

# Political Fiction and Allegory in the EFL Classroom

*What's the Use?*



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**Abstract**

What is the use of political fiction and its allegory in a language education context? The aim of this paper is to analyze the relevance of this literary genre to curricula, English language learning, and EFL classrooms. The specifically political content of this genre, its allusion to real-world happenings, and the linguistic aspects of the texts may be pedagogically instrumentalized and host a potential that English teachers can engage to innovate their teaching. By laying forth that a fundamental aim of most curricula is students' acquisition of democratic values and then analyzing the theories behind language affordances and allegory, this paper may act as a theoretical framework for planning a unit with a political fiction text involved. This paper finds that politically allegorical texts provide a context for students to inquire into the worth of democratic values and their successful communication in the vehicular language about their arguments and interpretations is made possible by language affordances drawn from the text's content. Associating fictitious political, ideological, or cultural content of texts with one's own personal experiences is a capability of all students of English. This sort of association encourages and supports critical thinking, a trait of lifelong learning competence. English language teachers may innovate their teaching and engage student's cognitive flexibility capabilities, associating politics and language learning by using political fiction and allegory.

**Keywords:** English language teaching, Curriculum, Democratic values, Language affordances theory, Lifelong learning

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Political Fiction and Allegory in the EFL Classroom: What's the Use?

What is the use of political fiction and its allegory in a language education context? The overarching theme of this literary genre: politics, can be a difficult and a generally disincentivized topic for young people and students (Rahimi & Sharififar, 2015). This paper observes that many authors have tackled the difficult task of interrogating political issues, such as the state of a nation's democracy and issues like radical ideologies and traditions, rendering them relevant to whomever, through literature (Horsley, 1990; Karaganis, McClure, Fein, & Leonard, 2018). Although any fiction may contain political themes, this particular genre known as political fiction is a literary genre where significance and values are drawn from the narrative's allusion or reference to real-world happenings. Despite the content being fictitious, political fiction makes use of the literary device of allegory to connect the content of the text to real-world contexts; usually political, ideological, or cultural issues or alternatives.

Orwell's *Animal Farm* was originally titled: *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story*, because on the surface and without any critical consideration (or previous knowledge) of the text's likeness to the 1917 Russian Revolution and its aftermath, the text could be viewed simply as a fable about farm animals (Hamilton, 2011, p. 30; Orwell, 1987a). One may come to a similar conclusion regarding Miller's *The Crucible*. For, on the surface, it is simply another tragic tale about witch trials in early Western civilization. Miller's text, however, is arguably a comparison of witch trials to the attitudes and behavior of politicians during the 2<sup>nd</sup> Red Scare, or McCarthyism, in the United States around the 1950s; both being *witch-hunts* after false or illusionary enemies (Hamilton, 2011, p. 34).

This allusion to real-world happenings, through fiction, is called allegory and can be seen as a political allegory when the allusion is specifically political. Orwell's perhaps most well-known text, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, is an example of political allegory. The allegories of the

mentioned Orwell and Miller texts may be argued as only having relevance to the context of their writing, *Animal Farm* being published in 1945 and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Crucible* soon after, in 1949 and 1953 respectively. The coming analysis and interpretation of this paper aims to enlighten pre-service and current English teachers of the many reasons why politically allegorical texts are relevant to current students of English regardless of the original context these fictions were published in, past or present. Political fiction and its practical usage of allegory is still very relevant in the context of the educational institution and English language teaching (ELT).

Politics is the administration and the ways in which the different institutions that make up society implement and support the continuation of a society's ideology and culture. The ideology and culture that this paper comes from, and of which the related educational institution is bound to, is of democratic value and empowerment. Most curricula define democratic values and democratic empowerment (terms that will be explained more in depth later) as foundational to their national educational institution's education policy. This paper will explain why that, in order to elicit a greater appreciation of democratic values and a drive to participate in a democratic society, these values must first be interrogated by students (Wahlström, 2016). This inquiry into the value and significance of democratic empowerment can be instrumentalized by the content of political fictions. Students that are given the chance to engage in this interrogation of democracy through a text's window into an alternative, sometimes politically opposite society will find that alternatives to democracy are insignificant.

Within this adventure into politics, students will be engaging, and most importantly to the context of this paper, *communicating* about their analysis and understanding of the allegorical text, whether spoken or written, in English. The political, ideological, and cultural experiences

that political fiction literature offer provides students with many language learning opportunities, and therefore can be a practical addition to a unit or lesson plan.

### **Method & Materials**

This paper will analyze the content of the literary genre political fiction rather than focus on the content of a specific text or texts. Because this is an investigation of the language learning mechanisms present in this genre, the settings and literary criticisms of the different texts will not be a factor in the findings of this paper. Therefore, the method of research for answering this paper's question: "What is the *use* of political fiction and allegory in the EFL classroom?", shall be ethnographic content analysis.

An ethnographic approach is used to analyze this literary genre because this method elicits the importance of the context that the research variables occur in, and the interplay amongst them (Krippendorff, 2004; Nunan, 1992). Ethnography is a qualitative approach to content analysis. A qualitative approach to content analysis calls for close readings of previous research, involves the interpretation of the given context to attempt to answer the research question, and the researcher acknowledges they are working within hermeneutic circles in which their own context of research constructively participates (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 17). The context of research being political fiction's relevance to, specifically, the EFL classroom.

Altheide (1987) explains that approaching subject matter with ethnographic content analysis allows for the investigation of one variable in the context of what is understood about other, extraneous features, allowing for the constant comparison. These *other features* that will make up the analysis section are curricula and democratic values, and language affordances and political allegory.

There will be references to established canonical literature in the political fiction genre,

*Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and *The Crucible* (Horsley, 1990; Karaganis et al., 2018).

However, a thorough analysis of the established literature by Orwell and Miller is, again, beyond the aim of this paper. These texts are referenced in order to provide examples of how to implement the analyzed theories in an EFL classroom and the ways in which the previous research has applied them regarding English syllabi and ELT.

The structure of this paper will be as follows. First, the research question will be introduced and fleshed out in the following background section (Nunan, 1992, p. 211). Then the data, which in the case of this paper consists of the previous research, scholarly journals, and theories, will be investigated and analyzed in relation to the research question (p. 221). Then finally, this paper's interpretation of the data will be discussed in a teaching context for further inquiry by other pre-service or current educators (p. 215).

### **Background**

The question that perpetually drives this paper is, "What's the use?" Put as a research question, "What is the *use* of political fiction and its allegory in an English language education context?" First, there will follow a brief outline of the basic ideas of the theories and materials used to develop this paper.

As educators, English teachers must be aware of what a community or society considers to be knowledge (Horsley, 1990; Willis, 1988). National curricula and syllabi for English, then, are the appropriate medium and policy for English language teachers to interpret the current values of knowledge and democracy that are expected to be present within their instruction (Willis, 1988, p. 328). Teachers are allowed, to a *degree*, to interpret these policy documents based on personal values, interests, strengths, and weaknesses in order to more effectively respond to the needs and learning opportunities of their students (McCutcheon, 1988). Through

studying curricula theory, teachers can effectively deliberate and influence the curriculum. Being an interpreter of curriculum engages development of the practice rather than teachers assuming the role of a pipeline from experts writing textbooks to students' minds (McCutcheon, 1988).

Within most Western curricula, the term: democratic values, is a prominent buzzword (Wahlström, 2016; Willis, 1988). The Swedish national curriculum, for example, opens with the statement that the entire educational institution is built upon democratic values (Skolverket, 2011). This term, democratic values, litters the Swedish national curriculum and similar Western curricula (Wahlström, 2016, p. 30). In fact, the democratic empowerment that the curriculum aims to promote is expected to be interpreted as, "If we are to live democratically, the way we induct [students] into the culture must be democratic as well" (Wood, 1988, p. 184). To be clear, this does not mean that living democratically, democratic values, and empowerment mean that everything within educational institutions is to be voted on by students, teachers, and so on. Democratic values and democratic empowerment are, then, the ways that curricula aim to describe the ideology and way of life (culture) in Western civilization (Wood, 1988, p. 168). In researching the effectiveness of political fiction in the English classroom, the data presented show that political inquiry and critical reflection of power structures is actually beneficial to strengthening democratic values and thus, a democratically empowered society (Sawch, 2011; Wood, 1988).

The theory of language affordances is relevant to second/foreign language (L2) acquisition and learning opportunities when studying the correlation between language, cognition, and society (Aronin & Singleton, 2012). Language affordances are found to be the realization of which communication via the vehicular language is possible in the specific learning situation (p. 318). In their research and development of language affordances in



multilingualism studies, Aronin and Singleton (2012) have found that the interactions between the language learner and the learning context generate specific language affordances for each particular context. The research of the language affordances theory allows for deeper insight into which affordances are possible or provided by the context of political fiction literature to English as a foreign language (EFL) students. Although political fiction is a form of literature and one must read and attempt to comprehend its content, the way that students learn through/with English is communication (Tarpey & Bucholc, 1997). Communication meaning that students are afforded the ability to interact with their peers and teacher and ultimately make correct use of English (Aronin & Singleton, 2012, p. 318). This outward interaction and usage of the language is made possible by language affordances when students successfully complete reading, writing, or speaking tasks (p. 318). Language affordances theory, in its realizations of which communications are possible in different learning situations, takes a more concrete form when educators are aware that whether their students are learning the parts of speech in a task or analyzing the parallels of a political allegory and a current or historical event, that it is *all* English communication (Aronin & Singleton, 2012; Tarpey & Bucholc, 1997). The aim is for students to, at least, be able to talk about (communicate) the political fiction, its meaning, or its allegory in English, whether in a classroom or extra-curricular setting. This communication is drawn from the language affordances.

A teacher that presents different critical theories in order to analyze and create flexible learning opportunities with political fiction will have to make use of allegory. Hamilton's (2011) research has found that political allegories are not as rigid as they may seem on the surface, drawing the simple conclusion that "Revolution is bad!" from *Animal Farm* defeats the conceptualization (the ways in which students learn) possibilities that students could have

experienced and may hinder future, similar learning opportunities (Coyle, Hood & Marsh, 2010; Horsley, 1990). Hamilton's (2011) study on the literary device of allegory presents the theory that a learner may fill in a text's allegedly fixed roles with other values that are more appropriate to either the learner or to a bigger context such as one's community. Using *Animal Farm* again as an example, Hamilton enlightens educators that,

Some critics have complained that *Animal Farm* 'was prone to different interpretations and could take on meanings of its own' because it was 'written in the mode of allegory', but I think the allegorical form is a strength rather than a weakness for politically subversive texts (Hamilton, 2011, p. 37).

With political fiction, even in a situation where a learner may be unaware of the author's context in which they produced their text, such as the context of McCarthyism in the USA, a learner is still found to be provided with the opportunities to create their own connections and thus conceptualizations (Hamilton, 2011). Political fiction and its allegory then, despite the context it is taught in, is timeless and flexibly applicable. Then, finally, in the EFL classroom.

In one study used to develop this paper, Tarpey and Bucholc (1997) observed team-taught classes in which an English and a social science teacher simultaneously taught classes in accordance with a newly constructed, experimental syllabus for interdisciplinary studies. The method of strategically placing a related political fiction literary work into a unit to complement and support the current historical or geographic topic found success, in this context, in proving the use of interdisciplinary courses (Tarpey & Bucholc, 1997). Additionally, in Lin (2012), Sawch (2011), and Rahimi and Sharififar (2015) one also finds studies of successful application of political fiction in the EFL classroom with advice, reflection, and promotion of why, specifically, political fiction can be an appropriate, effective educational tool for ELT regardless of place or time. Upon studying the research about political fiction in the English classroom, it is

quickly observed that cognitive flexibility, the ability to learn from associating different concepts with each other (such as social science and the English language), is benefitted by and can be enabled by the previously mentioned interdisciplinary methods studied or the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) method (Coyle et al., 2010).

The Swedish syllabus for upper secondary school English (Skolverket, 2011) reads, “Knowledge of English increases the individual's opportunities to participate in different social and cultural contexts, as well as in global studies and working life”. The syllabus, here, regards English language learning, like other international communities, as a necessity for a well-educated and skilled working-population (Zhang & Gao, 2001). Coyle et al., (2010) informs language teachers that students’ voluntary participation in learning, through a foreign language, has been shown to enhance motivation towards both the language and the other content. Setting these findings into practice, Sawch (2011) encourages political fiction in the English language classroom as a tool for EFL teachers to tackle the possible issue of motivation or the inevitable question of: “Why do we have to read this book?” (p. 81). The study of political fiction’s allegorical meaning encourages the potential for the students to interrogate and deconstruct the text’s message and themes, perhaps answering for themselves why the book *must* be read by making cognitive connections to history and society at large through the English language (Coyle et al., 2010; Horsley, 1990; Sawch, 2011). The educational policy of being able to effectively participate in social and cultural contexts in English and using political fiction’s allegory about these cultural or societal contexts can be effectively scaffolded and applied to different curricular or extra-curricular contexts. By providing the students, through instruction, a perspective into “new” or “alternative” contexts of society, cultures, and ideologies, the teacher

allows the students to safely *feel out* their own analyses and begin to think critically in ways that are particular to themselves (Sawch, 2011).

### **Analysis & Interpretation**

This paper has found that democratic values elicited in curricula, language affordances theory, and political allegory, when implemented in an ELT context, can be an innovative addition to a teacher's repertoire. The following analysis and interpretation section will explain the mentioned theories and how they can be used for ELT, using political fiction as the instructive material.

#### **The China Example**

To attempt to answer the question: "what is the use of political fiction and allegory in the EFL classroom?", to begin with, a seemingly larger than life example of political fiction in the Chinese EFL classroom will be observed.

Zhang and Gao (2001) studied the introduction of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (among, soon, other international political fiction novels) as required reading in the Chinese national syllabus for English in the late 1990s. The political and ideological impact of allowing texts with a so-called "domesticated" political allegory about authoritarian regimes reveals the importance of political fiction's allegorical meanings; that it can be effectively conceptualized by students in the EFL classroom, and it also shows a successful combination of subject and language content teaching (Coyle et al., 2010; Hamilton, 2011).

The original, autonomous method in China for EFL gradually became its own antithesis as it attempted to contain and subvert the inevitable cultural aspects that L2 learning invites, the broad learning (cognitive) possibilities it allows, and the language affordances of ELT (Aronin & Singleton, 2012; Coyle et al., 2010; Zhang & Gao, 2001). This autonomous Chinese framework

for ELT had, from the 1960's when their Communist leader Mao Zedong began privately learning English, setting the standard for ELT until educational reform in the 1990's, been *enforced* as: "Chinese learning as essence, Western learning as function" (Zhang & Gao, 2001, p. 124). Mao Zedong Thought was the ideology of China for decades which meant that Mao's personal method for learning English became the educational policy for ELT (Zhang & Gao, 2001).

As it was allowed to develop within the educational institution of China, this so-called method of ELT soon developed into: "learning a foreign language without learning foreign ideas" (Zhang & Gao, 2001, p. 125). ELT at this time, even when they eventually began using English language political fiction texts such as *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, attempted to ignore the specific cultural and political contexts that the Western political fiction texts were either embedded in or of which the texts had emerged from. But unlike mathematics and natural sciences, language learning cannot be completely detached from the ideologies, cultures, and society from which they originate (Zhang & Gao, 2001). Input from non-curricular phenomena as well as other academic fields has, in fact, contributed to ELT methodology (Coyle et al. 2010). This Mao Zedong Thought outlook, that regarded ELT and the English language simply as a tool for foreign language communication, with no value for the cultural aspects of English, eventually turned on itself.

As it was reformed, ELT in China existed within the educational boundaries of being regarded only as useful for creating a well-educated and skilled labor force and in turn a successful market economy that can operate and trade with international and English-speaking countries. One observes how Communist and Mao Zedong Thought ideology was gradually pushed out. A similar value of ELT and EFL as that found in the European Union countries has

taken the place of the old “foreign language without foreign ideas” method (Zhang & Gao, 2001, p. 129). One sees how political fiction being used in ELT can have a beneficial effect on both language acquisition as well as implementing the democratic and human rights values that are present in Western national curricula.

The significance of the Chinese example is that their instrumentalization of English, which attempted to force EFL into a corner where its only use was objective, and ELT’s role solely being to train communication skills without allowing students to absorb cultural aspects of English, was ultimately its own undoing. The idealism in Mao Zedong Thought was that, although English literature was prescribed to be the embodiment of the best learning opportunities in EFL, the learning opportunities it affords are to be realized as inanimate instruments, categorized by usage: English for business, English for tourism, English for science, etc. (Zhang & Gao, 2001). Justifiable as: “it is only the vehicle that counts and not the message” (p. 127). In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the anti-authoritarian value that can be drawn from the text may be interpreted by a student (or instructed by a teacher) as Orwell’s attempt at being subversive toward an authoritarian regime and, thus, encouraging a political alternative (Orwell, 1987b).

When a text is considered to be *subversive* in nature, the content may be interpreted as an inquiry into, or a challenge of the norms that the text presents (Hamilton, 2011, p. 24). Being subversive in nature means that the authors of these texts do not literally criticize things nor present facts, but rather, they build a platform for the reader to create their own values and meanings from the content, “the message is in the mind, not in the text” (Hamilton, 2011, p. 39). This subversive nature of political fiction has actually been found to be a beneficial factor in promoting democracy, democratic values, and democratic empowerment (Horsley, 1990; Wood,

1988).

It is rather simple to see the benefits of a democratic society when a text *metaphorically* lampoons authoritarianism and dictatorships. In the case of a strict ideological context such as the presented Chinese example, it is only natural that readers find new values hidden in or outside of a politically subversive text's alleged fixed roles, often yielding new meaning for texts in different contexts than that in which it was written (Hamilton, 2011). Political fiction, in comparison to other fiction texts, aims not to un-anchor the readers from reality but instead connects the fiction and the reader's own nonfiction. Whether it be personal or more social, the values and conceptualizations that learners draw from the political text will be anchored in reality. The new democratic values gained from political fiction and allegory in the EFL classroom in China is an example of education and democracy's often unspoken dependency on each another.

### **Education and Democracy**

This section about curricula's relationship to democracy will explain how a curriculum's mission statement is only an aim: that the curricular materials used, and teacher's method of instruction, are the ways in which the curriculum's goals are realized.

A democratically empowered population receives their *education in democratic values* through their years of experiences in educational institutions. Beyer's (1988) study of the culture of democracy within educational institutions expresses that democracy involves a way of life that empowers people to confidently act or participate in the daily situations and institutions that society is built upon. The democratic values that are found in most Western curricula are realized through the curricular and extra-curricular day to day happenings in school and are expected to be questioned, tested, and finally accepted through the materials and instruction presented in

classrooms (Beyer, 1988; Wood, 1988). Zhang and Gao's (2001) findings, that language is inseparable from the ideology, culture, and society from which it sprang, are presented above to show that the democratic values found in most Western curricula host a significant potential for students' realization within, specifically, the English language and EFL classroom.

In the introduction section of this paper, the Swedish national curriculum's mission statement was mentioned. It reads: "The [Swedish] educational system rests upon the basis of democracy" (Skolverket, 2011). This sort of mission statement, claiming democracy as the beater of paths for knowledge, prescribes schools as a site for exploration of democracy as a cultural phenomenon (Beyer, 1988; Wood, 1988). When political fiction is used in the EFL classroom as material for instruction, learners explore alternative explanations and perspectives of events through a lens of fiction. For learners to acquire the democratic values elicited in curricula, an EFL classroom should then seem to be a beneficial place to breed learners into members of democratically moral, participatory communities (Beyer, 1988). The Swedish national curriculum (Skolverket, 2011) again assigns the educational institution as the place for students to inquire and ultimately accept democratic empowerment, defining democratic values in the "Norms and Values" section:

Democratic values and human rights [are] the inviolability of human life, the individual's freedom and integrity, equal value of all peoples, gender equality, and solidarity between people. The educational institution will actively and consciously influence and stimulate students to encompass the common values of our societies and allow expression of these values in practical, everyday happenings within the school system (Skolverket, 2011, 2.2 Normer och värden [Norms and values]).

EFL teachers will probably not immediately draw the conclusion that a political fiction text would be a good resource for a unit by simply being aware of the curriculum's mission



statement's focus on democratic empowerment. It is not entirely up to teachers to deliberate and administer their course, how it should be structured, and what materials it should be made of.

Returning to the Swedish curriculum's mission statement, it states that: "All instruction shall rely on a scientific basis and proven [(tested)] experience" (Skolverket, 2011), meaning that instruction is not to be improvised, or "learn to teach as you go!", but rather, based on research and studies such as those this paper draws findings from. The scientific basis and proven experience that the mission statement speaks of, in other words, is what a national educational institution and its affiliated international organs currently consider to be knowledge (Wahlström, 2016). English language teachers, regarding teaching literature in relation to the curriculum's expectations, must draw a context from the chosen literature that will afford students learning opportunities and language acquisition.

That which the curriculum considers to be knowledge is an expression of the current ideology, culture of the society, and, politically, of the educational policy-makers by whom it was administered (Wahlström, 2016). Wahlström, in mapping out the theory behind the institutional and legislative reasoning behind the Swedish curriculum, points out that four themes are consistently present in the historical and current Western curricula: scientific rationalism, humanism, social effectiveness, and social reconstructionism. The basic idea of each of these terms:

- Scientific rationalism: Subject-based knowledge that it passed from one generation to the next.
- Humanism: To connect aspects of society and the world to oneself and deepen one's understanding of these (shared) experiences.
- Social effectiveness: Knowledge that a future, independent citizen requires in terms of ability, skills, and competency to participate in a society's economic and social development.

- Social reconstructionism: Using the individual experience of humanism to contribute to the development of a more fair and equal society at large.

(Wahlström, 2016, pp. 40-41)

Teachers may refer to these themes of curricula to assure that their choice of political fiction text is cohesive with both the curriculum's policy as well as being relatable to previous and following instructions' themes' relevance to educational policy. It should be noted that these four themes are not equally prominent in curricula but rather, throughout the history of national curricula, some themes are favored over others. This happens because the theme that best fits the current policy-makers' conception of a just and good society will usually stand clearly out in the foreground (Wahlström, 2016; Wood, 1988).

But if each school is to be the site of this so-called democratic empowerment, then like democracy's essentially fluid nature, the favored theme of the curriculum must also be likewise fluid (Wood, 1988). This is not saying that a curriculum's policy must constantly be changing, for example at the same rate as a country's political system may change politicians and governing bodies, but rather that the curricula that are in place should be clear about which theme(s) are favored while still providing support for so-called less favored themes. A teacher may find that the direction in which their unit planning is headed may be more applicable to a lesser favored theme in the curriculum, so the other less favored themes should therefore still be present in the curriculum's, for example, *tasks and values* section.

“Is it possible for [the educational institution] to achieve its democratic promise?” (Wood, 1988, p. 175). Despite the best efforts of teachers, the issues that face the population are usually so complex and that they are assumedly so distracted with personal matters, or afflicted with apathy, that a population will usually just turn to “technical experts” to solve political and social issues (p. 175). The way to avoid this then, as Wood (1988) and Wahlström (2016) have

laid forth, is to assure that the educational system is a center of "democratic experiences". This meaning that students must, through different subjects and contexts, be able to challenge the idea of democracy. By investigating, interrogating, and challenging democratic values through the seemingly endless material of the different curricular subjects, students find that neutrality and opposing alternatives to democracy are frivolous. Democratic empowerment fits into the context of this paper because of the defiant nature of the content of political fiction texts.

Democracy requires defiance. If not for the molecular defiance that is perpetually brewing and bubbling over in democratic systems, then the entire system would be on the road to if not already a victim of total social control (Wood, 1988, p. 176). Therefore, upon deciding to use a particular political fiction in the EFL classroom, a teacher may begin deliberation by being openly critical of the entire institution's, or community's current or historical issues; provided the teacher then uses this attitude in conjunction with the texts political message to provide a learning context that is appropriate to the student group (Wahlström, 2016). In order to attribute meaning to political acts and to create a context in which these acts afford students a language learning context, an English teacher may provide a text that seems, on the surface, to be in complete opposition to democratic values, (arguably) such as *Animal Farm* (Horsley, 1990). In the case of two of *Animal Farm's* horses: Boxer and Clover; they could not think for themselves, but on the other hand were exquisite at regurgitating everything their pig teachers had taught them, including how to win arguments using the pigs' rhetoric (Orwell, 1987a, p. 11). A classroom analysis of the characters' behavior in this instance should reveal the antidemocratic bearing of blind devotion and could enhance the students' ability to conceptualize one's own world through recognizing, and building a preference for a personal and social life characterized by humanism and social reconstructionism; the opposite of what is experienced in the provided

*Animal Farm* example (Orwell, 1987a; Wahlström, 2016; Wood, 1988).

That students learn is, of course, an aim of teaching. In an ELT context, however, students must be able to successfully communicate what they have learned, this is where language affordances theory and political allegory come into play.

### **Language Affordances and Political Allegory**

This section will discuss the linguistic and literary mechanisms that make it possible to instrumentalize political fiction literature in the educational institution: language affordances theory and political allegory. First, language affordances shall be explained.

Language affordances theory is used to arrange an inventory of words, metaphors, concepts, and ideas of a text from which educators may draw from to provide learning opportunities related to their current teaching endeavors. Language affordances are found to have cognitive connections to students' readiness to communicate in an L2 whether in school or in an extracurricular context (Aronin & Singleton, 2012, p. 318; Peng, Zhang, & Chen, 2016). This inventory of words, concepts, and ideas that students are provided with from each text, which they are then expected to communicate by completing a task, are language affordances.

Language affordances are a separate category of affordances from, for example, a "mathematical affordances" theory, because not all learning contexts may be connected to each other. As Zhang and Gao (2001) have pointed out, if politics were to somehow be applied to a mathematics lesson, the arithmetic would supersede any interest in or usage of the political and ideological content (p. 124).

Aronin and Singleton (2012), as well as Rahimi and Sharififar (2015), express that language learners will unequivocally tie ideological, cultural, and societal elements into their interactions with and communication in English. This is an opportunity for language acquisition

that English teachers may take advantage of if the correct instructive material is used. Using a political fiction's context of politics, ideology, and/or culture to relate to the students' personal experiences of them is instrumentalized using language affordances theory. The learning opportunities that students will receive from the communication that they draw from political texts are found to be considerably more long-term than other modes of L2 instruction, this long-term learning will be explained further in the EFL classroom section (Peng et al., 2016; Rahimi & Sharififar, 2015).

Rahimi and Sharififar (2015) explain that EFL students are given access to sociolinguistic processes when the personal cultural and ideological factors of the learner are in some way relatable to the cultural and ideological factors embedded in the language they are learning. Power relationships, when critically analyzed in the form of text, are virtually unanimously relatable to language learners; no matter if English is the students' first or second language (p. 505). Texts that are either clear about or allude to power relationships then can be found to afford students learning opportunities because of their relatability; relatable regardless of the author's context in which they produced the text.

Like the example of mathematics and politics, simply communicating about a subject in English does not elicit a learning opportunity (Aronin & Singleton, 2012). A student that goes no further than to describe *Animal Farm* as a story about farm animals has not communicated any possible language affordances from the text. The example student has not engaged in the communications that are made possible by the material. Instead, a student that can successfully complete a communication task, such as a writing task, drawing terms and ideas from the classroom content and discussions, and support their own arguments, is making use of the language affordances inventory that the ELT has provided (Aronin & Singleton, 2012; Sawch,

2011).

This interaction of the culture and ideology within English and personal experiences of the learners can be instrumentalized with a political fiction text's allegory. Critical thinking in English can emerge from analyzing or interrogating a political text and thus, students' communication about the power relationships, politics, or ideology of the text, are examples of successful engagement with the provided language affordances.

In other fields, such as psychology where Gibson founded the affordances theory as "possibilities that an environment provides an [individual]" (Aronin & Singleton, 2012, p. 312-3), particular features of affordances are favored in place of others. Aronin and Singleton affirm their findings that virtually all dimensions of language affordances are relevant to language acquisition and language teaching (p. 323). This is because, in order to successfully communicate in English, students complete varying tasks for the teacher to assess. Political allegory is the complement that language affordances require to ensure that student's successful communication in English is built on a basis of understanding of the political fiction material.

To engage EFL learners in political fiction's content, a teacher should choose a text that encompasses the students' real world (Beach, Appleman, Fecho & Simon, 2016). Although the canonical classics were written long before even the English teacher's time, Hamilton (2011) informs that it is virtually instinctive for L2 learners to relate the text's content to their own political and cultural situations. His study of political allegory states: "The fact that we can re-read allegories from the past and [learners may] still find them meaningful is perhaps why Ezra Pound famously said, 'Literature is news that stays news.'" (p. 33). A profound text does not tiptoe around political and cultural issues but instead may make use of allegory as a guardrail through which students may safely interrogate issues as well as, and more importantly, learn

from creating new values that connect the fiction's content to their personal reality (Beach et al., 2016; Hamilton, 2011; Rahimi & Sharififar, 2015).

An interesting fact about Orwell's *Animal Farm* is that it never mentions Russia or the 1917 Revolution (Hamilton, 2011). Students will instinctively relate the text's content to their own political and societal situations, so the teacher instructing a one-to-one connection that Napoleon represents Stalin because the pig does things Stalin would assumedly do is not necessary to establish the cultural and ideological meanings that Orwell aimed to elicit (2011). The political allegory in *Animal Farm* presents itself clearly and English teachers should be aware that some of the language affordances that are drawn from are the (however little) background knowledge and awareness of authoritarianism, specifically the international results of Stalin's Soviet Union, that EFL students will likely bring into the classroom (2011). In other words, students may not know why Stalin or Mao Zedong are "bad", but they will likely be aware of, or their families affected by, the Russian and Chinese dictators. This awareness of an alleged "bad man" or "- men" benefits the opportunity for students to realize the contextual language affordances when reading and discussing *Animal Farm* in the EFL classroom (Beach et al., 2016). Hamilton (2011) elicits the clarity of the allegory in *Animal Farm*:

In fact, meaning is established [in *Animal Farm*] by a cognitive process that is external to the text itself...Just as Soviet rulers betrayed the principles of communism, so too do the pigs betray the principles of Animalism (p. 32-3).

The language affordances in this context are the students' newfound ability to communicate – through writing or discussion in English – an understanding that the pigs betrayed the farm animals and the beast-revolution.

In fiction, the fairy story can be a literary adventure into an endless amount of different, fictive settings. Political fiction's usage of allegory, however, will anchor a text either in the

allusion the author had allegedly intended or, if the author's original context is unknown or is too abstract, the reader's own political reality.

Now that the theories that provide a basis for teaching political fiction have been explained, its practical usage in English and EFL classrooms will be observed.

### **In the EFL Classroom**

This final section of the analysis will mostly leave the theoretical and instead observe the findings, conclusions, and advice from researchers and educators that have studied and used political fiction in the EFL classroom. Blending disciplinary content, such as social science and English language learning, by analyzing the allegorical meaning of political fiction texts invites students to take risks, make judgments, establish timelines that connects a historical perspective of society to a current perspective, and come to conclusions about the content while using English to communicate. (Coyle et al., 2010; Hamilton, 2011; Horsley, 1990; Tarpey & Bucholtz, 1997).

EFL teachers may introspectively ask of themselves, "What is there to accomplish by teaching literary texts to EFL students?" and more specifically, "What kinds of learning opportunities does political fiction offer?" (Beach et al., 2016). EFL students are also members of diverse communities and society at large, so when they bring their individual experiences and issues with them to the classroom, innovative teachers may engage the cognitive flexibility of their students and combine ideological, political, and cultural contexts with ELT (Beach et al., 2016; Sawch, 2011). As mentioned in this paper's background section, cognitive flexibility is learning through associating different concepts with each other (Coyle et al., 2011). By allowing the real world's culture and ideology to be interrogated in one's EFL classroom with a politically allegorical text, criticizing or offering other perspectives of ideological or political realities,



English teachers are not attempting to create literary theorists of their students, but rather:

The point is to use literary critical theory as a means to some larger educational ends – the ability to inhabit a variety of perspectives at the same time, the ability to understand the point of view and perspectives of others, the ability to read resistantly, whether it's the textual or actual worlds, and the ability to become [a so-called] 'enlightened witness' (Beach et al., 2016, p. 138).

This may be observed in ELT and EFL classrooms when political fiction texts are inserted into units or lectures.

Educators such as Lin (2012), that have researched the pedagogical uses of combining different concepts with each other, suggest that content in the EFL classroom must first be built upon students' prior knowledge (p. 97). This is not to suggest that EFL teachers inquire into students' previous education from the other teachers or the school administration. As stated in the previous paragraph, EFL students bring their personal experiences and issues with them to the classroom. These experiences and issues can be viewed as general *previous knowledge* that all students will share, not only with each other but also with their teachers and school. Lin has found that this general previous knowledge is best administered by *amplifying* the curriculum rather than *simplifying* it (p. 97). By introducing political fiction whose allegory can possibly be provocative or defiant of the students' understanding of the general previous knowledge, or allowing them a safe, guardrail to question their societies norms, ELT amplifies most curricula's focus on democratic values as defined above in the "education and democracy" section (Lin, 2012; Skolverket, 2011; Wahlström, 2016). Lin's (2012) developing method of amplifying particular parts of curricula and syllabi during different units and lectures is part of an ongoing pedagogical development of EFL in China that is building upon the ELT reforms and the previously mentioned consequences of introducing political fiction texts into China's English syllabus (Lin, 2012, p. 97; Zhang & Gao, 2001).

The critical thinking and allegorical meaning that political fiction affords EFL learners have been found to successfully elicit problem-solving skills, decision-making skills, and lifelong learning skills using English (Rahimi & Sharififar, 2015, p. 506). These skills are in accordance with the European Union's key competencies for lifelong learning (Wahlström, 2016, p. 62-3). According to Sawch's (2011) classroom research, the critical abilities that students learn from interrogating and communicating about the values and meaning they created for a political text is beneficial to the mentioned lifelong learning abilities (p. 81). This means that, by asking and answering their own questions of the text, students will successfully communicate in English as well as communicate intuitive arguments (critical thinking) based on themes and values they uncovered in the text (p. 81-2). Tarpey and Bucholc's (1997) interest in combining political and historical disciplines with ELT led to the creation of an experimental, interdisciplinary syllabus that was applied to social science and English. After 3 years of implementation of the social science/English syllabus they found that, like Sawch (2011), when political fiction texts are strategically inserted into appropriate ELT contexts, the ideology and culture embedded in the texts afford successful language acquisition opportunities (Tarpey & Bucholc, 1997, p. 69). When English language teachers provide the opportunities for students to interrogate other political systems, question the norms that the students are accustomed to, and when the teachers themselves are experienced – by their students – making inquiries about the political content of the text or using the text to interrogate society (e.g. by posing provocative questions to help their students better relate to a text's defiant context), students may acquire critical thinking abilities that can be lifelong (Rahimi & Sharififar, 2015; Tarpey & Bucholc, 1997, p. 72).

Critical thinking and observing ideological, political, and cultural norms through a

guardrail of political allegory is not its own, separate discipline. Although this paper's aim is to encourage the usage of political fiction in EFL classrooms, it should not be misconstrued that there is any evidence that political fiction is universally applicable to *all* ELT contexts. In respect to rapport between the teacher and students, it is observed that students tend to confide more in a teacher who mirrors their own views; such as occasionally giving a 'rebellious' or more liberal impression, something that could be drawn from having political texts in one's instruction (Tarpey & Bucholc, 1997, p. 74). What then, of students that may not respond positively to political allegory, the subversive nature of political fiction, or that may be uncomfortable or uneager to investigate ideological, political, or cultural questions? The following discussion of possible difficulties may be considered in such a situation.

**Discussion of possible difficulties.** By using specific texts, such as Miller's *The Crucible*, students may take control of their own conceptualization and empower themselves to question the political, ideological, and cultural forces that shape the world as well as their own and others' ability to choose to act in it (Coyle et al., 2010; Sawch, 2011). As Tarpey & Bucholc (1997) have pointed out, and which is a general assumption about young learners, students tend to be more liberal and are open to being critical about society, culture, and ideology. But rather than assuming that students will be immediately open to and are willing to engage in, for example, Miller's foreboding allegory that witch-hunts like McCarthyism can have similar deadly results as the Salem Witch Trials, English teachers may consider some frameworks to prepare a political fiction unit.

Although it may at first appear lengthy, Beach et al. (2016) emphasize the following framework of abilities that educators should be engaging with their instruction. After reading through it, consider that not all abilities are to be engaged at once but rather that education is an

ongoing experience where some abilities are at times favored over others in order to complete different tasks.

- Curiosity – the desire to know more about the world.
- Openness – the willingness to consider new ways of being and thinking in the world.
- Engagement – a sense of investment and involvement in learning.
- Creativity – the ability to use novel approaches for generating, investigating, and representing ideas.
- Persistence – the ability to sustain interest in and attention to short- and long-term projects.
- Responsibility – the ability to take ownership of one’s actions and understand the consequences of those actions for oneself and others.
- Flexibility – the ability to adapt to situations, expectations, or demands.
- Metacognition – the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking as well as on the individual and cultural processes used to structure knowledge.

(Beach et al., 2016, p. 234).

Students that appear to be resistant to, or that are having trouble making connections to a text’s context can be, regarding the current unit being studied, having difficulties with one or more of the above abilities. Using this framework to be able to point out problems of cognitive engagement and to be able to be aware of which abilities work well with a unit or text can be beneficial to avoiding students’ resistance to “required reading” as well as for the teacher’s own assessment of the material. Beach et al. (2016) have found that students of English prefer texts that “teach them something”, dislike required texts because of an alleged lack of freedom of analysis, and that students today lack a social network surrounding their reading in contrast to virtually all other aspects of their daily lives such as movies, games, music, and media (p. 234). In deliberation of or upon the experience of these difficulties, teachers may consider in which

ways to support students' cognitive flexibility by providing real world or modern examples that are cognitively "within reach" of the students.

An example of this could be while reading *The Crucible*, the teacher guides the students through the allegory of witch trials to McCarthyism but then continues by making another witch-hunt allegorical example out of the situation of Middle-Eastern and African refugees (relevant at the time of writing this paper). For example, upon bringing up the refugee situation: "These people are under constant scrutiny over who amongst them are 'hidden terrorists' or criminals that are allegedly planning to create a 'European Caliphate', does anyone recognize this situation with refugees? Has there been any consequences as a result of this witch-hunt?"

Providing the example without eliciting a specific perpetrator or person of interest, the teacher allows the learning situation for students to make the connection between the text and given example as well as between the text and their individual experiences. Finally, students will be provided the situation to make a connection between their personal realities and society, ideology, and culture; communicating using the language affordances provided by the witch-hunt allegory of *The Crucible*. Associating the real-world issues of war and discrimination with the material in an EFL classroom is just one of many examples of political fiction's wielding of cognitive flexibility, language affordances, and political allegory.

Considering one's own teaching context, one may not feel strongly motivated to take on the task of political fiction and ELT. Another framework is provided but this framework is for teachers' consideration of material to be inserted into a unit or lesson plan:

- Defining aims – What is it for? Who is it for? and is it appropriate?
- Defining end results – What is to be achieved?
- Gathering information – non-textual examples that are accessible to students and information about either the text's or author's context at the time of writing/publishing.

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- Defining what must be done – making up a detailed list of possible actions, deadlines, and responsibilities.
- Action – formative assessment.
- Reviewing and evaluating – summative assessment of students and instruction material.

(Dogancay-Aktuna, 2006, p. 287).

If upon reflection and consideration of the above framework, and a political fiction text will be introduced into a unit, a teacher may refer to the appendix on pg. 30 for examples of texts.

Coyle et al. (2010) affirm that the ability to communicate in an L2 which, consequently, leads to *thinking* in the L2 can have a beneficial impact on subject-content learning (p. 10). As elicited in the previous witch-hunt/refugees example, by taking advantage of cognitive flexibility, subject-content (in this case social science) can be similarly beneficial to L2 learning. An L2 teacher does not need to also be a social science or history teacher in order to successfully provide learning opportunities and L2 acquisition using political fiction texts. Consider the ‘4 C’s’ framework of CLIL unit planning:

Students should -

- Content – acquire new knowledge, skills, and understanding of the *content*.
- Communication – through interaction, learn from and appropriately (to the context) use the L2.
- Cognition – engage in ‘higher-order thinking and understanding’ (see Coyle et al., 2010, pp. 29-30), critical thinking, and accepting challenges and reflecting on them.
- Culture – develop ‘self’ and ‘other’ awareness, identity, citizenship, and cognitive flexibility abilities.

(Coyle et al., 2010, p. 54).

Although the 4Cs are introduced and outlined separately above, they are reliant upon each other as an integrated whole; being equally fundamental to CLIL unit planning (Coyle et al., 2010).

Ultimately, it is the teacher who deliberates and implements the tasks and assessment in the class, regardless of whether students “react well” or even “want to” engage in the material and tasks provided. Beach et al. (2016) and the abilities framework provided may be considered for the teacher’s own problem-solving if they find that students are not reacting well to the provided politically provocative material. The framework also allows teachers to find and appropriately help students with minor cognitive issues if they arise. Dogancay-Aktuna (2006), Coyle et al. (2010), and CLIL, when taken into consideration, may provide a feasible method for planning a successful unit with a political fiction text and the appendix of this paper provides some example texts to get started with. This consideration section will hopefully clear up lingering doubts about using political fiction texts in a unit or lesson that could benefit from this literary genre.

### **Conclusion**

A way that this literary genre may be studied further as well as continue to develop in a language education context is its association with other subjects. Because it is full of interdisciplinary content, inserting political fiction texts into appropriate units supports lifelong learning factors like cognitive flexibility and critical thinking. Further research on literature in language education may consider that lifelong learning is often referred to, but pedagogical “tools” that aid in its realization, such as language affordances theory and political allegory, are not usually divulged.

This paper has explained the relevance – the use – of political fiction and its allegory in the educational institution, for ELT, and in EFL classrooms. In conclusion, democratic values are a dominant factor in curricula and in order to strengthen students’ understanding of and to empower them with these democratic values, they must be allowed to interrogate and inquire

into democracy's worth. Political fiction's dual-wielding of political allegory and language affordances are a sturdy bridge that connects EFL to the political, cultural, and ideological experiences that students require to successfully communicate in English. Pre-service and current English teachers should be encouraged by this paper to make use of this literary genre that provides the learning opportunities which foster democratically empowered students that additionally have a firm understanding of EFL.



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## Appendix

The following political fiction texts were chosen as examples because, despite the diversity of the author's backgrounds and contexts the texts were written in, they provide similar learning opportunities due to their political allegory. There are many more examples not listed, but a definitive list of political fiction texts is beyond the scope of the aim of this paper. English teachers that feel that their students are ready to engage political fiction may use these examples and begin to innovate units with interdisciplinary English content:

- Almoammad: (2016) *An Ishmael of Syria*.
- Atwood: (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale*.
- Bradbury: (1953) *Fahrenheit 451*.
- Dick: (1962) *The Man in the High Castle*.
- Golding: (1954) *Lord of the Flies*.
- Heinlein: (1966) *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.
- Huxley: (1932) *Brave New World*.
- Kafka: (1925) *The Trial*.
- Lewis: (1935) *It Can't Happen Here*.
- Miller: (1953) *The Crucible*.
- Moore & Lloyd: (1990) *V for Vendetta*.
- Orwell: (1945) *Animal Farm*; (1949) *Nineteen Eight-Four*.
- Xiaolong: (2003) *The Death of a Red Heroine*.