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Creativity and Language Play – Neglected Uses of English in the Classroom?

Janice Bland

Welcome to issue 11.2 of *Children's Literature in English Language Education*!

What are some of the reasons for English becoming so important in school curricula around the world? Being able to speak English can bestow agency on individuals – as English is the most popular means of communication through language with a total of circa 1.5 billion speakers, when

first language (L1) and second language (L2) speakers are counted together. Mandarin Chinese nearly equals that total, though its circa 1.2 billion speakers are mostly L1 speakers of Mandarin Chinese, whereas English, in contrast, is spoken by vastly more L2 speakers than L1 speakers. Even in countries where English is L2, secondary school education and tertiary education is often only available through English. Much academic literature is predominantly in English too.

Then there are the important uses of English for young people in their out-of-school lives with social media and hobbies, pleasure in story through feature films, gaming, documentaries, TV programmes, anime, original programmes on streaming services – the list goes on. But countless young people experience a disconnect between their pleasurable use of English beyond school and their English learning in the classroom. Teachers frequently try to bridge that divide through content-based language teaching, choosing subject matter and issues that are relevant for young people and taking the content seriously, and not merely as an illustration of new language. The justification for content-based language teaching includes the expectation that learners are more motivated through stimulating issues, that students' interests can be better involved, and that language is more deeply contextualized through a focus on content.

The 11.2 issue of the *CLELEjournal* is about creativity, and how young people often love to express themselves in writing, speaking, or creating in English in an imaginative and playful way. This tends to be overlooked by language teachers, and Kim (2016) has evidenced how there is a decline in creativity in education, in creative attitudes and creative thinking. Nevertheless, response that is resourcefully multilingual, creative, or artistic can play a significant role as knowledge representation in the language classroom; according to Sandoval (2014), 'such artifacts are proxies for learning processes' (p. 23). Lim et al. (2022) use the expression *multimodal pedagogy* as involving not only 'teachers making design choices in the ways in which the curriculum content is expressed' but also involves 'designing opportunities for students to explore and perform ideas and identities using a range of meaning-making resources' (p. 1). However, in language education, play and creativity are frequently undermined through classroom texts that are too challenging in language or content. When students struggle with individual words and expressions, both denotations and connotations are likely to elude them, leading to their feeling intimidated, instead of feeling encouraged to be inventive and creative. In fact, this can hardly be called 'reading', as overchallenged students are more conscious of isolated words on the page than

of meanings made by the magical combinations of ideas that writing can embody.

If pleasure, creativity, and language play are neglected in the language classroom, this may be in opposition to national steering documents for language learning, which sometimes *authorize* (Van Leeuwen, 2008) playful English learning. The Norwegian curriculum for English (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020), for example, accentuates creativity, particularly for young learners:

The teacher shall allow the pupils to be active, play, explore and use their senses in a variety of ways to experience language learning. The pupils shall be given the opportunity to experience that experimenting on their own and with others is part of learning a new language. [... to] discover and play with words and expressions that are common to both English and other languages with which the pupil is familiar [... and] play, explore and participate in oral, written and digital interaction. (pp. 5–6)

In Norway, moreover, the Core Curriculum (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2019), which is the foundational document for teaching all school subjects, includes a whole section on ‘The joy of creating, engagement and the urge to explore’ (p. 9), emphasizing how schools must respect and foster discovering and creating, encouraging development through sensory perceptions, aesthetic expression, and hands-on activities. According to the Core Curriculum, playful exploration affords opportunities for meaningful learning for all age groups, and creativity enriches society, as ‘explorative and creative thinking [are] required to develop new knowledge’ (p. 8).

Yet, there is little doubt that teachers in general may be still more influenced by expired curricula – when an older curriculum takes precedence over the current one. Wolcott (2023) has discussed this phenomenon in her research within Swedish ELT school settings, and has introduced a construct she terms *protracted curriculum*, which is meant ‘to define situations where an expired curriculum appears to still have an influence on decisions and teaching practices’ (p. 195). This notion is likely to be relevant in many countries, particularly as language teachers are also swayed by how they themselves were taught in the past (Borg, 2003; Richards et al., 2001). It seems that progressing from past ideas to current ideas on language teaching is akin to the competence of perspective-taking, an important ability to hone for teachers as well as students. Indeed, the

playfulness of language can itself be an instance of intercultural learning – sayings in different languages can tell us so much about different cultural contexts, feelings, and beliefs, such as the Norwegian saying *Ut på tur, aldri sur*, the German saying *Das ist mir Wurst*, and the English saying: *It's not my cup of tea*.

CLELE 11.2 opens with Recommended Reads, as we are focusing on creativity in this issue, and on an exceptionally creative writer of children's and young adult fiction: David Almond. The chosen recommended reads illustrate not only the poetic quality but also the range of Almond's work, introducing a picturebook, *The Dam* (illustrated by Levi Pinfold), a play, *Wild Girl, Wild Boy*, a young adult novel, *A Song for Ella Grey* as well as a hybrid text, *The Savage* (illustrated by Dave McKean).

The first article is contributed by Suzanne Kamata, herself an author of several children's books that illustrate the challenge of being adrift between unlike cultural contexts. In her paper 'Creating and Presenting Mash-up Stories in the English Language Classroom in Japan', Kamata reports that the new Course of Study for English learning in Japan does not emphasize creativity. The author shows how, nonetheless, creative multimodal storytelling as a group activity can support and promote many of the goals of the governmental guidelines.

The following paper continues the theme of creativity, referring to fitting mentor texts by two of the most creative UK authors for children and adolescents, Philip Pullman and David Almond. In my own contribution, 'Key Strategies for a Focus on Creative Writing in ELT – Using Mentor Texts in Teacher Education', I suggest detailed guidelines for creative writing in teacher education. I further reflect on bolstering student teachers' self-confidence in guiding their language learners to recognize *how* compelling texts achieve impact.

The last article is entitled 'Aesthetic Engagement with *Mouse Bird Snake Wolf* – Literary Multimodal Literacy in English Language Education'. With this paper, Mari Skjerdal Lysne deliberates on the nature of literacy that is prerequisite for an engagement with texts like Almond's hybrid multimodal books for young readers. Lysne argues for a new kind of literacy she terms *literary multimodal literacy*, with examples from a classroom literacy event with lower secondary school students in Norway.

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