Reading the world: English-language literatures as a tool for fostering critical language awareness[1]

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Abstract

This paper summarises how a critical pedagogical approach was joined with action research to foster a critical language awareness (CLA) perspective in redesigning and implementing the course, Practice in communicating English literature. Held at Eötvös Loránd University's Faculty of Primary and Pre-School Education (ELTE TÓK) as a part of the English specialisation programme in bilingual education for pre-service primary teachers, the curriculum used for teaching this course originally emphasised literary history, canonical works, chronological order, and literacy, all earmarks of the literature pedagogy most commonly employed in Hungarian classrooms. The questions investigated in this research therefore examine whether students socialised in the literature pedagogy methods listed above would react positively to unfamiliar materials and practices; whether literature could promote language learning in a way that emphasises content over literacy; and whether literature could motivate adult language learners to become autonomous language users who possess their own, English-language identity. The example of the first known, English-language autobiography, The Book of Margery Kempe (1501/1985)[2], will provide a set of practices (including storytelling, creative writing, role play and debate) for promoting critical language awareness among pre-service primary teachers. Redefining the aims and material for Practice in communicating English literature demanded further investigation in affirming its effectiveness while assessing the need to expose students to a broader range of cultural influences. The qualitative methods of document/coursebook analysis, observation, and a questionnaire conducted with students provide further input in determining whether the selected curriculum promotes CLA and Kachru's definition (1996) of world Englishes.

Keywords: literature pedagogy, critical pedagogy, community-based action research, critical language awareness, world Englishes, Margery Kempe

[2] Based on its Proem, what can be taken as the final version of this text was completed in 1436. The edition used for this course relied upon a version dating from 1501.

Introduction

This study demonstrates how cultural, historical, and social content can be conveyed via texts written in a variety of English variants by authors whose representations of marginalised communities allow for conversations on how educational institutions can bolster linguistic, political, and social ideologies and hegemonies. Beginning in 2018, the author has been using the course, *Practice in communicating English literature*, to experiment in combining critical pedagogical practices (Freire, 1993; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2011) with action research (Stringer, 1999) in order to foster a critical language awareness (Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Fairclough, 1992) perspective in redesigning and implementing an English Literature course for Hungarian students pursuing a four-year, BA degree in bilingual English-Hungarian primary education at ELTE TÓK. Action research is conducted by a researcher who is not an expert, but rather a facilitator or resource person who aids stakeholders in defining their problems and supporting them in their aim of reaching the solutions that they hold to be effective (Stringer, 1999, p. 25). Throughout this continuously evolving process, students have been encouraged to become active agents in defining their own identities as language users while developing both literacy and cultural sensitivity. For the purpose of this study, culture is defined according to Freire's (1973) definition of culture as 'a systematic acquisition of human experience' (Freire, 1973, p. 48). Neumann (2015) views Freire's notion of culture as being concrete, yet also highly symbolic due to its connection to the symbolism of language (Neumann, 2015, p. 436). As Freire contends, 'in reading the word, we also read the world' for the simple reason that 'we read the world in which these words exist' (Freire, 1997, p. 304). Fostering cultural sensitivity (also frequently known as cultural awareness) involves cultural sensitisation, a process which encompasses the transmission of the knowledge, awareness, and acceptance needed to understand other cultures or others' cultural identities. Cultural sensitivity can be viewed as an initial step toward attaining cultural competence and enabling effective intercultural communication. By applying Freire's definition of culture to the concept of cultural sensitivity, it becomes obvious that *Practice in communicating English literature*, a course that studies the words uttered by as many worlds as possible while emphasising the importance of communication, is a worthy context for furthering cultural sensitivity in future educators.

The questions explored in the course of this research concern whether students socialised in a non-critical approach to literature would react positively to less familiar materials and methods; whether literature can promote language learning in a way that emphasises content over literacy; and whether literature can motivate adult language learners to become autonomous language users who possess their own, English-language identity. The latter question is particularly significant given that students

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begin this course at the end of their third year and complete it in the first semester of their fourth year, i.e., directly before embarking upon their eight-week professional practice conducted in 'real-time' language classrooms. To provide an example of the methods I have developed throughout this five-year period, a summary of the practices applied to teaching the first known English-language autobiography, *The book of Margery Kempe* (1501/1985), will follow an overview of my position as a researcher in light of the literature teaching methods commonly found in Hungary and an examination of the research literature relevant to critical pedagogy, action research, and the ultimate goal of critical language awareness.

Factors determining curriculum design and pedagogical approach

Making a brief foray into the different approaches and questions I have observed in US versus Hungarian literature classrooms is necessary in order to indicate some of the issues that had to be considered when utilising works by authors whom I select based on their contrast to what most Hungarian university students have experienced in the secondary schools they attended. In other words, seeking to represent the English language's *lack* of uniformity and the bewildering variety of language variants and cultures present in English-language works from around the globe is likely to cause consternation or even distress among individuals who have been socialised in a monolingual, monocultural view of culture. Barring the presence of the exchange students attending our university on an Erasmus scholarship, an average of fifteen students attend this two-semester, annually held course and are Hungarian citizens who have completed the majority of their education in Hungary. These students have recently graduated from secondary school and are generally in their early twenties.

The number of Erasmus students varies greatly and can span any number from one to twenty-one, a sum that can alter the class composition from sixteen to thirty-six students, a factor that greatly influences whether this course can be held as a forum for communication or begins to take on the characteristics of a more traditional lecture. I find that a total of fifteen to twenty students is the ideal number given that absences or the attendance of compulsory in-school observations will affect attendance, thereby playing an important role in the quality and quantity of communication that can be achieved. Despite my best efforts, holding this course for thirty-six students made it extremely difficult to promote communication, thereby leaving me with the uncomfortable feeling of lecturing rather than fostering. In response to my qualms, this course was offered as a separate elective for Erasmus students, thereby separating non-Hungarian from Hungarian students. While this change could have allowed me to compare Hungarian versus European practices in literature pedagogy, it has been my repeated experience that Erasmus students (generally from Spain,

Germany, Switzerland, Ireland, and the Netherlands) have had little exposure to group discussions of texts, reading texts by members of minority groups, or a non-chronological approach to literary history. Beyond the fact that Erasmus students are currently facing the fate of being an 'outsider' and have gained some sensitivity to this status, I have not observed noticeable differences in the pedagogical methods used to teach European versus Hungarian students.[3]

My impression has been that the educational approaches that I encountered in the United States – such as those related to New Criticism, multiculturalism, addressing the legacy of colonialism, shifting literary canons to include the voices of the members of minority communities – have not gained a firm foothold within the educational curricula of secondary and tertiary institutions in Europe. As regards the legacy of colonization, for example, I was quite surprised when students from Spain (i.e., also speakers of a language that became global via colonisation) reported very little exposure to works by Spanish-language authors from Latin America. After no familiarity with Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, or Isabel Allende was demonstrated in class, I adjusted the course curriculum to include the Mexican American author, Sandra Cisneros. While the mixing of Spanish and English that typifies the writing of Cisneros posed no language barrier for these Erasmus students, her depiction of Mexican culture in the short story, 'Bien Pretty,' appeared as foreign to Spanish students as it was to Hungarians. Cisneros' many references to the stereotypes and cultural barriers experienced by Spanish speakers in North America seemed not only unfamiliar, but also uncomfortable for these students who voiced their astonishment at viewing a Spanish-speaking culture from the outside. Based on their expressed opinions, Cisneros' portrayal of the cultural identity struggles experienced by the work's bilingual narrator left them somewhat flabbergasted. German students have reported little awareness of literature written in variants of German; Dutch students seem to have no experience with Afrikaans or works written by Afrikaans-speaking, South African authors; the one French student who has, to date, attended our university reported inclusion of some female authors in the curriculum, but was unfamiliar with works by French-speaking authors from former French colonies in Africa or the Caribbean.

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[3] One exception to this is the assigning compulsory literature from a list that is compiled by the government and contained in the national curriculum. An educational approach stemming from the era of state socialism, the issue of compulsory literature is not only particular to Hungary but is customary in all former Soviet-bloc nations. In Central and Eastern European countries, discussions surrounding the literary canon are fraught with the many political issues or ideologies that have often been concealed within the book lists prescribed by national curricula. Politics naturally impacts actions such as banning books from school libraries in the United States, deliberately not including authors based on ethnic preferences, or advertently including authors from minority communities as a result of, for example, affirmative action policies. This reality further underscores the need for a critical pedagogical approach to designing literature curricula.

In 2021, when I had the opportunity to hold two workshops on *The Book of Margery Kempe* at the Zurich University of Teacher Education (PHZH) in Switzerland, the main feedback provided by workshop participants (all university instructors) pertained to their unfamiliarity with women's literature and their lack of knowledge in this area. While my experience cannot be viewed in any way as comprehensive, the main conclusions I have drawn are 1) the academic scholarship done by university departments focusing on minority, gender, or women's issues and literature seems to have remained isolated within small enclaves. The often very fruitful knowledge production conducted within these communities does not appear to have 'trickled down' to the literature curricula taught in secondary schools in Europe. 2) To be effective, cultural sensitisation demands a critical questioning and awareness of our own culture. It is not enough to expose students to works from another culture: they must be capable of both comparing and communicating the feelings (such as discomfort, astonishment, unawareness, or disagreement) that arise from this comparison. 3) The effects that knowledge production and transmission has had (or not had) on our personal perspectives is an essential aspect of this process. 4) Students have grown up exposed to a globalised world and have some awareness of issues such as cultural appropriation or social protests like the Black Lives Matter or MeToo movements, but have received little support in understanding the vocabulary, historical causes, or political influences that determine these matters. A very large gap therefore arises between students' cultural knowledge, awareness, and needs and school curricula.

To summarise another determining factor, since 2018 a total of four male teacher trainees have attended the course as Hungarian citizens. Within the Hungarian group, the remaining pre-service primary teachers identified as female, a circumstance that reflects the predominance of women in the field of education in Hungary. Based on the following compilation of statistics, *A közoktatás indikátorrendszere 2021* [*The indicator system for public education, 2021*], 80 percent of full-time educators in Hungary are women. In pre-school education, this rate is nearly one hundred percent, while 85 percent of the teachers in elementary schools are female (ELKH, 2021, p. 75). Nothing indicates that this circumstance is likely to change; indeed, the 2015 compilation of indicators states that the percentage of women employed in education has barely altered since 2001 (MTA, 2015, p. 59). This overwhelming gender imbalance can only be countered by the presence of male pre-service teachers attending our university on an Erasmus scholarship – a welcome addition that is lost when Erasmus students are grouped into a separate elective course. Given that most of the texts analysed in the course were written by women and often portray events or viewpoints that are ostensibly pertinent to 'women's issues', it is common for male students to display some discomfort or express the feeling of having been relegated to minority status; fears of being threatened (or blamed) by rabid feminism is another issue that has arisen.

When these responses or reactions emerge in class, I validate the acceptability of the fears underlying these concerns while pointing out that future educators will be responsible for teaching many girls; if school curricula has not provided access to the thoughts and perspectives of women, male teachers are potentially disadvantaged when it comes to teaching females. I also find it useful to continue this conversation one-on-one with male students, thereby easing the pressure or being surrounded by a roomful of women. I frequently observe that this uncomfortable experience is a teaching moment: many women feel the same when opening a literature or history textbook or stepping into an academic conference or an executive boardroom. In many cases, it is necessary to review and discuss the difference between feminism as a political movement and the academic field of gender studies. The inclusion of a unit on fathers and daughters has proven quite popular and led to an examination of whether the norms surrounding masculinity and fatherhood have changed from the time of W.B. Yeats' *A Prayer for my daughter* (1921) and Eminem's rap song about fatherhood, *Mockingbird* (2005). How female authors have described fatherhood is examined via Sylvia Plath's poem *Daddy*, Sandra Cisneros' autobiographical essay 'Only Daughter,' and the song *Winter* by Tori Amos. Beyond challenging students to ponder what attitudes and actions can qualify as 'best practices' for the fathers of daughters, this unit adds further discussion on what genres qualify as literature.

While common sense dictates that individuals who have already made the effort to become fluent in a foreign language are likely open to new cultural and linguistic influences, experience shows that students' curiosity could not always be explored in the course of their daily lives. The reason for this lies in the fact that many Hungarian students come from smaller cities, towns or villages located in the countryside and report little (if any) daily contact with other cultures. Those who plan to return home to teach frequently express the opinion that there is little need for them to understand the experiences of, for example, an immigrant: according to them, the likelihood of any foreign child appearing in their future classroom is small. Given the daily presence of foreign tourists and residents in the capital city and the likelihood that teacher candidates will be conducting practices or observations in one of Budapest's bilingual schools or multicultural districts, introducing elements of cultural sensitisation may have the added benefit of helping students who face a greater cultural and knowledge gap due to differences between rural and urban Hungary.

Preliminary steps to curriculum design: Comparing literature pedagogy in the US versus Hungary

The decision to reinvent the curriculum for *Practice in communicating English literature* stems from reasons both personal and professional. For any language educator, the aims of furthering students' ability to cross cultu-

res, think critically, and become global citizens of the world are required by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), where one objective is 'to promote mutual understanding and tolerance, respect for identities and cultural diversity through more effective international communication' (CEFR, 2001, p. 3; see CEFR, 2018, p. 21 wherein 'the CEFR broadens the perspective of language education in a number of ways, not least by its vision of the user/learner as a social agent, co-constructing meaning in interaction, and by the notions of mediation and plurilingual/pluricultural competences'). On the personal level, it is first necessary to position my own identity as a white, female, middle-class 'intellectual teacher' (Giroux, 1988) who is a native speaker of American English yet fluent in Hungarian. I have conducted my humanities-based education in secondary and tertiary institutions located in the US and Hungary and have taught in both secondary and tertiary institutions located in Budapest, the capital city of Hungary. From the perspective of literature education, my formative years in the United States were imbued by practices largely related to New Criticism. In the US literature classroom, I strongly recall being encouraged to apply myself to in-class, textual analysis rather than raise questions regarding the author's background, the work's social and historical context, or any issues surrounding critical reception. Group discussion of the text was supported, and students also received ample opportunity to detail their own interpretation of the selected literary work in written essays. Before university, I remember no exposure to literary history, theory, or biographical data about the author.

Thanks to continuous rounds of budget cuts in a district that was already disadvantaged due to the relatively low-income status of its inhabitants, the 1950s literature anthology used in my high school literature classes had not been replaced with a more recent textbook. Presumably predating the introduction of New Criticism to high school classrooms, it contained chapters on literary history and information about the authors' lives, sections in our only coursebook that we were exhorted not to read. In 1991, during my forbidden forays of reading under the desk, I remember how dumbfounded I was concerning the entry for e. e. cummings (1894–1962). Listed not only as an author who was still writing, but also as an 'up-and-coming poet,' e. e. cummings was an 'unorthodox' yet 'promising' talent whose work we were urged to keep in sight.

To complicate matters even further, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the introduction of multiculturalism to American schools. Due to our textbook, literature remained dominated by white, male authors while teachers scrambled to adapt to the inclusion of African American Studies or feminism in the new textbooks written for other subjects. I do not think teachers were prepared for or trained in passing on these new ideas. Looking back, I can see that the confusion displayed by my teachers largely stemmed from what Neumann (2015) pinpoints as the inability to define culture. As a result,

culture remained on the superficial, visible level of food, holidays, clothing, etc., with no recognition of how ethnic groups experience the world (p. 436). Oddly, the application of this approach was most obvious in school lunches, where two sad tacos placed on the usual partitioned, 'institutional green' cafeteria tray indicated both a newfound acceptance of Mexican culture and (for convenience's sake) the observation of *Cinco de Mayo*. Neither were Mexican students or parents consulted regarding this manifestation of their heritage culture, nor were their experiences and concerns in areas such as racism, language acquisition, assimilation or the preservation of their cultural identity addressed. (Incidentally, the only Latino students in the district were Puerto Rican.) If the America of my childhood had been turned into a melting pot containing a roiling jumble of bizarre, well-meaning but grotesque elements, it was still one with a very tight lid on it. With these examples, I aim to underscore how issues related to equal access to current educational materials or the questions surrounding a vast array of social and political matters were painfully evident in the predominantly working-class, second-generation immigrant environs of my school district, where the identity choices related to language usage (dialect versus 'standard' English, heritage language versus English) were never discussed, yet still clearly influenced the struggle to be the first generation to attend university.

Two years later, in 1993, I was an exchange student attending a Hungarian *gimnázium* in the wealthy twelfth district of Buda, where literature pedagogy followed a pace set by the *Nemzeti alaptanterv*, Hungary's National Core Curriculum. Roughly the same anthologies and textbooks were used throughout the country: the curriculum followed a well-established, chronological order dominated by literary history. Based on my observations, teachers were highly trained in literary history, theory, and textual analysis, yet used frontal methods that allowed for little in-class discussion. Students were more encouraged to apply the literary interpretations found in the textbook rather than formulating their own opinion. While I still would not be able to identify a photo of e. e. cummings, I have spent many hours staring at the images of Hungary's canonical authors whose presence not only appears in classrooms, but also in the form of public statues and street names found throughout the country. The recitation of memorised poetry was a regular part of classroom activities, together with oral testing on the historical or biographical information contained in the coursebook.

Other than the texts contained in the anthology, students were expected to read a list of compulsory works that featured both Hungarian and world literature in a rhythm that I soon discovered had changed little from the time students' parents had gone to school. (Indeed, my own children have also been assigned the same list of titles.) The fact that libraries and bookstores had a separate section dedicated to this selection of compulsory literature enabled me to gain the cultural background sorely missing from my autodidactic acquisition of Hungarian. While reading my way through these bookshelves,

I discovered what I felt to be a profound and aesthetically pleasurable insight into Hungarian history and culture that was easily accessible and bore (from what I could discern) the comforting stamp of universal approval. As an additional benefit, my vocabulary, grammar usage, spelling, and reading comprehension skills noticeably improved.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, particularly since the 1989 shift from state socialism to democracy, the methodology of teaching Hungarian literature to secondary school students had been the source of continuous debate and attempts at reform. To mention just a few of these recommended changes, the late 1980s saw the emergence of alternative practices, including József Zsolnai's *Nyelvi-irodalmi-kommunikációs* [Language/Literature/Communication] programme, the *Nyelvtan-kommunikáció-irodalom tizenéveseknek* [Grammar/Communication/Literature for Teens] project led by Zoltán Bánréti, or the initiative by Lajos Sipos (1998) to conceptualise methods in alternative literature pedagogy. Based on Karlovitz's (1992) interpretation, the early 1990s marked a time of widespread debate surrounding questions such as what role literary history has in literature classes, how to strike a balance between Hungarian and world literature, how literature can be used to strengthen national identity, whether 'untried', contemporary authors should be taught alongside the canon, and whether teachers should follow documents such as the National Core Curriculum and its accompanying Frame Curricula, or instead have the freedom to choose reading material. Handbooks and studies published by educators such as László Arató (1996), György D. Fenyő (1992), Lajos Sipos (1998), Csilla Nagy Pethőné (2005) encouraged innovation on the part of literature teachers. Cooperative learning forms, project-based activities, and elements of drama pedagogy also appeared among the good practices intended for Hungarian literature classrooms. More recently, Balázs Fűzfa (2016) has spearheaded the concept of experience-based literature pedagogy while research in the field of literature education increasingly emphasises the need to utilise ICT tools in literature classrooms (Gonda & Molnár, 2019; Kiss, 2021). Meanwhile, as Rebeka Herédi states, Hungarian media tends to publicise the debates surrounding either changes in literature pedagogy or the ominous and frequently highly politicised issue of what works 'make' the list of compulsory literature (Herédi, 2021, p. 71).

To echo Herédi's summation of the situation, the many innovations and efforts proposed by Hungarian literature educators have largely remained unrealised, resulting in a growing gap between applied methods and students' changing needs. As Herédi warns, this inability to adapt to the challenges posed by globalisation, digitalisation, altered reading habits, and the many social issues faced by young people today increases the likelihood of engendering negative attitudes toward both literature and reading. 'Adapting to these needs did not occur, just as 2021 has seen no paradigm

shift in literature pedagogy' (Herédi, 2021, p. 73)[4]. Adopted in 2020, the most recent National Core Curriculum (and its accompanying Frame Curricula for each subject) prescribes the following aims for literature education: developing competences, transferring culture, influencing students' personal development, furthering a sense of national identity, and exposing students to analytical strategies and their use. In other words, literature is interpreted as displaying the cultural, aesthetic, national, and emotional values described below:

> The subject of Hungarian language and literature possesses a predominant role due to the fact that it teaches students to think, passes on knowledge, and bequeaths a heritage of intellectual and moral traditions. A people's symbolic texts are mainly contained in literary works that thereby express the closest form of connectedness. Reading and teaching these texts develops the personality, aesthetic proclivities, critical attitudes, and moral sensitivities. As such, the subject of Hungarian language and literature forms one of the most important tools in nurturing emotional development.
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> Our culture and the literature it contains was born in Hungarian and continues to evolve in this language. Hungarian literature is the literature of Hungarian peoples from the Carpathian Basin. Our language, history, and culture is mutual. From a cultural standpoint, we form one nation. This is why the subject of Hungarian language and literature is the literature of the Carpathian Basin's Hungarian peoples and heretofore views this intellectual heritage as one that is uniform and handled uniformly (*Frame curricula for Hungarian language and literature, grades 9–12* 2020).

Assessing challenges in reforming Hungary's literature pedagogy

When weighing the many opinions surrounding the role literature plays in Hungarian educational institutions, it is obvious that the attitudes connected to literature pedagogy roughly echo those held in the two 'camps' outlined by Claire Kramsch and Olivier Kramsch (2000) in their historical overview of literature's changing status in the teaching of language. One viewpoint follows a belletristic stance in which literature is 'closely linked to the nation-state that engendered it', emphasises the philological and aesthetic value of literary texts, and is oriented toward Europe and the realm of elite education (p. 559). Referred to by Herédi (2021) as *az olvasásügy* ['the reading issue'] (p. 74), the other interpretation maintains the significance of literacy and increasingly views texts as a means for developing reading comprehension. Beyond Hungary, this process has mainly severed literacy from literary texts and favours the implementation of simplified works or texts that are already familiar to students (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000, p. 560). Within Hungary,

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[4] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations translated from the Hungarian original are the work of the author.

however, students and teachers largely struggle to meet an overabundance of curricular demands, absorb a wide range of cultural and historical information, and comprehend texts in a rigid system that expects literacy-related competences to be honed while students' cultural, moral, and aesthetic values must also be developed. As can be seen in the aims quoted above regarding the subject of Hungarian language and literature, these tasks are further determined by a concept that firmly locates Hungarian culture within the Carpathian Basin and the Hungarian language. One can only wonder what consideration prompted educational policymakers to disinherit the literature written in Hungarian by members of the many Hungarian diaspora communities located beyond the Carpathian Basin. It is also puzzling why the wealth of works written by members of Hungary's various ethnic groups (including languages such as German, Romanian, Serbian, Croatian, Slovak, Romanes and Yiddish) deserve no place in the teaching of Hungary's rich cultural heritage. (Yet it is safe to say that the Renaissance poet who wrote in Latin, Janus Pannonius (1434–1472), appears in every literature class.) To raise an additional oddity, the very low number of female authors found in literature classrooms is another factor that continues to be taken as 'normal'.

Foreign language education and the development of intercultural communicative competences

Students' exposure to other cultures during secondary school has been outlined in reference to Hungarian language and literature courses; the study of foreign languages offers students an additional opportunity to meet a different culture. A study conducted by Nikolov (2003) concludes that translation, reading aloud, grammar exercises, and written tests figured among the most common activities in Hungary's foreign language classrooms. Nikolov (2003) also points out that teachers seem to ignore language's role as a gateway toward learning about the world. In the past sixteen years I have spent teaching English, I have seen that translation is perhaps less common in today's EFL classrooms, but grammar and written competences continue to overtake communication. Students frequently express the opinion that they 'really' learned English from youtube or Netflix and felt English lessons to be more frustrating than useful. While students' reliance upon Internet sources can bolster autonomy and motivation, it once more leaves them without guidance when it comes to identifying and evaluating the nature of what they often passively consume rather than actively select based on set criteria or a discussion of language aims.

On the tertiary level, research by Lázár (2011) focuses on the importance of developing intercultural communicative competence (ICC) among Eötvös Loránd University's pre-service secondary school teachers and concludes that 'cultural awareness raising and the development of intercultural communicative competence have to be incorporated in teacher education

courses as early as the first year of studies'. Furthermore, gaining an insight into how to incorporate cultural content into language learning would enable future language educators 'to develop their students' linguistic competence', while at the same time using 'the English language as a medium to educate students about important cultural facts (similarities and differences in values, beliefs, lifestyles, customs and communication styles), to develop skills of observation, interpretation and mediation as well as to promote openness, curiosity, adaptability, non-judgemental thinking instead of the currently very common culture-free or zero-content language lessons where grammar instruction still dominates' (Lázár, 2011, p. 15). Talbi's (2022) recent examination of the inclusion of ICC in Eötvös Loránd University's BA English programme is also worthy of mention.

Yet, based upon the descriptions found in Lázár (2011) and Talbi (2022), the materials used in the examined university courses mainly seem to comprise academic-level readings in the area of ICC. In other words, students appear to be following the usual structure of a typical university course by completing a list of assigned readings that are then discussed or presented in class. In my estimation, this typical approach and course structure would not be feasible for *Practice in communicating English literature*. Firstly, as I summarised above, the students' sociocultural background demands a deeper awareness of culture's influence on identity formation, power relationships, and the workings of ideology in school settings – including the sensitive issues related to class, gender, stereotypes, marginalisation, immigration, and racism – before the competences necessary for intercultural communication can be practised. Before language (or literature) can be understood as more than 'easily defined systems that correspond to one nation, one society, or one race' (Boovy, 2016, p. 141), it would be necessary to apply critical pedagogy in the interest of encouraging my mainly monocultural students to step beyond the spaces they inhabit in their daily lives. As Richardson argues (2003), it is highly challenging to alter teacher trainees' perception of education due to a resistance to change. The reason for this is because, 'The beliefs that teacher candidates bring with them into their teacher education programs relate strongly to the form of teaching they have experienced. Thus, many students have an understanding of teaching that suggests that the role of the teacher is to place knowledge in the heads of their students. Further, they view teaching from the standpoint of an individual student – that student being themselves' (p. 2). The practices of problem-posing, conducting critical inquiry, and engaging in dialogue that are central to critical pedagogy provide a firm foundation for fostering what Neumann (2015) calls a 'Freirean disposition' after the first theoretician of critical pedagogy, Paolo Freire, whose definition of culture informs this study (Freire, 1973, 1993, 1997).

While Neumann concludes that bilingual education is a 'natural context for Freirean dispositions toward culture', his research also points to a number of obstacles in implementing the type of classroom inquiry that

this practice demands (p. 440). This reality becomes apparent in the second factor determining my decision to foster cultural sensitivity before ICC: in spite of their fluent English usage, students overwhelmingly prefer not to speak in class for reasons most closely related to school socialisation and language anxiety. Engendering the most important part of the course's title – '*communicating English literature*' – therefore necessitates far more interactive methods. Students must be encouraged to become active agents of their own personal development rather than passive listeners, a role that is subliminally reinforced in the word for university student in Hungarian: *hallgató*, i.e., 'listener', or 'someone who remains silent'. Conducting community-based action research proved the best means of gaining the students' active participation in the process of course/personal development[5]. Third, ELTE TÓK is a faculty that trains caregivers and teachers to enter nurseries, pre-schools, and primary/elementary education: our approach is oriented toward hands-on, practice-based learning that largely aims to foster language development in young learners, ages 0–12. I contend that laying the foundations for language competences among young learners who are facing a world that is both exciting and frightening can be more effective when educators possess a conscious awareness of CLA, the goal of which is to make 'knowledge about language a significant element in language education, and doing so partly on the basis of social concerns' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 2).

Refining core definitions

While some basic information has been provided about critical pedagogy, action research, and critical language awareness, further refinement of these terms is needed. Hawkins and Norton (2009) trace the term 'critical' from its origins in the Frankfurt school of critical theory, which demonstrated how ideology shapes the contextual factors that determine our understanding of the world, to the far less abstract, concrete role assigned to a 'critical' viewpoint in critical pedagogy. Formulated by the Brazilian educator, Paolo Freire, critical pedagogy is rooted in enacting social action and educational change (Freire, 1997, p. 31). Critical educators stress the importance of collaborating with students to analyse and question the hierarchies that school systems and educational policies reproduce and strengthen in ways that serve mainstream, dominant social and political ideologies. As a result of these hierarchies, hegemonies, and ideologies, students are socialised to *accept*, just as less powerful groups are marginalised. One way to avoid this outcome is to incorporate students' experiences within the curriculum and support

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[5] At the beginning of each course, students are informed of the nature of my research and made aware of their GDPR rights. All participation in course feedback evaluations or surveys is optional. None of their personal information or writing has been used in the preparation of this research.

students' agency. 'Drawing from this tradition, critical language researchers and educators emphasize the central role of language in the construction of knowledge and power, and in the negotiation and performance of identities' (Leeman & Rabin, 2007, p. 307).

Critical pedagogy therefore applies this perspective to language education in a way that leads to critical language awareness. The issues related to many language-related phenomena – including for example the cultural or social value attached to learning English versus another foreign language, the attitudes exhibited toward linguistic dialects or registers, the making of errors in grammar or pronunciation, or the way in which language practices like code-switching or literacy are judged – are always pointed out and discussed by the critical language educator. Upon drawing students' attention to how these attitudes and judgments are the product of a hierarchy, hegemony or ideology, students are encouraged to reflect upon the role language has in forming identity. Once this realisation has occurred, students can more easily become active agents in their own decision-making process rather than passively accepting language elements (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling) that are presented to them by an 'expert' whose word is 'law'. As a speaker of a world language such as English, I find nothing radical in this approach: living in an authentic, English-language environment means accepting the reality that my language usage is a result of my particular location, class, family background, and education level. No matter how correctly I may use the present perfect tense or pronounce the -th sound, my language usage would hardly be deemed 'acceptable' or 'appropriate' were I to find myself in Brisbane, Australia, Kingston, Jamaica or Dublin, Ireland, surrounded by individuals from a different social class, family background, and education level. My task is to present these questions to students, unveil the ideologies that compel us to make certain judgments, and encourage them to create their own language identity in English. Without discovering whom they choose to be when speaking English, students will remain foreign language speakers rather than autonomous language users. Throughout this process, meta-linguistic knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the structure and characteristics of language) remains important, yet still ancillary to content (e.g., the cultural, political, social attitudes governing language usage).

The question of personal identity and language usage is closely connected to Kachru's (1996) definition of the English language as 'world Englishes': 'The term "Englishes" is indicative of distinct identities of the language and literature. "Englishes" symbolizes variation in form and function, use in linguistically and culturally distinct contexts, and a range of variety in literary creativity' (Kachru, 1996, p. 135). Citing George Steiner's 1975 presidential address given before the English Association in London, Kachru also argues that the centre of the English language has shifted away from Great Britain to occupy multiple sites throughout the globe. Like many other global languages, English must be viewed as a diaspora language, the spread of which Kachru

defines as beginning with England's domination of Wales in 1535, spreading to North America, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand throughout the 18th century, and ending with the 'Raj phase'. This third phase resulted in the colonisation of South Asia, Southeast Asia, East, West, and South Africa, and the Philippines (Kachru, 1996, p. 136). Acknowledging this history and the realities it has engendered not only heals the wounds of a highly traumatic past, but also has the added benefit of employing a term that stresses 'the *WE-ness* among the users of English, as opposed to *us* vs. *them* (native and nonnative)' (Kachru, 1996, p. 135). Representing this type of sentiment offers a higher sense of inclusion for foreign language learners as well.

Other than the method described above, the question remains of how to catalyse the transformation briefly outlined above in a literature class wherein literary texts – inhabitants of the royal realm of culture with a capital 'C' – rule. Assigning the status of 'literature' to a text immediately places a work at the top of a hierarchy; the one to assign this status is automatically in charge of governing this order. Yet, in spite of literature's often elitist nature, there is much merit to Kramsch and Kramsch's (2000) argument that language learners deserve exposure to the poetic function of language and the way in which literature in a foreign language presents 'a different kind of poetic imagination and a different way of dealing with style and poetic form' (Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000, p. 569). Exposing students to various English dialects and variants should therefore comprise far more than a source of entertainment or an added challenge in a listening comprehension exercise: the vast creativity employed by authors such as Earl Lovelace, Chinua Achebe, Louise Erdrich, Amy Tan or Sandra Cisneros in combining local dialects, heritage/native languages or the 'broken' English spoken by immigrants with literary English offers an enriching opportunity for critically aware discussion of language. Youtube videos of the Trinidadian author, Earl Lovelace, or the Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, provide students with a 'live' example of highly educated artists code-switching from the 'elite' language of literature to a form of world Englishes.

Beyond altering the status of the researcher (teacher) from that of authority to facilitator, designing a curriculum based on the method of community-based action research offers further opportunities for applying critical pedagogy and supporting CLA. Community-based action research seeks the kind of collaboration that builds positive working relationships and communicative styles. One reason for this lies in the fact that community-based action research promotes those who have been used as 'research subjects' to the position of participants and decision-makers. A second reason is that the authoritarian measures and processes often lead to negative responses, such as aggression, apathy, and avoidance, rather than the desired goals of understanding, truth, sincerity, and appropriateness (Stringer, 1999, pp. 27–28; 32). According to Stringer, jargon and the use of technical, complex language, or esoteric topics impedes understanding.

Sincerity is risked when "teachers are bored with their work and merely go through the motions of providing services to their clients". Participation, the element that I find the most challenging to achieve when teaching students socialised in the Hungarian education system, is described as being effective when 1) levels of active involvement are significant; 2) students are able to perform important tasks; 3) support is available for students as they learn to be independent; 4) activities that students can achieve on their own are encouraged; 5) a direct relationship exists between the teacher and the students' (Stringer, 1999, p. 42). Rather than relying upon official forms of reporting (tests, exams, quizzes), the outcomes of this research process can be better expressed via drama, role play, simulation, dance, song, poems, works of art, or 'a combination of the above' (Stringer, 1999, p. 110).

Putting theory into practice: initial steps

To illustrate how the spirit of community-based action research has been introduced to *Practice in communicating English literature*, the first, ninety-minute session begins by asking students to answer the questions of 'What makes for a good literature course?' and 'What is a good literature teacher like?' I always know that my new group will be a good one when the first reaction is the question, 'What do you mean by "good"?' Students are given time to jot down notes or ideas or discuss their answers with others. While students are not always certain of what a 'good' teacher of literature is, this exercise usually sparks many memories of class environments, authors, teachers, or practices that they emphatically declare as bad. On the board, a list is made of the qualities, practices, and elements that students designate as either good or bad, a process that also leads to some debate. At this point, I reflect upon my own experiences with literature pedagogy in the United States versus Hungary, just as I did in the beginning of this study. The point of the list is to reach a consensus concerning how students wish to experience *Practices in communicating English literature*. While this aim may sound elementary, the astonishment with which students greet my questions and exercises indicates the lack of agency they have felt in literature classrooms. Designed to ensure anonymity and a greater since of safety for those who are uncomfortable with expressing their opinions in front of others, a follow-up exercise asks students to join an Internet word cloud platform and upload three words or phrases that they feel answers the question, 'What is literature?' Their answers usually include references to feelings – such as the comfort or pleasure in reading a satisfying book – and expressions of quality, as in 'great authors', 'great works', or references to phenomena like 'compulsory literature' or another traditional element of primary school literature/literacy education, the much detested *olvasónapló* [reader's diary].

Once each aspect of the word cloud has been weighed and discussed, I hand out the course syllabus. The syllabus deliberately contains only a brief

synopsis of the course's aims, a description of the grading policy, a schedule for assignments, and a list of 'possible' authors. In other words, the course material is deliberately not broken up into designated increments of time because, I explain, the quantity and quality is dependent upon their diligence and input into the course. Furthermore, reading literature is a practice that demands immersion and I maintain the right to choose readings based on the group's needs or interests – but I am also open to their own suggestions for the curriculum. In-class participation is worth 50% of the grade and hinges upon reading the texts and preparing discussions and questions surrounding the text for each lesson. Twenty-five percent of the grade consists of one presentation, a task I assign due to its familiarity for students given that presentations are often required in university courses. The rest of the grade is made up of short homework assignments that include exercises in creative writing, journaling, drawing, drama, or role play, depending on the literary work. Instead of the exam required at the end of the second semester, students are asked to create a project (the type of which spans anything from dramatisation to scrapbooking) that reflects one of the main themes or works covered in the course. When assessing students' creative contributions, I correct linguistic errors and provide feedback, but do not deduct points for them. Creativity, content, quality/craftsmanship, and punctuality are my criteria for grading homework assignments and the final project. In-class, spoken participation is graded on the basis of how regularly a student contributes and the content of their participation; in this case I also confirm that linguistic errors will be corrected, but not result in point deduction. In my experience, the fear of making errors is one of the main reasons why students choose passivity instead of active participation. (Figure 1.)

Figure 1.
Word cloud created by third-year, pre-service primary educators at the beginning of the course, Practice in communicating English literature
ELTE TÓK. February, 2022.

To date, the list of 'possible' works read in the course consists of Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*; Maya Angelou's *I know why the caged bird sings*; Alice Walker's *'Everyday use'*; Abraham Rodriguez Jr.'s *'The boy without a flag'*; selected poetry by W.B. Yeats, Robert Burns, and Dylan Thomas; Louise Erdrich's *'The red convertible'*; Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding sweetgrass*; Amy Tan's *The joy luck club*; Earl Lovelace's *Salt*; Sandra Cisneros's *The house on Mango Street*, and Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*. The work soon to be discussed in this study, *The book of Margery Kempe* (1501/1985) , almost always proves the most challenging for students to read, enjoy, and accept. Except for poetry and the one-act drama, Trifles, students are not expected to read entire novels, but only selected excerpts, a decision made in recognition of time and language constraints. I describe to my list of 'possible' authors due to the following exercise which invites students to analyse the compilation of texts upon which *Practice in communicating English literature* was previously based.

Thoroughly selected by Dr. Jánosné Czverencz, Erika G. Epres and Károlyné Kunyák, this compilation provides a comprehensive, chronological survey of English literature beginning in the medieval period and ending with William Golding's *Lord of the Flies.* A total of 65 authors are featured, out of which 57 are men and 8 are women. All of the authors are from Great Britain. As a poet who frequently wrote in Scottish English, the work of Robert Burns could represent the only instance of a language variant, however, the versions found in the coursebook are translations of Burns' works into 'standard' English. To my mind, this coursebook additionally offers an interesting 'translation' into English of the practices traditionally found in a Hungarian literature classroom, such as 1) the chronological arrangement of texts, a requirement still called for in the 2020 National Curriculum; 2) the overwhelming usage of canonical, literary texts (either prose or poetry) to teach literature; 3) the correlation between literature and one nation, in this case that of Great Britain; 4) a predominance of white, Anglo-Saxon male authors with Yeats, Burns, Dylan Thomas (and possibly Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*) providing a slightly different perspective upon British literature. Students are urged to make their own observations regarding the compilation's content. Some students notice the predominance of British, male authors, but most usually accept this content. In the latter case, it takes very careful questioning and moderation to draw students' attention to issues such as whether the many women in the room should be represented in the course materials. Another question that must be addressed is the compilation's underlying language ideology that English has a standard form with literary, British English comprising the highest language level to which all students must aspire.

As regards methodology, *Practice in communicating English literature* previously balanced a grounding in literary history (provided via frontal methods in the form of lectures given by the instructor) with an emphasis

on learning unfamiliar vocabulary and reading comprehension, aspects that were evaluated via tests. In other words, some cultural elements were combined with an emphasis on literacy. Students developed speaking skills by holding presentations on the authors' lives and doing some in-class textual analysis. It can be concluded that the course's original textbook exposes students to foreign language texts in a way that is familiar and presumably 'safe' for them as the curriculum adheres to what they have experienced in secondary school and aligns with the methods common to many university courses (readings, presentations, lectures, some discussion). I ask students to compare this compilation with my list of authors – almost all of whom are unfamiliar to Hungarians, to my knowledge none of the contemporary authors have been translated into Hungarian – and determine whether we are studying literature or not. To date, no student has replied to this challenge. Most appear flummoxed and eventually state that it is not their task to determine or evaluate course content: that is my job as the teacher. Throughout the duration of the course, discussions will return again and again to the initial responses, opinions, and judgments made during the first session.

Methods for fostering critical discussion:
The book of Margery Kempe

As was mentioned, *The book of Margery Kempe* (1501/1985) presents the greatest challenge in terms of both reading comprehension and cultural knowledge. Begun in 1436, this work is a recording of the life of "this creature", an English burgher's wife named Margery Kempe who became a religious mystic following the birth of her first child. In fact, her difficult birth forms the opening of her tale, since it was her traumatic postpartum experience – most likely a case of postpartum depression or psychosis, which she interprets as punishment for an unabsolved sin – that led to her first visitation from Jesus. Although sometimes tempted away from her resolution to serve God as a layperson, the rest of the book describes the visions and messages Margery Kempe continues to receive from God. Her determination to obey God's demand that she and her husband live a chaste life (after fourteen children) occupies a central place in her narrative. Her husband's eventual agreement only comes after repeated conversations and an instance of marital rape, events that are quite frankly detailed in *The book*. Other events concern various pilgrimages she conducted, her debates with clergymen, and the repeated danger she faces of being burnt at the stake for heresy. Beyond the usage of a great deal of religious terminology, Margery Kempe delivers a down-to-earth, matter-of-fact accounting in the voice of a medieval housewife of moderate means and no formal education. Rediscovered in 1934 after having been forgotten for centuries, *The book of Margery Kempe* (1501/1985) constitutes the first known autobiography written in English.

Given the narrator's almost too gossipy tone, is easy to assume that *The book* is entirely Kempe's work even though Kempe herself was illiterate. The opening 'treatise' entitled 'The Proem', however, describes the trials and tribulations she faced while searching for a priest who would write her story down. Beyond its historic or religious value, *The book* (1501/1985) provides an unparalleled glimpse into illiteracy's impact on a human life and Kempe's quest to overcome the disadvantages she faced due to limited access to education. Since there is no way of knowing how accurately the three recording priests followed her dictation or what editing may have been done, the narrator's validity remains at stake. Furthermore, current editions are translations from the original Middle English to modern English, a fact that also raises the question of who exactly wrote this work. In short, *The book of Margery Kempe (1501/1985)* demonstrates the importance of access to education, the perspective (and resiliency) of an illiterate individual, the challenges in facing an unfamiliar world and text, the creation of a public identity, the politics of translation and publication. However, the myriad of questions it raises surrounding gender roles, mental illness, marital rape, reproductive rights, sexuality, and a woman's role within the Church are just some of the topics that unfortunately remain taboo even today. Inducting students into Margery Kempe's world therefore requires a careful combination of methods, some of which I describe below.

In her book, *Teaching to transgress*: *Education as the practice of freedom* (hooks, 1994), critical educator and theoretician bell hooks eloquently describes the frustration of trying to introduce new techniques and material to 'resisting' students who "did not want to learn new pedagogical processes, who did not want to be in a classroom that differed in any way from the norm. To these students, transgressing boundaries was frightening" (hooks, 1994, p. 9). Out of all the sources I have read discussing education reform, hooks' compassion toward an elemental, human emotion – the fear of the unknown – has proved the best guide. When teaching a completely unknown, difficult text depicting uncomfortable events from a culture that is vastly different from ours today, the first step was to find a way to introduce this text in a way that would provide students with a feeling of familiarity and safety, yet not skirt or sugarcoat reality. In Lesson 1, I combine the technique of personal storytelling with a very familiar image of a family recipe that I project onto a screen. (see Figure 2).

The recipe I use is for 'Great Aunt Kate's Rhubarb Cake'. Passed down through my family, rhubarb cake is a typical dish from the Adirondacks Mountains, NY, the place where my family comes from. Known for its bitterly cold winters, rhubarb is an important source of vitamin C in this region and is almost always planted near the kitchen door of family homes (see Figure 3). However, I do not provide students with any of this background information. Instead, students must apply the 5W-H method of asking what, when, where, why, who, and how to investigate what this text is. Based on clues such as the style of handwriting, language, name usage, vocabulary,

the system of measurements, etc., students form hypotheses regarding what this text is, who wrote it, where it came from, when it was written, and why it is important. In short, we return to the first steps in using basic reading comprehension to process an unfamiliar text. Once this has been completed, I pose the question of: Is this literature? Students once more have the opportunity to express their opinions of what texts can be considered literature. Usually, the majority of students state that a family recipe is not literature and is not 'worthy' of being taught in a literature course.

I then reveal the background information described above and explain that this recipe is the only record marking the life of Kate Stevenson, a well-loved relative about whom little information is known other than her skill in baking, her gentle nature, and the brutal fact that she was a victim of domestic abuse that everyone in the family was powerless to prevent. As I tell her story, I place a tablecloth, dishes, and silverware on the desk in front of me in a performance that echoes how the consumption of rhubarb cake has become a way for my family to remember Kate Stevenson in the form of her signature recipe, rhubarb cake. Originally recorded by my grandmother, the many copies of this recipe found in family archives not only indicates how her story haunts us, but also allows us to trace a family network via the recipe recorder's familial tie to Kate Stevenson: in my grandmother's recipe book, it is just *Rhubarb cake from the kitchen of Kate Stevenson*, while my transcription is entitled *Great-Aunt Kate's Rhubarb Cake*, a repetition of hard consonants that renders her recipe into a bit of poetry. The story ends with pieces of the cake itself, a taste of culinary remembrance of which each student can partake. By the end, students agree that simple texts like a family recipe can be as powerful as a work of literature. Knowing this, however, is only possible if the story is transmitted. Beginning with this recipe therefore opens discussion to issues such as the value of a written record, who decides what is literature, how stories are transmitted, the role of the narrator versus the recorder, and the acts of remembrance that keep a story alive. All of these factors form an excellent segue into a work such as *The book of Margery Kempe* (1501/1985).

Following this exercise, I distribute untitled copies of the Proem to *The book*, once again not providing any background information or introduction to the world of 'this creature'. Students work together in small groups to apply the same investigative technique of 5W-H to discern where the text is from, when it was written, who 'this creature' is, and what type of text it is. After their conclusions have been presented and debated, I summarise the basic facts surrounding Margery Kempe's life and the rediscovery of her book in 1934. I introduce the concept of life writing, a concept that views any type of document that tells the story of a life as a form of literature. Within this broadened conceptualisation of literature, any written source – whether a memoir, diary, recipe, a blog, or the first autobiography written in English – qualifies as literature. Viewing literature from this perspective is one solution to connecting the capital 'C' texts of literature with culture's

lowercase 'c' components. By including a recipe, for example, one of culture's visible, superficial elements (food) becomes a complex symbol of storytelling, remembrance, family history, and women's rights. For homework, students are asked to read Chapters 1 to 4 and either draw or create a description of what kind of a person they think 'this creature' is.

Lesson 2 always begins with the unanimous summation that literature is hard! When reading this text on their own, students encounter a specialised vocabulary, a very different view of the world, a high level of religiosity, and the uncomfortable descriptions and topics mentioned above. Students are dismayed by the difficulty of the text and the taboo nature of the events Margery Kempe describes so directly. After reviewing the words and aiding students to feel that they can understand the text, I hold a ten-minute presentation on the original text in Middle English, including a very short overview of the history of the English language. Students are astonished to learn that this hard text is actually a modernised translation! After examining the text in the original, we listen to Youtube performances of first Old English, followed by Chaucerian English, then Middle English, an experience that brings Margery Kempe's world directly into our classroom. When students discover that the text is easier to understand when read aloud, the most difficult parts are read aloud by volunteers. Our closing discussion explores the narrator's reliability: did Margery Kempe, the anonymous, recording priest(s), or the modern translator write this text? Why is a woman pictured on the cover of the Penguin Classics edition even though we have no way of knowing what Margery Kempe looked like? How does the cover influence our image of 'this creature'? Students share their drawings or opinions of Margery Kempe's personality and appearance. For homework, students must define areas of research (e.g., women's education, giving birth in medieval England, famous medieval women, houses, clothing, medieval music) that they feel would bring the details mentioned in this book alive for them.

In Lesson 3 students present their research topics via any media they have chosen. After choosing the aspect that intrigued them the most, students are noticeably willing to engage with this work. Discussion focuses on how narration is structured, what is left out (the presence of her fourteen children!), and the means by which Margery Kempe quite cleverly creates her own identity. Students are generally appalled over the omission of her children, an opinion that leads to a discussion of whether a female author is *allowed* to exclude the existence of her children from her life story. I point out that Margery Kempe positions her narrative almost as a retelling of the story of Virgin Mary: her story begins amidst great hardship and results in the birth of a son, the only child she mentions. Including her other children would have overturned the delicate parallels she draws in her recreation of Christianity from the perspective of the Virgin Mary. Is this text blasphemy? Is she merely very religious, or expanding Church doctrine to include a mother of fourteen – who declares her enjoyment of sex – as a holy figure? The first writing assignment for this unit asks students to employ creative

writing to depict the life stage and event they would choose to begin their own life story. Chapters 5-7 are also assigned.

Lesson 4 begins with volunteers sharing their own writings. By this time students are passionately debating whether Margery Kempe had the right to take her own vow of chastity and demand that her husband join her in this decision. (As a language teacher, I am particularly pleased to hear students using words like 'chastity', 'vow', 'penance', etc., evidence that communicative methods are effective in building vocabulary.) We analyse the marital conversations Margery Kempe records and express our feelings regarding this very private insight into how a woman negotiates physical autonomy while still maintaining a very loving relationship with her husband, a man who eventually supports his wife's actions and decisions. Further debate surrounds the question of whether Margery Kempe genuinely heard God, was mentally ill, was merely using this as a ploy not to have more children or was actually an early example of a woman pursuing a career. As a final creative writing assignment, students must transport Margery Kempe into the present day. What would she say about the MeToo movement? As a devout Christian, what would she think about reproductive rights or abortion laws? As an alternative, the more adventurous students can dramatise the situation of Margery Kempe holding a talk show debate with the Canadian psychologist, Jordan Peterson, whose lectures on marriage and how to choose the perfect partner provide a perfect contrast to Margery Kempe's relationship with her husband. It is particularly important to connect a historical work to students' daily lives: including current events and personal narration is one way to do this (Kempe, 1501/1985).

Figure 2.
'Recipe for rhubarb cake from the kitchen of Kate Stevenson'
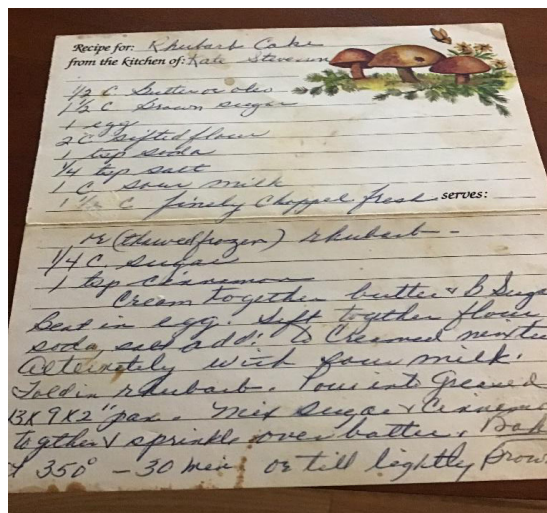*(Source: Jean M. Stevenson)*

Figure 3.
Rhubarb plants
(Photo by author)

Concluding thoughts and questions

A possible disadvantage to conducting community-based action research lies in the continuously evolving nature of the research project itself. Each group of students possesses a different level of English, knowledge base, or willingness to participate. Mapping out a straightforward research trajectory is therefore not very feasible. Relying upon the qualitative methods employed in community-based action research hinders the researcher's ability to display definite evidence regarding factors such as increased literacy rates, growth in vocabulary, or better grammar usage. As was mentioned before, adjusting to the kinds of transformation demanded by critical pedagogy and CLA is not easy: confronting taboos or breaking the chains of ideology demands a constant willingness to transgress. Overcoming a fear of the unknown in turn causes stress. When my students give voice to this distress, as a teacher I am often filled with doubt. Selecting the next reading is always a serious decision: is the class ready to discuss a topic such as rape, for example? Supplementing contemporary literature with texts or works that originate from pop or everyday culture demands constant reading, researching, and reviewing on my part. Returning to the comfortable, orderly march of a 'tried-and-true' literary canon conducted under the banner of academic approval would undoubtedly be far easier. Furthermore, being able to point to a particular data set, a rise or fall in ratios, would certainly provide a satisfying justification of my research/teaching methods.

With this latter aim in mind, in February 2022, I asked twenty-six, pre-service primary students enrolled in ELTE TÓK's bilingual English programme to answer Chen and Starosta's Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (2000). Totalling forty-four questions posed according to a seven-point Likert scale, this survey promised a comprehensive, accepted method for evaluating students' levels of intercultural sensitivity. All answers were provided anonymously upon accessing a link to <u>kerdoivem. hu</u>, a digital platform used for disseminating questionnaires. The only alteration made to the original survey was to reduce the range of answers from seven to five points, a change I implemented in order to make it a bit quicker and easier for students to answer forty-four questions.

For the purposes of research, the survey results are inconclusive: students were not able to answer the questions on their own. Class time had to be devoted to translating the original survey's very academic, deliberately neutral language into language my students found comprehensible. Within an instant, my research community was reduced to the status of 'objects' who felt embarrassed by what they perceived as their own lack of knowledge and ability in English. In addition, my explanation of the terms likely influenced participants' answers, thereby compromising the survey's validity. Evaluating intercultural sensitivity by means of Chen and Starosta's (2000) survey therefore demands a rewriting of the language, a process that may jeopardise the neutral nature of the terms that were used (e.g., the term 'culturally distinct counterpart', a phrase that proved the most incomprehensible for my twenty-six participants). Rewriting the survey to suit student needs would demand a great investment of time and student participation. After the survey's failure, the next phase in my research is to have students answer short, open-ended questions that are posed before and after each work is analysed.

Rather than asking students to quantify their emotions, I find it more effective to inquire into their knowledge regarding the culture, language, and topics we are about to explore. Once the unit has been completed, these feedback questions will ask students to write brief assessments of how their beliefs or views have altered (or not) based on the class materials and discussions. Since this process remains ongoing, the results can only be evaluated in a separate paper. Further concerns surround the predominance of US-based authors in my current list, a factor that I have not been able to overcome due to the fact that works published in Great Britain or the United States are much easier to locate. The advent of Covid-19 and online teaching has also demanded that each text be available in digital format: this practical factor very much limits my selection. By choosing authors from marginalised communities, I strive to turn the continued UK/US predominance into a dialogue with the traditional literary canon; Margery Kempe, for example, can be compared with Chaucer's figure in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. Further work must be done in sourcing more English-language texts from around the globe.

Given the fact that the composition of a university course changes every one or two semesters, community-based action research also allows the teacher intellectual/teacher researcher to adjust the curriculum in a way that tailors the course to meet student needs while emphasising student agency. In some ways, it is a form of differentiation, albeit one that tends to address the emotional intelligence essential to developing character and catalysing equality rather than compensating for learning or physical disabilities. Activating students from passive listeners to critical thinkers not only forms the basis of critical pedagogy, but also creates the kind of classroom environment where political, social, and language ideologies can be weighed and questioned. In the case of reading literature, locating the world within the written word opens the classroom to a critical view upon the sometimes bewildering, often difficult, yet always fertile vista of world Englishes.

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