

# Real life for real learning

Exploring feelings through literature with pupils in English and foreign language classes.

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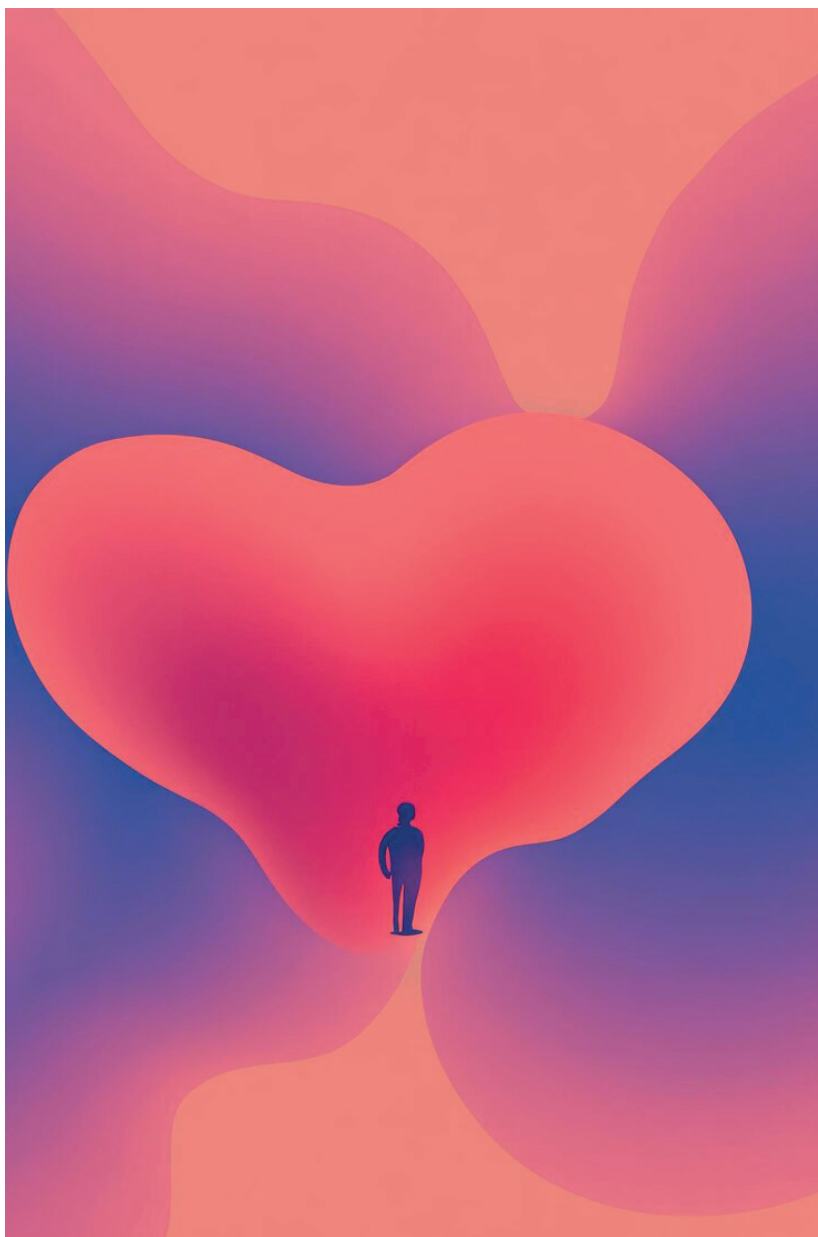
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## **Introduction: The importance of emotions when dealing with children and youth**

Emotions are important not only for children, but also for young people engaging in learning activities. In the same way that parents endeavour to understand children's emotions to more effectively offer them correction, so too should teachers. Dr Dan Siegel, executive director of the Mindsight Institute and founding co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA maintains that the emotions of children need to be addressed and taken seriously for the child to be able and willing to cognitively accept a correction of behaviour. Siegel argues that the phrase "connect, then redirect" is

essential. Specifically, the parent needs to tune in to the feelings of the child first and then convey a message about the need for changing behaviour (Siegel, 2004). Similarly, teachers should connect with and listen to their students before offering correction, and one method of connection is through the study of literature. Historically, upper secondary schools and universities have focused on developing reason and cognitive abilities, and emotions have often been ignored. And still, in the curriculum from 2020 for English and foreign languages, the verb "feel" hardly appears at all while the verb "think" appears more frequently (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, Udir). The memoirist and poet Maya

Angelou underlined the importance of considering others' emotions. In 2023, a quote by Maya Angelou was given for the written exam in English for 1st year students at Norwegian upper secondary school: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget how you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel" (Udir, 2023). If there is any truth in what Angelou said, it is essential that teachers take emotions into consideration when working with literature with students at all levels.



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### **Emotions and the concept of intercultural competence**

Taking feelings seriously is also in tune with the current theory of intercultural competence, an important concept in the national curriculum for English and foreign language teaching in Norway. For example, in relation to working with literature the curriculum states that “through reflection, interpretation and critical evaluations of different types of texts written in English, the pupils will acquire language and knowledge of culture and society. Through this, the pupils develop intercultural competence so they can relate to different ways of living, ways of thinking, and patterns of communication. The pupils get a foundation for seeing their own and others’ identity in a multi-lingual and multicultural context” (Udir, 2020). Pupils can learn not only how to relate to themselves, but also to others through interaction with texts. This understanding correlates with the definition of intercultural competence as “the ability to relate in a constructive way to humans that have different ways of living and different ways of communicating than oneself” (Dypedahl, 2020). For teachers to constructively relate to their students, it seems essential for them to address both cognitive and emotional aspects of the learner when reading literature, since human brains contain both reason and emotion.

### **Intercultural competence and the universal human condition**

Intercultural competence obtained through

the study of literature should engage both reason and emotion, and indeed it seems the word “intercultural” itself mean “mutual dialogue with cultures.” This indicates that intercultural competence is not just gaining knowledge “about” other cultures; it is having a dialogue that includes getting new insights into own’s own self and personal feelings. As Eide & Skalle state with reference to finding an intercultural identity, “the borders between self and other are explored, problematized and redrawn” (Eide & Skalle, 2022). This idea of “reciprocal influence” represents a change in the practice of reading literature in language teaching that can be represented by the circle model:

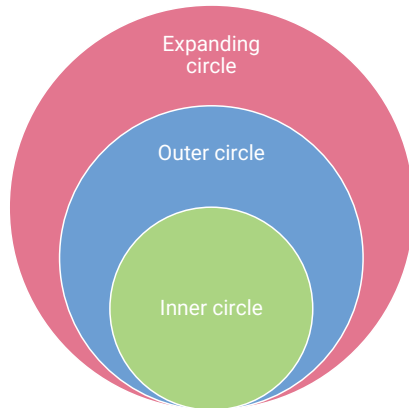


Figure 1: A model of the spread of English, inspired by Crystal (2003, p. 61).

**Expanding circle:** what does the text say about the universal human condition? What can I learn about myself by reading this text?

**Outer circle:** what does a text tell us about culture and society in the English-speaking world?

**Inner circle:** what happens in the story – traditional text analysis. Understanding words, characters, themes etc.

When reading a literary text in another language, the inner circle represents what happens in the story; this includes traditional text analysis, including understanding the words, the characters, the themes, the message, etc. Next, the outer circle says something about what the text can teach about living conditions, history and culture in the country where the story is set. Both of these circles have commonly been used by teachers in their work with literary texts with learners. However, the expanding circle illustrates a new practice or a new focus by exploring what a student, in the encounter with a literary text (or another means of cultural expression), should learn about “the universal human condition”. The reflections from the expanding circle will help learners develop intercultural competence. The fact that the circle is “expanding” also illustrates that it does not have clear borders and is a continuous process. Intercultural competence is not something one has or does not have; it is rather a way of thinking that continuously develops though life and constantly adapts and changes depending on what culture or

expression of culture a reader encounters. The illustration with the expanding circle is inspired by Hoff, whose model of the “intercultural reader” is more complex, including dialogue on many levels, between speakers, texts, emotions and cognition (Hoff, 2017).

### Investigating emotions through action research

Action research is a suitable methodology for teachers to investigate pupils’ work with literature. Action research can be described as a systematic investigation of one’s own teaching practice to challenge what has been done before (Ulvik, Riese, & Roness, 2016). Studying one’s own teaching process enables teachers to identify challenges and define changes in their current practice that can improve the pupil’s learning (ibid). When practicing language teaching I often find that I, consciously or subconsciously, give pupils tasks where they must reproduce “correct” answers, or find the answer “the teacher wants”. This type of exercise seems to make pupils lose their motivation as they are unable to develop their own emotions and cognition. Developing individual and critical thinking that can lead to deeper learning under these circumstances is difficult. Also, to develop interesting thoughts at a deeper level, it is important to be connected and engaged with one’s own emotions. Learners often say that “the texts we read in class are boring” and they “turn off” their emotions and thereby also their cognition. Literature should be an inspiration for an emotional journey

that can lead to engagement and then to independent and critical thinking, and thereby also be a step in the process of developing intercultural competence.

### Literature project in Spanish class exploring emotions

Spanish II students studied five pages of the graphic novel *Asylum* by Javier de Isusi (2017). It tells the story of "Aina", who believes she is running away from an arranged marriage in Nigeria but ends up being the victim of human trafficking and being forced into prostitution. It is a sad and shocking piece of text and after reading these five pages, the students expressed many feelings<sup>1</sup>:

1. *I felt informed, but also angry and shocked.*
2. *I was surprised, sad and irritated.*
3. *I feel anger; it was a scary story.*
4. *I feel sorry, and I feel empathy for all refugees.*

Students connected emotionally with this 5-page text extract despite having just worked with it for 90 minutes. Furthermore, the emotional engagement also led students to make observations about diversity and democracy. For example:

1. *The world is very unfair.*
2. *There is a lot of prejudice and negative portrayals of migrants in the media.*
3. *Diversity in Europe is very ethnocentric where some cultures are seen as better than others.*

4. *The world does not do enough for victims of human trafficking; this is a feminist problem, and it is this fight feminists first and foremost should fight, not that the Barbie film should be understood in the correct way by some "oldie".*

These statements show important reflections on diversity and democracy and can be used for developing knowledge that goes far beyond the boundaries of the literary text itself.

In terms of learning potential, a lot more could have been done with more time. Students could have written creative texts where they imagined they were immigrants like the girl in the Isusi text, or they could have developed their ideas about democracy through a collaboration project with other subjects such as social science or history. The only limitation is how much time one has available.

An important factor for successful reading with students is to spend a long time with pre-reading activities. For students to be exposed to Isusi (2017) and read about rape, prostitution, and human trafficking, it is important to prepare them emotionally for what is coming. Before spending 90 minutes reading the literary text, 90 minutes were spent preparing the students for the difficult sections. Students first discussed their feelings regarding travelling, then presented cards from holidays. They talked about what would be different when travelling as a tourist

versus "travelling" as a refugee. Finally, they listened to a melancholic and sad song about immigration to Spain by crossing the Mediterranean. Through these pre-reading activities, students expanded their associations with the concept of "travelling" that they knew from holidays with family, to a more "unknown" way of "travelling" which they saw in Isusi (2017). These pre-reading activities are essential to make the students emotionally ready to meet the content of the literary text. It is important, as Siegel (2004) puts it, to connect to their feelings of travelling being something fun and happy first and then redirect them to the new "place" of learning through dialogue with an unknown literary text. In other words, it is a good idea to start with the expanding circle, the universal and well-known, then meet the literary text in the inner circle, and in the end return to the expanding circle with new insight about the human condition and the self.

Eide & Skalle (2022) argue that borders between self and other are redrawn by developing intercultural competence, and some of the students' statements clearly show that this is happening. When saying "the world is unfair" and "there is prejudice and negative portrayals of migrants in the media," the students show awareness of how their own view of immigrants might be based on presumptions that are not necessarily true. Through discussion of the unfairness in the world, students see their own existence differently. The students were not taught anything explicit about

<sup>1</sup> My translation to English

social justice or migration before writing these statements; they were simply exposed to the pre-reading activity and the literary text itself. These statements show how dialogue with fictional texts can help students gain awareness about both who they are and what their position is in relation to others.

### Literature project in English class exploring emotions

Another project with literature was done with English students in the first year of upper secondary school, who read the short story "The Sniper" by Liam O'Flaherty (2020), which is set in the Civil War in Ireland around 1922. After reading and working with understanding, the students engaged in a creative writing assignment where they wrote a diary imagining themselves in 2050 living in a war situation in our city. Through this creative writing exercise students explored feelings of fear. Below are some of the students' reflections:

1. *It is 2050 and the Third World War has just started. What caused it to begin? It's straightforward: artificial intelligence. Internationally, computer science was and continues to be a growing and developing field. Few people could have predicted that AI would lead to war so soon. But there were obviously people that knew...*
2. *Dear diary, things are getting worse. I have not spoken to my friends since*

*the phone signal was cut off two months ago (...). It is like living in a simulation; at this point I do not know if the person beside me in the shop is real or not; like wake me up, I am tired of this modern war thing...*

3. *I don't mean to sound truly horrified, but with father away at war and mother at the hospital helping the injured soldiers, I simply have no one to comfort me when the ground is shaking, and the sky is filled with fire and smoke.*
4. *She is sick, my mum. She has been for a long time. She doesn't have a fever, and she says nothing hurts, but she is still just lying in bed all day.*
5. *It has now been 28 years since Russia invaded Ukraine. The regime is harsh, much like East Berlin before the wall fell. The economy is depressed by the loss of educated people. The media is fully under the Russian government's control and propaganda is going out left and right...*

This creative writing exercise was done just before ChatGPT was released, so it is interesting to observe in quote 1 and 2 that a war caused by artificial intelligence or a game simulation with no access to phones offered frightening scenarios for today's 16-year-olds. Furthermore, statements 3 and 4 show a fear of losing a

parent or being alone in the world without a guardian. A 16-year-old is soon to be an independent adult, but the thought of being alone seemed to cause a lot of anxiety. Lastly, quote 5, expresses worry about the current war going on in Ukraine.

As a response to quote 1 and 2, it would be interesting to have a class discussion about the role of screens, games and social media in the students' lives. It would also be interesting to discuss advantages and disadvantages of digital life and to explore the healthiest way of relating to the current digital reality. The fear of losing someone dear as expressed in quotes 3 and 4 could be dealt with as a mental health project, for example through Vestre Viken's VIP programme covering guidance and information about mental health that many schools already use. Moreover, mental health is also relevant to the fear of war as expressed in quote 5. Many young people today may feel upset because of the ongoing war in Europe and their fear of the future. This could be developed in a project in collaboration with social sciences where political systems are analysed and the impact of war on individuals is explored.

In the diary texts about war, students investigate what they are afraid of, and their texts show that they have different fears. When a person struggles with fear of spiders, one way to overcome this fear is to start thinking about the spider. After imagining the spider "cognitively," one can learn to live with the scary emotions

caused by it. Likewise, learning to deal with life is similar in many ways, and it is important that activities in the classroom reflect real life. Nobody knows if there will ever be a war in Norway again, but “thinking the unthinkable” and letting students put words to the emotions they think they would have in such a situation can make them more prepared if this situation does appear, or if they encounter anything else they are afraid of in life. By elaborating these feelings, they will be able to relate in a more constructive way both to themselves and to others (Dypedahl, 2020). Giving room for students to write about their fear will prepare them for real life situations.

Students might feel very differently about a text than their teachers. Students’ fears may not match teachers’ fears and world-views. Teachers should be careful not to present one “right” understanding of a literary text. Questions of the type “check your understanding” can be a tool when in the inner circle, but they should not be the last or the only exercise done with a text. It is essential that students get tasks that are open enough for them to put their own feelings into them. Creative writing where they imagine themselves into the story is interesting, but further research is needed to investigate which methods are most effective at developing dialogue between emotion-cognition and literary texts.

### Final comment

Literary texts show the complexity of real life (Hoff, 2017), and they are a good way for students to explore their emotions. The emotional engagement caused through “meeting” the characters in a fictional text can lead to interest that will stimulate further learning. One Spanish student noted after reading Isusi (2017):

*“These texts give another perspective on the situations compared to what we see in the news. The texts make me realize that it is real individuals, just like me, who must go through really sick situations. I always feel more touched when I read these types of texts than if I had read this in a newspaper”.*

It does not matter that the fictional text per definition is fiction, and not reality, because when the students feel it is real and feel they get to know real people, the emotional engagement will lead to an interest and an experience that they will remember. Angelou explained that “people will never forget what you made them feel” (Udir, 2023). Honouring students’ emotions and recognizing how they feel about a literary text unlocks great learning potential.

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