

CHAPTER 2

Deep Reading and In-depth Learning in English Language Education

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Abstract: This chapter focuses on the opportunities of deep reading for in-depth learning. By in-depth learning, not only deepening but also widening of English teaching is meant – embracing cross-curricular learning on subjects that are interdisciplinary and relevant for students’ out-of-school lives. The importance of connectedness for in-depth learning is discussed, and the *how* of deep reading is examined – both the physical aspect of reading – on paper as opposed to reading on screens, and a suggested structure for responding to texts in the classroom. I describe an example of in-depth learning using a framework for deep reading with *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014) by Neil Gaiman, illustrated by Chris Riddell, and incorporating other related texts such as different versions of fairy tales. With the deep reading framework, four interweaving steps suggest ways that students could be supported with unpuzzling, investigating, critically engaging with literary texts, and experimenting with creative response. The suggested activities include reciprocal teaching, exploring the multisensory nature of story, inferencing global issues such as gender, ageism, and ableism, activating agency through media literacy, and creative writing.

Introduction

In this chapter, I question how deep reading of an adolescent-friendly literary text could pursue in-depth learning in English language education. Applying a deep reading framework to Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddell’s *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014), I examine how this work (an illustrated

Citation: Bland, J. (2022) Deep reading and in-depth learning in English language education. In M. Dypedahl (Ed.), *Moving English language teaching forward* (Ch. 2, pp. 17–44). Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/noasp.166.ch2>
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fairly tale suitable for language students in their mid-teens) might be used for in-depth learning. Goals of in-depth learning include the objectives to help students see connections between their school subjects, help them reflect on their learning and master challenges in familiar and unfamiliar contexts and, most importantly, help them see how their learning can be applied to the world beyond school. In-depth learning is understood to mean that students become invested in their learning as they recognize its immediate relevance for their lives in the real world. In this way, in-depth learning seeks to involve students as agentive and ambitious participants in their own learning. Fullan, Gardner and Drummy (2019) define in-depth learning, as “learning that helps them [students] make connections to the world, to think critically, work collaboratively, empathize with others, and, most of all, be ready to confront the huge challenges that the world is leaving their generation” (p. 66). This seems to link both to Dewey’s approach to education as a mechanism for social change and Freire’s (1985) critical pedagogy approach, in which adults as well as children gain agency through reflecting on problems, developing critical consciousness and critical thinking, while taking on a certain degree of personal responsibility by working on possible solutions.

The role of connectedness and deeper knowledge in moving English language teaching forward

The in-depth learning approach appears appropriate for moving English language teaching (ELT) forward as there is currently a worldwide interest in critical thinking and in-depth learning across school subjects. The field of ELT can well embrace opportunities for critical thinking and in-depth learning as the educational goals of English language education are broad, often including multiple literacy, metacognition, learner autonomy and creative problem solving in addition to interculturality, empathy, diversity competence, engaging in cross-curricular topics and global issues. Fullan et al. (2019) emphasize connectedness for learning in depth – connecting to others, connecting to the world, and connecting to the purpose with passion (p. 68).

There is also at the present time an escalation of online interactions raising demands for criticality precisely while making connections to the world. Social media have been key in helping communications stay open during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Salomon (2016) argues that “it is questionable whether virtual interaction truly functions as a collaborative tool as it usually does not afford the creation of shared beliefs, values and deeper knowledge” (p. 155). Rather, the echo chamber effect of online communication is resulting in societies becoming ever more polarized. Kramsch and Zhu (2016) describe the dangers in the following manner: “Such environments risk isolating them [people] in communities of like-minded peers, makes them vulnerable to electronic surveillance and makes them addicted to peer approbation and peer pressure” (p. 45). Connectedness is central to the notion of in-depth learning, and educational goals of ELT call for intercultural connectedness, in addition to the practice of language skills. Nonetheless, in-depth learning within ELT can be more nuanced and sensitive to the possibility of polarization when taking place in a classroom community of learners. And while ELT can be usefully supplemented by virtual interaction, this must be fully integrated into the pedagogical goals.

Comparing digital reading and print reading for complex cognitive growth

Another issue that needs attention in the context of ELT and in-depth learning relates to reading on paper compared to reading on screens. It is a key educational responsibility to question the wisdom of allowing digital reading to entirely replace print reading in school language education. Norway has widely facilitated the use of digital devices in the classroom; as a result, children use their tablets for writing, illustrating, creating, reading texts digitally (often including the coursebook) as well as retrieving information, quizzes, and digital contests. This development progresses fast, overtaking the research that explores the consequences of this major shift – the move away from physical materials such as print books, pens, pencils, and different kinds of papers. In response, Støle, Mangen and Schwippert (2020) cautiously state, “We need a more nuanced picture of

what various digital technologies are good for, and when long form print (book) is preferable for learning” (p. 10). The research team also warns of potentially changing students’ reading behaviour through encouraging only digital reading: “As online reading typically involves skimming and scanning, rather than reading for pleasure or to learn, it is possible that some children develop a screen reading behaviour that is not beneficial for deep reading for comprehension” (Støle et al., 2020, p. 10).

English-language fiction and nonfiction for children and adolescents are frequently a part of school curricula, including in Norway (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019). Story apps especially designed for interactivity work well on tablets, can be very motivating and, in shared reading situations, can prompt dialogue in the language classroom. However, the students’ hunting for hotspots in story apps can distract from the story and message (Brunsmeier & Kolb, 2018; Schulz-Heidorf et al., 2021). Therefore, it is imperative that children do not completely lose print reading, which supplies them with opportunities for deep reading. It is also important that teachers, librarians, and curriculum designers become better acquainted with children’s literature scholarship. This is because most kinds of illustrated children’s literature (picturebooks, graphic novels and illustrated chapter books, see Bland 2018b), which are designed to be read as print books, do not work well in digital format. The layout is changed when creating ebooks from multimodal print books, which affects the meaning and the opportunities for artefact emotion. Artefact emotion refers to an aesthetic response to a striking artistic creation, such as a literary text (Hogan 2014), and can be inspired by a combination of meticulous craft and literary cohesion.

Similarly, sensory anchoring of language and meaning is supported when students can touch and smell the books they read. Baron (2015) reminds us of the “physical side of reading: holding books in your hands, navigating with your fingers through pages, browsing through shelves of volumes and stumbling upon one you had forgotten about” (p. xiv). Particularly younger students should be encouraged to “explore and use their senses in a variety of ways to experience language learning” (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 5). However,

all students profit from multisensory, whole-person learning, which is also known as head, heart and hands learning (Gazibara, 2013). Students can and do lose the fascination of print books. For instance, I have seen picturebooks left untouched on students' desks after the class of 12-year-olds, who use digital coursebooks as a rule, had listened to a story being read aloud while watching corresponding scanned images in the student teacher's slideshow. It did not occur to any of the students to study the pages and pictures more closely during follow-up oral and written response activities by opening the physical picturebook that lay on their desks.

The relatively new practice of skimming rather than deep reading that is influenced by online browsing encourages many students to understand reading – and writing – as fleeting activities. Baron (2015) emphasizes how reading and writing are intertwined, and ephemeral online reading habits lead to less formality, precision and stamina in students' writing: "Computers, and now portable digital devices, coax us to skim rather than read in depth, search rather than traverse continuous prose. As a result, how – and how much – we write is already shifting" (p. xiii). Carr (2020) maintains that our reading style has fundamentally changed: "What is different, and troubling, is that skimming is becoming our dominant mode of reading. Once a means to an end, a way to identify information for deeper study, scanning is becoming an end in itself – our preferred way of gathering and making sense of information of all sorts" (p. 138).

However, helping students achieve deep concentration on issues through focused reading and listening in addition to sharing thoughts through speaking and writing should be at the heart of ELT work for in-depth learning. A study of Norwegian 10-year-olds conducted by Støle et al. (2020) has revealed the importance of not entirely supplanting print reading with digital reading because children's complex cognitive growth is best achieved through print reading. The strong implications of their study indicate that "in order to ensure comprehension development, children still need time to read enjoyable long-form texts to consolidate reading, develop vocabulary, automaticity and fluency, and thereby comprehension. If this does not happen in the home, it is even more urgent that schools encourage book reading" (p. 10).

A framework for deep reading and in-depth learning

Using carefully selected literary texts, we can combine a focus on both language and in-depth learning; language learning will thereby become central to education and not simply an acquisition of English as a useful commodity. In-depth learning should support our gaining new perspectives on the world and ourselves, which is sometimes known as world-mindedness and defined as “global openness and the disposition to reflect on how our actions and decisions concern us not only locally but also affect all peoples around the world” (Bland, 2022, p. 318). In-depth learning seeks to expand students’ limited subject knowledge and promote cross-curricular learning. When classroom teaching is dependent on memorization and divorced from global culture, opportunities for students to apply their learning beyond school in unfamiliar contexts are lost. The experiential learning approach emphasizes the role of students’ experiences outside of school as significant and relevant for their learning processes. So it is certainly worrying when, as Brevik’s (2016) study indicates, adolescents in Norway tend “not [to] see the educational profits of their out-of-school English usage” (p. 55). For the heart of in-depth learning is two-way agentic learning: students are empowered by having their out-of-school experiences made relevant in the classroom, and further empowered when their classroom learning helps them master fresh challenges by transferring their new learning to different contexts outside of school.

In order to become discerning participants of text, language learners need guidance in exploring ideas, investigating, critically engaging and experimenting with creative response, activities that can begin with picturebooks already in the primary school. Student teachers in teacher education need in-depth support in learning about deep reading of texts that primary and lower secondary language students could manage. A successful literary text aimed at young people is very often accompanied by transmedia stories and reimaginings such as audio books, fanfiction, films, images on the Web and graphic novel versions, which provide additional comprehension support through retellings, all-important shared multisensory experiences, and inspiration for students’ own creativity. They also provide opportunities for critical literacy, for instance

reading against the text. The strong intertextual characteristics of much children's literature is highly valuable for language and literacy learning, however a shortage of pre-service guidance in teacher education with this focus may be a global phenomenon (see Bland, 2019).

Figure 1 presents a framework of four interweaving steps as a potential guiding structure for the deeper exploration of various fiction or nonfiction texts in ELT. With this framework, the learning goals could embrace aspects of multiple literacy, critical thinking, interculturality, diversity competence, global issues, empathy, cross-curricular topics, creativity, metacognition, and learner autonomy.



Figure 1. Deep Reading Framework

Note. Figure reproduced from Bland, J. (2022). *Compelling stories for English language learners: Creativity, interculturality and critical literacy*. © Bloomsbury.

In the light of this deep reading framework, I will examine the opportunities provided by Gaiman and Riddell's *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, a complex literary text that is an object of beauty while being adolescent-friendly, and – I will argue – can support young people's acquisition of deep reading and in-depth learning in ELT.

Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddell's *The Sleeper and the Spindle*

The Sleeper and the Spindle (2014) by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Chris Riddell is a reimagining of two interwoven fairy tales, with some dark and ominous elements. The central character is an intrepid woman – a young queen – who succeeds through courage and wisdom (painfully gained through her past experiences with an evil stepmother), where many heroic princes have previously failed. The following ideas make use of the deep reading framework (see Figure 1).

Step One: Unpuzzle and explore

Before reading the story, students can be shown the book and invited to think about the format and predict the genre. The format certainly resembles a picturebook, it has the typical shape, and illustrations on every double-page spread. However, the book is twice the length of a regular picturebook, and the verbal text is detailed and challenging, indicating that this is not a book for elementary learners. Chris Riddell's pen-and-ink illustrations are stunning and sumptuous, and at times menacing. The elaborate black ink drawings are highlighted with flashes of metallic gold in the hardback version and embellished with deep red in the paperback edition. The images are filled with intricate visual storytelling. Students could explore the details of beauty, such as the dark-haired queen and exquisite roses, and look for contrasting symbols of death, for example the cobwebs and skull motifs. Students may spot the signs in the illustrations such as the queen's armour and the dwarfs' swords that recall the ancient origins of oral tales, which were popularized through the Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm folklore collections (published in several

editions in Germany between 1812 and 1857). The class could examine how *The Sleeper and the Spindle* evokes medieval manuscripts through its drawings with accents in gold (or red in the paperback version) that decorate the borders, some of the words are hand lettered by Riddell, and many pages are headed by illuminated initial capitals.

The genre is quite easy to predict after glancing at the book's first few pages. In the illustrations the students will detect dwarfs, trolls and underground pathways, high mountains, a many-towered palace, and roses with sharp thorns, all of which suggest fairy tale and fantasy. Fairy tales have never been meant for young children alone; rather, they reflect the rich oral tradition of storytelling passed on and shared from generation to generation. *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, a very literary fairy tale, is most appropriate for adolescents who can deal with the book's linguistic complexities as well as its intertextuality. The title refers to a spindle, suggesting *Sleeping Beauty*, while the dwarf characters and dark passages beneath the mountains suggest the fairy tale *Snow White*. While the book is indeed a reimagining of *Sleeping Beauty* cunningly blended with *Snow White*, this is only gradually and tantalizingly revealed. Postmodern literature generally disrupts expectations, and as Salomon (2016) conveys, "the construction of knowledge is facilitated by ambiguity, conflict and uncertainty" (p. 155). The book's intertextuality will therefore be discussed under Step Two with the recommendation that students be allowed to discover the merging of these two fairy tales for themselves.

The book cover makes an immediate visual impact as both the hardback and paperback covers are exquisitely beautiful. Thus, the book is packaged in an attractive way, which is key for igniting students' interest and motivation from the outset (see Bland, 2018a, p. 12). The hardback edition (see Figure 2) appears to confirm that this is a version of *Sleeping Beauty*; it also provides a visual clue as to the meaning of "spindle". The cover certainly tempts the reader to enter into the story and discover the sleeping princess. Invitingly, she is partly concealed by the golden climbing roses that cover the transparent dust jacket.

The cover of the paperback edition of 2019 features a disputed and very strikingly drawn image from inside the book, the moment when the

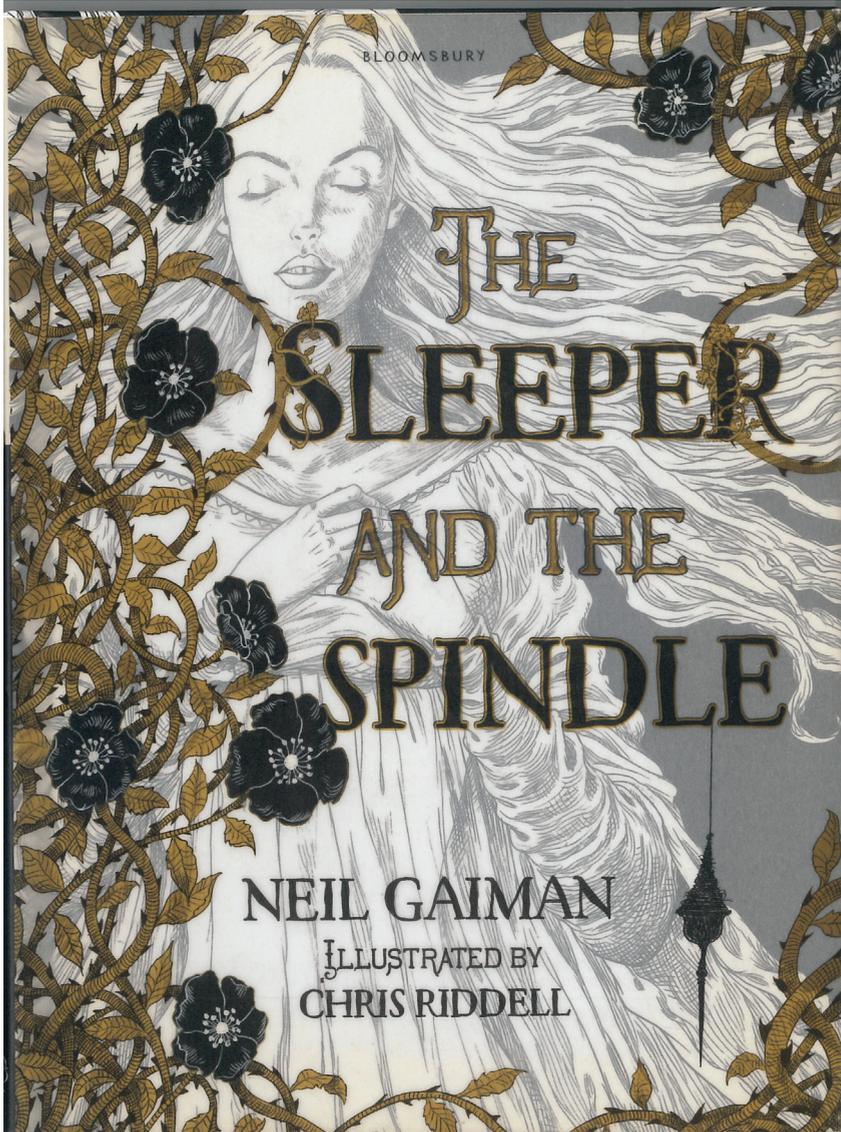


Figure 2. Hardback Cover from *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014) by Neil Gaiman, Illustration by Chris Riddell. Copyright © 2014, published by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

queen kisses the lovely young woman awake (see Figure 3). This image generated much publicity for the book, and both negative and positive reactions. Some readers rejected a fairy tale that championed (as they believed) LGBTQ+ issues, while other readers were disappointed that *The*

Sleeper and the Spindle is not a lesbian retelling and considered this to be an example of queerbaiting. (The stunning paperback cover, though somewhat misleading, is probably as enticing to students as is the hardback cover – this will be revisited under Step Three.) The golden disk on the cover also alerts the reader that the book won the CILIP (Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals) Kate Greenaway medal in 2016, an award that recognizes distinguished illustration in children’s literature. In fact, Chris Riddell is so far the only triple winner in the history of this award. Neil Gaiman is similarly an award-winning author. He has won both the CILIP Carnegie Medal, an award that annually recognizes an outstanding literary achievement in a book for children or young adults, and the American Newbery Medal (both for his *The Graveyard Book*, 2009). This information should be noted by both students and teachers alike; while many have heard of texts for adults that are culturally marked as classics of the literary canon, far fewer are well informed regarding canonical texts of children’s literature.

Neil Gaiman’s text is poetically told in a condensed manner. It was originally published as a short story, a format that favours rich but succinct glimpses into other worlds. However, the language of *The Sleeper and the Spindle* has far more descriptive detail than either the Grimms’ versions or other traditional *Sleeping Beauty* retellings. The teacher could help the students enter into the story by reading the first page aloud, with books open so the students can follow along with the text and enjoy the pictures that aid their understanding. Students could then be given the task of making notes about language that points to the fairy tale genre. Already on the very first page, this would include *kingdom*, *queen*, *finest silken cloth*, *dwarfs*, *magic*, *magical gift*, and *ruby*. The three dwarfs, who are hastening to the neighbouring kingdom through underground pathways to buy the finest gift for the young queen, are introduced on the first page as “tough, and hardy, and composed of magic as much as of flesh and blood” (Gaiman, 2014, p. 10). Through the urgency of their speed through the tunnels beneath the mountains in search of the finest gift, and their exclamations “Hurry! Hurry!” we understand – before we even meet her – that the young queen is an exceptional person. This motivates us to continue with the story.

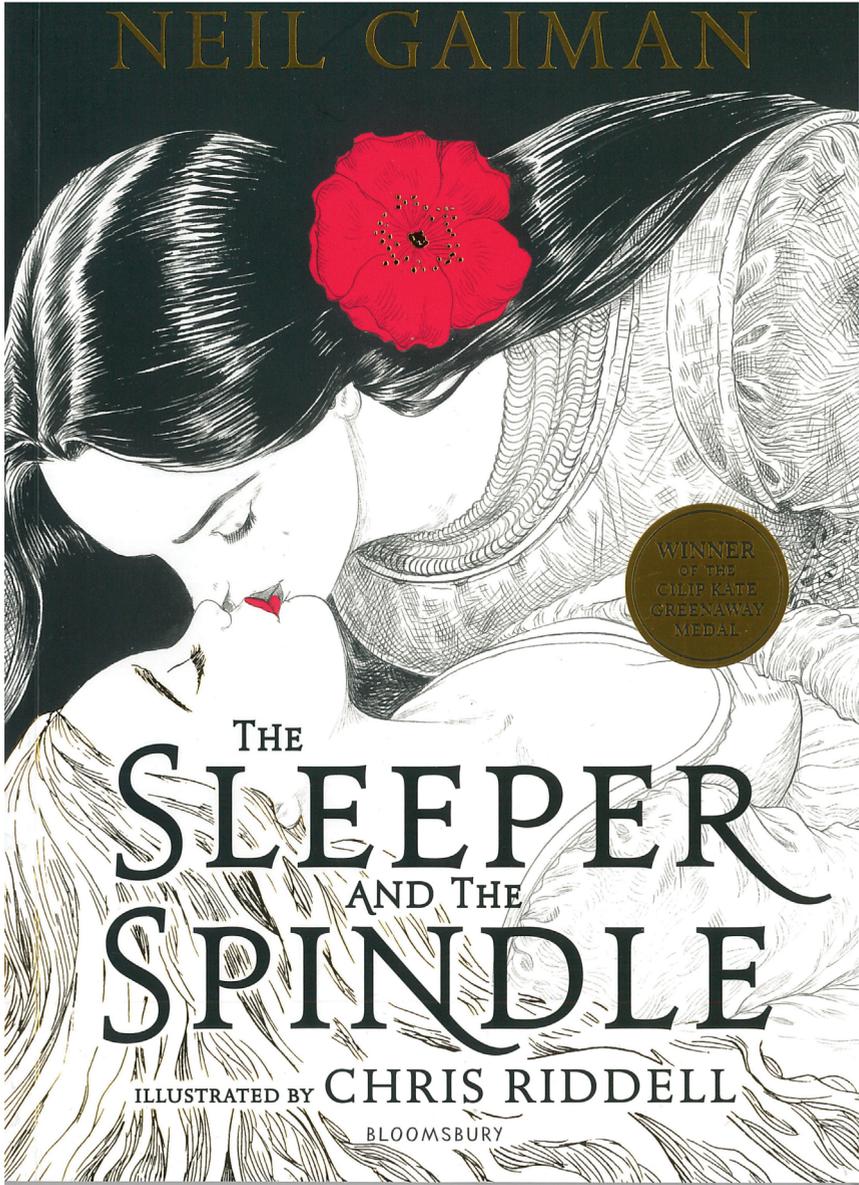


Figure 3. Paperback Cover of *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2019) by Neil Gaiman, Illustration by Chris Riddell. Copyright © 2014, published by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Step Two: Activate and investigate

If the students read through *The Sleeper and the Spindle* first at home, the in-depth work can take place in the lessons. The story begins when the three dwarfs discover that a magical sleeping sickness has spread outside of the walls of a cursed castle in a neighbouring kingdom that lies beyond the high mountains. They inform the young queen that the zone of the spell is expanding fast, assuring her that “if any of you big people can stay awake there, it’s you” (Gaiman, 2014, p. 20). The queen had previously been in a cursed sleep for a year and had woken again unharmed. So, she delays the preparations for her wedding to the prince and immediately sets off with her loyal dwarf companions to investigate the threat to the two kingdoms.

A fairy tale reimagining is motivating in that it both affirms and interrogates students’ pre-existing knowledge of fairy tales. Some of the students have probably noticed by now that there are elements from *Snow White* (dwarfs, underground passages with precious stones and the death-like sleep) in addition to the *Sleeping Beauty* story. Prior knowledge of fairy tales can be activated when students compare versions they know, for instance as a *think-pair-share* activity. The teacher could initiate this by inviting the students to reflect individually on the versions of *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty* with which they are familiar. Next, each student pairs with a partner to share their experiences of these fairy tales. Students should have time to recall versions they have read or seen and to formulate their response before further sharing in a whole-class discussion. *Sleeping Beauty* tales that students may know might include the version in the folklore collection published by the Brüder Grimm (various English translations based on the final 1857 collection are freely available online through Project Gutenberg). Two Walt Disney versions may be familiar, the animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959), and the live-action film *Maleficent* (Stromberg, 2014). Well-known versions of *Snow White* include the Grimms’ *Sneewittchen* (*Snow White*), Walt Disney’s first animated feature film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937), and the recent films *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Sanders, 2012) and *Mirror Mirror* (Singh, 2012).

As one aspect of deep reading is to encourage pleasure in books, the teacher could show well-known book illustrations of these fairy tales to prompt discussion of different versions. Award-winning fairy tale illustrators, whose works have entered the public domain and can easily be found online, include Walter Crane (1845–1915), Warwick Goble (1862–1943), Franz Jüttner (1865–1925), and Arthur Rackham (1867–1939). Figures 4 and 5 could be used to discuss the characterization of Snow White and the dwarfs in the older tales in comparison to their characterization in *The Sleeper and the Spindle*.



Figure 4. Franz Jüttner Illustration of *Sneewittchen*, 1905. Public domain.

Chris Riddell’s illustrations offer many opportunities for groupwork centred on the pictures, and groupwork is important for this is a postmodern reimagining of the fairy tale that can be confusing to students who are not used to twists in traditional tales. *Reciprocal teaching* is a dialogic, cooperative process of learning from literary text that helps students acquire strategies for learning from story. In groups of four, students



Figure 5. Warwick Goble Illustration of *Snow White*, 1913. Public domain.

discuss either an image or a section of text in detail. Each student has a specific role in reciprocal teaching: oral summarizer, clarifier, predictor, or questioner. The summarizer describes in detail what is happening in the picture (this can be quite complex in *The Sleeper and the Spindle*) and suggests a suitable title for the page. The clarifier describes what has led up to this point and attempts to clarify any confusions. The predictor studies the picture to interpret the scene and predict what will happen next. The questioner investigates the meaning of any symbols, any intertextuality or historical background of the story. Once each student has briefly discussed and understood their role in their own small group, these groups disperse, and all the summarizers, clarifiers, predictors, and questioners then meet, compare notes, potentially revise their findings, and report back to their group and, finally, to the entire class.

Reciprocal teaching groupwork might, for example, revolve around the illustration on page 53 (see Figure 6) showing a flashback of when the princess pricked her finger. Some of the students who have read the book to the end may still be confused – who exactly is the sleeping young

woman on the bed, and who is the old woman? Whom must the queen save? Working in groups, students can compare their understanding. The questioner could investigate why spinning has such a negative image in fairy tales, and collect expressions for wearisome work (such as monotonous, women's work, long hours, humdrum, mind-numbing). So, century after century, women relieved the tedium of spinning by telling and listening to stories. How do people relieve monotony today? Are stories still important?

Next, the students might compare to what degree the narration of *The Sleeper and the Spindle* differs from the fairy tale retellings of the Brüder Grimm. Their traditional folklore is characterized by a plot-driven story, swift narration, and conventionalized, one-dimensional characters. In contrast to this, Neil Gaiman's narration is full of opulent description. For instance, the citizens who seem to be sleepwalking below the castle of Sleeping Beauty are described in multisensory, chilling detail:

Sleeping people are not fast. They stumble, they stagger; they move like children wading through rivers of treacle, like old people whose feet are weighed down by thick, wet mud. (...) Each street they [the queen and the dwarfs] came to was filled with sleepers, cobweb-shrouded, eyes tight closed or eyes open and rolled back in their heads showing only the whites, all of them shuffling sleepily forwards. (Gaiman, 2014, p. 35)

Step Three: Critically engage

There are good reasons to critically engage with any retelling of fairy tales, including both *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White*. There are often gender issues and the patriarchal code of bygone ages to consider. Especially in films, critical issues can easily be overlooked. There is usually an aspect of ageism in *Snow White* films – fairy tale expert Jack Zipes (2012) refers to the “glorification of the virgin princess” in the recent films *Snow White and the Huntsman* and *Mirror Mirror*. The characteristic of ageism often found in fairy tales is neatly reversed in *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, when students finally discover that it is the old woman who is the true heroine of that Sleeping Beauty story. As we can be strongly influenced by the



Figure 6. The Princess Pricks her Finger. Page 53 from *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014), © Chris Riddell (illustrator) and © Neil Gaiman (author), Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

stories we read and watch, critical literacy and media literacy should be exercised in ELT as an important element of deep reading, while simultaneously exercising communication skills, critical thinking, visual literacy, and diversity competence, all of which are interconnected across the curriculum and with relevance for students' lives outside school, and thus contribute to in-depth learning.

To begin with gender issues, in the Grimms' canonical retelling of the *Sleeping Beauty* tale, the princess's fate is sealed at her christening party. She then sleeps for much of the story, so it is no surprise when the prince who discovers her in the tower one hundred years later seizes the initiative to decide their future, leaving the princess with no voice in the matter at all. In a slightly less patriarchal age a century later, Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959) has the prince and princess meet in the woods and fall in love before she falls into a charmed sleep. On the other hand, the Grimm's *Snow White* has a child protagonist who is only seven years old when she flees from the palace. As a mere child, it is unsurprising that she fails to recognize her disguised evil stepmother three times. After the apple poisoning, even while the dwarfs mourn her loss, they allow an entirely unknown prince to carry her off in her glass coffin. Apparently, he has fallen in love with a beautiful child corpse; yet when Snow White awakes, his suitability as her husband is not questioned. Disney's version, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937), introduces the prince to an adolescent Snow White before her flight into the woods, in an episode at a well and a balcony scene that is reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Nonetheless, Snow White's apparent lack of agency when she awakes in her glass coffin could not be more different from Shakespeare's intrepid Juliet, who similarly awakes in a tomb after a death-like sleep. These are important issues to discuss, for in some countries girls learn to behave with humility and restraint as part of the social code. Student teachers from Norway, for example, might consider whether *Janteloven* suppresses self-esteem more powerfully in girls than it does in boys.

While *The Sleeper and the Spindle* also has a bewitching "Once upon a time" feel, both familiar and strange at the same time, the three strong central characters – two good and one bad – are all female, which completely changes the texture of the story. Unorthodoxy is a common trait

in postmodern literature, and *The Sleeper and the Spindle* disrupts and transforms older versions. If they read the peritext, students will discover that the author/illustrator team of Neil Gaiman and Chris Riddell dedicated this book to their respective daughters. The message that girls need to be resilient and self-confident (and not meek and intimidated) could be highlighted through discussion and comparison with traditional versions. In the past, Gaiman's Snow White had learned a lesson about coercion from her malevolent stepmother: "Learning how to be strong, to feel her own emotions and not another's, had been hard; but once you learned the trick of it, you did not forget" (Gaiman, 2014, p. 59).

The Sleeper and the Spindle is an affirmation that girls and women can and should take the initiative, and princes are anyway not always charming (see the dangerous tendencies of the prince in the Grimms' *Snow White*). It is a good idea to help students exercise media literacy by introducing them to what has become known as the Bechdel test (or Bechdel-Wallace test). This is a way of calling attention to gender inequality in contemporary books and, in particular, films. The test, which was first introduced by graphic artist and novelist Alison Bechdel, examines whether a film (or other narrative) is worthwhile. This requires that it has at least two female characters whose names we get to know and who talk to each other about something other than a man. In recent years, the Bechdel test has drawn attention to the lack of breadth and depth of female characters in popular movies as well as to gender one-sidedness in serious films and fiction. Given that its three central characters are all female, *The Sleeper and the Spindle* is an almost complete turnaround from the many stories that fail the Bechdel test.

This unsettling might be engaging to adolescent students, as a reversal of norms and literary conventions can be appealing to them. However, it might be interesting to debate in class whether male students find the lack of a prince concerning while the lack of a female lead in narrative is still very much the norm, especially in popular narrative. Students can hopefully discover that *The Sleeper and the Spindle* is less female dominated than many traditional works of fiction are male dominated. The three dwarfs may be the only male characters of significance, but they certainly talk to each other and take initiative, too. Still, the prince remains invisible

throughout the plot of *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, and once Snow White has overcome both sleeping sickness and the wicked enchantress, she makes the decision to abandon her wedding plans (see Figure 7):

She said nothing, but sat on the moss beneath an oak tree and tasted the stillness, heartbeat by heartbeat.

There are choices, she thought, when she had sat long enough. *There are always choices.*

She made one. (Gaiman, 2014, p. 66)

Students could also compare Chris Riddell's illustrations with enduring scenes from fairy tales, for example comparing the image of the resolute queen helper in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* with that of the three good-fairy helpers in Walt Disney's animated film *Sleeping Beauty* (Geronimi, 1959). The female helper is a traditional feminine role, but this function has developed hugely in postmodern literature from the portrayal of the fairy helpers in the Disney classic as stereotypically middle-aged and often ridiculous – another instance of ageism. This can be seen in the screen grab in Figure 8 and in a film clip freely available on YouTube Kids depicting the humorous fight over the colour of the princess's dress – <https://www.youtubekids.com/watch?v=D1fOLHnTlyA>. In contrast, the young queen in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* is not only determined, courageous and strong-minded but also thoughtful and perceptive.

The Sleeper and the Spindle is not a queer love story, even though it is Snow White herself who kisses the beautiful sleeper awake, but it is disturbing that the boy-kisses-girl imperative of traditional fairy tales is still so strong that the book garnered much controversy for its same-sex kiss. Once all the students have finished reading the book, the class could critically engage with the choice of covers for the hardback and paperback editions (see Figures 2 and 3) in the light of conflicting issues: homophobia, which caused rejection of the book in many circles due to the same sex kiss, and queerbaiting, the marketing ploy of featuring the same sex kiss on the cover when this is not an LGBTQ+ retelling. The author and illustrator Gaiman and Riddell discuss the illustrations and this controversy in an entertaining three-minute video – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1yvbXJDz1c>.

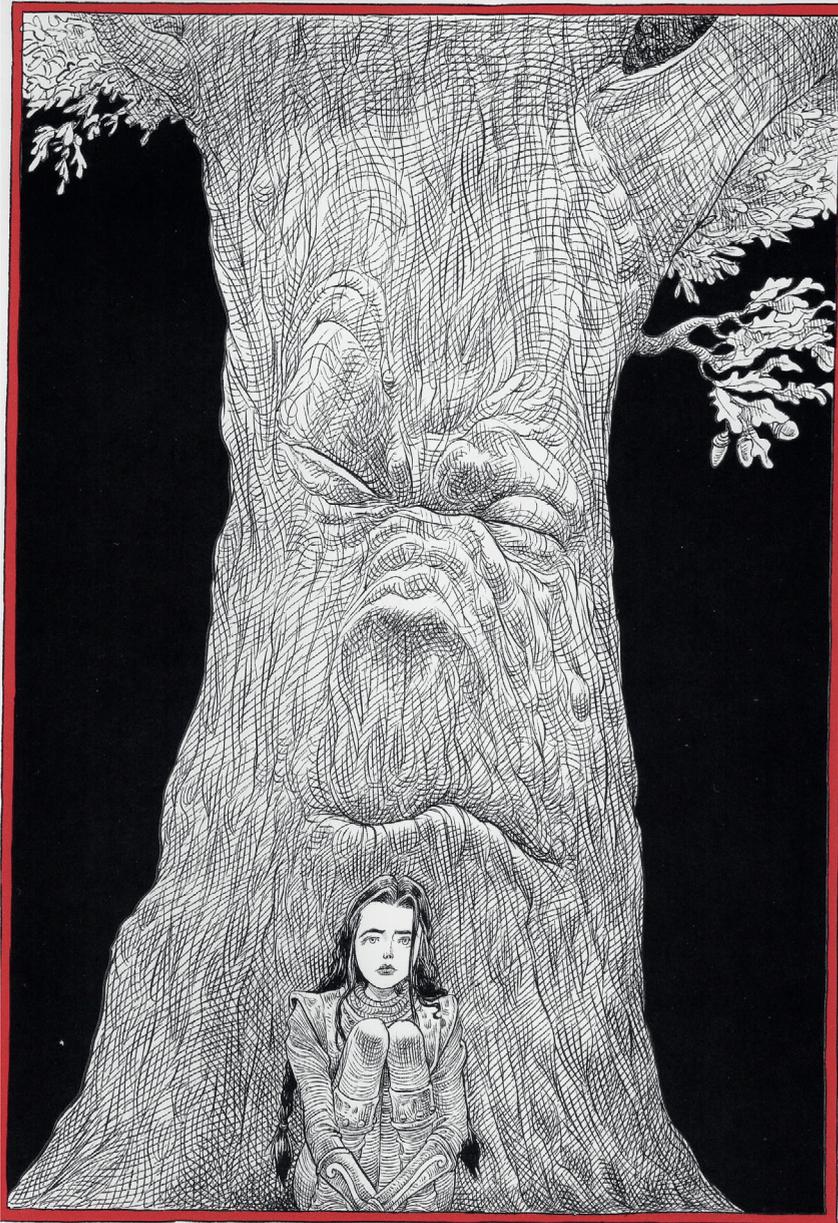


Figure 7. "There are choices", she thought. Page 67 from *The Sleeper and the Spindle* (2014)
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Figure 8. The Three Good Fairies: Screen Grab from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

Students themselves could take the debate on these issues further than *The Sleeper and the Spindle* offers, by investigating in groups and presenting concise information on important current concerns which might include the #MeToo movement, coercive control, sexual objectification through social media and advertising, body shaming, sexual harassment, sexual abuse, victim blaming, rape culture, hegemonic masculinity and the *Everyone's Invited* website.

The dwarfs in *The Sleeper and the Spindle* are magical creatures – the magic number of three rather than the magic number of seven – who play a guiding role throughout the story, finally accompanying Snow White following her decision not to return to her kingdom and marry the prince. In Warwick Goble's illustration of the dwarfs (see Figure 5), they are represented as mature miners of small stature, some with long grey beards. In Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937), the dwarfs are named Happy, Sleepy, Sneezy, Bashful, Grumpy, Doc and Dopey, and Snow White describes their home as "just like a doll's house". In keeping with their absurd names, they are infantilized, goofy and mucky. Indeed, all of the comedy in this film derives from the dwarfs'

cute but silly behaviour and antics. Snow White, who is not yet an adult, immediately takes charge of the older men (and also cleans and cooks for them) until the prince turns up, when he immediately takes charge of Snow White. The infantilization of the dwarfs is very apparent in the scene when Snow White wakes up in their home and meets them for the first time. This is freely available on YouTube Kids – <https://www.youtubekids.com/watch?v=jSkE-bozEqY>.

A classroom discussion after watching the Disney film, trailer or above scene can help students engage critically with the topic of ableism – discrimination in favour of non-disabled people – in the film’s representation of the dwarfs. Currently, actors who are members of the dwarfism community are deeply concerned about Disney’s forthcoming live-action remake of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. According to actor Kiruna Stamell (2022), the 1937 animated film “is still problematic but with more distance from me, in the real world. The dated nature of the animation also reduces the hurt it causes because it was from another time, predating the disability rights movement”. Stamell doubts, however, whether Disney is “capable of making the massive ideological leap needed to create a film in which the seven dwarfs are the fully fledged humans they should be. With real names, rounded characters and having some kind of agency”.

The dwarfs in the live-action film *Snow White and the Huntsman* (Sanders, 2012) were not performed by professional actors living with dwarfism, but by actors of average height whose faces were digitally united with small bodies. Thus, the opportunity of a humanizing media portrayal of dwarfism and the casting of professional actors of short stature was lost. Do students see this as equally problematic as when a Native American character is portrayed by an actor who is not Native American? *Mirror Mirror* (Singh, 2012), on the other hand, represents disabled bodies respectfully. The dwarfs are portrayed by professional actors with dwarfism, the characters all have real names and real professions (at least until they become outcasts), and the prejudice they experience due to their stature is a topic in the storyline. Paying attention to such issues belongs to the cross-curricular learning goals of media literacy and interculturality.

Step Four: Experiment with creative response

Fairy tales have key elements that are repeated in all different versions. In *Sleeping Beauty* this includes an enchantress who was not invited to a christening feast, a baby princess who is cursed to prick her finger on a spindle and fall into a death-like sleep, and a magical awakening by a kiss. These elements are important building blocks so that a story can be identified, allowing the pleasure of recognition.

Students could be invited to write an episode from a well-known fairy tale; but instead of focusing on the plot, they exercise creative writing by focusing on setting and/or characterization. Myhill (2020) refers to a weakness in secondary school writing as “over-emphasis on plot, resulting in plot-driven narratives with much weaker characterisation, and establishment of setting” (p. 204). Students can be asked to describe a character from a fairy tale, including not only their appearance, but also how they behave and move. The following is a detail from *The Sleeper and the Spindle*, which illustrates the importance of movement in characterization, while also emphasizing the magical number three:

The three dwarfs scrambled out of a hole in the side of the riverbank, and clambered up into the meadow, one, two, three. They climbed to the top of a granite outcrop, stretched, kicked, jumped and stretched themselves once more. Then they sprinted north, towards the cluster of low buildings that made the village of Giff, and in particular to the village inn. (Gaiman, 2014, p. 15)

Riddell’s illustrations, or images from fairy tales available on the Web, could be used as a prompt for creative writing. Looking carefully at a picture can inspire students to include sensory details, so that the reader can engage with the characters and experience the setting in a multisensory way. Pictures can help students visualize what they want to write, for as Burmark (2008) highlights, language should help the reader “to *recall* things we have already seen and experienced. This is why writing is so much more detailed and evocative when students can look at an image before they start writing” (p. 11, emphasis in original).

In addition to using pictures to help students create convincing settings and characterization, careful, deep reading of a creative language

model could mentor students' own writing. The following extract from *The Sleeper and the Spindle* includes many sensory impressions – visual, aural, kinaesthetic, tactile, and olfactory – so that the reader can see, hear, feel the motion (the rustle and movement of the crawling maggots), and smell the stinking fish, while the seven-fold repetition of “sleeping” creates cohesion and a well-interconnected scene.

There were sleeping riders on sleeping horses; sleeping cabmen up on still carriages that held sleeping passengers; sleeping children clutching their ball and hoops and the whips for their spinning tops; sleeping flower women at their stalls of brown, rotten, dried flowers; even sleeping fishmongers beside their marble slabs. The slabs were covered with the remains of stinking fish, and they were crawling with maggots. The rustle and movement of the maggots was the only movement and noise the queen and dwarfs encountered. (Gaiman, 2014, p. 34)

Creative writing should not be a silent mode, on the contrary, students can better focus on the poetry, rhythm, and other auditory aspects of their writing if they read their texts aloud. Students should be encouraged to make use of synonyms to “enrich their vocabulary and create a powerful textual rhythm. A castle, for example, is not just big, it can be *vast, grandiose, and with an infinity of strangely shaped towers*. The forest can be *deep, dark, and with dense, melancholy shadows*” (Bland, 2022, p. 154, emphasis in original). Creative writing tasks help students to write effectively, making language choices carefully and taking pride in their work. The cognitive depth achieved is far greater than gap-filling exercises could possibly provide. And, as Fullan et al. (2019) point out, “filling in the blanks on a laptop is no more cognitively challenging than doing so on paper” (p. 65).

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have discussed why it is imperative that students continue to include deep reading of print in their reading repertoire. I have then questioned how deep reading of a literary text might enable students'

in-depth learning in English language education, helping young people to reflect on their learning and see connections to the world beyond school and, hopefully, to better master challenges in new contexts. In this connection, I have introduced a deep reading framework (see Figure 1), using it to explore a high-quality literary text suitable for adolescents, *The Sleeper and the Spindle*.

When applying the deep reading framework, it became apparent that in order to reach some of the learning goals, it would be helpful to include additional texts, such as older fairy tale versions, fairy tale illustrations or films, thereby creating a text ensemble. For example, handsome illustrations of the fairy tales (see Figures 4 and 5) can inspire cross-curricular work with the art class, and films or film trailers can provide an additional opportunity for media literacy and discussion of global issues. It became clear that the inclusion of other texts, however short, would help previously unquestioned perspectives to be questioned. Additionally, more critical thinking on global issues could be included, so supporting in-depth learning as students recognize the immediate relevance for their lives outside of school. This suits the postmodern definition of text, which is also reflected in the Norwegian *Curriculum for English* (ENGO1-04):

The concept of text is used in a broad sense: texts can be spoken and written, printed and digital, graphic and artistic, formal and informal, fictional and factual, contemporary and historical. The texts can contain writing, pictures, audio, drawings, graphs, numbers and other forms of expression that are combined to enhance and present a message. (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2019, p. 3)

Salomon (2016) has claimed that while “mastery of information can be demonstrated by its reproduction; mastery of knowledge is demonstrated by its novel application” (p. 155). In this sense, in order to move English language teaching forward, a fresh focus on in-depth learning that includes students taking on a central role as discerning, agentive, and ambitious participants in their own learning process, seems to be a fruitful path to follow.

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