

# Text Selection in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom

Anna Thyberg

“But who does not know of literature banned because it is interrogative; discredited because it is critical; erased because alternate?” (Morrison)

## Introduction

Paradoxically, the power of the written word appears both vindicated and under threat as we speak. Concurrently as the first national Youth Poet Laureate in the United States, Amanda Gorman, declares that “all art is political” and speaks of standing on the shoulders of her ancestors in a TED talk that has been viewed more than 2 million times, social justice issues have incurred a heavy-handed backlash in the form of culture wars on multiple fronts. In the U.S., book banning and self-censorship are on the rise (Goldberg 2021; Harris and Alter 2022; Paul 2022) and educators risk being accused of indoctrination (Renkl 2022). Suffice it to say that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the literature classroom has come right into the fray. All the more reason, then, to take the warning to heart that Toni Morrison issued in her Nobel Prize speech almost thirty years ago. My hope is that educators might be willing to pick up the baton and more intentionally discuss text selection and even deliberately teach challenged texts as an act of solidarity. Swedish educators have the power to create spaces where authors’ freedom of artistic expression and students’ rights to read literature that sheds light on different human experiences are protected. The responsibility that comes from working in a country where the profession is trusted to select literary texts for classroom use without oversight should not be taken lightly.

Yet, in the midst of the day-to-day busyness, lofty goals may inadvertently fall by the wayside as the complexity of teaching restricts one’s ability to fully process the constant barrage of impressions and in-the-moment decisions. As a reflective practitioner, my overarching aim when writing this article was therefore to engage in the kind of deep self-reflection that we so rarely have the chance to undertake. Here I will systematically go through what has guided me in the process of text selection and start to disentangle some of the threads from what could be seen as an intricate web of factors. I will specifically focus on the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom and argue for the benefits of a higher degree of student empowerment in terms of choice and validation of lived experiences from an equity perspective. It should be noted that text selection will mainly be addressed from a theoretical perspective all the while a few current pedagogical approaches that highlight social justice will be touched upon. Furthermore, the argument will be broad,

delineating various aspects to consider rather than going deeply into any one pedagogical approach.

In truth, literature pedagogy covers a wide variety of topics such as disciplinary literacy (Goldman et al. 2016; Rainey 2017; Wilder and Wolfe 2009), curriculum design (Beach et al. 2016; Levine 2014), and instructional practices (Appleman 2015; Copper et al. 2021; Langer 2011; Probst 2004; Schoenbach et al. 2012) to name but a few. Unfortunately, these areas remain beyond the scope of this article. I should also mention at the outset that the scholarly work drawn upon in this article mostly stem from American literature instruction since this is my field of expertise. As an instructor in EFL, I will also refer to the Swedish context repeatedly. When I speak of students, let me clarify that I refer both to the pre-service teachers in my courses at university and their future students in upper secondary school. The same issues ring true regardless of level when it comes to student motivation and critical reading strategies: How can we engage students in the text selection process? To what extent can we broaden the text concept to pique students' curiosity? What texts may challenge students' preconceived notions and make them want to engage in conversation to hear others' impressions?

While preservice teachers have their own reading preferences and interests, in their degree program the idea is to enculturate them into reading with a teacher's eye always considering advantages and disadvantages of literary texts for educational purposes and having the proficiency levels and interests of their future upper secondary school students top of mind. In this way, the boundaries of disciplinary literacy (Shanahan and Shanahan 2008) are stretched in the sense that it is not enough for pre-service teachers to master the craft of the literary scholar. They are also required to learn to read literature from an educational stance, asking themselves how to create curriculum designs that raise the interest of adolescents and align with national learning objectives. While it is my mission as a teacher educator to present teacher students with a bank of textual resources that they can draw from in their own teaching career in the Swedish upper secondary school, it is hardly my task to give survey courses on canonical literature from the English-Speaking world. Not only because it is problematic from an ideological standpoint, as I will highlight in this article, but also because it would defeat the purpose of finding texts that may resonate with adolescents and give them new perspectives on the world. Indeed as the pioneer reader response theorist Louise M. Rosenblatt has famously stated: “[w]hen one thinks of all that great literary works can yield, one is horrified to see them so often reduced to the level of language exercise books for the young. . . . Those who cram the classics down students' throats long before they are ready are careless of the fate of the great works of the past” (1995: 207). That is to say, canonical literature holds value in terms of its generational transfer of ideas and culture, but the consideration of receptivity and maturity of the reader may be more important for increasing motivation to read than following a

prefabricated sequence of classic texts. In alignment with the goal in the Swedish Curriculum to foster “lifelong learning” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2013: 5), language teachers could take the lead in bringing student interests into the equation thus hopefully cultivating a love of reading even in languages they have yet to master.

### Overview of the Complexity of Text Selection

One of the key factors affecting text selection in the EFL classroom stems from the extra burden of the language barrier and its negative impact on the reading experience for students. The quite staggering range of English language proficiency in Swedish classrooms adds to the complexity. We have students who have superior language skills due to e.g., extensive gaming, consumption and creation of fan fiction, and/or engagement on social media, but we also have immigrant students who may not have encountered English in their daily lives or may even lack consistent schooling all together. Recent scholarship on translanguaging, which questions the position of English first and pushes for a shift to heteroglossic practices, illustrates ideological aspects of classroom practices (Panagiotopoulou et al. 2020; Juvonen et al. 2021; Tian et al. 2020). English first means to conduct teaching mainly using the target language with minimal code-switching to the mother tongues of the teacher or the students. This position is supported in the Swedish Syllabus for English which states: “[t]eaching should as far as possible be conducted in English” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed.). From the perspective of a small country on the fringes of Europe heavily dependent on export such as Sweden, the purpose of literature instruction from a monoglossic point of view may in the past have implicitly been to augment what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “cultural capital” of students competing on the global market (2002: 281). For Swedish EFL teachers, the purpose of teaching literature may have been viewed as a seemingly neutral endeavor to impart the frames of reference that inner-circle speakers of English share for greater success in business deals. This stance skews the selection toward canonical texts that traditionally have conveyed high prestige in the language classroom. The risk with such an approach concerns how it glosses over ideological and political ramifications while adopting an instrumental conceptualization of literature.

In fact, bringing to the fore the complexity in text selections entails acknowledging cultural, political, and ideological issues stemming from colonial history, the aftermath of World War II, and neocolonialism. This is highly relevant in the EFL classroom given the status of English as a *lingua franca* (Pennycook 1998). In a multicultural classroom, educators may wonder if the practice of selecting texts from inner-circle countries should not at least be widened to other parts of the English-speaking world (Kachru 1992: 122, qtd. In Tajeddin and Pakzadian 2020: 2). To date the ideological roots of English literature as a discipline have been discussed in depth by postcolonial scholars (e.g., Ashcroft 1989; Spivak 1993). According to Paul

Jay, English literature was used as a so-called civilizing tool in the British empire mostly abroad, but also at home occasioned by the influx of middle class and female students into higher education (2010: 23). For student populations today, the influence of Anglo-American mass media and culture necessitates developing critical tools to analyze dominant discourses in the Western world.

Another key aspect to consider for teachers selecting literary texts for the language classroom regards student motivation. Not surprisingly, motivation is a common object of study in educational research concerning literature instruction. Thomas P. Crumpler and Linda Wedwick found close to 80 articles published in *Reading Research Quarterly* and *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* between the years of 2005 and 2007 on adolescent motivation to read (2010: 65). Relying on extrinsic motivation for reading, such as using reading comprehension quizzes to check students' reading, may lead to surface learning and students turning to Sparknotes etc. instead of reading the texts. Using quizzes not only reduces the capacity of literature as a work of art to generate an aesthetic experience (Rosenblatt 1995: 33) to simply an act of memorization, but it also fails to validate students' unique experiences of reading. From an intrinsic standpoint, it is about what might incite a student to read literature in a foreign language. In today's media-saturated society, we need to ask ourselves how to make reading interesting for 21<sup>st</sup> century students. The question is to what degree motivation may be of higher salience given that storytelling pervades everything from commercials to peak streaming flooding us with TV-series and films as well as the elaborate storyworlds in narrative videogames. On the one hand, then, students are immersed in stories and most likely well-versed in different kinds of narrative structures. On the other hand, the persuasive design of the software on digital devices and social media may lead to students spending so much time on them that little is left for other kinds of reading.

On a more optimistic note, the complexity of text selection could offer affordances for conceptualizing schooling as a democratic endeavor. A central mission statement in the Swedish Curriculum is that "[e]ducation should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based. . . . The school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to empathise" (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2013: 4). Teachers are expected to find ways to accomplish these goals in their classrooms which is no easy feat. In the classes I teach, pre-service teachers often ask about how to deal with homophobic or racist statements in class. Part of the reason why the pedagogical approaches discussed in this article are so pertinent to explore is that they provide guidance and practical activities that may alleviate such concerns. In alignment with Ulrika Tornberg's view of the language classroom as a democratic arena, I would like to suggest that pre-service teachers could use this idea to justify a focus on the wider significance of literature in the EFL

setting. Tornberg recommends that language teachers abandon the sole focus on proficiency, and she holds that adopting a sociocultural perspective can enable authentic communication since it emphasizes the type of social context in which the interlocutors can be heard (2000: 266). Such an ambition may be even more important today when the echo chambers that result from the algorithms of social media and search engines work against efforts to uphold the deliberative dialogues requisite for a democratic community.

The function of literature with its multiple meanings could thus be to provide opportunities for students to genuinely interact in open and contingent dialogues which might realize the democratic potential of the language classroom. In this sense, Tornberg's view of language learning aligns well with dialogic teaching methods where there is an exchange of ideas instead of questions with right or wrong answers. As regards the content of foreign language learning, Angela Marx Åberg has sought to replicate parts of Tornberg's investigation of Swedish foreign language curricula and she states that learning a new language is more efficient if the content that is to be communicated comes across as relevant to students so that they really want to be part of the interaction and share their thoughts, not just practice speaking the foreign language (2022: 7). It follows that this focus on authenticity, as in having something unique to contribute to the dialogue, carries weight for motivation building. Marx Åberg concludes that recent revisions of the curricular documents in Sweden show a stronger focus on personal development and on incorporating students' interests and experiences in the foreign language classroom (2022: 10). Hence there is an incentive for Swedish educators to consider motivation from this angle. Naturally, the design of learning activities may also affect the opportunity for each student to participate in authentic and egalitarian ways which is another reason specific pedagogical approaches merit consideration. Before turning to the discussion of pedagogical approaches, I want to mention some practical limitations and general sets of selection criteria.

### **Practical Limitations and Selection Criteria**

While I argue that students are important stakeholders in the process of text selection, it should be acknowledged that for in-service teachers a major challenge in literature pedagogy is the practical limitations to reckon with when deciding on a reading list for a unit. Before inviting students into the text selection process, teachers may need to ask themselves, for instance, what the district or school dictates in terms of procedures for text selection, what the subject or class library holds in class sets or multiple copies, if only a few copies from each class set may be used for literature circles, what room in the budget there is for book purchases, if it is legal to use PDFs found online under copyright law, and how permission to show a film/artwork/musical performance in class can be procured. For EFL teachers, the access to books may be even more restricted. To be clear, Janice Bland claims that literature

has often been overlooked in terms of significance for the language classroom (2018: 2) which means that there might not even be a class library or collections of English books at the school.

Once this maze of practical limitations has been navigated, it remains to be determined on what grounds the options at hand will be evaluated as possible candidates for the EFL classroom. Based on what criteria will the texts be selected? In their book *Teaching Literature to Adolescents*, Richard Beach and colleagues have formulated a few selection criteria for Young Adult Literature (YAL) that can be of use also more generally in the EFL classroom. It should be mentioned that the criteria were developed as a helpful guide for teachers when determining the literary quality of YAL. The first criterion is *characterization*, which is framed as authenticity, especially regarding whether the represented minds are “consistent with how adolescents experience the world” or not (Beach et al. 2016: 47). The second criterion is called *cultural currency* and refers to whether “portrayals of the social worlds in a text are relatively current” (Beach et al. 2016: 47). Finally, the third criterion, *cultural models and author/audience relationships*, involves examining implicit values and ideologies promoted in the text but it also pertains to whether the choice of literature is such that students feel comfortable going against “consensus beliefs and attitudes of the majority of their peers” in their interpretations (Beach et al. 2016: 49). This criterion urges teachers to work systematically to build community in their classes so that students feel safe enough to venture into uncharted territory. In a multicultural society, a diversity of voices in teaching materials may further enable all students to see themselves mirrored in the text at some point (Bishop 1990: ix). Beach and colleagues address the American context, but similar objectives have been formulated in the Swedish Curriculum for Upper Secondary School where it is stipulated that, “[t]he internationalization of Swedish society and increasing cross-border mobility place high demands on the ability of people to live with and appreciate the values inherent in cultural diversity” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2013: 4).<sup>1</sup> If we recognize the overarching stature of the Curriculum, this should have a real impact on the EFL classroom concerning text selection. I will return to the issue of representation below.

Bland has formulated a longer list comprising ten text selection criteria in her introduction to the anthology *Using Literature in English Language Education: Challenging Reading for 8–18 Year Olds*. Some of the objectives align closely with the three proposed by Beach and colleagues and she points out that young adult literature should be the first choice for the language classroom (2018: 13). Bland specifies the following considerations for teachers engaged in a text selection process:

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Curriculum are taken from the only English translation that is provided at the website for the Swedish National Agency for Education (skolverket.se). Unfortunately, it does not include recent revisions.

1. The text should be generative – providing material for deep reading and genuine communication on complex dilemmas.
2. The text should possess literary merit and the teacher should also enjoy the text.
3. Accessibility is essential, and this refers not only to language but also to culture-related and age-related schemata.
4. Some empathetic and appealing characters must be involved.
5. The text should be a compelling read, involving the emotions – for example through surprising, humorous, tragic or heart-warming features.
6. The text should be imaginative, well researched and informative, throwing light, for example, on different periods of history, different nations or diverse cultures within nations.
7. The text should be potentially schema refreshing, challenging readers to re-examine their beliefs.
8. The text should offer gaps, and opportunities to speculate on creative solutions to problems.
9. The text should be packaged in an inviting, attractive way and not too long for the relevant age group. Connected opportunities for autonomous, extensive reading or viewing would be ideal.
10. Teenagers prefer books they can discuss with their friends so that ideally the text should have renown with the peer group. (Bland 2018: 12)

Bland's list of criteria may seem daunting and probably impossible to meet in full, but it could be viewed as requirements to weigh against each other. Depending on the aim of the teaching unit that is being designed, certain criteria may take precedence over others at the discretion of the educator. Most importantly, these recommendations render visible tacit and taken for granted notions about what qualifies as appropriate literature for classroom use. Teachers can discuss these criteria with upper secondary students, and it could be decided in class what criteria should be employed for each reading project. As is true for any aesthetic experience, the requirements that Bland lists will also matter in various degrees for different readers at different times.

Text selection criteria can also draw on insights gained in related fields. In books written for librarians, such as *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* by Joyce G. Saricks, the professional focus may be on what books to suggest both to not-yet readers and to readers who have finished a novel and are looking for another equally captivating book.<sup>2</sup> Similar situations may occur in which this mindset is applicable in the EFL classroom. In fact, an innovative approach to the issue of motivation can be found in what Saricks has termed "appeal elements," namely: "[p]acing, characterization, story line, frame (physical setting and atmosphere), tone and mood, and style and language . . ." (2009: 11). These elements might come across as all-comprehensive, but they are meant to point to essential qualities in books that take precedence in the reader's mind, and also bring forth the emotional

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware that the commonly used terms are struggling readers, non-readers, reluctant readers, etc. but inspired by the work of Carol Dweck and the principles of Disability studies where labels and deficit thinking are to be avoided I prefer to use this term that offers a potential for growth.

component in reading. According to Saricks, readers tend to have (often unconscious) preferences as to what matters most for them in a story, “[t]hey want a book with a particular ‘feel’” (2005: 40). For instance, some students may enjoy fast-paced, suspenseful plots but grow impatient when reading landscape-based books where the frame is more prominent. Other students may look for well-rounded characterization and intense interpersonal conflicts yet want to feel reassured that the storyline will provide closure. Knowledge about what our students value about reading, as revealed in these elements, may not only feed into the initial round of text selection but also help educators frame literary texts in a positive light by emphasizing aspects of pacing and characterization that students have appreciated in the past. Given the language barrier in the EFL classroom, the potential of emotional investment may be truly significant. Therefore, I mention to pre-service teachers that they could conduct a survey at the beginning of the school year based on Saricks’ appeal elements. By asking EFL students how they respond to books, TV-series, films or videogames, the teacher will hopefully get a better sense of what range of text options to select for that particular class. The value of surveying students should not be underestimated as it also signals that their opinions matter. Having a small group discussion on favorite genres could be another way to collect this information while simultaneously building community and enthusiasm for reading.

I have already referred to objectives found in curricular documents above and it hardly needs saying that the leeway any educator will have to make decisions about text selection will depend on such regional, national, and governmental directives. Since I specialize in American literature and mostly use research conducted in the U.S., I try to contextualize the issue of text selection for my students in view of changes in policy documents and the like. For instance, the Common Core standards that came into effect in the United States in 2010 have since been implemented in more than 40 of the 50 states. This federal initiative has, perhaps mistakenly, been interpreted as promoting non-fiction reading which has reduced the amount of literature on reading lists in some K-12 schools (Stotsky 2013). Regarding the Swedish Syllabus for the English subject in upper secondary school, it is mainly up to the profession to determine what literature to bring into the EFL classroom since it only references genres in general, such as “[c]ontemporary and older literature, poetry, drama, and songs” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2013). In my courses for pre-service teachers, students sometimes lament the lack of guidance the Syllabus provides for beginning teachers, which has encouraged me to specify the grounds for text selection in my classes. We talk about what criterion in the Syllabus each text may work to fulfill, how to invite diverse voices from the English-speaking world, how relevant the text may appear to adolescents, what critical lenses might be interesting to apply, what scaffolding might be needed given the range of proficiency levels in the three courses taught in upper secondary school (English 5, 6, and 7), and how to contextualize it. As



mentioned in the introduction, there is no national or regional censorship or banning of literary works in Swedish schools; each teacher is free to decide on their own teaching materials. I talk to pre-service teacher about how, from a solidarity perspective, this could serve as an opportunity in the EFL classroom to read banned literary works as a celebration of freedom of expression. They can use literature as an opportunity to revisit human rights issues as stipulated in the Curriculum and discuss with upper secondary students the power of the written word and how it has been threatened historically.

As mentioned above, the on-going culture wars in the United States illustrate how text selection can be a contested process in which the stakes are high. Christopher J. Greig and Susan M. Holloway argue that “school-sanctioned texts have also consistently provided secondary school students with particular worldviews that are at best categorized as narrow as it too often ignores the complexity of the world” (2016: 397). Efforts to broaden the scope of reading lists may nonetheless be met with various forms of resistance. According to Greig and Holloway, even when instructors are ostensibly at liberty to select texts, more subtle forms of structural power such as school-sanctioned texts and pressure to conform to what colleagues consider high quality texts can act as restrictive measures. Consequently, teachers may choose well-established or canonical texts because of fear of repercussions from administrators, parents, or students. Greig and Holloway clarify that: “[t]he underlying assumption may well be that policy makers do not feel they need to tell teachers which books to teach because teachers will implicitly know the consequences of taking risks . . .” (2016: 400). The effects may be more sinister than mere conjecture since Greig and Holloway found that interviewees reported effectively being under surveillance and therefore often hesitant to choose controversial titles, as the following quote shows: “. . . like you’re walking on eggshells and you have to be what’s expected of you and you can’t really deviate from that, you can’t move away from the norm” (2016: 402). The norms for what texts to choose may be less clearly enunciated in a Swedish context where there are no official school-sanctioned lists. Yet matters of teacher identity, that is how teachers negotiate their professional standing among colleagues and vis-à-vis other educational stakeholders, and the tendency to self-regulate, striving to uphold this image and avoid confrontation or controversy, could still affect text selection in the pedagogical practice. It should also be mentioned that parental influence in its negative forms is a growing concern among Swedish teachers and this can also act as a restricting factor in text selection.

Returning to the issue of student motivation, a vital step concerns ownership of learning. Again, recognizing students as important stakeholders in the text selection process means putting their opinions and concerns front and center in curriculum design. In my own practice, apart from changing the reading lists based on student evaluations, I also incorporate choice whenever

possible for the readings students are asked to do prior to our weekly workshops. Student choice is important for me because it serves as a model for how pre-service teachers can later organize their own classrooms “using democratic working methods” which is another curricular requirement (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2013: 5). In the past, I thought that student choice was possible only when teaching poetry and short stories (offering a number of texts or two separate options of texts to choose from in the learning management system) and not for novels. This was due to our local regulations at the university, in which novels should be specified on the official course syllabus that is published at the university website eight weeks before the start of term. By the time I was able to do the collaborative course design with students in the first week of class, the window for choice had been closed long ago. This year, I fortuitously came up with the idea to include the phrase “students are asked to choose one novel out of the four listed below” in the Syllabus. It will be very exciting to see how the students react to this opportunity to choose a novel that appeals to them. From student evaluations, I have learned that it is important to design the selection process for each workshop in a way that ensures that every student is able to share their ideas and thoughts with someone that has read the same text(s). Therefore, I either have one text that is required reading for everyone as well as a list that students can choose from, or I ask that everybody in the study group reads the same texts.

In the interest of time management and a sustainable work-life balance, I understand that it may be preferable for teachers to decide on texts before the school or academic year begins even if it will limit the choice for students. I encourage readers to see this article as inspiration and potential time saver in terms of how it gives an overview of criteria and possible pedagogical approaches to use by those who are interested in the issue of text selection. The hope is that honing the process of text selection in a strategic manner based on the research and perspectives presented here may increase the likelihood that students become engaged in assigned literary readings.

### **Inquiry-Based Learning**

In my practice, I have found the application of certain pedagogical approaches to text selection especially conducive for a critical mode of reading. This set has developed over time and now constitutes the foundation of my text selection process. When I started teaching at university, I was confined to using reading lists created by colleagues, and it was only in my second year of teaching that I was able to begin revising those lists and creating new course designs. I have continued to tweak and adapt the reading lists based on current research, student evaluations, reactions to texts in workshops, and how they played out in assignments. Already from the start, my teaching philosophy was founded on inquiry-based, dialogic and student-centered learning. According to Beach and colleagues, “[a] critical inquiry approach is informed by sociocultural learning theories in that it fundamentally involves

raising and exploring questions about the texts we teach in relation to the communities and social and political contexts within which teaching and learning literature happens” (2016: 7). Indeed, a focus on student agency and empowerment has consequences for text selection due to its aims to include students in the course design in an effort to collaboratively find literature that might generate curiosity and a willingness to engage both in reading and conversation. Along similar lines, when striving to validate each student in the literature classroom, the process of text selection will ideally include matters of representation. Rudine Sims Bishop emphasizes readers’ right to see themselves in the texts that they come across in their schooling. In her own words below, we find the striking metaphors for reading that have had such a profound effect in the field of literature pedagogy ever since her article was first published in 1990:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books. (Bishop 1990: ix)

In light of the societal development since Bishop’s declaration, the issue of diversity can be framed as connected to validation of silenced voices as well as to the relevance that comes from addressing issues connected to social justice. It is evidently clear from the Black Lives Matter and the Environmental movements that young people are interested in issues of fairness, want to know the underlying reasons for inequities, and learn ways to take action (Paris 2021: 364). These pursuits are supported in the Swedish Curriculum where it is stated that “[a]ll tendencies to discrimination and degrading treatment should be actively combated. Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2013: 4). In a broad sense, diversity covers factors such as ethnicity, disability, neurodivergency, socioeconomic background, gender identity, and sexual orientation. As Bishop argues, literature has a unique capacity to invite readers to see themselves but also to vicariously experience these continuums of embodiment (1990: ix). Teaching civic values may be a contradiction in terms. In my dissertation I argue that the function of literature in the EFL classroom could be to provide the means for broaching difficult topics by proxy since conversations will revolve round literary characters and the plot rather than students’ personal experiences (Thyberg 2012). For educators who want to take the ambition to build student agency and develop critical thinking

skills one step further, the pedagogical approach Critical literacy is a viable option.

## Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a pedagogical framework with the ambition to educate for social justice and empowerment. It challenges the tendency to adhere to a list of canonical texts in education on the grounds that these texts “perpetuate ideologies that are also dominant – about Whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, Christianity, and physical and mental ability, for example” (Borsheim-Black et al. 2014: 123). Critical literacy scholars advocate for students to learn how to question canonicity and become involved in the text selection process (Borsheim-Black et al. 2014: 126). Again, this positions students as collaborators in matters of design instead of passive recipients of ready-made curricula sets. In a Swedish EFL classroom, this type of pedagogical approach can be tied to the goals in the Curriculum to implement democratic practices and develop critical thinking skills (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 5). The ideological aspect of text selection is accentuated by Jeanne Dyches, who argues that “[e]ncouraging students to notice and critique the discipline of English as a culture allows them to recognize more clearly the ways in which canonical literature acts as a social construct that honors the voices and experiences of dominant groups (2018: 541). As mentioned above, in the Swedish context these concerns have largely remained unvoiced perhaps because English as a language has often been more or less divested of its ideological underpinnings in elementary and secondary education and the society at large. What is more, English is one out of three core subjects which students need to master in order to move up in the school system and it is also required for university studies leading to its being seen as a high-status subject. A case in point is that the largest private secondary school provider in Sweden is the International English school which uses English as the medium of instruction as much as the Education Act allows, that is 50 percent (Swedish Parliament). International Baccalaureate programs exist both on the secondary and the upper secondary level in Sweden. I would argue that the critical reading method promoted in Critical literacy therefore merits higher use in the EFL classroom as a way to critique celebratory conceptions of English as the language of Shakespeare or a neutral lingua franca.

Critical literacy affords both developing analytical skills in students but also in teachers who are encouraged to engage in self-reflexivity regarding positionality when it comes to text selection. The work to uncover potential privileges and blind spots entails encouraging educators to consider, for instance, the following questions: “Have any of the following affected how you read the world: gender, sexuality, race, social class, body size, dis/ability, geography, political affiliation, religion, language, family structure, immigration, citizenship?” (Jones and Woglom 2016: 445). Regarding analytical skills for students, Critical literacy offers highly productive and thought-

provoking questions that can be directly implemented in the EFL classroom, such as: “Whose viewpoint is expressed? What does the author want us to think? Whose voices are missing, silenced, or discounted? How might alternative perspectives be represented? How would that contribute to your understanding the text from a critical stance? What action might you take on the basis of what you have learned?” (McLaughlin and DeVoogd 2004: 53). In short, this approach views students as active agents who can take charge of their own learning and these higher order cognitive skills can then be employed in various other parts of their lives. I believe Critical literacy could be a valuable tool that could model for students what it means to be an engaged member of a democratic society and it also works well for teachers who want to keep canonical texts but foster a critical stance. For students who feel at a loss when asked to analyze literature, these questions can also work as scaffolding. It provides a concrete set of steps to go through and divests texts of their authoritative status by opening up a space for interpretation and critique. Another avenue could be to choose texts that are not viewed as authoritative and that even question the rigid boundaries of the text concept altogether.

## Multiliteracies

As stated above, Beach and colleagues and Bland, respectively, put forth YAL as a worthwhile genre for the English classroom. Likewise, according to Thomas Bean and Karen Moni, “both accomplished and struggling readers need opportunities to make personal and intertextual connections with young adult literature that challenges their thinking” (2003: 640). These propositions indicate that YAL as a genre was excluded from reading lists in the past. Nowadays, the quest for relevance and student engagement may lead educators to go beyond YAL. In some instances, it may be necessary to facilitate the development of critical reading skills by using texts that function as high-interest vehicles. Educators may want to consider to what extent it would be possible to put non-print texts, such as “YouTube videos, TED talks, zines, artwork, dance clips and song lyrics” on the reading list (Batchelor 2019: 385). Not only will these texts allow for more in-depth analysis since students are familiar with the form and content, but they may also serve to increase student motivation. Popular culture is aimed at a broad audience by definition and generally appealing in design and output due to high-budget productions. Ashley K. Dallacqua and Annmarie Sheahan recommend an inclusion in English classrooms of “contemporary or nontraditional texts of popular culture that mirror students’ experimental ways of knowing” since “. . . reading comics and other multimodal texts supports complex literary and analytical understandings” (2020: 68). Such an endeavor can be supported in the concept of multiliteracies famously coined by the New London Group (Cope and Kalantzis 2015).

Considering the needs of not-yet readers in our classrooms, it may help to focus on validation of student voice in a different fashion. Literary analysis need not be restricted to texts in book form but can include art, graphics, music, lyrics, film, and video games etc. Hopefully, this range of genres and modalities generates motivation and higher levels of engagement since it builds on upper secondary students' interests and knowledge. When educators invite popular culture into the language classroom, they send a clear signal to students that out-of-school cultural experiences merit careful investigation. In the context of valuing the extra-mural language learning that students engage in, gaming literacy and fan fiction can act as focal points in the text selection process. Likewise, Genre Fiction, including the umbrella term Speculative Fiction (e.g., Science Fiction, Afrofuturism, and Fantasy) has the potential to build reading stamina and augment processing speed due to its surprising plot twists and fast-paced action. For language learners a somewhat formulaic narrative structure can act as a scaffolding when lack of language skills impedes understanding. Genre Fiction can allow students to follow the major plot line and identify with characters that they get to know over a series of books.

Despite the disparaging treatment this genre suffered in the early years after its inception, John Hoben argues that Science Fiction can be especially apt for inclusion in education since it asks students to consider civic values, democracy, and the impact of technology on their lives (2013: 95). Along similar lines, Jennifer Lyn Dorsey points out that, “[b]ecause speculative literary forms take the big issues and questions out of their potentially polarizing cultural contexts, speculative fiction is an excellent medium for developing this kind of critical thinker” (2013: 75). Higher order thinking skills fall well in under a critical inquiry stance and are often included in national and regional standards, so it is a possible path to take. Moreover, Hoben suggests that this genre highlights creativity due to its concerns with: “finding an alternative space, a new horizon, in which imagination and critical thought become a uniquely playful, yet powerful, combination” (2013: 114). For students wrestling with multiple pressing issues in the modern world, it can be liberating to envision other types of realities where innovative solutions to societal problems are enacted. To that effect, Hoben claims that “[t]he value of SF . . . is not so much in the worlds that it portrays but in the associations it creates between the world of the here-and-now and the possible worlds that exist as holes in time’s dark fabric” (2013: 112). Likewise, Dorsey claims that there is added value in how “[g]ood SF confronts the nature of reality and forces readers to engage with philosophical questions in a creative way by thrusting them out of their comfort zones and into worlds that operate according to different rules and structures” (2013: 75). In sum, if student engagement is the main objective when planning a teaching unit on literature, this genre offers ample examples of highly popular texts and films all the while commenting on philosophical and existential questions. Existential

questions are mentioned in two of the English Syllabi for the Swedish school, hence it is justifiable also from that perspective (Natl. Ag. f. Ed., “English 6 and 7”).

### Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

When looking for ways in which educators can work systematically towards fulfilling the curricular goals of inclusivity and diversity in connection to the text selection process, I have turned to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). A corollary to the method of translanguaging mentioned above and brought about by recent changes in student demographics (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 2021; Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2021, *Statistics*), CRP provides an inclusive approach to learning. Gloria Ladson-Billings has formulated the following CRP tenets: “academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness” (2014: 75).<sup>3</sup> The first tenet clearly distinguishes this approach from the more general celebration of cultural differences found in Multicultural education. The emphasis on academic success means that there is a concerted effort to move away from deficit-oriented mindsets (Golden 2017: 355). Rather than talking about what skills and experiences students have yet to develop, the idea of the second tenet is to acknowledge the competences and knowledge that students bring to school, along similar lines as translanguaging validates the languages students already know. Regarding text selection, the second tenet of CRP encourages educators to choose texts that represent a broad range of cultural experiences (Scherff and Spector 2010: 13). The third tenet aligns with Critical literacy in its attempt to render dominant discourses and positionality visible. As long as the majority of teachers in the Western world are white middle-class women, there are issues to consider regarding what the purpose of schooling is for the involved parties, something which the following quote illustrates: “the differences between teachers’ and students’ perspectives on education often create a disconnect that neither can easily bridge in the classroom” (Shoffner and Brown 2010: 91). A very practical example is when educators are not given the time to read up on literature from different cultural contexts. Even if teachers try to leave their own preferences behind, it requires a firm resolve to overcome implicit biases and embrace the cultural expressions of other ethnicities to the point of achieving the kind of cultural competence that Ladson-Billings speaks of. Another complicating factor, according to Ladson-Billings, is that teachers who were early adopters of the CRP approach unfortunately “rarely pushed students to consider critical perspectives on policies and practices that may have direct impact on their lives and communities” (2014: 78). In other words, the third tenet also

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<sup>3</sup> Ladson-Billings developed CRP in 1995 and concedes in her article from 2014 that CRP has been improved on by other scholars such as Django Paris who speaks about “culturally *sustaining* pedagogy (qtd. in Ladson-Billings 2014: 76). In this article, I use the original designation CRP because it seems to be more widely used by practitioners and in educational research.

involves developing critical thinking skills and agency in order for student empowerment to come to fruition. In the work with text selection and literary analysis in the EFL classroom, one of the objectives can be to try to create connections with the local community, both regarding cultural diversity and cultural expressions.

In addition, as was the case with the questions listed in Critical literacy, CRP has a focus on silenced voices which means that educators may want to consider: “Whose voices am I leaving out in this unit? Who needs to be better represented in the text selections that I have in my classroom?” By scrutinizing representation in fiction, one’s own positionality, and validation of out-of-school literacies, educators have a better chance of catering to the needs of a diverse student population. Considering that new immigrant groups are coming into Swedish classrooms teachers can do an inventory of literary texts that may mirror these students’ experiences (Bishop 1990: ix). Even if there are no literary texts written in English by authors from immigrant students’ homelands, texts that depict the refugee experience across cultures can surely be found.<sup>4</sup>

## Disability Studies

The goals in the Swedish Curriculum specify that “[s]pecial attention must be given to those students who for different reasons experience difficulties in attaining these goals. . . . The school has a specific responsibility for students with functional impairments” (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2013: 5). This indicates that text selection as part of curriculum design could benefit from a more systematic approach also regarding accessibility. Such an approach could be Disability Studies which, according to Essaka Joshua, have the following two aims: “uncovering the ideologies that have led to the exclusion, oppression, and disparagement of people with disabilities, exploring new ways of understanding literature, history, identity, and culture” (2017: 306). That is to say that it specifically moves the focus from the alleged problems and limitations of the individual to how society has been organized to favor able-bodied people. As far as literary studies are concerned, Michael Bérubé points out that Disability Studies invite us to “reread the role of temporality, causality, and self-reflexivity in narrative” (2005: 576), and to recognize “that many of the narrative devices and rhetorical tropes we take for granted are grounded in the underrecognized and undertheorized facts of bodily difference” (2005: 570). This approach is similar then to Critical literacy and CRP in terms of raising awareness of how the dominant discourse may be upheld in literary texts. Consideration of representation implies that we search for counter-narratives that depict disabled people in an unbiased manner.

Questions to ponder in the search for literary texts from the vantage point of Disability Studies could be: What knowledge / experience does the author

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<sup>4</sup> The wordless graphic novel *The Arrival* (2006) by Shaun Tan is one such example.



have, how are characters with disabilities portrayed, how will the effect on the reader be different based on if it is narrated by the character with disability or by a significant other to a character with disability, to what extent is the cure narrative (that derives from the medical model of disability) challenged? A valuable educational resource is the outburst of new titles in YAL depicting neurodiverse characters which could serve to represent the experiences of neurodivergent students who may make up about 30–40 percent of the student population (ADHD Aware).

## Universal Design for Learning

With the focus on student motivation and critical reading methods in mind, a pedagogical approach that builds on Disability Studies and can be implemented in the EFL classroom as a comprehensive framework for inclusion is Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL in practice means “designing barrier-free, instructionally rich learning environments and lessons that provide access to all students” (Nelson et al. 2013: 3). As mentioned above, the focus on multiliteracies in literary studies in EFL can be extended further to mean that instructors consider what materials can be accessible in multiple modalities. Combined with UDL, it can be in the form of e-books with different fonts, colors, and sizes, but also graphica or film adaptations. The three main tenets of UDL specify that all students benefit from “multiple ways of representation . . . multiple means of expression . . . multiple means of engagement” (Hitchcock et al. 2002, qtd. in Minow 2012: 56). Subsequently, teaching materials would be offered in different modalities (representation), assessments would be structured so that students have a choice in how to demonstrate their learning (expression), and students would be able to work with the materials in different ways (engagement). The main idea is of course that we avoid the false notion of the so-called average student when designing lessons and units. What this means in practice is that UDL dictates that many if not all of the accommodations for students with special needs could be made available to all students as part of normal procedure. Not only does this have the potential to reduce the stigma inflicted on neurodiverse students, disabled students, and students with learning disorders, but it also recognizes that all learners evince variability in their learning. In this scenario, audiobooks for instance could be chosen by anybody, not just visually impaired or dyslectic students, and it would no longer garner attention from other students which is something adolescents usually want to avoid at any cost.

Implementing UDL may serve to raise motivation since it encompasses both affective and metacognitive factors. The following quote illustrates how variability is not something restricted to certain learners: “recent research in neuroscience reveal that learners are diverse in many dimensions, including the feelings they have about learning, how they process information, and what makes them motivated” (Minow 2012: 55). In the language classroom, there

may be more wiggle room to adjust the content to accommodate student choice thus heightening the possibility that students feel heard and validated. Speaking in a foreign language can be intimidating for some students which makes it more urgent to create a safe and encouraging community of learners in which variability is expected and part of the design. It is feasible that the chance to exchange ideas and interpretations of literary texts can give students feeling a sense of belonging in the classroom because they feel that their contribution matters.

## Queer Pedagogy

As proposed by CRP and Disability studies, inclusivity and representation are important principles for text selection, however, this comprises more factors than ethnicity and disability/able-bodiedness. In the transitional period of adolescence, identity formation can be a struggle against notions of perfection and conformity propagated by influencers and social media. Adolescents are also in the process of discovering their gender identity and experimenting with sexual orientation which may be in opposition to the heterosexual matrix. The matrix is a model devised by Judith Butler who defines it as: “a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (2007: 208). Given the forceful impact on individual lives by the matrix and how it often leads to harassment of members of the LGBTQ+ community, finding ways to validate queer voices may hopefully serve to alleviate some of that pressure. The important work against homophobia and discrimination has been taken up by scholars in the field many of whom offer advice on how to implement these findings in the classroom (Crawley and Donovan 2020; Dodge and Crutcher 2015; Greathouse et al. 2020; Kedley and Spiering 2017) and this is something we discuss in my classes.

Another reason for adding the genre of YAL to the language classroom stems from how it has become more intent on counteracting heteronormativity and incorporating LGBTQ+ themes in recent years (Bach 2016: 917). Some authors use their writing to disrupt the heterosexual matrix and convey to young adults that emotional turmoil is to be expected but possible to overcome during this time in life. According to John Pruitt, Queer Studies allow the reader to deconstruct conventional modes of analysis: “[t]hrough a queer lens, identity categories remain unstable, experiences constructed, reality imagined, and knowledge continues to provoke uncertainties and silences. . . . the disruptive and discomfoting . . . the decentering of one’s own subjectivity” (2016: 86). Even if it may be challenging for a young reader to take on this mode of critical reading, it can also be liberating and empowering. Recognizing the social construction of gender identities enables the individual to question conventional norms as expression of the dominant discourse. In fact, queer pedagogy “offers a critical view of the practices of

exclusion that are naturalized in the classroom by a banal heteronormativity that makes all those who don't fit into a certain standard invisible" (Neto 2018: 591). A Queer Pedagogical approach begs the question what the ramifications of this omission may be. Even though LGBTQ+ issues and rights enjoy a higher visibility in media and politics in the Western world, for the individual student the choice by the teacher to bring the effects of heteronormativity to the fore can make a significant difference. Text selection entails deciding what is allowed prominence in the classroom and who gets a voice in the conversation.

In today's fraught social context educators may feel hesitant to bring in sensitive topics dealing with sexual expressions and gender identities. Based on an empirical study of LGBTQ+ young adult literature in teacher education, Jacqueline Bach suggests that Queer Pedagogy may help disrupt conventional ways of working with literary texts in the classroom and "expose what happens when any book is categorized, intentionally or unintentionally, as representative of adolescent experiences" (2016: 930). It is problematic if pre-service teachers, as Bach reports, feel intimidated and choose not to teach LGBTQ+ literature because it is controversial (2016: 918). A queer stance carries the potential to develop critical reading skills and Marla Morris posits that, "[q]ueerness as an aesthetic or sensibility reads and interprets texts (art, music, literature) as potentially politically radical" (2012: 228). In this way, it is more about ideological layers rendered visible and made possible to question and challenge as in Critical literacy. Nemo Neto explains how Queer Pedagogy cautions that "educational institutions should not attach themselves to one set model, since these ideals end up alienating, even excluding, certain individuals" (2018: 591). As far as I understand it, a queer reading therefore seeks to invite fluidity and circumvent labelling. It is not so much about integrating the queer perspective into existing structures as it is about expanding what is seen as possible thus resisting existing norms and boundaries.

Returning to the Swedish context, the curricular documents clearly state that sex education should be integrated into all subjects:

The aim is to give the pupils perspective and knowledge, get them to see context and realise how the view of gender equality, sexuality and relationships has an impact on entire societies and people's life chances, while making them aware of the norms and values that affect individuals and groups in society . . . In literature teaching, discussions about love, gender equality, relationships and sexuality may be central themes, and may then be taken up in connection with topical issues in the media or comparisons between different English-speaking countries. (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2014: 6, 18)

In the latest version of the Curriculum, in effect from 1 July 2022, Swedish teachers have been explicitly tasked to discuss sexuality, consent, and relationship in their classes. I would like to suggest that Queer Pedagogy can

provide applicable analytical tools and constitute a strategic approach; it is a readily available method to implement for an instructor who is unsure of how to proceed.

In analogy to what is posed as problematic in terms of representation in CRP and Disability studies, the aspects of agency and empowerment require consideration also when selecting texts featuring for instance transgender characters. Linda Parsons cautions that “[t]he spectacles of violence in these novels portray the transgender characters as victims of oppression rather than as people living satisfying lives. The point of view also warrants comment” (2016: 936). Hence finding texts that could be empowering rather than depressing would be a worthy pursuit, or at least to problematize the depiction of transgender or queer characters. In addition, educators could talk about how a literary text represents one author’s fictitious version of the world. From this perspective, it is a challenge in the EFL classroom with its limited space for literary texts not to introduce a single representative or a series of token representations. What is more, there is a fine line between promoting empathy and causing a mistaken sense of appropriation of lived experiences accessed through fiction. That said, the significance of including queer voices on our reading lists cannot be overstated. Every year most of my pre-service teachers report that they have never read a queer text at school.

## Conclusion

The main purpose of this article has been to illustrate and discuss the complexity of text selection in the EFL classroom. I have argued that motivation may be higher if students gain ownership of what texts to read. The ambition is therefore to work toward increased student agency with a strong foundation in matters of equity and social justice. A secondary aim has been to outline how text selection could be conceived as part of a self-reflective practice with critical reading skills at the forefront. I have discussed ideologically based considerations for text selection in the language classroom but also practical limitations in that text selection will be limited by access to books, curricular documents, and individual teacher’s need to project a professionally accepted persona. I have considered theoretical perspectives found in Critical literacy, CRP, Disability Studies, and Queer Pedagogy and discussed to what extent these pedagogical approaches offer educators strategies that can aid in the text selection process, not to mention curriculum design in a wider sense. Furthermore, I have argued that adopting a view of literature as comprising multiliteracies may allow teachers to expand the range of texts and modalities incorporated into teaching units for the benefit of students by catering to their variability in learning abilities, preferences for reception and expression, as well as building on their strengths when it comes to assessment.

The Swedish context has played a major role in this article, especially the strong curricular directive to support democracy, encourage students to adopt

different perspectives, and help them to empathize (Natl. Ag. f. Ed. 2013: 4). While these overarching goals may be difficult to realize in the pedagogical practice, elsewhere I have argued that reading literature can function as a kind of contact zone since it affords the possibility to see a fictional representation of the world from a new vantage point (Thyberg 2011). From an optimistic standpoint, a carefully designed reading list can serve as a gateway into inviting and celebrating instances of nuance and ambiguity in the language classroom thus stimulating students to develop an open mindset. In fact, I would like to suggest that a desire to invite students to collaborate on the creation of reading lists and learning activities and to incorporate diverse voices and critical reading methods in the EFL classroom represents an ethical imperative. After having learned about these pedagogical approaches and the possible life-changing effects on individual students when they are put into practice, I could not in good conscience disregard them. We often talk about that the classroom should be a safe space for students, but this does not have to be an empty cliché. Studies show that in 2019 30 percent of upper secondary school students in the United States struggled with mental health issues (CDC 2019). An educator that offers stability by being consistent in validating diverse voices, works to humanize schooling by showing respect and trusting that students want to learn, and builds community may become the one reason for some students to come to class.<sup>5</sup>

Yet as any literature instructor can tell you, there will no doubt be resistance from students to reading projects since reading is often seen as a time-consuming and demanding activity. Moreover, attempts to decolonize and diversify the reading list may encounter pushback from conservative students and colleagues. And yes, it can be intimidating to abandon traditional ways of reading literature. But it is important to recognize that reading *with* a text is easier for those whose privilege is upheld in the fictitious world. It is only when we consciously decide to read *against* the text that we can expose the ways in which it silences disenfranchised voices. Therefore, I have argued that educators need the theoretical foundation that these pedagogical approaches provide both as methods to implement and justification for change.

Additionally, I have proposed that one way to increase student motivation is to validate students as important stakeholders in the text selection process and allow for student choice. Conventional methods to this effect are literature circles (Daniels 2002) and silent independent reading (Schoenbach et al. 2012) and there is nothing wrong with these practices. However, using the principles of UDL may enable teachers to work more strategically to increase the likelihood that a reading project will be conducive for learning. Firstly, it is important that different literary options and critical reading skills are

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<sup>5</sup> Reading and talking about literature can help people struggling with mental health issues as bibliotherapy has shown. See for instance ch. 11 in Sarah McNicol and colleagues' book *Bibliotherapy* (2018).

available for everyone. Secondly, we can have variability in mind when designing the reading list. For not-yet readers we can build on extra-mural competences from gaming and fan fiction to somewhat mitigate immediate negative reactions to reading. For readers who want to adhere to the literary canon, we can include classics in our literary options. For students who are working on their language skills, we can offer multiple literacies via, for instance, film adaptations, graphic novels, slam poetry, and postmodern picture books. Thirdly, I would like to clarify that transformations of reading lists need not be done in a radical and comprehensive overhaul but could be done incrementally at a pace that is sustainable for the individual instructor. Although I continue to search for literature that might appeal to adolescent readers and draw on successful experiences reported by in-service teachers and scholars, I cannot guarantee that every text that I include in my courses will be suitable for the vast range of student populations that pre-service teachers will encounter in their careers. I can only hope that the consistency in which we discuss and problematize the literary texts on the reading list for possible implementation in the EFL classroom will enable pre-service teachers to make informed decisions further down the line.

Taken together, the hope is that involving students in the text selection process and offering choice on multiple stages in the coursework combined with a validation of diverse voices where more students get to both see themselves in literature and try on new perspectives may increase student motivation to read. Strengthening students' critical reading skills and bringing in equity and social justice issues may have the potential to make literature relevant even in today's media saturated world and show students that agency is possible. It is my hope that standing in solidarity with educators and students in other parts of the world by discussing the value of free expression and right to read may empower students to recognize the power of art to effect change in the world.

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