

**Critical Literacy and Deep Reading in Teacher Education
through the Novel *The Boy at the Back of the Class***

**(Alfabetización crítica y lectura profunda en el aula de Magisterio
a través de la novela *The Boy at the Back of the Class*)**

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Abstract: This article presents a pedagogical experience carried out with student teachers in the first year of the BA in Primary Education at the University of Alicante. The chapter book *The Boy at the Back of the Class* (2018) by Onjali Q. Raúf served as a unifying thread through the semester to develop critical literacy through deep reading, which involves the in-depth exploration of literary texts approached from different aspects and perspectives in the classroom. Choosing the right text (at the right time) that can appeal to different sensibilities and reading levels is key (Bland 2019). In this sense, *The Boy at the Back of the Class*, is presented as an ideal intercultural literary work both for its linguistic content about the classroom and school, as well as for its meaning, with themes in tune with the SDGs such as the refugee crisis, bullying, language barriers and affectivity as a driver for communication. The results of the research carried out have proven the experience is adequate to fostering deep reading for in-depth learning, as the results of the questionnaires and the testimony of the students involved in the case study demonstrate.

Keywords: Deep reading. In-depth learning. Critical literacy. Intercultural children's Literature. SDGs.

Resumen: El presente artículo se basa en una experiencia pedagógica llevada a cabo con alumnado de primero de Magisterio en la Universidad de Alicante. La novela juvenil *The Boy at the Back of the Class* (2018) de Onjali Q. Raúf ha servido como hilo conductor durante el cuatrimestre para desarrollar la alfabetización crítica a través de la lectura profunda, implicando ésta la exploración en profundidad de textos literarios abordados desde diferentes aspectos y perspectivas en el aula. Elegir el texto adecuado (en el momento adecuado) que pueda apelar a diferentes sensibilidades y niveles de lectura es clave (Bland 2019). En este sentido, *The Boy at the Back of the Class* se presenta como una obra literaria intercultural idónea tanto por su contenido lingüístico sobre el aula y la escuela, como por su significado, con temas en sintonía con los ODS como son la crisis de refugiados, el acoso escolar, las barreras lingüísticas y la afectividad como motor de la comunicación. Los resultados de la investigación realizada han demostrado que la experiencia es adecuada para fomentar la lectura profunda dirigida hacia un aprendizaje en profundidad, como demuestran los resultados de los cuestionarios y el testimonio del alumnado participantes en este estudio.

Palabras clave: Lectura profunda. Aprendizaje en profundidad. Alfabetización crítica. Literatura infantil intercultural. ODS.

1. Introduction

In light of the current educational landscape, the thoughtful and active incorporation of literature in language education emerges as a highly powerful tool, as the LOMLOE emphasises the necessity of centering children's rights within the educational framework, alongside principles such as gender equality, sustainability, and global citizenship. Literature and artistic expression intrinsically embody cultural representation and meaning.

Furthermore, among the eight fundamental competences delineated, two are directly associated with intercultural citizenship education: Citizenship Competence and Cultural Awareness and Expression Competence. The former pertains to responsible civic participation in societal development, fostering a sense of global citizenship, and a commitment to sustainability; the latter concerns promoting a critical, positive, and respectful perspective toward various cultural and artistic expressions. Needless to say, such competences are in direct dialogue with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Recent evidence underscores the benefits of employing literature in the teaching of an additional language, demonstrating a resurgence of interest in this approach over the past few years (Bland 2013, 2018; Hall 2015), particularly

following earlier shifts associated with communicative language teaching, which resulted in a 're-positioning' of literature (Hall 2015: 19). Overcoming this misconception of literature as an artificial use of language, the advantages of utilising literature in English language education are being increasingly acknowledged.

This article expands on teaching with literature in the subject Didactics of English Language for Primary Education taught at the Faculty of Education of the University of Alicante, Spain, during the academic year 2023-2024. For this experience, we have selected as a framework the chapter book *The Boy at the Back of the Class* (2018) by Onjali Q. Raúf. The idea of using this title comes from a previous event using this book at the University of València. At that time (2022-2023), this sentence kept coming out in the interviews professor Miralles-Alberola held with her students: "Every teacher should read this book." Student teachers felt compelled and deeply moved by Raúf's novel, since it shows different school conflicts, situations and dilemmas from the perspective of children, along with diverse issues related with the Sustainable Development Goals such as quality of education, poverty, inequalities and peace.

The study we have carried out departs from deeply and actively reading *The Boy at the Back of the Class*, letting students participate in and contribute to the story. Deep reading, as defined by Janice Bland, means "transacting with and participating actively in the literary text," fostering in-depth learning, which is understood as an "approach that aims to reconnect school and the world beyond" (2023: 290). In this spirit, the main objectives of this work are to explore critical literacy and intercultural learning among students. The activities based on *The Boy at the Back of the Class* aimed to show how current and concerning topics present in our world can connect with our teacher students' concerns.

Also, an aim of this project is to analyse the transformation of students' perspectives through the deep reading of intercultural texts working on the Citizenship Competence and the Cultural Awareness and Expression Competence, as in English Language Teaching (ELT), the integration of sustainability presents a unique opportunity. Language learning goes beyond mere vocabulary and grammar, it is a powerful tool for shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours.

2. Literature in English Education

There are several important and well-founded reasons why literature is used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. Any curriculum that requires meaningful content in addition to language learning must consider the aesthetic value of literature as well as its thought-provoking and stimulating content, as

Janice Bland explains (2018: 1). Among the emerging trends in faculties of education at Spanish universities, teaching how to use literature to teach English is gaining increasing importance. This makes the moment ideal for adding intercultural literature to curricula.

When it comes to using literature in EFL teaching, it is worth noting that despite the dominance of Communicative Language Teaching over the last few decades—where language is taught for practical purposes—teaching additional languages with literature has always been a widely accepted and valuable practice. However, as Geoff Hall points out, literary texts were often reserved for advanced learners, and the rise of communicative approaches led to literature being reconsidered and re-positioned in language teaching (2015: 19). Nonetheless, through the careful selection of appropriate texts and genres along with compelling methodological approaches to the texts, teachers can tap into students' motivation early on. As Hall states, “[n]othing is more serious or more valuable than enjoying a good story or poem.” (2015: 14).

Despite the complexity of literary language and its differences from everyday usage, the benefits of using literature to develop language skills are immense. These benefits include the joy of reading or listening to literature, exposure to the rhythm and musicality of a language, vocabulary acquisition, and the interactive participation that storytelling encourages. However, it is important to acknowledge that literature in English language education has often been dominated by traditional canonical works, whereas nowadays a genuine commitment to intercultural learning is required (Miralles-Alberola 2021a, 2021b). In this sense, intercultural literature can help create inclusive learning environments for primary school children, many of whom come from multicultural backgrounds.

It is necessary to focus on the use of authentic literary materials in EFL classrooms for primary education, but more importantly, it calls for an expansion of the traditional literary canon in English language teaching. When incorporating literature into EFL lessons, educators must consider the type of literature they present, making an effort to include not only mainstream texts but also works from groups that have been historically marginalised in academic settings. Additionally, care must be taken to avoid perpetuating stereotypes through correct choice of texts (Miralles-Alberola 2021a, 2021b).

Also essential to the selection of materials is the fascination factor, as we have already pointed out. The concept of 'compelling comprehensible input,' which originates from S. Krashen's input hypothesis (1982: 7-9), emphasises that comprehension is vital for second language acquisition, as learners gain proficiency by being exposed to comprehensible input (1982). Krashen, along

with Bland, later expanded this idea to 'compelling comprehensible input' (2014), highlighting the importance of captivating readings that fuel a desire to learn a language in order to access such information. These readings, for various reasons, capture the interest of particular audiences through three different phases.

The first phase involves oral stories heard by the learner, while the second phase consists of readers choosing engaging texts for themselves. The final phase refers to academic or specialised reading (Krashen and Bland 2014). Therefore, to facilitate access to academic language, it is important to nurture readers from their initial exposure to reading. This requires offering a broad selection of genres, topics, and authors from diverse backgrounds, ensuring a range of perspectives and appealing to the widest possible audience.

To demonstrate to our students the enticing power a literary piece might have in the primary classroom, we chose *The Boy at the Back of the Class*, a chapter book that is appropriate for children, but also has the power to profoundly move teachers-to-be and, in this way, promote in-depth learning, as it helps learners to understand the relevance of their learning for life beyond school (Bland 2023). In-depth learning relies on learners' autonomy, and it is fostered in the classroom when practical activities engage student teachers with the real practical problems of schools.

Deep reading and in-depth learning have been pedagogically developed by ELLiL Project Partners (2019-2024) and materialised into the framework Reading for in-depth learning (Ridl). Ridl considers the cognitive, affective and social framework when it comes to the selection of texts. On the other hand, the activities carried out in the classroom have four different levels: Textual, Personal, Critical, and Creative and Transformative. During the Textual phase, students explore the multimodal design features and discover the use of language and stylistic devices. The Personal activates the prior knowledge and connects the text with the world. Through the Critical phase, learners investigate their positioning as readers, find and interpret gaps and ambiguities, and take perspective through the diverse "cultural lenses" in the text and in the classroom. Finally, in the Creative and Transformative stage, learners produce creative responses exploring ways to address issues and take action constructively.

Susceptible to serve the purposes of in-depth learning in reconnecting school learning with the world outside (Bland 2023), *The Boy at the Back of the Class* also contains that fascinating factor noted by Krashen and Bland (2014), as we analyse in the following section. This is a powerful text that counters racism, sexism and cultural stereotyping, providing a rich space for intercultural learning and criticality, making participants question their own beliefs and fostering a mindset for social justice that also projects beyond-the-classroom learning.

3. *The Boy at the Back of the Class* by Onjali Q. Raúf (2018)

The chapter book chosen for this experience has proved to be suitable for a class in teacher education as it is full of situations, symbols and even objects related with education and language acquisition. *The Boy at the Back of the Class* provides student teachers with multiple opportunities to introduce and review classroom language, but there are more profound aspects related to school, language and childhood that work in multiple symbolic and metaphorical ways and are presented masterfully by Onjali Q. Raúf.

3.1. The rucksack

In a sense, children come to school carrying what Path Thomson calls ‘virtual school bags,’ filled with knowledge, customs, and values from their surroundings, “things they have already learned at home, with their friends, and in the world they inhabit.” (2002: 1). However, the contents of these metaphorical bags “are not equally valued, and some children are not given the opportunity to open their bags and access resources like additional languages and cultural knowledge.” (Bland 2018: 6). Unfortunately, the ability to open these bags often correlates with the prestige and privilege associated with the children's backgrounds. Amicable environments where all backgrounds are equally valued allow students to symbolically unpack their school bags and share their personal experiences, their family stories, and their identities. More and more, classrooms should foster an environment that promotes genuine intercultural learning, where children and young adults from all backgrounds can freely and equally express their knowledge, emotions, and beliefs.

In *The Boy at the Back of the Class* the virtual school bag materialises in Ahmed’s rucksack, which has accompanied him from Syria. The bag has a significant relevance in Ahmed’s story, not only because of its origin and the fact he has managed to keep it with him, against all the odds and regardless of the overwhelming difficulties, but also because he would not change his torn-out rucksack for any new one. If the bag represents the child’s background, trading it for a more convenient one is not an option.

School stationery plays an important role. The first paragraphs of the book are filled with the voice of the storyteller telling the readers about the excitement of getting new stationery for the new academic year. The mother has to work two jobs and, although the economy of the family is very unstable and spending money on a whole set of school supplies is not a possibility, parent and child transform the purchase of a new pencil case into an adventurous expedition. This status of mere objects as precious treasures counter consumerism and may make students be critical about redistributive social justice and sustainability.

3.2. *Language*

The boy at the back of the class of the title is Ahmed, a Syrian refugee that starts the year in a new school, where he eventually becomes friends with the four children who are also the main focus of the narration, told by one of them. Ahmed has the opportunity to share his experiences when he feels more comfortable in the new language (English). He gets to express himself thanks to the efforts of the educational community to provide sufficient support for him to start to overcome trauma and thanks to the insistence of the other children to communicate and connect with him, not only through verballity, but also through actions. This works as a metaphor of additional language acquisition and the struggle it might suppose, but also the efficiency of affectivity, as Ahmed is able to open when he feels in a secure place.

Likewise, the language permits the author to play with the revelation of the gender of the storyteller, Alexa. English has this advantage, as grammatical gender is reduced to some pronouns and a few nouns. The delay in allowing the reader to learn about the ethnicity and gender of Alexa works as a test, similar to the popular puzzle of the surgeon:

A father and a son have a terrible accident. The father dies and the son is badly injured. When the boy is taken to the operation room, the surgeon says 'I can't operate on him, he is my son. How is this possible?'

Analysing our response to this riddle and to the assumptions about the gender of the storyteller in *The Boy at the Back of the Class* put us in the position to explore what has been conceptualised as implicit associations or implicit cognition, which encompass "attitudes, stereotypes, and other hidden biases that influence perception, judgment, and behavior." (Project Implicit). Being critical about implicit associations can reveal unconscious discrimination and bias.

3.3. *Criminalisation of children*

In *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding* (2019), Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian denounces the strategies of the power structures to invisibilise children's childhood in the eyes of the public, so that killing them, incarcerating them, and making them disappear does not scandalise society. In *The Boy at the Back of the Class*, the media criminalises the children and even refer to them as terrorists. We do not know until the end that this happens because of their ethnicity, as they are not white. The way it is presented by the author makes us

question why the media is doing that, but we do not learn the reason until later. In this case the implicit association is being carried on by the media.

Within the novel, such criminalisation of ethnically diverse children disrupts the climate of adventure and innocence normally linked to this type of literature. The plot, the narrative point of view, and the use of time in revealing certain facts and identities contribute to re-humanize infancy, making the children protagonist visible and investing them with agency.

By deep-reading through critical literacy the dilemmas and biased situations that pose the narrative of *The Boy at the Back of the Class*, we are introducing in the classroom the questioning of violence, racism, sexism, and classism and the machinery this modern apocalypse horse riders come with. We are also fostering criticality about our own bias to be able to become actors and committed citizens working towards sustainable goals in our global societies.

4. Sustainable Development Goals in the project

The SDGs most directly linked to this project are: no poverty (1); good health and well-being (3); quality education (4); reduce inequalities (10); sustainable cities and communities (11); and peace, justice and strong institutions (16). By fostering deep reading with a children's book that implies critical literacy and social justice, as pointed out in the previous section, we have implicitly worked on these SDGs. With the students, we have explored some of the opportunities this chapter book provides to discuss aspects such as economic inequalities, consumerism, racism, children's rights to wellbeing, protection and education, social justice, and the effects wars have on the most vulnerable. Some fragments regarding the consequences of war with children have been the most emotional in this process.

As previously pointed out when talking about stationery in section 3.1. (The rucksack), we have also explored the three-dimensional vision of the theory of justice regarding redistribution, recognition and representation (Fraser 2005, 2013). Redistributive social justice has to do with the fair distribution of wealth, whereas recognitive social justice deals with the right to identities. Representative social justice connects directly with political institutions, but also with cultural manifestations such as literature "contributing to the collective memory and imagination of the people represented." (Miralles-Alberola *et al* 2014: 169)

A key method to provide learners with tools to reflect on the world from socially justice and critical perspectives, as Luke points out, is to engage them with texts and discourses that bridge "time and space, critically understanding and altering the connections between the local and the global, moving between cultures and communities, and developing transnational understandings and collaborations." (Luke 2003: 22). In this sense, criticality is a vital tool for

advancing in global democracy and social justice in education, which should be guided by diversity and students' agency. We have done so by introducing a text such as *The Boy at the back of the Class*, which invites readers to witness problematic situations involving racism and bullying in the very halls of a school in the periphery of London. There is need for awareness regarding the intercultural socio political nature of our schools, since, as Luke points out:

If ever there was a time in which a common institutional experience where the children of people of diverse histories, cultures, languages, standpoints and beliefs were brought together in common interest and common cause, it is now. (2018a: xi)

Language is not neutral as it can be easily biased, and “materials for language education are significant cultural artefacts with an ideological impact on our students.” (John Gray qtd. in Bland 2018: 3). Literature serves as a cultural and ideological medium that conveys specific worldviews. “All texts are ideology-laden,” Bland notes, and emphasises that when selecting texts for language education, it is beneficial to incorporate diverse global experiences to prevent any single viewpoint from dominating (2018: 3). She further highlights that “our research into meaning-making in language classrooms will also draw on areas such as cultural studies, literary studies, postcolonial studies, cognitive criticism, and critical pedagogy.” (2018: 3). From the standpoint of critical pedagogy, as articulated by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), critical literacy emerges as an educational approach aimed at teaching students to read with a critical eye.

Engaging with different literatures can serve as a means of questioning one’s own cultural framework, offering alternative ways of thinking and perspectives that challenge dominant ideologies. Critical literacy fosters an awareness of personal beliefs and an understanding of how individuals may conform to prevailing cultural norms. The establishment relies on this dominant cultural framework to maintain itself and its inequalities through a banking model of education, where students are viewed as repositories for information without questioning the underlying framework (Freire 1970: 71-86). In contrast, fostering curiosity and critical thinking can empower students to relate new knowledge to their own experiences and inspire them to take action for change.

Attention should be paid to the multiple literacies that are present at the acquisition of new competences. Apart from functional literacy, literary literacy (which focuses on understanding the aesthetic aspects of literary texts), visual literacy (which involves critically analysing images for information), and

information literacy (which emphasises the effective and responsible use of the internet for research), it is essential in today's sociopolitical climate to impart values and critical thinking through critical literacy. This involves "teaching to read all texts critically and recognising their manipulative power." (Bland 2018: 5). Bland states that "the need for a broader understanding of literacy" is increasingly important in the twenty-first century, especially given the significant influence of social media and the risks associated with "a culture where a few statements on Twitter can hold the same weight as a library full of research." (Coughlan 2017). Moreover, as Byram (1997, 2021) suggests, criticality is essential in developing intercultural competence, which he defines as "the ability to critically evaluate, based on explicit criteria, the perspectives, practices, and products of one's own and other cultures and countries." (Byram 1997: 53)

5. Methodology

With this in mind, the novel has acted as a framework for various tasks and assignments, including reading-aloud activities and the creation of ICT aids to accompany reading and video reviews, which results, along with those of the pre- and post-questionnaires, have served to hint the adequacy of the experience and its implications in critical literacy and in-depth learning. All questionnaires used in this study contained consent disclaimers informing participants about their freedom to participate and the anonymity of their responses.

This pedagogical experience was carried out with a total of 42 student teachers in the first year of the BA in Primary Education, in the subject Didactics of English Language taught at the Faculty of Education of the University of Alicante, Spain, during the academic year 2023-2024. *The Boy at the Back of the Class* served as a framework for the different activities of deep reading developed for and by the students.

Along this project, we wanted to explore deep reading with student teachers to motivate and encourage them to reflect about the teaching and learning process. What this case study tries to demonstrate is how *The Boy at the Back of the Class* acts as a compelling, informative and thought-provoking reading for pre-service teachers that might foster their joy of reading and the will to share their taste for literature with their own prospective students.

As we stated in the introduction, the impact the book has on student teachers was tested the previous year (2022-2023) at the University of Valencia in a class instructed by Professor Dolores Miralles-Alberola, where they had to read it as the basis for individual interviews. Most interviewees, in many cases quite emotively, stated that every teacher should read Raúf's book. Being aware of this

impact on students, we selected this book as an integrated conducting thread in the class at the University of Alicante.

5.1. Pre-questionnaire

As a first step, the participants were asked to answer a pre-questionnaire about their reading habits, in order to understand their reading routines. From the results of the first part of the questionnaire, we can say that just 40% of these students stated they read for pleasure. On the other hand, to the question of “How do you typically approach reading a challenging or complex text?” 14.3 % of students admitted avoiding such texts; 42.9% said that they take their time to understand each part thoroughly, while the other 42.9% recognised they try to skim through to get a general understanding.

About the third question, 64.3% of the respondents admitted the importance of making connections to their own experiences or other texts as well. Meanwhile, in the third question, 69% considered it important to understand the underlying themes, motifs, or symbolism in a text. Regarding the vision of critical thinking, 59.5% of the students declared it to be somewhat important, while just 28.6% considered critical thinking essential.

Regarding the importance of reading as a contribution to students’ personal growth and understanding of the world, 26.2% admitted that it is essential and they often analyse the text critically; 54.8% answered that it somewhat contributes to their personal growth and understanding, and even a 19% said that it does not have much impact on personal growth and understanding whatsoever.

The second part of the pre-questionnaire was about the habits of reading in English. In the question about frequency, shown in Figure 1, 57.1% admitted rarely reading English texts, and just a 9.5% stated they daily read English texts, most of these being mainly academic.

How often do you engage in reading English texts (e.g., books, articles, online content)?

42 respuestas

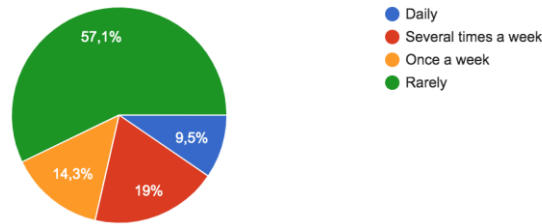


Figure 1

When asked about the benefits of reading in English for language learners, most of the students agreed that vocabulary and the language were their most important aims in terms of learning. Besides, the main challenge for them to comprehend a text would be understanding the vocabulary and overcoming these challenges. They recognised looking up words they are not familiar with in dictionaries or on the Internet.

The third part of the pre-questionnaire was about expectations, predictions, genre, themes, and targeted audience of *The Boy at the Back of the Class*. To the question about the genre, 42.9% answered “mystery” and 35.7% “historical fiction.” Also, nearly 80% of the responses anticipated that the book might explore the topic of friendship and acceptance and more than 15% thought that they were going to read about adventure and action. Apart from that, most of them thought that the book was addressed to an audience of teenagers, as Figure 2 shows.

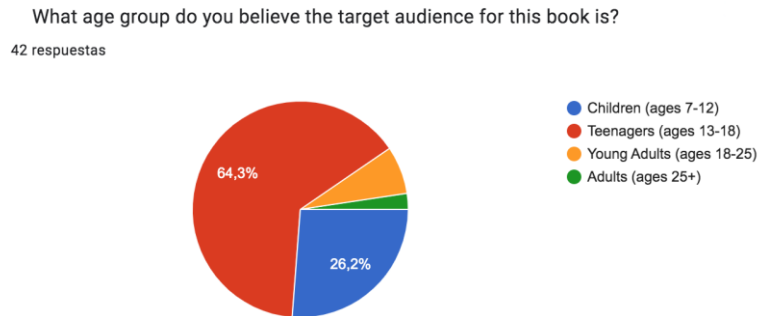


Figure 2

5.2. Activities

After the pre-questionnaire, students participated in whole-class and group activities, following a guided reading. The activities were based on audiovisual material—such as the viewing of Onjali Q. Raúf’s video *Why Children are our Most Powerful Hope for Change* (2019), as pre-reading scaffolding—and other investigative prompts. For instance, as pre-reading for the first chapter “The Empty Chair,” participants were asked to scan the text to look for “stationery,” “brand-new term” and “exciting.” Having an important role in the story, these terms served as cues to discuss aspects related to what students were going to find in the first pages, both in the form, but also in the deep content. As we pointed out in section 3, the stationery in the story has to do with redistributive social justice, so students had the opportunity to draw attention to words as “rucksack,” “pencil case,” “ruler” and “rubber,” and relate them to the images of the astronaut and Tintin as shown in Figure 3.

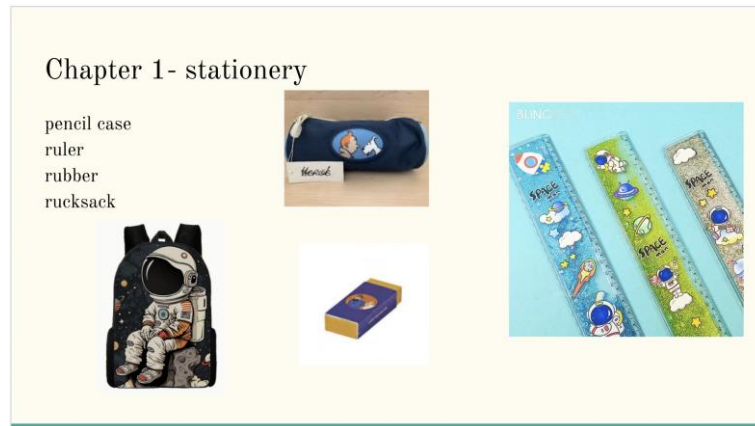


Figure 3

The guided reading accompanied students for the first five chapters and served as examples for them to create ICTs activities to help other students along the reading. These activities served as deep reading to explore the text profoundly. Then, they were assigned as a main activity to create a Booktube video about *The Boy at the Back of the Class* in groups of five. We could visualise some book review examples for the students to get ideas about how to work with the students' own versions. The guidelines to elaborate their video book review were:

1. Start with a couple of sentences describing what the book is about. But without giving any spoilers or revealing plot twists! As a rule, try to avoid speaking in detail about anything that happens from about the middle of the book onwards. If the book is part of a series, it can be useful to mention this, and whether you think you'd need to have read other books in the series to enjoy this one.

2. Discuss what you particularly liked about the book. Focus on your thoughts and feelings about the story and the way it was told. You could try answering a couple of the following questions:

- a. Who was your favourite character? Why?
- b. Did the characters feel real to you?
- c. Did the story keep you guessing?
- d. What was your favourite part of the book? Why?
- e. Were certain types of scenes written particularly well (for example sad scenes, tense scenes, mysterious ones...)?
- f. Did the book make you laugh or cry?

- g. Did the story grip you and keep you turning the pages?
3. Mention anything you like or dislike about the book. Talk about why you think it didn't work for you.
 4. Round up your review. Summarise some of your thoughts on the book by suggesting the type of reader you'd recommend the book to. For example: younger readers, older readers, fans of relationship drama/mystery stories/comedy. Are there any books or series you would compare it to?
 5. Suggest a pedagogical application the book might have in a class of EFL in Primary, stating age/level, appeal for Primary students, and a possible learning situation.
 6. You can give the book a rating, for example a mark out of five or ten, if you like.

5.3. Post-questionnaire

After the reading and all the activities related, student teachers answered a post-questionnaire where some of the questions showed the change of perspective. For example, when asked about the genre, most of them had changed their mind, and around 10% more thought the book was about mystery, as Figure 4 shows, and that the themes that they found in it were friendship and acceptance.

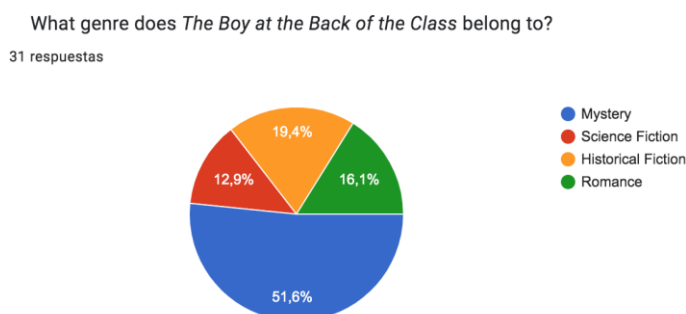


Figure 4

On the other hand, in an open-ended question respondents stated the central conflict of the story addresses the life and the situation of a refugee kid from Syria in the UK. This led 71.9% of them to think that after reading the book they gained insight into different cultures.

To the question about the author's purpose in writing the book, students showed a deep understanding of the scope of the text while in the pre-questionnaire, they thought the purpose was to improve their reading and comprehension skills. These are some of the answers:

To raise awareness about the need and commitment society has to have to cope with the problematics of our real world. Kids can contribute to this problematic (sic), kids can have their own voice. They deserve and need to know what the reality is.

She wants to move readers with the complicated stories of regugiated (sic) people, in addition to making visible the importance of friendship.

That aspects such as solidarity, empathy and inclusion be worked on.

Make us being concious (sic) about everyday problems that may appear in teachers and students life (sic).

Lessons about empathy, resilience and the importance of caring action in times of need.

To promote empathy and understanding towards refugees and to highlight the importance of kindness and friendship.

To make people aware of the number of refugee children who lose their families.

To teach people to treat people of different cultures equally.

When asked about what types of English texts they usually read, 59.5% answered in the pre-questionnaire that they read academic texts such as research papers or textbooks, and in the post-questionnaires they answered that they 71.9% were keen on reading fiction books such as novels or short stories (Figure 5). Obviously, this was an improvement.

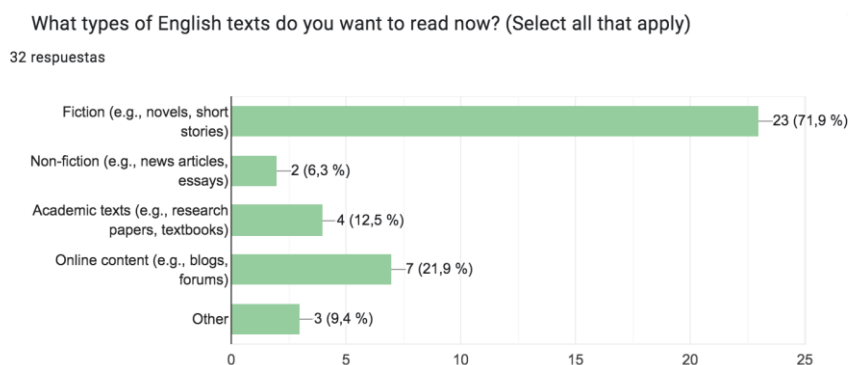


Figure 5

Surprisingly, just 12.5% wanted to read academic texts as a way of learning English. In terms of how important it was for them to understand the underlying themes, motifs, or symbolism in a text, from 69% of them considering it somewhat important before reading the book, it has increased up to 87.5% determining it as very important. Also, 62.5% admitted having always empathised with the characters and immersed themselves in their experiences. Finally, when they were asked in an open question to add anything they wanted about the book or the experience, positive or negative, their answers were in general very positive, except for one response:

It has been really positive. This book has become one of my favorites (sic) ones from all that I've read in university.
 In my experience read the book (sic) is bad because y I don't understand the vocabulary, but the book is good.
 I think it is a fantastic book and it achieves its objectives.
 I consider it to be a great book that contains great values and that is why it is very suitable for reading in primary school.
 Is a great book with a very emotional story, what I liked the most are the values which promote along (sic) the story.
 It make (sic) us being concerned about really important problems and it show us that every problem has a solution.
 The book has a very notable criticism of society, it refers to very important topics that we leave aside. I think it helps you be less ignorant and more empathetic.
 It has been a positive experience as the book helps you to put yourself in the place of others and above all the vision of children in different situations.

I think that is (sic) an educational book and deals with topics such as empathy, kindness, loneliness.
My experience reading this book has been very positive since I understood all the characters perfectly and I felt part of the story in some way. Also, consider that my understanding and vocabulary in English has improved.

These results were representative of the positive feelings students have experienced reading the book. The fact that, apart from the humanitarian message, it is a novel about school and issues related to education made true, once again the conclusions of the previous year at the University of València about this being a text every teacher should read. The deep reading for in-depth learning principle showed how the way in which a book is worked in the classroom can have a bigger and positive impact on the readers beyond the classroom. It can lead students to be critical thinkers and be involved in the process of being responsible citizens at the same time they are acquiring an additional language in a practical way.

Conclusions

By introducing young learners to a love of literature, teachers are giving them a lifelong gift, fostering empathetic, well-rounded individuals capable of appreciating art in multiple languages. Rather than dictating what children should read, educators should guide them in nurturing their natural curiosity for stories, adventures, fantasy, and the music of language. Through a deep-learning process and the co-creation of activities that foster in-depth learning, we firmly believe that we have encouraged students to reflect on the importance of the main topics in the book, as “[d]eep reading of worthwhile narrative supports engagement through experiencing problems, vicariously together with the protagonist.” (Bland 2023: 42)

The results of the research have proven the experience is adequate to fostering deep reading for in-depth learning, as the results of the questionnaires and the testimony of the students involved in the case study demonstrate. However, it will need some improvement in aspects such as the time devoted to the realisation of some of the activities in class. All in all, as previously pointed out, most of the students considered the role of critical thinking in their reading process to be somewhat important and they considered different perspectives.

Critical literacy emphasises teaching individuals to challenge dominant narratives and critically analyse both written content and the broader context. Developing critical literacy helps to promote awareness of how people conform to dominant cultural norms and social power structures. Hilary Janks states that

“critical literacy is about enabling young people to read both the world and the word in relation to power, identity, difference and access to knowledge, skills, tools and resources.” (2013: 227)

As we have demonstrated, language education implies much more than merely linguistics. Emotional factors and social justice are also involved. In the process of meaning-making, we can't leave social justice outside, not nowadays. An incontestable way to fulfil the Sustainable Development Goals In the classroom, we have to teach with literature and with books that are at the same time compelling and socially responsible, and in consonance with the defence of children's wellbeing.

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