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Author(s)	Vanithamani Saravanan
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Language Teaching and Children's Literature: Loughborough '79

In recent discussions on bilingual education in Singapore, attention has been directed towards related studies such as psycholinguistic factors in language acquisition, principles of language learning and the socio-cultural-economic factors that motivate the learning of languages.

What is the place of children's literature in language learning? Charlotte S Huck in *Children's Literature in the Elementary School* (1976) states that "literature is the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language. The province of literature is the human condition, life with all its feelings, thoughts and insights" (p. 4). The aesthetic experience produced in the reader is through the symbols of language and it is this unique combination of symbols and experience that produces both intellectual and emotional responses in the reader. Thus language learning consists not only of learning the formal structures of language, but also includes an aesthetic appreciation of the language as well.

It was the recognition of children's literary needs that began children's literature as a branch of literature. Children's literature is concerned with finding books of genuine quality that children want to read and enjoy reading; with the task of finding books that satisfy the emotional and psychological needs of children – their curiosities, doubts and preoccupations; and it is concerned with finding the machinery to introduce books not only to the book child but also to the non-book child and the reluctant and backward readers we have in our schools. The field has other related interests such as children's reading habits, the psychological needs of children, the acquisition of reading skills amongst pre-school children and reading activities to stimulate and motivate reading for pleasure.

Language teachers in Singapore looking for resources to supplement their teaching materials (apart from textbooks and aids) would find it worth their while to find out more about the literary needs of their children and to consider the resources in children's libraries which can help

them to find the means to stimulate and encourage reading and writing skills amongst children.

It was with the view of getting persons involved in children's literature together to stimulate an international flow of outstanding children's literature that the Loughborough International Summer School on Children's Literature began in Britain in 1968. Writers, illustrators, publishers, librarians, reviewers and teachers got together to discuss ways of publishing and distributing quality books to children, to compile bibliographical information on children's books not only in the West but in countries round the world, and to spread good books to more children in other countries.

The 12th Loughborough International Seminar on Children's Literature was held at the University of Stirling, Scotland, from 13 – 18 August 1979. Amidst the serene setting of the purple-grey slopes of the Scottish Highlands, writers of children's books (Leila Berg, Mollie Hunter, Joan Lingard, Aidan Chambers, Rumer Godden), publishers (Julia MacRae), illustrators (Fiona French) and Anna Home, producer of "Jackanory" (B.B.C. TV), met to discuss their concern for children and children's books.

Mollie Hunter, an author, spoke about bridging the gap between the culture known to the writer but not the reader. In Scotland the linguistic differences between the Highlanders and Lowlanders, who spoke Gaelic and standard Scottish English respectively, have led to the creation of a minority culture among the Celtic speakers.

There is a need to describe the sense of the real world to children of a minority culture, the senses, shapes, colours, seasons, food and shelter and the entire environment they react to. This may be done through language, especially the dialect variety, for it is this variety that has an enriching effect and can convey the idiosyncracies of the spoken variety. A writer concerned with children who are culturally displaced may write in dialect, and such books will help to bridge the gap.

Leila Berg expresses a similar concern for five-year-olds who come to school without any of the intimate personal building-up with words that the book child has had. In *Reading and Loving* (1977), she states that such children are

. . . expected to leap into a language that in sounds, vocabulary, meaning, tune, phrasing, attitude, bears little relationship to their own – *but the pretence is that it is their own.*

The price for this achievement is to be able to read books that bear no relationship to their experience, their longings, joys, fears, and preoccupations – *but the pretence is that they do.* Or rather the pretence is that the children have the same longings, joys, fears and preoccupations as the children in the books, but that their own experience is not “fit” to be put into books (p. 109).

It was this concern that made Leila Berg write the “Nippers” series to include children in books for she too as a child had made the desperate attempt to make personal sense out of print by juggling about with sounds.

How does this compare with the reading experiences of children in Singapore? Singapore children often speak the basilect or mesolect variety of English to their peers and to their siblings. But in the classroom when confronted with formal structures in English, they stumble and struggle to make sense out of print. The language teacher in deep frustration brands them as failures. Some help might be found if teachers were able to teach pupils to recognise that language has both formal and informal varieties and that these styles operate in various contexts. Books written with some dialogue in a dialect of English which children are familiar with might be very helpful. Teachers also have the enormous task of selecting texts and materials suitable not only for teaching language skills but those which describe experiences and environments that children recognise as their own. At present in Singapore, there is little such material available.

The other concern expressed amongst the conference participants was the concern for “realism” in children’s literature. Would “realistic writing” attract the young who are stimulated by television and electronic music and who buy records rather than books? Writers in the field have reported that young readers have been turned off books because they have found that little of relevance is being written on what it is to be young.

Marshall McLuhan’s theories have been that television has created a huge gap between

generations, between those who learned to read and write before TV, and those who came to TV first. The TV generation, he asserts, wants “depth and involvement” because it is attuned to an outer environment “charged with messages”. It is therefore in rebellion against the print-oriented ways of acquiring knowledge and pleasure or pleasure through knowledge.

Is it possible then to reach these children in the medium, the novel? Nat Hentoff in *Fiction for Teenagers* (1967) states that it is possible because children’s primary concerns are only partially explored in the messages they get from their electronic music and are diverted rather than probed on TV. If a book is relevant to their concerns, not didactically but in creating textures of experience which teenagers can recognise as germane to their own, it can merit their attention.

One writer who seeks to create such textures of experience is Joan Lingard. She presents a “slice of life” through the characters and plots she invents in her novels. Her concern is to reach out to young people to help them come to terms with the violence and pains of life and growing up without indulging in or exploiting these experiences. Realistic fiction like this can help young people through the transition to adulthood and can give them active help to make sense of these experiences.

Lingard spoke of her attempt to “transmute life into art”. In her “Ulster” books (she grew up in Ireland), she describes teenagers caught in a flux, in the conflict between Protestants and Catholics. In *Across the Barricades*, *The Twelfth Day of July* and *Into Exile*, she describes the effects of contemporary history on the lives of children.

The concern for realism and truth in children’s literature was next discussed through the work of an illustrator, Fiona French. In a dialogue between French and Margaret Marshall MacDonald (writer and lecturer), it was observed that “art education is the education of feeling” and that “bad art is corruption of feelings.” Bad art consists of drawings that are out of proportion and crowded with incorrect designs.

French spoke of the research conducted, of visits to settings she had made before illustrating her books, the concern for authentic detail in period costumes, architecture, setting and atmosphere and of the need for historical accuracy in depicting the social life of her characters. She sometimes went over the text and illustrations in her picture books ten to fifteen times in order to obtain the accuracy she desired.

“The text and pictures in a book should be

one entity," she observed. The use of colour in children's books was not only for attraction but for information as well. In Anthony Browne's *A Walk in the Park*, for instance, it is the perception of the artist that is uppermost and the surrealistic illustrations have to be apparent to the adult before children perceive them. There's more to it than meets the eye. The book disappears because children start hunting for the text.

Julia MacRae, formerly of Hamish Hamilton, spoke of the need for high standards in publishing for children. Children deserve good quality books as much as adults do. Though editors need to consider the economies of sales, budgeting and funds, yet there is a justification for quality books printed on quality paper with designs that are imaginative and aesthetically pleasing, where there is attention to the visual image and to details such as the title page.

Publishers need to take risks in order to keep good books in print. Today publishers who have gone cautious package books and these packs are sold in the supermarkets. Packs such as "Animals of the World" are colourful and glossy but have very little content and little informative value. This proliferation of packs has pushed out thoughtful and imaginative books for children.

The Loughborough Seminar ended with the observation that in many countries, the education system had not yet taken account of children's literature and that the field had no status. Few university English departments or schools of education run organised courses. Teachers in colleges of education are not seriously concerned

with this field and when they start teaching, so many other demands are made upon their time that they hardly devote time to the study of children's books. Even teachers of English more often know little or nothing about modern children's literature.

These observations may be qualified with a note on the interest shown in children's literature in Singapore. The National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDC) held a writers' workshop on children's books from 18–22 June 1979. Its aims were to (i) provide potential Singapore writers with an opportunity to exchange ideas on various factors in writing, illustrating and publishing children's books in Singapore, (ii) increase the output and quality of children's books in Singapore, (iii) heighten an awareness of the function and role of children's literature in Singapore.

NBDC awards for children's books and for good design are a further incentive in this area. The English department of the University of Singapore has accepted academic exercises on children's literature from its students and an M.A. thesis on "Children's Literature in South-east Asia".

Finally, teachers in Singapore may want to know that publishers have produced a great number of children's books in hardback and in paperback. A great number of review journals are devoted to children's books and there is a mine of information in these sources and from references on the subject at the National Library and its branches. 

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