

Literature and the Anthropocene in EFL Education

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Introduction

This special issue brings together articles first presented at the digital conference *Literature and the Anthropocene in EFL Education* held in February 2024. The publication of this special issue is undoubtedly timely, as both climate science and the environmental humanities are responding with growing urgency to intersecting global crises. The Anthropocene, a concept rooted in the natural sciences, has become increasingly important in the humanities as a means by which to challenge conventional assumptions about the human relationship with the natural world. In literary studies, the Anthropocene has established new avenues for approaching topics such as narrative, form, temporality, agency and scale. When considered in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) education, as the contributions to this special issue demonstrate, literature can offer a distinctive pedagogical space, where students are able to engage with these ideas while simultaneously developing critical language skills.

The conceptional framing of the Special Issue

Derived from the ancient Greek *anthropos* (human) and *-cene*, from *kainos* (new or recent), the Anthropocene is the name proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer (2000) for a new geological epoch in which human activity has become a planetary force that alters ecosystems, climates and the very chemical composition of the Earth itself. Although the International Commission on Stratigraphy has not formally recognized the Anthropocene as an epoch (Zhong 2024), the name remains a powerful concept, used to capture, however imperfectly, the magnitude of humanity's accelerating impact on the planet (Witze 2024). The Anthropocene functions as more than just a scientific label; it challenges traditional distinctions between nature and culture; the human and the non-human; the past and the future. This blending of scientific insights and

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cultural reflection is what continues to make the Anthropocene both a complex and a contested idea. Indeed, as Pieter Vermeulen, one of the contributors to this issue, points out in *Literature and the Anthropocene* (2020), the Anthropocene is a contested name precisely because it exists at the crossroads of ‘painstakingly established scientific facts and deeply-felt value commitments’ (6).

These value commitments—rooted in questions about justice, responsibility and care—are central to how the Anthropocene is represented and interpreted, particularly in the humanities (cf. Cohen and Foote 2021; Parham 2021). Although the Anthropocene, as the name suggests, positions humanity at the center of its concerns, at a time when it has been argued that humanity needs to be decentered (Latour 2021), and does not account for differences between those who disproportionately cause environmental harm and those who bear the brunt of its effects (Moore 2016), it can still be a starting point for rethinking human identity, not as sovereign or separate from, but as radically entangled with, non-human forces (Haraway 2016).

To engage with the Anthropocene is to rethink human agency and ethical responsibility, but also to reconsider stories about humanity’s place in the world. Literary studies can play a crucial role in this rethinking, as the contributions to this special issue show. Literature’s capacity for ambiguity, for narrative complexity and for voicing silenced perspectives, can help readers to grasp what can otherwise feel ungraspable by offering a space to imagine alternative futures, to reckon with time and loss and to challenge human-centered worldviews.

Such rethinking is inherently interdisciplinary and requires dialogue among environmental, cultural and educational perspectives. As Roman Bartosch, also a contributor to this special issue, notes in *Literature, Pedagogy and Climate Change* (2019), ‘there is an educational demand for reconfiguring our engagements not only with the world but with the cultural forms through which we make sense of our environments’ (4). The premise of this special issue is that EFL education, understood here in broad terms, from elementary education to tertiary studies, can play both a unique and a complementary role in meeting that demand.

Given English’s status as a global lingua franca, EFL classrooms are ideally positioned to introduce diverse cultural and environmental perspectives. Literary studies in EFL education can thus be a means to foster an understanding of the unequal impacts and varied experiences of

ecological crisis (cf. Ahlberg 2021). It also allows for an explicit focus on language itself: on how to talk about the Anthropocene, how narratives shape perception and how metaphors and discourses inform both thought and action. By engaging students in both reading and creating texts, teachers at all levels of education can support them in formulating responses to ecological crises and promote students' critical awareness of how narratives construct meaning and frame the choices available to them.

The contributions to this Special Issue

The contributions to this special issue focus on literary studies within tertiary and non-tertiary EFL education, spanning teacher training programs as well as primary school and higher education settings. Together, these nine contributions offer diverse yet complementary perspectives on how literature can enrich EFL teaching in the Anthropocene.

The first three articles explore how poetry, pedagogy and re-definitions of agency intersect to address the complexities of the Anthropocene. **Pieter Vermeulen** highlights the pedagogical value of poetic complexity, using Evelyn Reilly's 2009 collection *Styrofoam* in an MA-level course in the Netherlands on American literatures of the Anthropocene to explore scale and intertextuality. **Roman Bartosch** draws on experiences from tertiary literacy education in English in a German teacher training program to examine the challenges of learner agency in climate education. In his article, Bartosch proposes a pedagogy of 'flourishing' through arts-based literacy practices that include a novel take on poetry. **Barbara Barrow** and **Ellen Turner**, on their part, explore the use of poetry in student-created podcasts in a Swedish teacher education context, showing how such use can foster ecocritical dialogue and promote sustainable thinking among future teachers.

The next three articles in this issue focus on how literature for children and young adults can encourage critical engagement with sustainability and the Anthropocene in EFL teacher education. **Celia Aijmer Rydsjö** and **Ulrika Andersson Hval** examine intergenerational conflict and disrupted narratives in young adult climate fiction to explore how such stories can help Swedish student teachers to develop their future students' perceptions of responsibility and futurity. In her article, **Natalie Dederichs** addresses the practical challenges that EFL teachers face in selecting climate fiction for young learners and presents a toolkit for

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fostering climate change literacy in German students aged 14 to 16. **Zita Farkas, Malin Lidström Brock** and **Marie Wallin** explore the use of fairy tales in Swedish primary teacher education, proposing that the genre's moral clarity productively clashes with the complexities of sustainability, which creates entry points for developing critical and sustainability literacies among primary school student teachers.

The final three articles in this issue examine how literature can prompt learners at all levels to reconsider the human in relation to the non-human. Sharing a posthumanist perspective, the authors of these articles articulate a belief in the power of literary texts to challenge anthropocentric thinking. **Kathryn Bowes** draws on a reading of Elif Shafak's *The Island of Missing Trees* (2021) to examine multispecies 'storying' and the role of language learning in cultivating attentiveness to the more-than-human world among Japanese university-level learners of English. **Maxim Shadurski** presents a reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021), designed to develop the critical literacy of university students of contemporary Anglophone literature in Poland by examining themes of artificiality in the novel and their connection to Anthropocene discourse. Finally, **Shubhneet Kaur Kharbanda** presents a posthumanist reading of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, proposing its use in Indian EFL primary education to challenge anthropocentric views. She suggests pairing the text with classroom activities that cultivate ecological awareness and foster what she terms a sense of 'necessary wilderness' in young learners.

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