

THE USE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FOR THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH & CHARACTER EDUCATION

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Abstract: The power of children's literature to entertain and to inspire has long been acknowledged as has its power to educate a child's moral sensibility. In many respects, children's literature continues to be an important vehicle through which moral values are taught and "caught". Yet, how this might be done with children of today may require some pause. In this talk, I discuss the relationship between the use of children's literature, character development of young children and the teaching of critical thinking. Drawing on the work of Luke and Freebody (1990), I will attempt to describe the 21st century world and the key competencies, chief among them critical thinking, that children will need. I argue that approaches such as Lipman's Philosophy for Children (1970) that seek to use critical reasoning as the means to character learning might be more appropriate for children of today who will be the citizens of tomorrow. I demonstrate through the examples from children's literature how these will serve as textual "mediums" (Krashen, 1962) for language use in classroom discussions on tasks focused on moral issues. In this way, I offer the view that English language lessons are an excellent site for not only the use of children's literature for language use but for the development of children as the future moral caretakers of the world.

There is a growing acknowledgement that children's literature is an excellent vehicle for language and literacy development (Winch, Ross Johnston, March, Ljungdahl, & Holliday, 2016). However, the view that children's literature is a wonderful conduit for character development has been acknowledged for some time now (Kilpatrick, Wolfe, & Wolfe, 1994). Nodelman & Reimer (2003, p. 187) argue that even though children's literature are "texts written for children" and "often belong to genres that may be familiar already to people who know something about literature written for adults", they also have much in common with other texts for children and therefore, is "considered a genre of literature in its own right". As a genre of literature in its own right, children's literature is useful as an enculturation and socialization tool as it is useful for psychological and cognitive development of children. Winch et al. (2016, p. 478) so aptly describe children's literature as "language applied". They argue that children's literature is also equally excellent for children's cultural and digital literacy development.

In this paper, I discuss how children's literature and stories might be used for language, literacy and character development from a critical literacy perspective. I argue that the characteristics of the generation of learners in our classrooms today are vastly different from the generation before (Prensky, 2001; Tan, Liu, & Low, 2012) and that language, literacy and even character education may need to be approached differently as it was done before.

Children's Literature & the Development of Language in Children

As English language teachers, we aspire that the learners in our classes develop the abilities to use English in authentic ways. We aspire that our learners are confident users of English in a wide range of contexts. More importantly, we aspire that our learners master English to the degree that they will have access to other opportunities beyond their current stage of development, beyond their own schools and for some, beyond the boundaries of their own country. Communicative models of language teaching focus on the development of communicative competence in learners

(Canale & Swain, 1980). Hymes (1972) explains that communicative competence is “not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations” (Bagarić & Djigunović, 2007, p. 95). The role that children’s literature plays in the development of language competence is worth recounting since much of it is already informing language policy and practice in many parts of the world.

Reading

From the perspective of communicative competence, children’s literature is a useful conduit for language development and in particular reading. From research, we learn that the habit of reading can be cultivated in children through the reading of children’s stories. Tunnell, Jacobs, Yong & Bryan (2016, p. 4) implore teachers to read to their learners in order to “create the desire to read”. Research now shows us that the more children read, the better readers they become (Gambrell & Marinak, 2009; Guthrie, Schafer, & Huang, 2001). The authors also argue that teachers play a paramount role in reading development by modelling good reading, enacting communicative competence through expressive reading and providing learners with opportunities during the reading to engage with the reading by responding to story elements like characters and plot and talking about their own knowledge of the world. Further work on the relationship between children’s literature and reading development reveal the benefits of giving children the time while at school to read books of their own choosing (Fresch, 1995; Krashen, 2004; Worthy, Turner, & Moorman, 1998). Progress in this aspect of reading development is much slower in terms of implementation in schools.

Writing

The research on the relationship between children’s literature and the development of writing skills is more developed for early learners. It is in this relationship that the elements of good children’s books must needfully be attended to. Interestingly, Tunnel et al. (2016, p. 32) identify the elements of weak writing in children’s stories as didacticism, condescension and controlled vocabulary. They maintain that these elements shape children stories such that they are “not clear but fuzzy, not believable but implausible, not interesting but dull”. Didacticism, described as “writing that pretends to be a story but is actually a lesson”, fail to engage children in the experience of the story or how language is used to communicate. If one were to consider every story as a communicative act, didacticism situates learners to pay attention to the lesson drawn from the story rather than on how language is used in the story to create meaning. Equally, condescension explained as stories where “the writer underestimates the reader’s abilities” undermines the experience of the story as well. A consistent meme in applied linguistics research across language areas and skills is the appeal not to underestimate the abilities of learners and certainly not their cognitive abilities. Lastly, the use of controlled vocabulary in stories based on the belief “that children learn to read easy words first then graduate slowly to more difficult ones” restrict children’s exposure to interesting words and language patterns essential for communication and ultimately the development of fluency.

Winch et al (2016, p. 479) assert that children’s literature are authentic examples of writing especially when the selection of literature is of quality. They argue that children’s literature offers the opportunity to develop English learners into “knowing writers” because of the exposure to a wide range of authentic models through literature in different modes and formats. They argue that because of this, children move from being literary competent to developing literary understanding (Sipe, 2000), from accurate writers to fluent writers (Bamford & Day, 1997) and from text user to text critic (Freebody & Luke, 1990). This call for the use of children’s literature for language development, particularly in EFL contexts, has been long-standing requesting “for the learner’s immediate exposure to genuine instances of language use” (Widdowson, 1979, p. 151).

Listening and Speaking

Children’s literature offers learners a natural platform for authentic oral discourse. Winch et al. (2016, p. 40) explains that oral language is both expressive and receptive. They explain that oral language is learnt through spoken interaction and not just by listening. From this, we appreciate the basis of instructional approaches such as the Shared Book Approach (Clay, 2005a, 2005b) or Read-

Alouds (Fisher, Flood, Lapp, & Frey, 2004), where learners listen to a reading of a story by a teacher or competent user and are then provided with the opportunity to talk about the book. As learners are read to, the opportunities for conversations about books and around books are numerous. Winch et al. (2016, p. 41) add that strong oral language growth in children is promoted when they interact with parents and caregivers whose interactions have the following qualities: (a) interactions are embedded in a real context, (b) there is focus on the meaning of what the child is trying to say, (c) the child is given the time to talk without interruption or correction, (d) new words are introduced in the context of real objects or experiences, (e) recasts or rephrases are introduced into more standard English and, (f) the child’s attempts or language is not criticized. Literature-based conversations allow for these qualities to realise as part of communication since both teacher and learners are situated as “wanderers” (Sipe, 2008, 2012) through the story.

Original conceptualisations of book talk (Chambers, 1993/1999) is that they should engage the learner in a wide range of discourse about books and related literature, as well as talk about the experience of reading and being a reader. Open-ended or fat questions (Anderson, Krathwohl, & Bloom, 2001) that allow for learners to bring their own experience to the conversation and express views about situations in the book are preferred to closed-ended or skinny questions. Chambers (1993/1999) describes these questions as “tell me” questions. He proposes that these questions, examples of which are shown in Table 1, are most useful to begin engaging learners in book-based conversations. Such questions as one notices are largely different from questions that seek comprehension alone. They seek preferences, opinions, reasons, justifications, elaboration and evaluation – all of which engage learners as *text critics* (Freebody & Luke, 1990) and *critical thinkers*.

Table 1. Examples of Chambers “Tell Me” Questions

No	Questions
1	Was there anything you liked about this book?
2	Was there anything you disliked about this book?
3	Was there anything that puzzled you?
4	Were there any patterns-any connections- that you noticed?

Children’s Literature & The Development of Literacy

Prensky (2001) alerts us that today’s generation of learners are vastly different from generations before. Described as “digital natives”, generations of learners are not only conversant in technological and communication skills but also in thinking critically. The call for the development of thinking-based curricula was already been made in the 1980s after research breakthroughs in critical literacy. Today, OECD (2009) informs that the 21st century critical thinking skills are of a higher-order than individual thinking skills. Critical literacy processes such as those shown in Table 2 are now proposed as foundational for learners who will work and live in worlds vastly different from the world as we know it now.

Table 2. Critical Literacy Processes for the 21st Century

No	Type
1	Decision-making
2	Strategic Thinking
3	Entrepreneurial Thinking
4	Information, Media and Technology

Research such as Sipe (2008, 2012) reveals that teachers act as readers, managers, fellow wanderers and extenders during read-alouds and will therefore ask more open-ended questions that require extended answers. In addition, as teachers move in and out of these roles during read-alouds, they instinctively expect that learners will be creative and critical. And, opportunities for children to make decisions, be strategic or entrepreneurial abound when they engage with literature. For Sipe found that children tended to respond in the following ways: (a) analytically (talking about the story elements), (b) intertextually (bringing in related or similar texts), (c) personally (bringing in their personal experiences), (d) transparently (engaging in the story as real world) and/or (e) performatively (manipulating the text with humour, irony or creativity).

Winch et al (2016, p. 484) explains that children's literature is "transformational, opening other worlds, self to a world of others, and others to a world of self". They are a powerful medium to shaping the world of the reader and its relation to other communities. The authors argue that "cultural literacy is a knowledge and appreciation of this world of others [diverse ways of being], and values its differences" (Winch et al., 2016, p. 536). As a body of work that celebrates inclusive understandings of the multicultural world we all live in as "snippets of culture", children's literature provides the knowledge and platform for this vital 21st century literacy to be developed. Our instruction must reveal this appreciation of our own identities as well of others.

Finally, the digital diversity in which children's literature allows for learners to access "multiple forms, devices and formats to engineer, integrate, synthesise, translate/transform/transpose, create, disseminate and evaluate" (Winch et al., 2016, p. 536). Learners read a story, watch a short animation on it, respond to it using a range of technological tools, share it across technological mediums opens new ways of not only reading texts but engaging with it and with whom. The research is compels us to consider its use for not only literacy development but for 21st century literacy development.

Philosophy for Children

Philosophy for Children (henceforth, P4C) originated by Mathew Lipman in 1970 (1976; 1990; M. Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyon, 1980) offers one way of developing language and the 21st century competencies. The approach is described as structured dialogues with learners focused on philosophical issues such as "truth", "fairness" or "happiness". The aims of the approach is to give learners the confidence to ask questions, construct arguments and engage in reasoned but respectful discussion. Short-term and long-term programme evaluations have revealed positive impact on pupils cognitive abilities (Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999; Topping & Trickey, 2007; Trickey & Topping, 2004) although in specific contexts. As such, most proposals to introduce the approach or a variant of the approach has been prefaced by localized studies.

The following are the main stages of a P4C lesson: (1) Getting set, (2) Presentation of stimulus, (3) Thinking time, (4) Question making, (5) Question airing, (6) Question choosing, (7) First thoughts, (8) Building, (9) Last thoughts and (10) Review. Critical to P4C lessons is the use of critical literacy to explore, listen and dialogue with learners philosophical issues arising from children's literature. Research on this approach indicates that it might offer children the opportunity within the English curriculum to talk about deep and even existential issues that resonate but often remain unattended as learners mature.

Children's Literature and Character Education

Research on the use of children's literature for character education is entirely possible. Historically, children's stories in particular genres such as traditional folklore such as fairy stories and fables are stories that focus on educative aspects of good character. Such stories are traditionally written to contrast good and evil, just and unjust, right and wrong. However, other more modern genres and even postmodern children's stories have proven to be excellent platforms as well for the discussion of the complexity of these issues in modern life – life in which our learners live. While traditional stories may be primers for younger learners, more complex stories in genres such as contemporary realistic fiction are useful as well for learners to think critically about character values in the modern world.

If didacticism, condescension and controlled vocabulary (Tunnell et al., 2016, p. 32) are asserted to be attributes of weak writing in children's stories, then surely teacher-directed moral-oriented literature are equally likely to be less persuasive for the learners of today. The challenge for teachers then is to explore how conversations with learners might be facilitated as learners are given opportunities to argue and reason about their own morality. Equally, if learners are introduced to new worlds and peoples through children's literature (Winch et al., 2016, p. 536), the need to select books that focus on specific character attributes may not be the best way forward.

Conclusion

Tan, Liu and Low (2012, p. 72) point out that "the emerging profile of learners is one that seeks experiential learning, participation through active involvement, imagery-rich and inquiry-based learning environments and a high degree of connectivity in cyberspace". And, I suspect that many who are parents and teachers in this audience have already come to experience this to be true causing us as teachers to rethink traditional approaches to the teaching of English or character education. The research is compelling and has been for some time that children's literature accompanied by discussions will strongly encourage language development in learners. In EFL contexts where learner exposure to good quality language use is often challenging, not only is children's literature important but the selection of children's stories will matter. As learners read good literature, both their receptive and expressive vocabulary will improve in both their oral communication and writing.

As learners become more critically aware and culturally literate, opportunities for self-selection of literature may prove needful. New forms and formats of stories offer learners complex learning in new technologies which could include learners which are speakers of English from different parts of the world. Digital literacy of this nature come close to ways in which new technologies are being used in the world of work today. However, if we agree with the view that the learners in our classrooms today are thinking, capable of thinking deeply and desire to think critically and creatively, this might cause us to pause if transmission-oriented approaches to learning are still appropriate or if literature-based critical pedagogy is the way ahead for us to assist their development as 21st century learners.