglet 3:	And we've lost our way!
Cow 1:	Yes, but be quiet!
Cow 2:	Come in.
Calf 3:	See the baby asleep in the hay!
Pig 1:	Wonderful!
Pig 2:	Tiny and sweet!
Piglet:	Do babies like nuts to eat?
Cow 1:	He drinks milk at his mother's breast.
Cow 2:	For babies milk is best.
Piglet:	I'd rather have nuts any day.
Calf:	My Mum gives me milk that way.
	(from: Bland 2009, pp. 27–28)

Serrurier-Zucker and Gobbé-Mévellec (2014) report on a rewarding ELT drama project in France, whereby teachers chose to act out carefully selected picturebooks with young learners. It was shown in the study that acting out provides multisensory clues to meaning, and supports a motivating classroom environment. Reynolds and Chang (2018) describe how they prepared pre-service teachers in Taiwan to use picturebooks with children and their parents in a community service project. The student teachers scripted picturebooks into interactive plays with which to involve pre-school children and their parents in a 'Weekend English Story Time' project at their university library. In Germany, a scripted drama project in ELT, 'Coming Together', involving student teachers and young learners, proved to be a highly effective way to introduce teachers to a 'team-teaching and bridge-building pedagogy' (Bland 2014, p. 172). This study, located at the primary to secondary school transition, again showed the advantages of working on a play together for a motivating classroom environment. It is to be hoped that the choice of a play for young audiences as a new addition to the *Harry Potter* oeuvre, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (Thorne et al. 2016), which is well-suited to acting out in the secondary school, will reinvigorate the format of play scripts for children just as much as Rowling's novels reinvigorated young adult fiction.

Formats of children's literature for fluent readers

Chapter books and graded readers

The chapter book is a format for those children who are beginning to read independently, and the books consequently have far more text than a picturebook. Chapter books have very short chapters 'for children who have mastered basic reading skills but still require simple, illustrated texts' (Agnew 2001, p. 139). Although typically quite richly illustrated, the pictures are not essential for the meaning of the story, in contrast to the larger-formatted picturebook. Jeff Brown's *Flat Stanley* (1964) is a well-known chapter book, later turned into a series, which has inspired intercultural primary-school project work internationally.

Begun in Canada, this project work has been 'connecting kids from around the world with literacy since 1995' (www.flatstanley.com/about). The protagonist, Flat Stanley, has exciting adventures due to his thinness, for example, he is mailed in an envelope to visit a friend in California. In the global literacy project, a paper Flat Stanley becomes the mutual friend of the project partners, and is mailed from school to school accompanied by reports of what he has experienced in other countries and contexts. Fleta and Forster (2014) have reported on a recent international ELT project, carried out in Portugal, Estonia, Spain, Slovakia, Switzerland, Latvia, the United Arab Emirates and Cameroon, based on this idea.

The many graded readers that are produced for the international ELT market are mostly quite similar to the chapter book format, but are typically less richly illustrated, with a less cohesively patterned text (Bland 2013, p. 8), and the majority are without the child-focused content, as even the beginner titles are often aimed at teenager and adult ELT. In contrast to chapter books, graded readers frequently include comprehension questions and other activities to support the teacher, and are offered for particular language levels with the vocabulary and grammar correspondingly controlled. In many ELT classrooms, this is considered an essential aid, although answering comprehension questions does not in most cases support the joy of playful language, intercultural awareness and deep reading. In ELT curricula with young learners, for example in Europe, acquiring intercultural competence is often considered as important as learning the language.

In an extensive reading programme for young learners aimed at pleasure reading and language enrichment, teachers should ideally offer titles of all possible formats for a wide reader choice. Access and the opportunity to enjoy self-selected material are particularly important with children who are in danger of losing the love of reading, which happens frequently around the age of 12 (Harmgarth 1999, p. 18). For, as Bamford and Day express it: 'Only by discovering the rewards of reading through actually engaging in it will students become people who both *can* and *do* read' (1997, emphasis in the original).

Verse novels, young adult novels and crossover novels

The verse novel is a fairly recent format that is very promising, however mostly for teen readers rather than young learners – an example for younger readers is Sharon Creech's *Love that Dog* (2001). The word scenery of verse novels and the musicality of the language often reflects the strong emotions of adolescence; as in poetry, feelings reverberate in the omissions, lingering in the moment of what can be said and what can only be felt. For the ELT classroom there is ample potential for slower, deep reading of the poetry. The most successful verse novels not only offer the vivid depth of feeling that poetry can deliver, but they are also convincing as stories.

Young adult literature is included in the umbrella term children's literature (Bland et al. 2015, p. ii). It is usually considered to aim at the liminal phase between childhood and adulthood, and so falls outside the field of potential material for young learners. The topics of young adult literature often include concepts that children are normally sheltered from, such as sex and death. Some novels seem to be equally read by teenagers and adults – by all those who love a compelling story – and thus recently the term crossover literature has been introduced. *The Hunger Games* series is a high profile example of crossover literature.

Critical issues and topics

The lag in including children's literature in language education with young learners is due to a number of problematic issues – connected firstly to the lack of access to texts through (school) libraries and consequent equity issues, and secondly to teacher education.

Janice Bland

A reading apprenticeship for young learners in ELT for development of (critical) literacies, intercultural awareness and the ability to read deeply will give learners the chance to prepare themselves playfully and pleasurably for the very rewarding but challenging adult canon, which is often an aspect of ELT syllabuses in higher grades. However a major area of concern is access to suitable texts. This is not only a question of social class and equity of opportunity, but also of information about selecting suitable reads:

> In the case of EFL worldwide, it is not only the children of poverty who have no access to compelling reading in English. Apart from *Harry Potter* and perhaps *The Hunger Games*, compelling titles for children and young adults in the lingua franca are not at all well known by parents generally, as well as being very expensive. Most parents will be at a loss to choose compelling books for their children in English. The library with a certified librarian can supply this access immediately, and free of charge.
>
> *(Krashen and Bland 2014, p. 9)*

Unfortunately, nowadays school libraries with a certified librarian scarcely exist anywhere except in private schools, but it may be possible to make an arrangement with the local library. If communities, schools and parents are all unable to finance books, the teacher has a heavier burden – which is usually the case. There are many YouTube renderings of picturebooks that can be shared if they can be projected in the classroom. If at all possible, teachers need to supply at least two print copies of the books for children to read and enjoy. An excellent source of second-hand children's books can be found in the thousands of charity shops in the UK. However, the lack of resources generally and books in particular in many countries is a huge disadvantage for children learning English. Oral storytelling and nursery rhymes require little or no funding, but these performative formats demand well-trained teachers with very good language skills. Another barrier to using children's literature in class can be the educational culture. In many countries, storytelling is not central to the curriculum and teachers tend to rely on traditional coursebooks.

Within teacher education, three major aspects of studying children's literature have been identified as important for future ELT teachers, according to Narančić Kovač (2016). The researcher describes a study programme of primary English at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, Croatia, that aims to provide the following:

- Experience of a wide range of children's literary texts.
- The theory of children's literature, for example, the picturebook.
- The ability to evaluate the potential of a book for ELT and design activities for young learners.

Pre-service teacher education in ELT worldwide is often exclusively designed by applied linguists with a focus on language, but no experience either in teaching young learners themselves or in the wide-reaching educational affordances, the breadth and depth, of children's literature.

The ability to evaluate the potential of a book for ELT refers to language and communication affordances, to aesthetic criteria and also to content. English-language children's literature is not for the most part published for any particular market, and some books will be unconventional, even controversial in some contexts. Challenging ideas make for genuine discussion, potentially transformative content, motivated reading and listening, more tolerance of unfamiliar vocabulary and hence language development. For example young adult

278

literature largely avoids the self-censorship that troubles the ELT international graded reader and textbook market (avoiding politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms and pork – the PARSNIP policy). This is a huge advantage for critical literacy approaches and intercultural learning. However, teachers must themselves pre-select with regard to cultural sensitivity in their own context as well as consider the language level for their students.

An understanding and appreciation of out-of-school learning – wide or extensive reading – as well as in-school deep reading and critical literacy, should accompany all pedagogical, administrative and financial decisions on teaching English to young learners. Thus there is still much work to be done in the area of theory building – connecting conceptual and empirical research in ELT with young learners – in order to close the gap regarding children's literature in language education, specifically in the primary and early secondary grades, where most compulsory ELT takes place.

Current contributions and research

Current research into learning through literature with young learners divides roughly into areas of applied linguistics and second language acquisition on the one hand and areas that connect to children's literature scholarship and pedagogy, such as visual and critical literacies and intercultural learning, on the other.

The usage-based approach to language acquisition provides a valuable understanding of the role of context, formulaic language and usage (for example, reading as receptive usage and booktalk as productive usage) in children's language acquisition. This approach highlights the exemplar-based nature of language acquisition and how lexical and grammatical knowledge can emerge through engaging with extended input, 'with language, as with other cognitive realms, our experiences conspire to give us competence' (Ellis, O'Donnell and Römer 2013, p. 45). Frequency and salience (which includes prominence of meaning and whether the feature – from a morpheme to a formulaic sequence – is easy to notice) are crucial. Repeated encounters with oral stories, poems and picturebooks with electrifying characters and exciting storyworlds, which entice children to revisit them again and again with their teachers, are arguably the best if not the only way to supply extensive input for young learners, when they cannot yet read autonomously in English. Usage frequency seems to be the ideal condition for second language acquisition: 'Psycholinguistic research provides the evidence of usage-based acquisition in its demonstrations that language processing is exquisitely sensitive to usage frequency at all levels of language representation' (Ellis et al. 2013, p. 30). The patterned nature of most children's literature connects to concerns such as literacy (reading and writing skills) as well as oracy (listening and speaking skills). This supports discourse skills, while making language pleasurable and salient for young learners: 'The ability to understand, recall, and produce songs, rhymes, chants, and stories [. . .] are all examples of discourse skills' (Cameron 2003, p. 109). Research by Kaminsky (2016), Lugossy (2012) and Mourão (2012; 2016) has shown that if young learners' response is taken seriously in an approach that utilises and values the multimodality of children's literature, then authentic communication emerges from the interaction between the learners, their books and their teacher.

A fertile source of research and contributions on learning through literature with young learners is the peer-reviewed journal *Children's Literature in English Language Education* (*CLELEjournal*), an open access journal that was established in 2013. Many articles published in the *CLELEjournal* connect to international children's literature scholarship, such as exploring visual literacy, critical literacy, diversity in literary texts and intercultural

learning, while exploring the different formats and genres in the ELT classroom. This area of research is expanding particularly fast, with children's literature scholars involved in education becoming ever more cognizant of the plurilingual and pluricultural nature of classrooms across the world – where English is the vehicle of teaching, but many children in the classroom have a home language other than English – and the need to prepare in teacher education for emergent bilinguals.

There is consequently an ever-increasing demand for teaching English to young learners, who must learn English over many years. Children need to be motivated in ways that make sense to them; and meaningful stories and patterned language, such as rhythmical poems, can activate their implicit learning mechanisms (Bland 2015b). Learning through literature with young learners sits well alongside the current focus on content-based teaching, the acquisition of intercultural understanding, multiple literacies and an initiation into the pleasures of literature. Unsurprisingly, teaching English with children's literature is now a rapidly expanding research area. However implementation in primary school ELT is patchy and poorly resourced in most countries. The frequent attitude of policy makers that teachers for young learners need less English language competence than teachers for advanced learners is extremely damaging for the necessary progress in this area.

Recommendations for practice

While suggestions on methodology and *how* to teach language and literature to young learners have been available for some decades, for example the three editions of Ellis and Brewster (1991, 2002 and 2014), there has been less analysis to date of *what* to teach and *why*. I will focus in this section on the picturebook as a frequently used literary text with young leaners. Important questions to ask when selecting picturebooks (particularly with a view to reflecting diversity and practising intercultural understanding) would include:

1   Is the language and content accessible for the target group?
2   Do the pictures add layers of meaning to the story?
3   Does the characterisation in words and illustrations encourage empathy?
4   Is diversity mirrored in some of the chosen texts?
5   Is the story compelling, e.g. exciting, humorous, surprising or moving?
6   Can the children relate to the narrative – is the import of the story meaningful for them as individuals so that they will wish to revisit it?
7   Is the representation of the world and of people accurate and respectful?
8   Does the story encourage a questioning stance and genuine communication? (Bland 2016)

An exemplar: Thunder Boy Jr

Teachers may find, depending also on the cultural context of their teaching environment (the humorous use of language in the excerpt below, for example, may not be acceptable in all settings), that Sherman Alexie's picturebook *Thunder Boy Jr* (2016) fulfils the above criteria. The verbal text is very brief: the reader is introduced, through colourful words and powerful pictures (Yuyi Morales), to a vibrant Native American family. Thus the book reflects a minority culture in the USA, but is emphatically upbeat – the struggles of the young hero, Thunder Boy Smith, are presented both in the pictures and in the language with life-affirming humour. The small, empathetic hero is busily working on his agency – it is

easy for children to relate to his story as he invents names for himself that should express his vivacious sense of self. He was named after his dad, Thunder Boy Smith Sr,

> People call him **BIG THUNDER.**
> That nickname is a storm filling up the sky.
> People call me
> LITTLE THUNDER.
> That nickname makes me sound like a burp or a fart.
>
> *(Alexie 2016, unpaginated)*

Many picturebooks play with language. Young language learners will enjoy this use of language – scatological humour is particularly popular with children as they understand it to be 'naughty'. This adds to the fun of the book: 'Just as intense emotion is an elementary force setting the tone for many a successful children's book, so is humour' (Tabbert and Wardetzky 1995, p. 3). The little boy's spirited temperament also empowers him – his characterisation is humorous due to the subversion of the pattern that small is powerless – and not only the dynamic illustrations but also the typographic creativity support his demand for agency. His speech bubbles are frequently filled with shouting capitals, such as '**I WANT MY OWN NAME**'. Thunder Boy's emotions are expressed in words, in symbolic pictures (for example, a howling wolf, a hissing snake and a growling bear to express frustration), in colours and even in the shape and outline of his speech bubbles. All of this encourages a questioning stance and genuine communication. While he shares his hatred of his name with the reader, he loves his father and fears to upset him by revealing his dislike of their shared name.

This picturebook is suitable for the youngest language learners, and the respect they may feel for Thunder Boy could be considered the first step towards intercultural understanding. It is important to remember that classroom activities should develop strategies for understanding other texts as well as the particular text children are sharing, and 'simply preteaching all the unknown words [. . .] does not help them to know what to do the next time they come to an unknown word' (Gibbons 2015, p. 145). Once the children have heard the story read aloud, and have become acquainted with the family through the lively illustrations, the teacher can decide to spend more time – and more than one lesson – on selected pages.

Thunder Boy Smith goes on to create new and wonderful names for himself, which are also energetically illustrated, for example

> I love playing in the dirt,
> so maybe my name should be
> MUD IN HIS EARS.

and

> I like to go to garage sales
> with my mom, so maybe
> my name should be
> OLD TOYS ARE AWESOME.

The story is full of communicative potential, as the example shows (Figure 17.2). The children will be keen to name the toys and describe their own toys when they see a similarity or difference. As Ghosn writes: 'In literature-based lessons students can remain in their

Figure 17.2 From *Thunder Boy, Jr.* by Sherman Alexie, illustrated by Yuyi Morales. Text copyright © 2016 by Sherman Alexie. Illustrations copyright © 2016 by Yuyi Morales. Used by permission of Little Brown Books for Young Readers

own persona while exchanging ideas about the story content, which results in meaningful discourse, during which children can draw on their L1 when necessary' (2010, p. 32). The teacher thus has the important role of supplying input that models language and clarifies vocabulary, for instance by recasting children's L1 utterances into English. Teachers might tell an anecdote about their experience with 'garage sales', or the closest equivalent in their culture. A jumble sale of toys might be arranged at school – for example to raise money to buy picturebooks for the classroom.

Young children often talk to their toys, so it is meaningful for them if the teacher elicits dialogue for the toys illustrated (Figure 17.2). For example: 'What does the crocodile

say?' The teacher typically needs to make the first suggestion as a model, such as 'Perhaps the crocodile says: I want my dinner', which will prompt the children's inventive suggestions (I want my Mom, I want a friend, I want my river, I want to swim, I want to play, I want to sleep, etc.) All the toys could be given a voice: What does the robot say? What does the dog on wheels say? What does the elephant (or horse/mouse/rabbit/rattle) say? And the children may choose a favourite toy (from their own lives or from the book) to draw with a speech bubble. The children can focus on Thunder Boy and his sister Lillian: They love skipping, they love riding, they love playing, they like old toys, they like noise, they like fun. And the children can also voice their own preferences. Thunder Boy plays with names on this and other pages, and this suggests many creative and fun opportunities for inventing new personality names with young language learners.

Humour is supplied by the gentle, carnivalesque nature of Thunder Boy's wishing to determine his own name, creatively and innovatively, and reject his given name. Although the expressive illustrations and bold typographical creativity suggest conflicting emotions, the humour of the story is the prevailing mood: 'The best antidote to the anxieties and disasters of life is laughter; and this children seem to understand almost as soon as they are born' (Opie 1992, Introduction). Thunder Boy does not want to hurt his father, which causes his dilemma and the tension. But all is happily resolved in the end (and will not be revealed here) – with the ingredients of a strong and loving father-son relationship – providing a happy counterbalance to the many picturebooks that focus on mother-child relationships.

Future directions

A number of institutions must become more actively involved for the future development of learning through literature with young learners. These are universities and colleges responsible for pre-service and in-service teacher education, publishers of children's literature and ELT materials, schools, school libraries and local libraries. A pedagogical study of children's literature in ELT teacher education is essential in order to test and discover its potential for creative reading and writing, as well as performance, intercultural understanding and critical literacy. However, a literary study of children's literature from the outset in teacher education is crucial in order to equip future teachers with the know-how to select the finest possible texts for their individual classes – which involves the ability to analyse the potential of a variety of formats and genres for ELT. The best training in the long run is wide or extensive reading and deep reading, booktalk and reflective classroom practice. For the sake of crucial educational goals, including literacy development, intercultural awareness and the ability to read deeply, the ever-multiplying and diversifying ocean of literary texts for children should be made accessible to a vastly greater extent than they currently are – conceptually through teacher education courses and materially through school or local libraries – for all those involved in ELT with young learners and adolescents. As Barack Obama observed, in the last days of his presidency:

> When so much of our politics is trying to manage this clash of cultures brought about by globalization and technology and migration, the role of stories to unify – as opposed to divide, to engage rather than to marginalize – is more important than ever.
>
> *(Obama 2017)*

Janice Bland

Further reading

1 Bland, J. (2013). *Children's literature and learner empowerment. Children and teenagers in English language education*. London: Bloomsbury.

    A book that covers the full breadth of children's literature in ELT in depth, including picturebooks, graphic novels, fairy tales, poetry, creative writing, plays and young adult novels, with an emphasis on creative response, critical literacy and intercultural learning.

2 Ellis, G., and Brewster, J. (2014). *Tell it again! The storytelling handbook for primary English language teachers*, 3rd ed. British Council. www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/D467_Storytelling_handbook_FINAL_web.pdf [Accessed 14 January 2017].

    A seminal publication with a hands-on approach. Systematic criteria for selecting stories are included with reference to psycholinguistic, sociological and intercultural affordances of the picturebook to support the development of the whole child.

3 Ghosn, I.-K. (2010). Five-year outcomes from children's literature-based programmes vs. programmes using a skills-based ESL course – The Matthew and Peter effects at work? In Tomlinson, B., and Masuhara, H. (eds.) *Research for materials development in language learning*. London: Continuum, 21–36.

    The chapter reports on a study which examines 10 to 11-year-old children's English learning outcomes in Lebanon. Two different programmes with 106 children in four schools were researched – one literature-based programme and the other following an international ESL course. The results are illuminating.

4 Mourão, S. (2016). Picturebooks in the primary EFL classroom: Authentic literature for authentic responses. *Children's Literature in English Language Education*, 4(1), 25–43. http://clelejournal.org/authentic-literature-for-an-authentic-response/ [Accessed 8 October 2016].

    This article surveys the manifold promising connections between picturebooks and the central concern of ELT – rich and meaningful communication. Mourão analyses picturebooks as artefacts, and then details and reports on systematic categorizations of children's engaged oral response when a picturebook is offered as a compound literary form.

5 O'Sullivan, E., and Rösler, D. (2013). *Kinder- und Jugendliteratur im Fremdsprachenunterricht*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg.

    The authors combine children's literature scholarship with a rich methodological repertoire to illustrate the benefits of children's literature in the foreign language classroom to promote literary reading and intercultural communicative competence.

Related topics

Teacher education, Materials for early language learning, Young learners' motivation, and CLIL

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Janice Bland

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