University of Latvia

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture

Volume 15
2025
ISSN 1691-9971

University of Latvia

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture

Volume 15

Riga 2025

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture, Volume 15. Riga: University of Latvia, 2025. 166 pages.

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture is a multidisciplinary international scientific journal in general linguistics, applied linguistics, literature and culture.

The journal uses a double-blind review process: all papers are reviewed by at least two blind-reviewers.

Web site: https://journal.lu.lv/bjellc
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025

The journal is covered in Scopus (since 2023), ERIH PLUS; NSD Index (since 2018); Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index, provided by a Clarivate Analytic company (since 2017); EBSCO: Central and Eastern European Academic Source, EBSCO Discovery Service; EBSCO Humanities Source (since 2015), Index Copernicus, DOAJ, the MLA Directory of Periodicals and indexed in the MLA International Bibliography, BASE (Bielefeld Academic Search Engine), CROSSREF, ROAD Directory of Open Access Scholarly Resources, WorldCat, Sherpa/Romeo, Scilit, LINGUIST List, Google Scholar.

ISSN 1691-9971 (Print)
ISSN 2501-0395 (Online)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 4–16
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.01

SUBJECTIVITY IN DIPLOMATIC DISCOURSE: A DOUBLE ANNOTATION ANALYSIS

MARIIA ANISIMOVA and ŠÁRKA ZIKÁNOVÁ
Charles University, Czech Republic

Abstract. Although diplomatic texts are undeniably evaluative, linguists have yet to figure out the main features of diplomatic attitudes. One of the main problems in such an evaluation is the absence of specific criteria and guidelines for corpus analysis. We have aimed to describe the typical problems that arise when assessing appraisal (Martin and White, 2005) in diplomatic speeches. Our approach is based on a double annotation experiment on selected diplomatic speeches. The experiment was completed according to extensive guidelines we developed earlier (Anisimova and Zikánová, 2024), allowing for a finer-grained attitude annotation of the data. The primary source of disagreement stems from text spans selected only by one annotator. This could be explained by the nature of the attitude identification process, the subjectivity factor, and human error. The cases of agreement tend to satisfy both attitude subtype and polarity criteria. The analysis has shown that categories of judgement and attitude polarity are central means of attitude expression in diplomatic communication.

Key words: diplomatic discourse, inter-annotator agreement, Appraisal Theory, evaluation, manual corpus annotation, attitude analysis

INTRODUCTION

For the longest time, human annotation was considered the gold standard in linguistics and computer science. The annotation process is usually tedious, both for linguists planning the experiments and for the annotators. The former need to establish a framework that would be clear, concise, and explicit enough so that the annotators would be able to understand it unambiguously and ideally would provide motivated, explainable, and reproducible results. The resulting outputs are judged through various inter-annotator agreement measurements, such as Cohen's Kappa (McHugh, 2012) or Fleiss' Kappa (Moons and Vandervieren, 2023). Traditionally, a higher agreement is supposed to represent the unambiguity of the well-prepared experiment and its execution.

Most importantly, the common approach to defining the good and bad annotations helps develop various natural language processing applications, as technical decisions, especially in large projects, such as large language models, are

made through a majority vote. What this approach needs, however, is the realization that very often, in linguistics, as in life, there can be more than one correct answer (Fuoli, 2018). This concerns all levels of natural language processing, in particular semantics and pragmatics, for example, lexical semantics, argument and sentiment analysis, and machine translation; there can be more than one explainable interpretation of a given task, and there often is.

Our work focuses on attitudes in diplomatic speeches, as defined by Martin and White (2005). A crucial part of the ongoing research on the theory and its implementations focuses on further development of the framework, possible interpretations, and, most importantly, the innate subjectivity of the very nature of attitude.

This paper is devoted to exploring the in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of the inter-annotator agreement and the double annotations themselves.

Our goal is to find possible weak areas in the annotation process and to identify, highlight, and classify the areas of innate subjectivity embedded within an experiment of this type.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As our goal in diplomatic text analysis was to discover the typical and non-typical ways of expressing evaluative meanings in a particular context, namely in the diplomatic discourse, we have first analyzed the existing approaches to attitude and subjectivity analysis and their outlined applicability (Anisimova and Zikánová, 2022). Another resource providing an extensive comparison between the various approaches to evaluation in discourse and semantics is the work of Hunston and Thompson (2000). In conclusion, when choosing between the grammar-based interpersonal and discourse semantics (Halliday, 1984; Ventola, 1987) and an approach founded on 'evaluative' lexis (Martin and White, 2005), we chose the latter one.

As defined by Martin and White (2005) and further exemplified by Anisimova and Zikánová (2022), the Appraisal Theory views appraisal as 'the language of evaluation [and] meanings in context and towards rhetorical effects rather than towards grammatical forms' (Martin and White, 2005: 94) and, therefore, focuses on analyzing such meanings as positivity/negativity, meanings by which intensity and directness are strengthened or weakened, as well as meanings of engagement. We can therefore distinguish between the three central systems of appraisal: *Attitude*, *Engagement*, and *Graduation*, whereby *Engagement* is concerned with how resources such as projection, modality, sentiment polarity, concession, and various comment adverbials position the speaker with respect to the value position being advanced and potential responses to that position; and, finally, *Graduation* is concerned with gradability, for instance, adjusting the degree of an evaluation while expressing how strong or weak the feeling is (ibid.: 35-37).

In the scope of our project and this paper, we have been focusing solely on the *Attitude* system of the Appraisal Theory. *Attitude* is concerned with our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgements of behavior, and evaluation of things (ibid.: 35). It refers to a framework for mapping feelings as they are construed in texts. The main parts of this system are three semantic subsystems covering what is traditionally referred to as feelings (*Affect*), ethics (*Judgement*), and aesthetics (*Appreciation*) (ibid.: 42). Each of the subsystems is then further divided into categories, as shown in Figure 1.

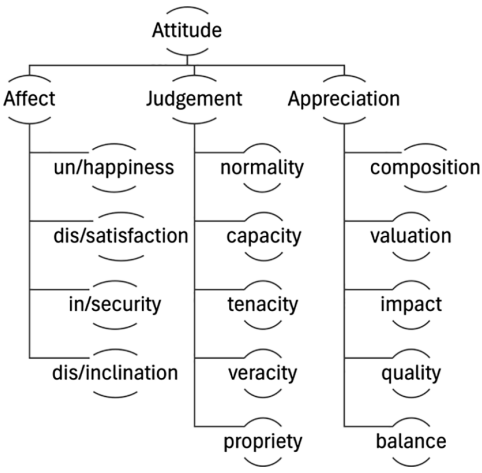

Figure 1 **Overview of the selected Appraisal resources**

The subsystem of *Affect* is designed to register a number of positive or negative feelings and emotions related to subjective evaluation of oneself or others. The range of emotions provided in the description of this subsystem includes happiness, security, satisfaction, and inclination. In diplomatic discourse, such expressions may, for instance, be found in greetings (as in 'We are happy to welcome …', which is an example of happiness) and expressions of one's emotional assessment of the situation under discussion (as in 'grieve circumstances', which is an example of insecurity).

The subsystem of *Judgement* deals with attitudes towards someone's actions or lack thereof. Within the many aspects of judgement implementations, the most important distinction is made between the judgement of 'social esteem' and 'social sanction'. The first term is concerned with the concepts of 'normality', 'capacity', and 'tenacity', whereas the second term is concerned with the 'veracity' and 'propriety'. When it comes to identifying a particular type of judgement in a subjective expression, one needs to ask themselves if the evaluation is of how normal, capable, resolute, and truthful someone is or if their actions are appropriate to the ethical expectations in a given context. In diplomatic discourse, judgement may present itself in various syntactic forms as it is often expressed implicitly. Some of these forms include modality (as in 'The truth must prevail', which is an example of

propriety) and metaphors (as in 'Nothing could be further from the truth', which is an example of veracity). The examples of the subsystem of *Judgement* being expressed explicitly (e.g., via a single evaluative adjective) in this context are rare.

The subsystem of *Appreciation* involves subjective evaluations of objects, especially objects we make and performances we give, but also includes natural phenomena – what such things are worth and how we value them. These evaluations may express the speaker's reaction to phenomena (and reflect on their impact on us, or on their quality), describe their composition (and evaluate how balanced and complex they are), and their value (Martin and White, 2005: 56). The usual realization of this subsystem is an adjective or an adverb, which is also the typical representation we see in diplomatic speeches, as in 'direct and open', 'tragic', 'successful' etc.

Among the three presented *Attitude* subsystems, *Affect* is considered central to the whole framework. *Judgement* and *Appreciation* are also centered around emotion, although in these cases, the emotion is institutionalized (ibid.: 45).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

As our research focuses on the diplomatic discourse, namely on discussions of international military conflicts, we have created our own dataset that would represent this area in the chosen period (CoDipA UNSC 1.0, 2024). For the sake of the experiment described in this paper, we have taken a subset of our data, namely four diplomatic speeches, which consist of 3501 tokens in total. The size of the selected sample is motivated primarily by annotation difficulty and costs, as well as the availability of the annotators. All the speeches are in English and were either conducted in it or translated by the UN translation services. The relatively small volume of data reflects the complexity of the task. The speeches were presented in 1995, 2001, 2008, and 2015, which partially covers the time frame of the language resource, namely from 1995 to 2015.

As it was mentioned before (Anisimova and Zikánová, 2022), diplomatic speeches have a specific structure that has evolved to fit the context perfectly and to serve the many purposes of international diplomatic communication. The diplomatic speeches of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) are highly formalized and structured; the syntactic structures vary from short and simple sentences to more complex ones depending on the communicative goal of the speaker: to be clear and concise or to avoid being specific. In the case of attitude representation, this distinction takes the form of an explicit statement (as in 'I support'), as opposed to an implicit subjective statement (as in 'We find it harder to understand, however, why others would join in playing that game'). Another feature is the subdued, understated tone of the texts. As the primary role of each speaker is to communicate their country's position, they often use the third person in the plural to highlight this. The speeches are usually long monologues, with a rare immediate response from the other party, so speakers rarely acknowledge the other's position. These features demonstrate that the linguistic characteristics

shared by diplomatic speeches distinguish them as a separate discourse group, suggesting they may function differently with respect to specific pragmatic dimensions, such as the expression of attitude. The specific annotation challenges observed when working with appraisal in diplomatic speeches include the issue of attitude identification, a complex cognitive process, further complicated by the overall vagueness, as well as the need to formalize longer lexical attitude-bearing expressions, such as metaphors.

The parallel annotation experiment was conducted using the *Doccano* annotation tool (Nakayama et al., 2018) and included two linguists, both of whom were non-native English speakers. Such a choice of annotators poses both additional challenges and benefits. On the one hand, linguists are expected to understand the complexities of the Appraisal Theory much better than the general untrained audience. On the other hand, native speakers outperform non-native speakers when it comes to dealing with complex elements of evaluative language like irony and metaphor, which can pose challenges for non-native speakers (Martin and White, 2005). Each annotator was given a set of detailed annotation instructions and asked to select spans of an arbitrary length that, to their best knowledge, would fit into one of the aforementioned categories of the *Attitude* system. The annotation process for this experiment is similar to the one that was described together with the CoDipA UNSC 1.0 (Anisimova and Zikánová, 2024).

To analyze the data comprehensively, we used a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. This combination was chosen to leverage the strengths of both approaches: the qualitative analysis captures the subtlety and complexity of evaluative language, while the quantitative analysis supports statistical analysis of inter-annotator agreements and ensures the replicability of the findings.

The obtained annotations were statistically analyzed by utilizing the *.jsonl* output files and empirically analyzed by comparing the annotated spans in length agreement on all defined annotation labels. The criteria for manual inter-annotator agreement analysis were devised based on the observed intersections of annotation labels in the double annotations for all annotation levels, such as *Attitude* subsystem and type, sentiment polarity, and attitude explicitness**.**

AGREEMENT CLASSIFICATION METHODOLOGY

In this part of the paper, we will provide a description of our approach to manual inter-annotator agreement analysis that was created for assessing the double annotation of the *Attitude* system of the Appraisal Theory. The analysis consisted of a side-by-side comparison of the double annotations, where each inconsistency in the annotator's decisions was noted down and manually classified.

We will start with the description of the agreement on span, and then we will describe the annotated semantic features, namely the *Attitude* subsystem and type, sentiment polarity, and explicitness.

In terms of the span agreement classification, we distinguish between full, partial, and no agreement, with full agreement (the *Full* label) representing situations when both spans have exactly the same borders (i.e., they begin and end with the same tokens, and their lengths are exactly the same), partial (the *Partial* label) representing the situations when both annotators have chosen overlapping spans, and no agreement (the *None* label) used for situations when only one annotator has decided that the span conveys attitude. Although it is valuable for both annotators to agree exactly on the borders of an annotated fragment, we decided to give more freedom and did not restrict annotations to a specific number of tokens. This decision was motivated by the observation of complex lexical constructions (as in 'The rats are already abandoning the ship') that play an important role in expressing interpersonal meanings. The annotators were allowed to select a number of tokens, from one up to a whole clause if necessary; however, they were advised to aim at annotating as few tokens as is possible given a particular context. Such an approach to border definition further lowers the expected agreement; however, we prefer it at this stage of corpus analysis due to its informativeness.

As to the agreement on semantic categories, when annotators show disagreement within the attitude subsystem, i.e., when annotators agree on a higher level but disagree on the particular attitude type, we only include the categories on which the annotators agree in this particular case, further creating the basic agreement, representing cases where annotators agree only on the *Attitude* subsystem (*Judgement*), as shown in Table 1.

The situations where annotators agree on attitude polarity are further specified as *polarity*, as illustrated in Table 2.

The situations where the annotators agree on attitude-explicitness are further specified as *explicitness*, as shown in Table 3.

Table 1 **Example of agreement on attitude subsystem**

	Annotator 1	**Annotator 2**
Annotated span	Some continue to confuse the proposed review list with a denial list	Some continue to confuse the proposed review list with a denial list
Selected label	Judgement–capacity	Judgement–propriety

Table 2 **Example of agreement on attitude polarity**

	Annotator 1	**Annotator 2**
Annotated span	brutal	brutal
Selected label	Negative	Negative

Table 3 **Example of agreement on attitude explicitness**

	Annotator 1	**Annotator 2**
Annotated span	clear threat	clear
Selected label	Inscribed	Inscribed

Table 4 **Examples of a full agreement**

		Annotator 1	Annotator 2
Example 1	**Annotated span**	it must be the Council's purpose to ensure that that threat remains contained	it must be the Council's purpose to ensure that that threat remains contained
	Selected label	Judgement–propriety–positive–invoked	Judgement–propriety–positive–invoked
Example 2	**Annotated span**	Let me join my colleagues in welcoming	Let me join my colleagues in welcoming our new colleagues
	Selected label	Affect–happiness–positive–inscribed	Affect–happiness–positive–inscribed

In cases where annotators agreed on all the semantic labels, namely the *Attitude* subsystem and type, attitude polarity, and explicitness, the *Full* agreement label was assigned. Table 4 offers two examples of *Full* agreement, with full and partial overlaps of the annotated fragments.

RESULTS OF MANUAL AGREEMENT CLASSIFICATION

After the parallel annotations were analyzed according to the workflow described in the methodology sections, we created summarizations for each of the aspects (such as full agreement, aspects of polarity, explicitness, and attitude type and subtype).

We shall commence with the examination of the span agreement within the parallel annotations, as shown in Table 5.

We can see that among the categories used for full and partial span overlaps, the partial overlap occurs roughly two times more often than the full one (50 times over 27). The total number of cases with either full or partial overlap equals 77, which is roughly two times less than the number of cases where the annotated spans do not overlap. This finding indicates that the span definition lacks sufficient clarity and/or the task possesses a degree of subjectivity that limits its reproducibility to an exact extent.

Table 5 **Summary of the span agreement calculations**

Span agreement	Absolute numbers	Percentage	Percentage (relative)
Full	27	12%	35%
Partial	50	22%	65%
None	150	66%	
Total	227		

A summary of the agreement classification results is provided in Table 6.

This table indicates that, while disagreements occur at some levels in the majority of cases, when we look at the relative percentage (which only reflects calculations on agreement, excluding all cases of complete disagreement, as marked by the *None* row), the most common outcome is full agreement across all categories. Another important observation is that when at least some agreement on the presence of attitude exists, there mostly also exists an agreement on the core category (61 times over 16).

Table 7 shows the summary of the polarity disagreement calculations.

There appears to be minimal disagreement on sentiment polarity, namely only 2 percent. Such a small number signifies both the annotation guidelines providing sufficient explanation of the essence of this category and the subjective convenience of understanding the semantic meaning of both positive and negative polarities.

On the other hand, as suggested by the results of the double annotation analysis on the explicitness agreement in Table 8, this category may cause more doubt and disagreement.

Table 6 **Agreement classification results**

Tag agreement (Attitude)	Absolute numbers	Percentage (absolute)	Percentage (relative)
Attitude: Full	32	14%	42%
Attitude: Basic (disagreement on attitude type)	29	13%	38%
Attitude: no agreement	16	7%	20%
None	150	66%	
Total	227		

Table 7 **Summary of the polarity agreement calculations**

Polarity	Absolute numbers	Percentage (absolute)	Percentage (relative)
Agreement	73	32%	95%
Disagreement	4	2%	5%
None	150	66%	
Total	227		

Table 8 **Summary on the explicitness agreement calculations**

Explicitness	Absolute numbers	Percentage (absolute)	Percentage (relative)
Agreement	48	21%	62%
Disagreement	29	13%	38%
None	150	66%	
Total	77		

We can see that agreement does prevail over disagreement; in fact, the annotators agree almost two times more than they disagree. In this case, we would like to add that these particular results may be, apart from the reasons for disagreement in span, caused by the nature of the diplomatic language itself, for example, by reading complexity caused by formalized language and complex syntax. As mentioned previously, diplomats tend to avoid being specific with their language, which may explain an unusually high number of indirect evaluations such as metaphors.

A substantial portion of the number of full agreements derives from the agreement on the propriety category of the Judgement subsystem, which is also the most frequently selected tag in CoDipA 1.0.

DISAGREEMENT CLASSIFICATION METHODOLOGY

Generally, the types of disagreement are antagonists of the agreement types of label and span agreement. They stem from reversing the already analyzed data, as this can reveal even more information about the parallel annotation process. In this approach, categories on which annotators disagree do not appear in the disagreement cell of a given row. The more tags annotators agree on, the fewer tags would be present in the disagreement type column, which means full agreement would correspond to an empty cell for disagreement.

As our analysis at this point is very strict regarding annotation overlaps, we have defined a scale on which we will judge the disagreement to allow for a more flexible bond between the theory and practice. The importance of various types of disagreement is the following:

1) We assume disagreement on polarity to be of the utmost importance, as it signifies the annotators perceive the text in the semantically opposite way.
2) The second important type of disagreement is the disagreement in attitude type (affect/judgement/appreciation), as it signifies that the annotators perceive a subjectivity span in different ways (in terms of the Appraisal Theory).
3) The least important is the disagreement on attitude subtype (affect–inclination vs. affect–happiness), as such a disagreement type relates to a situation when both annotators agree on attitude type and polarity but differ in their perception of the details of the meaning of a subjectivity span.

RESULTS OF MANUAL DISAGREEMENT CLASSIFICATION

The results of the manual disagreement classification are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9 **Summary of types of disagreement**

	Absolute numbers	Percentage points
Polarity	4	2%
None (full agreement on all criteria)	9	4%
Attitude-type and subtype	16	7%
Attitude-subtype	29	13%
Explicitness	29	13%
Span differences	50	22%
Absence of annotation	150	66%

Disagreement on attitude type and subtype was observed 16 times; this result is quite positive, considering the task's difficulty and context. Further improvement of the description of the three main attitude types in the guidelines based on clearer semantic and morphologic criteria is expected to substantially reduce the disagreement, even if the annotators disagree on complex constructions, such as metaphors or irony.

Differences in the annotation of the attitude subtypes occurred 29 times. The reason behind it may be that a portion of the categories are hard to distinguish among (in particular, subtypes of Appreciation, such as quality and valuation, and vagueness in the description of impact).

Disagreements stemming from explicitness also occurred 29 times. This is due to two key factors: guideline imperfections and the prevalence of complicated semantic structures in diplomatic discourse.

The second most frequent type involves differences in span annotation, occurring 50 times. As long as annotators at least partially agree on the span and do agree on the core attitude categories (namely attitude type and subtype), we do not consider the span differences to be a major factor signifying differences in attitude perception.

Finally, the majority of the disagreement cases stem from the absence of an annotation tag, which means that the situation when only one annotator has considered a given span of text to be conveying attitude is highly prevalent. There are a few possible reasons for this type of disagreement: vagueness in the annotation guidelines; the volume of a given task (as annotators may have been tired and did not recognize attitudes); text complexity; and the innate subjectivity of the given task. In cases of annotation overlaps, when one annotation span, for example, selected by Annotator A, corresponded to the same annotation span, partially or fully selected for two annotation labels, for example, by Annotator B, we have counted two annotation pairs, where one could have a partial agreement, and another one corresponded to no agreement.

Let us further analyze this type of disagreement through Table 10.

Table 10 **Absence of annotation according to the attitude types**

	Annotator A (number of occurrences)	**Annotator B (number of occurrences)**
Judgement	19	64
Appreciation	7	41
Affect	1	17
Total	27	123

Judgement is the category that both annotators see the most (70% of all cases for Annotator A and 52% for Annotator B). This may further support our claim that the category of Judgement is central to the attitude expression in diplomatic discourse, as it is also the most frequent in the CoDipA 1.0. In terms of absolute numbers, Annotator B sees more disagreeing attitudes than Annotator A.

The majority of these reasons were addressed in the updated version of the annotation guidelines, which is expected to improve the reliability and replicability of the future experiments.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents the results of the manual analysis of the inter-annotator disagreement in the annotation of evaluative language in diplomatic speeches. Our double annotation experiment on a corpus of diplomatic speeches revealed significant disagreement between annotators, particularly in identifying attitude spans and specific subtypes. However, core labels such as attitude type, polarity, and explicitness exhibited relatively higher agreement, suggesting a shared understanding of the general evaluative tendencies in diplomatic discourse by annotators. However, attitude identification may require additional refinement and is the most subjective part of the annotation procedure.

The findings emphasize the need for improved guidelines and frameworks to handle the subtleties of diplomatic discourse. However, complete objectivity in discourse-related tasks remains out of the scope due to human interpretation's inherent subjectivity. In future research, we will aim to refine these annotation methodologies and explore additional strategies for reducing subjectivity in attitude analysis in diplomatic texts.

LIMITATIONS

This study presents results of an empirical analysis of the double annotation outcomes, in particular of the inter-annotator agreement and disagreement. The limitations of this work are related to both innate subjectivity of human

evaluation, both on the stages of annotation and analysis. The limited scope of the selected textual data may pose additional challenges in disambiguation of the presented research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work has been funded from the grant 205-09/260698 (SVV) of Charles University, and partially supported by 24-11132S (Czech Science Foundation): *Disagreement in Corpus Annotation and Variation in Human Understanding of Text*.

REFERENCES

Anisimova, M. and Zikánová, Š. (2022) Attitude in diplomatic speeches: a pilot study. *Proceedings of the 22nd Conference Information Technologies – Applications and Theory (ITAT 2022)*, (pp. 151-158). Zuberec: CEUR-WS.org.

Anisimova, M. and Zikánová, Š. (2024) Attitudes in diplomatic speeches: introducing the CoDipA UNSC 1.0. *Proceedings of the 20th Joint ACL – ISO Workshop on Interoperable Semantic Annotation @ LREC-COLING 2024*, (pp. 17-26). Turin: ELRA and ICCL.

Fuoli, M. (2018) A step-wise method for annotating appraisal. *Functions of Language*, 25 (2): 229-258.

Hunston, S. (2013) *Corpus Approaches to Evaluation: phraseology and evaluative language*. New York: Routledge.

Martin, J. R. and White, P. R. R. (2005) *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

McHugh, M. L. (2012) Interrater reliability: the kappa statistic. *Biochem Med*, 22 (3): 276-282.

Moons, F. and Vandervieren, E. (2023) Measuring agreement among several raters classifying subjects into one-or-more (hierarchical) nominal categories. A generalisation of Fleiss' kappa. Available from https://arxiv.org/abs/2303.12502 [Accessed on 15 July 2024].

Swain, E. (2017) Interpersonal style(s) in diplomatic argumentation online. In G. Garzone and C. Ilie (eds.) *Argumentation Across Communities of Practice: multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 127-148). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Thompson, G. and Hunston, S. (2000) Evaluation: an introduction. In G. Thompson and S. Hunston (eds.) *Evaluation in Text: authorial stance and the construction of discourse* (pp. 1-27). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

LANGUAGE RESOURCES

[CoDipA UNSC 1.0] Anisimova, M. and Zikánová, Š. (2024) Corpus of Diplomatic Attitudes of the United Nations Security Council 1.0, LINDAT/CLARIAH-CZ digital library at the Institute of Formal and Applied Linguistics (ÚFAL), Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University. Available from http://hdl.handle.net/11234/1-5532 [Accessed on 20 October 2024].

TOOLS

[Doccano] Nakayama, H., Kubo, T., Kamura, J., Taniguchi, Y. and Liang, X. (2018) *Doccano: text annotation tool for human.* Available from https://github.com/doccano/doccano [Accessed on 19.05.2022].

Mariia Anisimova (Mgr.) is a Ph.D. student and researcher at the Institute of Formal and Applied Linguistics, a part of Charles University (Prague, Czech Republic). Her research is focused on political and diplomatic discourse analysis, with the main areas of interest being attitude and argument analysis.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2478-2815

Email: zikanova@ufal.mff.cuni.cz

Šárka Zikánová (Dr.) is a research associate at the Institute of Formal and Applied Linguistics (Charles University, Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Prague, Czech Republic). Her research interests evolved from the word order in Older Czech (position of the clitic se, position of a verb, information structure, Latin influences) to the information structure and discourse relations in new Czech, compared to other languages. She is especially interested in the interplay of syntax, information structure, discourse relations and coreference. Her specific research area is implicit discourse relations. Nowadays, she is turning her attention to the psycholinguistic studies of discourse and other coherence phenomena.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7805-9649

Email: zikanova@ufal.mff.cuni.cz

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 17–30
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.02

GLOBAL CRISIS, LOCAL MYSTERIES: TRANSCULTURAL ECHOES IN THE CONTEMPORARY DETECTIVE NARRATIVE

EVITA BADINA
University of Latvia, Latvia

Abstract. The research examines the episode *A Climate of Death* from the British crime drama series *Midsomer Murders* (aired in December 2023), exploring how contemporary detective narratives integrate transcultural influences and ecological concerns. The study investigates the interplay of cultural diversity, environmental themes, and crime storytelling, using textual analysis as the primary method. Drawing on Wolfgang Welsch's concept of transculturality alongside ecocritical and postmodern perspectives, the paper delves into the narrative strategies employed in this episode. By contrasting these elements with the more traditional frameworks of the *Sherlock Holmes* saga, the research highlights a shift in detective fiction – from reflecting Victorian-era cultural binaries to engaging with modern global anxieties. The study demonstrates that *Midsomer Murders* retains the genre's foundational conventions while addressing contemporary societal challenges, creating a narrative space where local and global concerns converge.

Key words: transculturality, detective fiction, *Midsomer Murders*, *A Climate of Death*, postmodern irony

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its development, originating in Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Ratiocination*, police professional stories, and the first adventures of Sherlock Holmes in the 19th century, the Anglophone detective narrative has always mirrored the cultural norms and tendencies, societal concerns and political moods of the respective era, be it the issue of racism as in *The Yellow Face* (Doyle, 2009a), religious controversialities as in *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle, 2009b), gender role expectations as in *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches* (Doyle, 2009c) or spy games as in *The Purloined Letter* (Poe, 1966: 57-85) or *The Naval Treaty* (Doyle, 2009d). Across different media, contemporary detective narratives offer rich material for exploring how the modern world problems circulating in society are reinterpreted on page, screen, or stage.

Though it is noted that such a view on detective fiction tends to ignore 'issues of structure and style' (Mullen and O'Beime, 2000: i), the present paper follows the dominating tradition. It focuses on the approach of '"symptomatic" interpretation, where details of the fictional world represented are used to diagnose a specific set of social preoccupations and priorities operative at the time of writing' (ibid.), more specifically, the collision of ecological concerns, transculturality, societal expectations, and individual human interests as represented on the screen. Additionally, it must be emphasised that the focus is on the detective narrative. As such, in its contemporary embodiment, it still tends to be what Cawelti (1972: 122) defined as a 'formula stor[y]' or, in other words, 'structures of narrative conventions' (ibid.: 123) with a specific plot, characters and settings.

Contextually, *A Climate of Death* (2023), an episode of the British crime drama series *Midsomer Murders*, reveals the murderous essence of the specific episode and symbolically connects the homicides to the fundamental elements of nature. In Sleepy Goodman's Land, known as the greenest village in Midsomer ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 1' 04''), one victim dies from a stroke with a stone and is buried in the field (Earth), another is stabbed in the chest with a weathervane (Air), the next with an AeroCone Rain Collector (Water), and the last victim is poisoned with Capsaicin, the active component of chilli peppers (Fire). These methods of murder subtly allude to the destructive relationship between humanity and the environment, drawing attention to the episode's ecological themes.

Although *A Climate of Death* touches on several topical issues that have become central in recent detective stories globally, both in books and on the TV screen – for example, pollution, climate change, and the exploitation of natural resources, in the case of *Midsomer Murders* (1997 – present), one still deals with a traditional British detective story, which, despite all the 'inventions' (Cawelti, 1972: 118), adheres to a familiar set of 'conventions' (ibid.): most notably, a clear-cut resolution and the restoration of societal order.

Noting the distinctively British character of *Midsomer Murders* adapted from the novels by English playwright, screenwriter, and novelist Caroline Graham, and set in small country villages across the fictional English county of Midsomer, accompanied by a notable soundtrack created by British composer James Mavin Parker – can we still agree with Wolfgang Welsch's assertion that 'Wherever we continue to speak of German, French, Japanese, Indian, etc. culture, what we really have in mind are *linguistic* or *state* borders – not genuinely cultural formations' (Welsch, 1999: 207). It becomes intriguing to explore what lies beyond the distinctly English elements in the series and to consider how these elements transcend *Englishness* and can be described as examples of transculturality, explained by Welsch as a form that '*passes through* classical cultural boundaries' (ibid.: 197).

To examine social and cultural mobility – how different cultures, ideas, influences, practices, and beliefs converge in contemporary detective narrative – the departure point is taken from the reference culture, the British. The iconic *Sherlock Holmes* stories are the most representative example of detective

fiction from the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the foundational canons of the genre were established. Moreover, in the episode under consideration, there is a direct reference to Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. One of the characters, a Texan, is excited when he sees Detective Chief Inspector (DCI) John Barnaby and his assistant, Detective Sergeant Winter, calling them Holmes and Watson and referencing the famous deerstalker ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 20' 20''). This postmodern, playful comparison highlights the difference between Holmes, a private detective – or, as he calls himself, 'the only unofficial consulting detective' (Doyle, 2009e: 90) – and Barnaby, a representative of the police institution, bridging the gap between classical detective fiction and the modern procedural. Examining these two distinct points on the timeline of British detective narratives – representing different forms of crime fiction (the private detective and the police procedural) and different media (print and screen) – was intentional, as both illustrate how the detective genre has evolved while remaining a popular and enduring storytelling format.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Central to this analysis is Wolfgang Welsch's (1999: 197) concept of transculturality, which challenges traditional notions of distinct cultural boundaries, 'the insinuated form of homogeneity and separateness'. According to Welsch (ibid.: 197-198), the 'altered cut of today's cultures' is characterised by the dissolution of the foreign-own distinction, leading to a hybridisation of cultural practices and identities. This theoretical standpoint is instrumental in analysing detective narratives, where traditionally localised settings, such as the English village in *A Climate of Death*, now serve as sites for global anxieties. The foreign is no longer seen as exotic; it has become part of a shared global identity. Characters like Rooster Harlin, who initially embody stereotypical American or foreign traits, eventually reveal deeper, more complex connections to the English village. This reflects the postmodern irony of the narrative, where former cultural distinctions dissolve into a more fluid, interconnected global identity.

In his *Transculturality: The Changing Form of Cultures Today,* Welsch (1999: 197-199) explains the concept of transculturality on two levels: (a) society's macro-level, which branches into, for example, networking, hybridisation, and dissolution of the foreign-own distinction, and (b) the individual's micro-level, which is explained by the scholar's consideration of 'multiple cultural connexions' and cultural identity in contrast to national identity. Following Welsch's framework, this analysis will examine several constituents of society's macro-level to illustrate the transcultural present in contemporary British detective narratives. The episode *A Climate of Death* will serve as a case study to explore how the traditional distinction between *own* and *foreign* transcends the fictional world of 21st-century British detective stories. To develop this discussion, we first need to define the traditional alternatives of own and foreign to trace their transformation. As Welsch (ibid.: 208)

states, 'The diagnosis of transculturality refers to a transition, or to a phase in the transition process'. He explains the 'double character of the transition': one moment is 'the ongoing existence of single cultures (or of an old understanding of culture's form)', and another is 'the shift to a new, transcultural form of cultures' (ibid.). This shift involves the creation of dynamic spaces where new identities emerge. Bhabha (1994: 38-39) describes such spaces as the 'Third Space,' or 'the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture' and states, '[…] by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves'.

Bhabha's formulated 'Third Space' complements Welsch's transculturality by illustrating how cultural identities are negotiated in spaces where the local and global intersect to create new forms of belonging. This dynamic is evident in *A Climate of Death*, where characters transcend fixed cultural identities to reflect the complexities of a globalised world. For example, Ken Makoto initially appears as a stereotypical Japanese student abroad, seemingly confined by simplistic cultural markers. However, the revelation of his true identity as Niko Akabane, a Japanese billionaire from Texas, disrupts these assumptions and highlights the fluidity of cultural identity in transcultural contexts. Similarly, Rooster Harlin's character reinforces these transcultural dynamics by merging his image as a Texan oilman with ancestral ties to the English village, illustrating the intertwining of local and global narratives in hybrid identities.

While these transcultural dynamics demonstrate the evolving complexity of identity in contemporary narratives, they also invite reflection on how traditional detective fiction approached the interplay of cultural boundaries in their time. The legacy of the *Sherlock Holmes* stories serves as a valid and productive departure point for examining transculturality in contemporary detective narratives. As Messent (2013: 4) notes, '[…] it is Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes that first gave detective fiction its enormous popular currency and began to make it such a resonant part of our cultural consciousness'. *Holmes*'s stories, with their strong ties to British imperialism and the concentric spatial model that centres the Empire (Badina, 2013: 158), represent a moment where detective fiction mirrored the cultural and ideological concerns of its time. By contrast, today's contemporary narratives like *A Climate of Death* reflect the shift toward transculturality, where the spatial model dissolves into overlapping cultural zones. In this way, the study of the episode builds on the foundational elements established by classical detective fiction but reinterprets them from the perspective of modern transcultural and environmental anxieties.

Examining the evolution from imperialistic frameworks to transcultural narratives also necessitates a postcolonial perspective, which illustrates how classical detective fiction, such as *Sherlock Holmes*, constructed cultural boundaries and representations of the *Other*. Thus, postcolonialism, as an added lens, provides valuable insight into how former imperial ideologies continue to shape narratives of *otherness* in detective fiction. Edward Said's (1979: 117) theory of Orientalism brings critical insight into how Western cultures have historically constructed

the East as 'the alien and exotic' *Other*. Said (ibid.: 20-21) describes Orientalism as a Western projection: 'Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West'. Especially relevant to this discussion is his emphasis on constructed representations of the Orient (ibid.: 21). As Said (ibid.) states, 'This evidence is found just as prominently in the so-called truthful text (histories, philological analyses, political treatises) as in the avowedly artistic (i.e., openly imaginative) text'. This claim is crucial in understanding how classical detective narratives like *Sherlock Holmes* constructed non-Western characters and cultures as inferior or mysterious, legitimating colonial power by portraying the West as the civilising force.

In contrast, *A Climate of Death* reflects a postmodern irony that undermines these simplistic representations. The episode plays with expectations of stereotypical roles. The contemporary narrative rejects the traditional Orientalist model by shifting from the clear-cut binaries of the past to more fluid, transcultural identities. In this sense, *A Climate of Death* represents a transition from the colonial mindset of the Holmesian saga to a more complex and global understanding of identity, where cultural boundaries are no longer fixed.

This progression from rigid colonial binaries to fluid transcultural identities aligns with broader theories of representation and stereotyping, such as those articulated by Stuart Hall, which provide critical insights into how cultural boundaries and the notion of the *Other* have been constructed and challenged in detective fiction. Stuart Hall's (2013: 247-259) theory of representation, particularly his discussion on stereotyping, intersects with Said's concept of Orientalism. Hall (ibid.: 247) argues that 'stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes, and fixes "difference"', and Orientalism can be seen as one specific instance of this broader process. Orientalism constructs Orientals as 'irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"' (Said, 1979: 40) – qualities the West seeks to distinguish itself from, '[…] thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, *normal*' (ibid.). In traditional detective narratives, such stereotypes cast non-Western characters as dangerous or exotic, reinforcing social and symbolic boundaries between the West and *Others*. However, in the modern-day *A Climate of Death*, these boundaries become more absorbent as the notion of the *Other* becomes more nuanced, reflecting the shift toward transculturality. While *Sherlock Holmes* reflects the clear binary between the British centre and its colonial peripheries, contemporary narratives dissolve these boundaries, addressing the complex interactions between cultures in a globalised world.

Hall (2013: 247-248) explains that stereotyping 'deploys a strategy of "splitting". It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable' and '[...] symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong'. In the episode, stereotyping operates not only through ethnicity but also through social and environmental conformity. For instance, the village's rigid eco-friendly policies divide those who conform to its green rules and those who do not. In this case, the *Other* is not only defined by ethnicity (Japanese Ken Makoto)

or nationality (oilman Rooster Harlin from Texas, USA) but also by those who deviate from the community's environmental standards (local villager Aldo McLean). This reflects Hall's (2013: 247-248) argument that stereotyping is 'part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order', as the village draws symbolic boundaries between the *acceptable* green advocates and the *unacceptable* transgressors of environmental norms. Those who do not adhere to the rules – whether by driving petrol cars or refusing to comply with eco-practices – are cast out as *Others*, reinforcing the boundary between the insiders and outsiders, the *normal* and the *deviant*. Hall's (ibid.: 226) idea of 'symbolic boundaries' helps to explain how the narrative uses these distinctions to explore tensions around power, identity, and social order, where the *Other* can be anyone who challenges the community's norms, regardless of background or nationality.

These symbolic boundaries, initially rooted in social and cultural divisions, extend seamlessly into the environmental domain, where conformity to eco-friendly norms becomes another marker of inclusion or exclusion. As the episode incorporates ecological concerns, starting with the macabre message implied in the title, and overall builds around literal and metaphorical references to the natural elements and green way of living, an ecocritical perspective is also applied to interpret the environmental themes woven into the narrative. Defining ecocriticism today, Garrard (2011: 5) states that in recent academic discussions, 'attention is increasingly given to the broad range of cultural processes and products in which, and through which, the complex negotiations of nature and culture take place'. The episode's allusions to the classical elements – Earth, Air, Water, and Fire – not only connect each murder to nature but also serve as a metaphor for the fragile balance between humanity and the environment. This ecocritical lens reveals how contemporary detective fiction reflects global ecological anxieties, situating environmental issues within broader transcultural contexts.

Thus, by combining transculturality, representation, postcolonial and ecocritical perspectives with the historical foundation provided by the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, this study considers how detective narratives adhere to and expand upon genre conventions to engage with the pressing global concerns of our time.

DISCUSSION I: FROM IMPERIAL SPATIAL MODELS TO TRANSCULTURAL NETWORKS IN DETECTIVE FICTION

> And when we come to Kipling, Conrad, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard, R. L. Stevenson, George Orwell, Joyce Cary, E. M. Forster, and T. E. Lawrence, the empire is everywhere a crucial setting. (Said, 1993: 63)

The *Sherlock Holmes* stories are fundamentally about the Empire. Doyle shapes spatial models that revolve around a central point, symbolising the cultural and ideological framework of 19th-century Victorian society (Badina, 2013: 158). These models reflect a hierarchical order, with the Empire at the outermost level, followed

by England, then London, and finally narrowing down to the home as the core of this worldview, 'Empire – England – London – House' (ibid.: 159). In this four-concentric-circle system, the outer circle – Empire – functions as a literal space and a symbol of the centripetal force drawing everything toward the heart of the Empire (ibid.: 161). In Doyle's stories, characters, events, and exotic elements make their way from the far reaches of the colonies toward the centre, where the imperial worldview takes hold; everything of value and importance is meant to be contained, but anything seen as chaotic or threatening is kept at a distance, pushed out to the margins to maintain order closer to the core (Badina, 2013: 161). The episode with Selden, the escaped convict and murderer from *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, is particularly illustrative. Barrymore, the butler, informs Watson and Sir Henry of his and his wife's plan to send Selden, Barrymore's brother-in-law, to South America, asking that they not reveal him. Watson and Sir Henry agree, seeing this as a relief for the English people, reinforcing the notion that problems should be expelled from the centre of the Empire to its distant, *less important* peripheries; as Watson marks it, 'If he were safely out of the country it would relieve the tax-payer of a burden' (Doyle, 2009f: 728).

In contrast, *Midsomer Murders* explores the English world in the context of globalisation, where the spatial code resembles more of a Venn diagram than a concentric circle system. In this model, the intersection represents the overlap between five spatial spheres on a single plane: the world, Europe, Great Britain, an English county, and an English village. With each new episode, the overlapping zone, or in this case, the transcultural zone, appears to expand.

In *A Climate of Death*, the *world* circle overlaps with the *English village* circle in terms of networking, hybridisation, and the dissolution of the foreign-own distinction. For instance, ecological awareness represents *networking*, which Welsch (1999: 197-198) identifies as an essential element of transculturality at the macro level: 'Lifestyles no longer end at the borders of national cultures, but go beyond these, are found in the same way in other cultures'. The inhabitants of Goodman's Land are primarily focused on living an environmentally conscious lifestyle. However, the opposing views within the local community echo the global divide. There are initiators of the green movement, environmental activists, and true believers, alongside power abusers and opportunists who conceal their ambitions behind the ecological agenda. Additionally, there are compromisers, reluctant participants, and outspoken deniers.

Upon entering the village, one is greeted by a billboard stating: 'Goodman's Land Eco Park: Driving petrol and diesel cars inside the village is prohibited. Rules: All lights are to be switched off at 7 p.m. No exceptions' ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 5' 00''). Welsch's (1999: 198) notion of 'worldwide material and immaterial communications systems and economic interdependencies and dependencies' is present here, enabling the 'questions of power' to surface. The village is equipped with several waste-sorting containers, and both e-scooters and e-bikes are available for use. However, the villagers are constantly watched and under surveillance. One of the activists spies on fellow residents, taking photos of anyone who breaks

the rules or avoids using an electric vehicle. He reports these violations to Havergal, the *Green Man Pub* owner, who believes he has the historical right to control the village.

Residents shop online (the *world* circle). Still, their parcels are delivered to the local pub (the *English village* circle), allowing Havergal and his wife, Dixie, to inspect and control the orders. Their daughter, Harper, an influencer dressed in pink, connects local issues to a global audience, though a local activist doubts her motives: '[The] question is, do you want to change the world, or are you just pretending? Fake and single. Not a good vibe' ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 14' 05''). Ginny Kilcannon, who used to repair cars, has become a taxidermist. However, to make ends meet, she sells her high-heeled shoes to online shoe fetishists. These examples of *networking* illustrate how global and local interactions redefine traditional boundaries, paving the way for hybridisation as an essential marker of transculturality.

To highlight *hybridisation* as an indicator of transculturality, Welsch (1999: 198) observes that 'Worldwide, in most countries, live members of all other countries of this planet; and more and more the same articles – as exotic as they may once have been – are becoming available the world over […]'. In the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, the Empire is represented in the central spatial models of England – London – House, with exotic elements that consistently signal the outer, most distant circle; for example, unusual knick-knacks from India, foreign servants, and bright colours that contrast with the typically mild English palette in *The Sign of Four* (Doyle, 2009e) or dangerous animals in *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* (Doyle, 2009g).

In the 21st century, many products once considered exotic or unusual for English culture have become commonplace and are no longer perceived as foreign. What was once regarded as foreign – equated with the exotic and belonging exclusively to other cultures – was often used to highlight one's specificity, eccentricity, or otherness in *Sherlock Holmes*'s adventures. However, these formerly exotic elements and *Others* in contemporary detective narratives have become integral to transculturality.

Thus, in keeping with the tradition of English pubs, the *Green Man Pub* organises entertainment for the locals. However, instead of the usual pub quizzes or dart games, it hosts the *Annual Hot Chilli Competition*. Participation in the competition does not evoke any sense of exoticism but rather invites people to test their limits. The challenge encourages participants to 'See How Far You Can Get Up The Scorch Board' ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 5' 24''), emphasising personal endurance and self-testing rather than cultural otherness.

Although hot chilli peppers are not a part of traditional English cuisine, they become a curious weapon in a duel between an American Texan and an English policeman. In the concluding scenes of the episode, the American, Rooster Harlin, challenges his British opponent, saying, 'We never did finish our competition. Great Britain versus America. You know you want to' ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 1h 27' 15''). This is followed by Barnaby's ironic encouragement to his detective sergeant: 'No pressure, Winter. It's only national pride you're playing for' (ibid.: 1h 27' 27'').

Interestingly, the episode illustrates the *dissolution* of the foreign-own distinction. As Welsch (1999: 198) explains,

> Henceforward there is no longer anything absolutely foreign. Everything is within reach. Accordingly, there is no longer anything exclusively "own" either. Authenticity has become folklore, it is ownness simulated for others—to whom the indigene himself or herself belongs.

This idea is reinforced when DCI Barnaby remarks upon the announcement: 'A chilli competition – nothing I like more than spicy food. You?' to which DS Winter responds, 'More of a sushi man myself' ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 5' 25''). This exchange highlights how chilli, once considered foreign, and sushi, traditionally Japanese, are now fully integrated into English cultural practices. These foods no longer represent exoticism but have become part of a shared global identity, illustrating Welsch's (1999: 198) point that authenticity is often an imitation, as cultures continuously borrow from each other.

In the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, the centre of the concentric circle system serves as a unique convergence of the three outer circles, with the house representing a secure, personal space (Badina, 2013: 169). For Holmes, it is a place where his investigative adventures start and very often end, making it both a literal and symbolic place of refuge. Chaos is resolved within this space, and social order is restored (ibid.: 169-170). While the house in *Sherlock Holmes* remains a bastion of stability and ownership, the transformation of the Havergals' Inn in *A Climate of Death* highlights how such spaces, once symbols of familial heritage, now embody the fluid boundaries between private and public, own and foreign.

The Inn is housed in a building that has been in Brian Havergal's family for generations, dating back to the 12th century. However, by the 21st century, what was once their own space has gradually become foreign. The Havergals are now forced to rent out rooms in the very place where Dixie's husband's ancestors once slept, symbolising how their private, familial space has been transformed into something public and commercial, blurring the lines between *own* and *foreign*. The mirroring of the numerals in the 12th and 21st centuries adds a layer of irony, suggesting a cyclical pattern where roles between the *own* and *foreign* are reversed. What was once a symbol of familial heritage and ownership in the 12th century has become commodified by the 21st century, reflecting how distinctions between private and shared or sold are configurated. This transformation of the Havergals' Inn from a private familial space to a commodified public one reflects the shifting perceptions of heritage and ownership seen in the dialogue between Dixie and Rooster, where differing views on the past reflect broader tensions between tradition and modernity.

What Dixie tells Rooster, the American, about her husband's family history carries different meanings for each participant in the conversation. For Dixie, it is an authentic account of her husband's ancestors' glory and power in the village, which, in her

view, justifies their current status: 'His ancestor, Arthur Havergal, gave the village its name, Goodman's Land. He was the "good man" who looked after the villagers. The Havergals, well, they are the village' ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 23' 33''). However, Rooster sees her story as folklore — a distant, almost mythological account with little relevance to the present. To him, it is merely a story for history enthusiasts: 'The past is, after all, another country' (ibid.: 24' 05''). This remark adds another layer, implying that the *good old England* Dixie clings to is a myth, a relic of a bygone era that no longer reflects the realities of the modern, globalised world. Dixie's categorical response, 'Not here, it isn't' (ibid.: 24' 13''), carries a sense of finality. Yet, it turns into another striking example of situational irony when it is revealed that Rooster's ancestors were, in fact, the actual owners of the village.

Thus, the episode challenges the historical binaries of *own* versus *foreign*. Postmodern irony adds to the narrative, reflecting a fluid, hybridised cultural landscape where the once rigid boundaries between the English village and the outside world dissolve. The impending village purchase by the Texan Rooster Harlin III restructures colonial dynamics. Traditionally, British detective narratives feature British characters asserting dominance over foreign lands or people, as seen in *Sherlock Holmes*, for example, in *The Sign of Four* (Doyle, 2009e). However, in *A Climate of Death*, it is an American oilman who is poised to buy the entire English village, a twist that symbolises a reversal of colonisation. Rooster's acquisition of the village mirrors the colonial practice of ownership but reverses the roles, as the foreigner – how villagers perceive Rooster – is now the one in power. Adding another layer of irony, as mentioned earlier, it is revealed that Rooster's ancestors are actually from the village. Yet, the dynamic of reversed colonisation remains intact, as the actual buyer of the village turns out to be a character who would represent the *Other* in classical detective stories – a Japanese individual who had been concealing his true identity until now.

DISCUSSION II: TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE EVOLUTION OF STEREOTYPING IN DETECTIVE FICTION

Classical detective narratives like *Sherlock Holmes* often used straightforward stereotyping to mark characters outside British society as the exotic *Other*. These depictions reinforced imperial views, with Eastern characters depicted as socially or morally inferior, confirming the dominant Western perspective of the time (Badina, 2013: 161). For instance, little Tonga, an indigenous man from the Andaman Islands in *The Sign of Four*, is a loyal assistant to Jonathan Small, an Englishman. Although Small calls Tonga his friend, their relationship resembles that of a master and his dog rather than two equals (ibid.). When Tonga takes the initiative and kills Major Sholto, Jonathan Small simply whips him:

> It was that little hell-hound Tonga who shot one of his cursed darts into him. I had no part in it, sir. I was as grieved as if it had been my blood-relation. I welted the little devil with the slack end of the rope for it, but it was done, and I could not undo it again. (Doyle, 2009: 140)

Doyle portrays the representatives of the East based on the stereotypes of his time about the peoples of the colonised territories (Badina, 2013: 162). For example, Indians are silent and reserved: 'The second floor is inhabited by Daulat Ras, the Indian. He is a quiet, inscrutable fellow, *as most of those Indians are*' (Doyle, 2009h: 601), and people from the islands are wild and fierce:

> Never have I seen features so deeply marked with all bestiality and cruelty. His small eyes glowed and burned with a sombre light, and his thick lips were writhed back from his teeth, which grinned and chattered at us with a half animal fury. (Doyle, 2009e: 138)

A study of the oriental text of the Holmesian saga reveals that Victorian Doyle initially positions the East as dependent, subordinate, and dangerous while portraying the West as a dominant and progressive force (Badina, 2013: 162). Pinaki Roy (2008: 35) points out, 'It is significant that in Sherlock Holmes stories the Orientals or individuals connected to the East never use modern scientific gadgets or instruments, […]'.

In contrast to these static representations, *A Climate of Death* introduces a more nuanced and complex portrayal of cultural identity. The episode plays with the audience's expectations by presenting characters who initially seem to fit into familiar archetypes but ultimately reveal more complex identities. For instance, Ken Makoto, a Japanese PhD student, is positioned as the *Other* through careless stereotyping related to his ethnicity and nationality. This is evident in an exchange between Harper Havergal, the daughter of the village pub owner, and Ken: 'I've heard loads about you. Village goss and all. It seems we have loads in common. I love Tokyo, and I love technology. And I love mango' ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 32' 04''). To which Ken corrects, 'Manga?' (ibid.: 32' 23'') This misstep highlights the superficial understanding of Ken's culture, reducing it to a collection of vague, mismatched associations that reveal more about the speaker's ignorance than about Ken himself.

When Barnaby visits the home of Ken Makoto, he immediately notices the high-tech security system guarding the house ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 56' 13'') – an image far removed from the exoticized or *primitive* portrayal of Eastern characters in Doyle's detective fiction. However, the layers of Ken's identity become even more profound. In a dramatic revelation, Barnaby uncovers that Ken is Niko Akabane, a Japanese billionaire whose sole focus is reversing climate change. Barnaby's discovery – 'Nice to meet you, Mr. Akabane. You are the person who's actually buying the village, aren't you?' (ibid.: 1h 16' 42'') – reveals that Ken is the one pulling the strings behind the village's sale. His plan to use the village as a 'test case' (ibid.: 1h 17' 06'') for climate reversal highlights how the *foreign* and

own are no longer fixed categories. What was once the preserve of local ownership and traditional village life becomes part of a global experiment addressing climate change.

Hence, in *A Climate of Death*, stereotyping operates not only through ethnicity but also within social and environmental dimensions. The village's strict eco-friendly policies serve as a new framework for defining insiders and outsiders. Those who conform to the village's green rules are seen as acceptable, while those who resist these environmental standards are cast as *Others*, regardless of nationality. Aldo McLean, the former butcher whose business closed due to the green practices, challenges the village's eco-regulations. He is portrayed as a transgressor, not because of his ethnicity but because he openly speaks against environmental norms, 'You're a disgrace, you know that? Wielding your unwelcome influence. Destroying livelihoods' ('A Climate of Death', 2023: 18' 40'').This reflects Hall's (2013: 248) argument that stereotyping maintains 'social and symbolic order' by fixing boundaries between the

> *acceptable* and the *unacceptable*, what *belongs* and what does not or is *Other*, between *insiders* and *outsiders*, Us and Them. It facilitates the *binding* or bonding together of all of us who are *normal* into one *imagined community*; and it sends into symbolic exile all of Them – *the Others* – who are in some way different – *beyond the pale*. (ibid.)

This reinforces the narrative's commentary on the fluidity of cultural boundaries in contemporary global contexts, echoing Hall's perspectives.

CONCLUSION

A Climate of Death exemplifies how detective narratives can address contemporary concerns while preserving the genre's traditional framework. By integrating postmodern irony with environmental commentary, the episode invites viewers to reflect on ecological issues through a symbolic lens. The murder methods – linked to the classical elements of Earth, Air, Water, and Fire – suggest a deliberate metaphor for humanity's destructive relationship with nature, encouraging a deeper, more interpretive engagement with the narrative. This fusion of themes with familiar detective tropes allows audiences to explore pressing anxieties within a recognisable storytelling format.

The episode combines the familiar elements of mystery and resolution with more nuanced reflections on transcultural identity and shifting cultural boundaries. It plays with the spectators' expectations by challenging traditional notions of *own* and *foreign*, allowing characters to emerge in more complex ways than one might initially expect, thus defying traditional stereotypes and embodying the episode's transcultural themes. Figures like Rooster Harlin and Ken Makoto challenge viewers' initial perceptions by revealing more intricate backgrounds that blur the lines between *own* and *foreign*. Rooster, initially perceived as an outsider,

turns out to have ancestral ties to the village, complicating the notion of belonging. Ken Makoto, whose quiet demeanour might evoke stereotypical assumptions, is later revealed to be an influential figure with a hidden agenda. These characters transcend fixed cultural boundaries, reflecting a more globalised, interconnected world.

Building on these insights, future research could explore how transcultural detective narratives address other global crises, such as migration or technological ethics. Comparative studies between Western and non-Western genre adaptations could further illuminate their evolving role in a globalised world.

REFERENCES

Badina, E. (2013) *Detektīvstāsts no Edgara Alana Po līdz Arturam Konanam Doilam* [The Detective Story from Edgar Allan Poe to Arthur Conan Doyle]. PhD thesis. Daugavpils: Daugavpils University.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge.

Cawelti, J. G. (1972) The concept of formula in the study of popular literature. *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 5 (2): 115-123.

Doyle, A. C. (2009a) *The Yellow Face*. In *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (pp. 350-362). London: Penguin Books.

Doyle, A. C. (2009b) *A Study in Scarlet*. In *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (pp. 15-86). London: Penguin Books.

Doyle, A. C. (2009c) *The Adventure of the Copper Beeches*. In *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (pp. 316-332). London: Penguin Books.

Doyle, A. C. (2009d) *The Naval Treaty*. In *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (pp. 447-469). London: Penguin Books.

Doyle, A. C. (2009e) *The Sign of Four*. In *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (pp. 89-158). London: Penguin Books.

Doyle, A. C. (2009f) *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. In *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (pp. 669-766). London: Penguin Books.

Doyle, A. C. (2009g) *The Adventure of the Speckled Band*. In *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (pp. 257-273). London: Penguin Books.

Doyle, A. C. (2009h) *The Adventure of the Three Students*. In *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (pp. 596-607). London: Penguin Books

Garrard, G. (2011) *Ecocriticism*, 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Hall, S. (2013) The spectacle of the 'Other'. In S. Hall, J. Evans and S. Nixon (eds.) *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 215-271). Los Angeles a.o.: Sage.

Messent, P. (2013) *The Crime Fiction Handbook*. Chichester and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Mullen, A. and O'Beime, E. (2000) Introduction. In A. Mullen and E. O'Beime (eds.) *Crime Scenes: detective narratives in European culture since 1945* (pp. i-vi). Leiden: Brill.

Poe, E. A. (1966) *The Purloined Letter. The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. New York: F. Watts.

Roy, P. (2008) *The Manichean Investigators: postcolonial and culture rereading of the Sherlock Holmes and Byomkesh Bakshi stories*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons.

Said, E. W. (1979) *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.

Said, E. W. (1993) *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage.

Welsch, W. (1999) Transculturality: the changing form of cultures today. In M. Featherstone and S. Lash (eds.) *Spaces of Culture: city, nation, world* (pp. 194-213). London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

SOURCE ANALYSED

'A Climate of Death' (2023) *Midsomer Murders*, series 24, episode 4. Directed by Leon Lopez. Written by Maria Ward. First broadcast 25 December 2023 [DVD]. London, Bentley Productions.

Evita Badina (Dr. philol.) is working as an Assistant Professor of Literary Studies at the University of Latvia. Her main research interests involve 20th-century Anglophone literature, comparative studies, genre literature and mass culture.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9604-3464

Email: evita.badina@lu.lv

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 31–50
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.03

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE INTEGRATION IN ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT PERSPECTIVES IN SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY SETTINGS

MONTA FARNESTE and TATJANA BICJUTKO
University of Latvia, Latvia

Abstract. In the rapidly changing world, educational establishments are facing a new reality and have to consider measures so that AI-powered tools neither harm the education process nor impede learning outcomes. Thus, the goal of the present study was to investigate student experiences in using AI when acquiring academic writing skills in English. The research method chosen for the study was a questionnaire survey. The research questions posed for the survey were: (1) Which types of AI-powered tools do students use in their language learning process? (2) What do students think about their effectiveness? (3) How do they apply AI in academic writing? One hundred and eighteen upper-secondary school and university students from Latvia participated in the survey. Overall, students demonstrated high awareness of AI software, with ChatGPT and Duolingo being the leaders among AI-powered language learning tools. Still, a quarter of the respondents did not hold any opinion on the effectiveness of the use of AI tools in learning languages. It was concluded that the use of such tools in academic writing in English is irregular, cautious and/or secretive both at the secondary and tertiary levels.

Key words: academic writing, AI-powered tools, English as a Foreign Language, upper-secondary and tertiary-level students, survey

INTRODUCTION

With the problematics of artificial intelligence (AI) well-established in the public eye, AI use in language acquisition has been a source of constant debate. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the integration of AI-powered language learning tools has significantly accelerated, as learners developed their digital skills and started searching for more effective ways to complete their written tasks online. The authenticity of submission, however, has become a contested issue and in turn

raised the question of the reliability of assessment. Further, lesser effort spent on tasks with the help of AI led to devaluing the role of language skill development.

With AI-powered tools (henceforth AI tools) having become increasingly popular since the Covid-19 pandemic and all levels of students studying online, the public release of ChatGPT in 2022 only fostered student reliance on AI tools in their home task performance (see, e.g., Roe, Renandaya and Jacobs, 2023). This reliance on tools in the learning process could have been expected, as the present generation are digital natives spending much time on the Internet, finding out its affordances and, thus, quickly adjusting themselves to the present world innovations. By the same token, they are searching for new, more efficient ways to obtain the required results in their studies. This process has some positive aspects, as students develop their autonomous learning and digital literacy skills, including 'how to manipulate audio-visual or computer media (e.g., the Internet) as learning resources' (Council of Europe, 2001: 12; 141).

However, prior studies have revealed that students' use of AI tools may lead to misinformation, as non-native speakers can demonstrate better English writing skills than they really have (Dwivedi et al., 2023: 24); therefore, nowadays teachers should reconsider which tasks to give to their students so that they cannot submit tool-generated texts (ibid.). Scholars also warn about the threats of 'textual plagiarism' (Roe, Renandaya and Jacobs, 2023: 23) if users are not responsible for their text production.

Due to the need for measures to ensure that AI tools support rather than disrupt the education process, the goal of this study is to investigate student experiences in using AI tools when acquiring academic writing in English at school and university in Latvia. In order to reach the stated goal, three research questions were posed: (1) Which types of AI tools do students use in their language learning process? (2) What do students think about the usefulness of using AI tools in language learning? and (3) How do students apply AI tools in academic writing?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1 COMPETENCES IN ACADEMIC WRITING

In recent years, literacy and digital competence development have become inseparable within English as a Foreign Language (henceforth EFL) teaching, especially in academic writing classes. In the *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, literacy competence is defined as 'the ability to identify, understand, express, create and interpret concepts, feelings, facts and opinions in both oral and written forms, using visual, sound/audio and digital materials across disciplines and contexts' (European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2019: 5). Digital competence, on the other hand, refers to 'the confident, critical and responsible use of, and engagement with, digital technologies for learning, at work, and for participation in society' (ibid.: 10).

Developing critical digital skills in education is recognised as essential for 'promoting the development of a European digital education ecosystem and enhancing the digital competence […] of all learners for the digital transformation and a world mediated by digital technologies' (European Education and Culture Executive Agency: Eurydice, 2023: 4). In order to achieve these two priorities, four key initiatives are proposed:

- developing basic digital skills and competences from an early age;
- implementing computing education;
- supporting digitally competent and confident teachers and education and training staff;
- facilitating effective digital capacity planning and development, including up-to-date organisational capabilities (ibid.).

Thus, teachers must not only assist students in developing their literacy competences but also integrate digital tools, such as software, devices and artificial intelligence (Didkovsky et al., 2021: 9). However, the dramatic introduction of AI tools has sparked debate regarding their application, especially in academic writing skill development at different levels of language proficiency (e.g., Alharbi, 2023; Chen, 2024; Virlan and Tomak, 2024).

Furthermore, students should develop personal, social and learning-to-learn competences that envisage such skills as decision-making and collaboration as well as autonomous learning and working (European Education and Culture Executive Agency: Eurydice, 2023: 11). In turn, to enhance their writing proficiency and become more autonomous, students should master self- and peer assessment (Khodadady and Khodabakhshzade, 2012; Chung, Chen and Olson, 2021; Nemati, Ghafoori, Birjandi and Izadpanah, 2021; Cheong et al., 2022). Undeniably, both types of assessment require clearly defined criteria.

Thus, proficiency in EFL academic writing encompasses various competences, including autonomy, decision-making, collaboration, and independent learning. Today, this skill set is further enriched by digital literacy, particularly the ability to work with AI tools.

2 AI USE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

AI tools have become a part of writing classes as students are increasingly inclined to use them for completing their tasks (see, e.g., Eke, 2023; van Niekerk, Delport and Sutherland, 2025). Tools like QuillBot, WordTune, Jenni, ChatGPT, Paperpal, Copy.ai, and Essay Writer can help to improve EFL student writing (Marzuki et al., 2023; see also Khalifa and Albadawy, 2024; Tanjung and Dewi, 2024). Although Hammad (2023: 459) claims that AI tools are not yet advanced enough to fully write a research paper, he admits that AI tools can paraphrase the written papers so that plagiarism may not be detected. Therefore, he emphasises that penalties are considered for the use of AI tools in content and result generation (ibid.).

As to the reliability of research papers due to potential plagiarism, Casal and Kessler (2023: 11) warn that only 38.9 per cent of the reviewers were able to distinguish AI-generated text from human writing. As a result, almost one fourth of the respondents (25.9%) require that such tools be not acceptable, as they cannot ensure the reliability of the produced text (ibid.: 8).

Academic writing includes 'a variety of genres, from student essay to refereed journal article to grant proposal' (Tardy, 2016: 47), with academic essays used both at the secondary and tertiary levels for developing student writing skills (e.g., Frattarola, 2021; Maamuujav, Olson and Chung, 2021; Jo, 2021). Furthermore, research paper writing is also included at both education levels; for example, Roxas' (2023) study focuses on collaborative research writing at senior secondary school, whereas a study by Gupta et al. (2022) examines academic writing support for doctoral students. Although academic essays still dominate as assessment tools in higher education, Baglione (2008: 595) considers that more attention should be devoted to other genres, for example, research papers (see also Nesi and Gardner, 2012; Tribble, 2015). Tertiary-level writers need to master both

> cognitive (critical reflection) and metacognitive thinking skills (planning, reflection, assessment, and repair) to compose successful summary or paraphrase citations. These require writers to draw on their prior knowledge, existing English language resources and personal composing strategies to be able to successfully synthesise source content. (Wette, 2021: 2)

Writers should possess a variety of skills to produce research papers, namely, research, writing process and genre production skills; their lack might make novice researchers rely too much on AI-enhanced writing tools (Barrot, 2023, and Koltovskaia, 2020, cited in Warschauer et al., 2023: 3; Radtke and Rummel, 2025). Previous studies have also registered students' concern in relation to the reliability of AI tool use in text production; for example, Grammarly was said to be unable to 'detect the errors of logical development between sentences' (Chang et al., 2021: para. 24), as well as suggested edits to already correct sentences.

Despite the problems that inexperienced students may encounter when using AI tools, nowadays nobody can ignore their existence and increasing importance in the labour market, where 'employers value efficiency and productivity over authenticity' (Warschauer et al., 2023: 3), and thus less proficient writers may be at a disadvantage.

Currently, it is important that writing instructors are trained to be skilled enough to integrate new digital tools in their teaching. The evolving landscape requires 'teaching and learning skills, digital literacy and capabilities, motivation to innovate, adaptability and resilience, to name but a few' (Enomoto, Warner and Nygaard, 2021: 9). The rapid pace of AI development makes it hard to predict its full impact, as 'most people do not fully understand AI, the decisions that can be made by machine algorithms, or the role people play when interacting with AI' (Carvalho et al., 2022: 2).

At present, the growth of AI tools and their applications are surpassing any imaginable expectation.

Given the identified issues, this paper deals with the current use of AI tools, investigates the students' perspective and focuses on how these tools are utilised in the development of academic writing skills in English at both the secondary and tertiary levels.

METHOD AND PARTICIPANTS

This study employed a questionnaire survey to gather data on students' experiences with AI tools in the context of academic writing in English. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part gathered basic demographic information, including participants' age, education level (secondary or tertiary) and gender. The second part focused on academic writing and the use of AI tools therein and consisted of 14 questions. Of these, 9 were multiple-choice questions designed to assess the frequency and types of AI tool usage in academic writing. The remaining 5 were open-ended questions, allowing participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions, as well as on challenges related to the use of AI tools.

The final draft of the questionnaire included an introduction outlining the research purpose and a note on anonymity and confidentiality, ensuring informed consent from the participants. The complete questionnaire was made available online via Google Forms. The link, along with a cover letter, was then emailed to the groups currently being instructed by the researchers, as well as to their colleagues involved in teaching academic writing in English, for further distribution. Prior approval from the administration of the educational institution was obtained to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and to prevent any issues related to the participation of minors. Additional distribution of the questionnaire was carried out using the snowball sampling method.

The methods for reaching upper-secondary and university students differed significantly, likely contributing to the discrepancy in the number of respondents. For upper-secondary students, the process was more complicated due to the requirement of obtaining parental consent for minors, which could discourage participation and delay administrative procedures. Additionally, upper-secondary students often have more rigid schedules and less autonomy compared to university students, which may limit their availability and willingness to participate in surveys. In contrast, university students are more independent and can be easily reached through institutional channels or digital platforms, making them more accessible for research participation. Moreover, the perceived relevance of the survey topic likely influenced participation rates, as university students may feel a stronger connection to academic research processes and the use of AI tools in their studies. These factors together help explain the disparity in respondent numbers between the two groups.

The responses from the multiple-choice questions were examined using quantitative methods. The frequency of responses and potential correlations were

processed using Google Sheets. For the open-ended responses, text analysis was conducted to uncover common themes and trends related to the use of AI tools in academic writing in English.

The survey was conducted between 5 December 2023 and 12 February 2024, and the study involved a total of 118 students from Latvia, with participants drawn from both upper-secondary and tertiary education levels. Specifically, the sample included 26 upper-secondary school students (henceforth SS) and 92 university students (henceforth US). Among the secondary-level participants, 2 were in the 10th grade (8.5%), 3 in the 11th grade (12.7%) and 5 in the 12th grade (18.6%). For the tertiary-level participants, 46 were in their 1st year (50%), 8 in their 2nd year (8.5%), 12 in their 3rd year (12.7%), and 17 in their 4th year (18.6%).

The sample had a predominant gender distribution: 87 participants were female (approximately 3/4 of the total), and 24 were male (about 1/5 of the total). Additionally, 5 respondents chose not to disclose their gender, and 2 identified as 'other'. In terms of age, the majority of participants fell into two key groups: those aged 17-19 years (59.3%) and those aged 20-29 years (35.6%). Smaller percentages were represented by students aged 30-39 years (5 students), under 17 years old (2 students), and 40 years or older (1 student). It is obvious that the bigger cohort comprises both SS and US, the overlap suggesting a bigger significance of education level in the present analysis of student engagement with AI tools in academic writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1 USAGE OF AI-POWERED LANGUAGE LEARNING TOOLS

Since the language used to define AI tools can reflect perceptions of their use and effectiveness, a word analysis of AI definitions was conducted first. The frequency analysis predictably revealed 'tool' (77 tokens), 'artificial' and 'intelligence' (42 and 36 tokens, respectively) as the most prominent words used in participants' responses. Although this finding might not suggest general understanding of AI as a toolset, the prominence of 'help' and 'can' (34 and 20 tokens, respectively) indicates a focus on AI's practical applications.

Next, two-word clouds of keywords used by the students to describe the nature and functions of AI tools were created and examined. Despite apparent similarities, the comparative cloud analysis pointed to certain differences in perceptions among SS and US. For the high schoolers, the use of words such as 'can', 'programmes', and 'abilities' strongly indicates a perception of AI as a resource that can assist humans in various tasks. Further, words such as 'human' and 'generate' highlight the idea that AI tools are designed to interact with and support human capabilities. The diverse range of words used by high school students suggests a relatively broad understanding of AI's potential applications, from education ('Grammarly') to creativity ('anything').

In the US' definitions, 'information' is nearly equally prominent as 'intelligence', the combination emphasising AI's cognitive capabilities. In turn, such frequently used words as 'specific' and 'tasks' suggest a more nuanced understanding and/or application of AI as a tool designed for particular purposes. A problem-solving orientation is evidenced through the prominence of 'questions', especially in combination with 'help'.

Thus, despite the mutual emphasis on assistance, automation, and the supportive role of AI tools, a more sophisticated grasp of AI's cognitive aspects demonstrated by the US suggests a clear progression in understanding. This, in turn, highlights the need for incorporating AI concepts into educational curricula at earlier stages, with the earlier introduction of AI conducive to a stronger foundation for AI proficiency.

The obtained data reveal notable patterns in students' usage of various AI-powered language tools, indicating preferences and differentiation among tools for general language learning versus academic writing (see Figure 1).

ChatGPT emerges as the most popular tool, with 47 per cent of all participants reporting general use, 32 per cent specifically utilising it in academic writing, and no significant difference in its use between SS and US. This high adoption rate suggests that the language generation capabilities of ChatGPT are widely perceived as versatile and reliable for both casual and academic applications. The one-third decrease of its use in academic writing raises some doubts about the credibility of the answers, though.

The next most popular tool, Duolingo, is used by 39 participants, more than a third, whereas in academic settings, it is applied by only 11 students. This aligns with Duolingo's functionality as a platform focused on general language learning and practice rather than specialised academic support. Still, the fact that nearly one-tenth of respondents use the application not meant for advanced learners raises many questions, which are, however, not to be addressed in this paper.

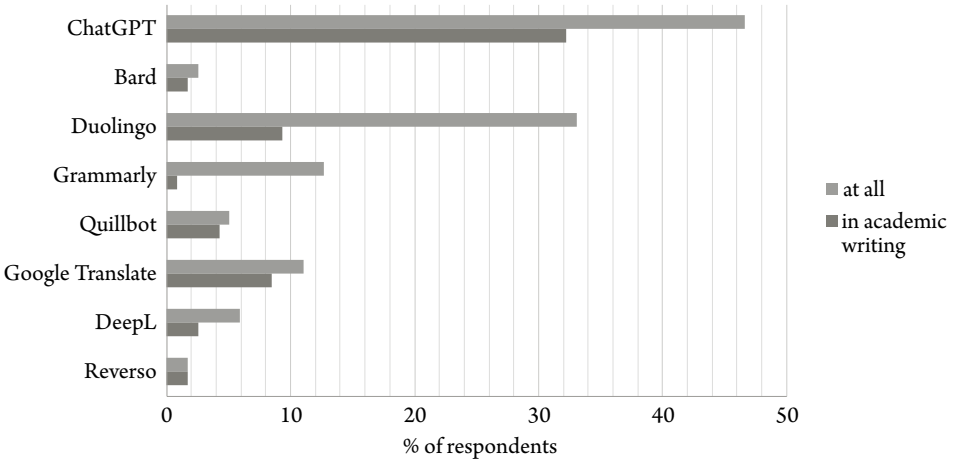

Figure 1 **AI-powered language learning tools used by students (%)**

Grammarly, despite its functionality for proofreading and grammar correction, shows 13 per cent general use, with only one respondent acknowledging its use for academic purposes. This may reflect students' preference for more comprehensive language generation tools, such as ChatGPT, when crafting academic texts, while Grammarly serves more as a final editing tool. In turn, only 5 per cent of the respondents admit to using the paraphrasing tool QuillBot, with 4 per cent applying it in academic writing. The low response rate for both writing assistants may suggest students' preference for more extensive support. Although effective for editing and rephrasing, Grammarly and QuillBot may be seen as more limited in scope compared to the broader functionality of ChatGPT, which can assist not only with grammar and paraphrasing but also with content generation, idea structuring, and answering questions in real-time. Furthermore, the free versions of Grammarly and QuillBot have reduced functionality, whereas the free alternative of ChatGPT evidently meets students' basic needs. Finally, the low use of Grammarly and QuillBot in academic writing might also suggest that students are not aware of how to use them effectively for academic purposes.

Google Translate also shows considerable use, with 11 per cent of the respondents using it overall and slightly less than 8 per cent applying it in academic contexts. Added by DeepL (6 and 3 %) and Reverso (2 % in both contexts), translation tools are seen as regularly used for both general and academic purposes. The accessibility and immediate translation capabilities make such tools a convenient choice, though of lesser use for structured academic tasks.

The rest of the listed tools include less widely known AI assistants, such as Bard and, mentioned by one student, Claude.ai. Similarly, a less popular language learning app, LingoDeer, as well as Google Docs and Google, were added by one respondent each. Thus, the results demonstrate students' preference for efficiency and multi-functionality in language support and accessibility in translation or language practice. Conversely, grammar and paraphrasing tools, although appropriate for academic writing, seem to be used selectively.

As for the motivations behind using AI-powered language learning tools in English studies, a 'personal interest or hobby' shows as the leading motivation among US, with half of them indicating this reason, compared to 38 per cent of SS (see Figure 2). 'Enhancing research skills' is another significant motivator for both groups, with around 39 per cent of US and 35 per cent of SS citing this purpose.

For 'improving academic writing', about 46 per cent of SS said they use AI tools for this purpose, compared to the slightly lower percentage of US at around 40 per cent. However, 'preparing for examinations' was a similarly strong motivator among both SS and US at 35 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively.

When it came to 'preparing for standardised tests', only around 20 per cent of SS cited this reason, while it was evidently higher among US at about 27 per cent. In turn, 'improving English language skills' had the highest response rate among SS, at 46 per cent, while the university students showed a much lower response rate of around 27 per cent. It is of note that for SS, improvement of academic writing and English language skills stand at identical high levels of importance, and in

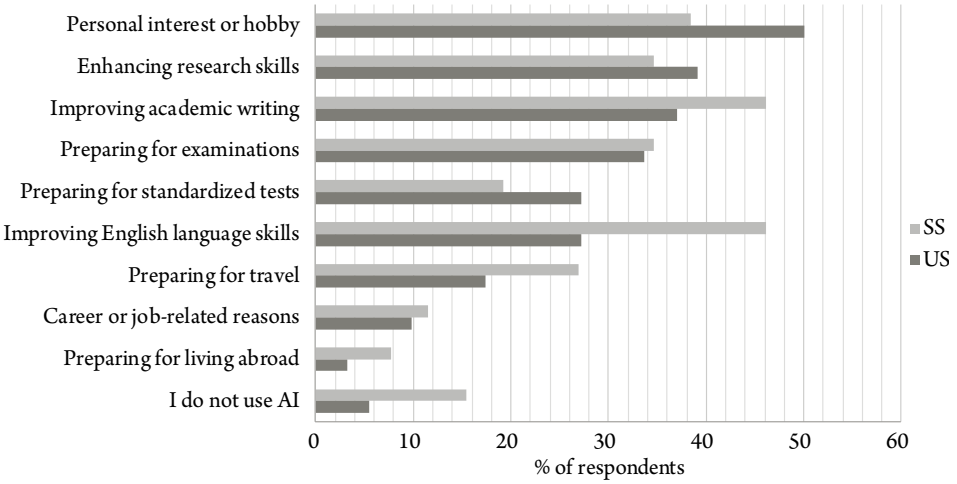

Figure 2 **Motivations for using AI tools (%)**

both cases, they rate it significantly higher than the other group of respondents. Such priorities could be explained by the changes in the upper-secondary school programme and its focus on the development of academic skills.

Among the motivations not related to studies, 'preparing for travel' has the second place after 'personal interest or hobby' and is of more significance for SS (27%) compared to US (17%). Other motivations such as 'career or job-related reasons' and 'preparing for living abroad' had significantly lower response rates in both groups, with career-related motivations at about 12 per cent for SS and 10 per cent for university students and emigration rational at about 8 and 3 per cent, respectively.

Finally, a notable proportion of SS, slightly more than 15 per cent, indicated that they 'do not use AI' tools at all, compared to only five US selecting this option.

This data suggests a divergence in motivations between SS and US, with SS focusing more on language skill improvement and academic writing, while US are more strongly motivated by personal interests and research enhancement. These findings highlight how education level and academic needs may influence students' reasons for using AI-powered language learning tools in English studies, though further research is necessary.

2 STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE USEFULNESS OF AI TOOLS IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Before discussing the views, the students took on the benefits and drawbacks of AI tools; several more aspects are worth examining, and they are the effectiveness and frequency of using AI tools in general writing and academic writing in English (Figure 3).

Answering the question on the perceived effectiveness of AI-powered language learning tools in acquiring a new language, more than one-third (37%) of the respondents found the tools to be either 'effective' or 'very effective', with 30 per cent expressing 'no opinion'. In terms of group differences, the bigger number of US perceived AI tools as 'effective' or 'neither effective nor ineffective' (33% each). In turn, SS were more likely to have 'no opinion' (35%). This data suggests that while overall AI-powered language learning tools are well-received, their perceived effectiveness may vary depending on the user's education level and experience.

Further, answering the questions of the frequency of using AI tools for writing in English in general and for academic writing in English specifically, the respondents admitted to lower frequencies, with 42 per cent of SS using AI tools in English writing 'less frequently than monthly' and 38 per cent 'rarely' using them in academic writing. The distribution of US' answers is slightly less uniform (see Table 1), though equally askew towards the lower frequency of the spectrum.

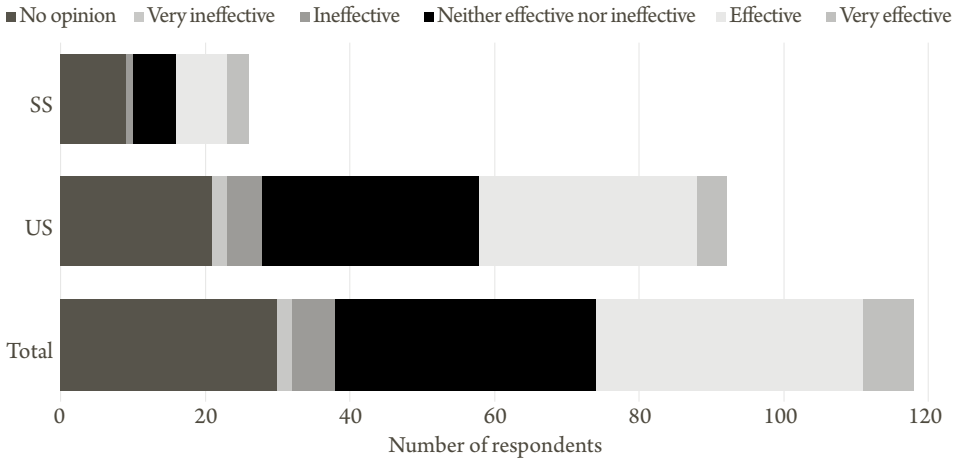

Figure 3 **Perceived effectiveness of AI tools in language learning (N)**

Table 1 **Standard deviation in perceived effectiveness and frequency of using AI tools in general writing and academic writing in English**

	Respondents		
	all	**SS**	**US**
p (effectiveness)	1.67	1.88	1.60
p (use in English writing)	1.24	1.11	1.26
p (use in academic writing)	1.00	0.92	1.02

The obtained data was radically different from students' private testimonies, and hence there was the necessity of further examination. Thus, a conducted correlation analysis between the two survey questions on the frequency and the one on the perceived effectiveness of AI-powered language learning tools showed a positive correlation between the frequency questions ($r = 0.59$), with a strong correlation for US and moderate for SS (0.63 and 0.43, respectively). For SS, the correlation between the effectiveness of AI for learning a new language and its frequency of use in academic writing in English is lower but still moderate ($r = 0.52$), whereas there is no significant correlation for US ($r = 0.22$), and neither between the effectiveness and the use in English writing for both groups (0.22 and 0.32, respectively). The findings raise the question of the integrity of the provided answers (particularly about the frequency), with a possible reason for adapted responses being the uncertain status of AI tools and their frequent 'criminalisation' (especially in university) at the time of conducting this survey.

The question about the preferences regarding the most valuable aspects of AI tools (see Figure 4) showed 'personalised learning' as favoured by more than half of the respondents (50% for SS and 53% for US).

The most notable feature among US, however, is 'ease of use', selected by 57 per cent of respondents, whereas this feature is much less prioritised by SS, though still significant, at 42 per cent, respectively. In turn, for the SS group, the most prominent feature is 'interactive practice', with 54 per cent of respondents indicating its importance. 'Real-time translation', while not the highest-ranked feature, is valued by 46 per cent of SS and 35 per cent of US, indicating its consistent, though not dominant, appeal.

Surprisingly, 'game-like features' are valued the least among US (18%) and show low levels of preference among SS (23%). Further, 'cultural information and tips' appear to be of the lowest importance for SS (15%), with a higher percentage of interest from US (29%).

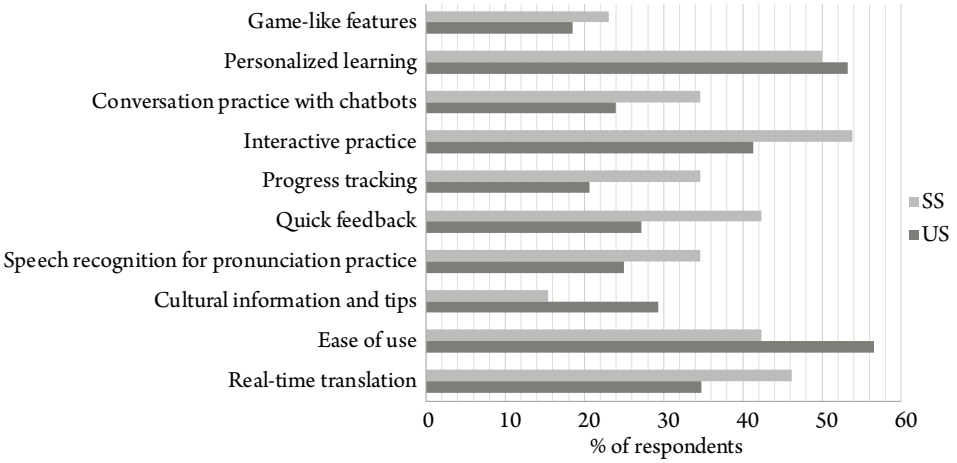

Figure 4 **Most valued features of AI tools (%)**

Other features such as 'conversation practice with chatbots', 'progress tracking', 'quick feedback' and 'speech recognition for pronunciation practice' show consistently higher levels of preference among SS than US. This data suggests that despite common attitudes towards AI tools' expediency, there are distinct preferences between the two groups: while US gravitate towards practical and technical tools, SS focus on their gamified and interactive aspects. Such differences could inform the design and customisation of digital language learning platforms for varied audiences.

3 AI APPLICATION IN ACADEMIC WRITING

The question about the benefits and downsides of AI-powered tools in academic writing may not have seemed to be loaded and, therefore, may have yielded a more objective response, especially among US.

The distribution of responses regarding motivations for using AI tools in the academic writing process (Figure 5) demonstrates the preference for surface functions of AI tools. As one respondent put it, 'You can source works related to the topic much faster than in Google.'

Overall, the data shows that both groups, namely, 58 per cent of SS and 47 per cent of US, primarily utilise AI tools for time-saving purposes, followed by obtaining tips and examples, at 42 and 52 per cent, respectively. Additionally, while a higher rate of SS writers tends to use AI tools more frequently for enhancing writing quality, immediate feedback and translation support, US report a higher usage for boosting confidence.

The overview of the basic uses of AI tools in academic writing among both groups of respondents helps to highlight distinct patterns in their application of these tools (Figure 6).

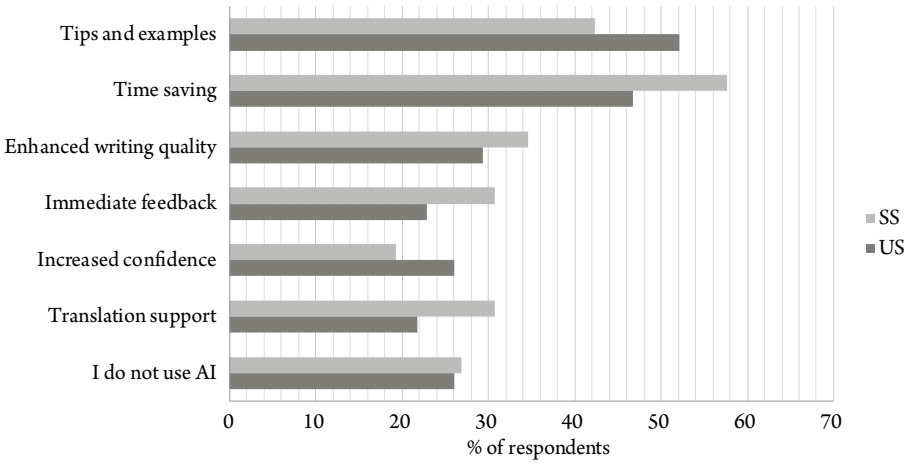

Figure 5 **Primary reasons for using AI tools in academic writing in English (%)**

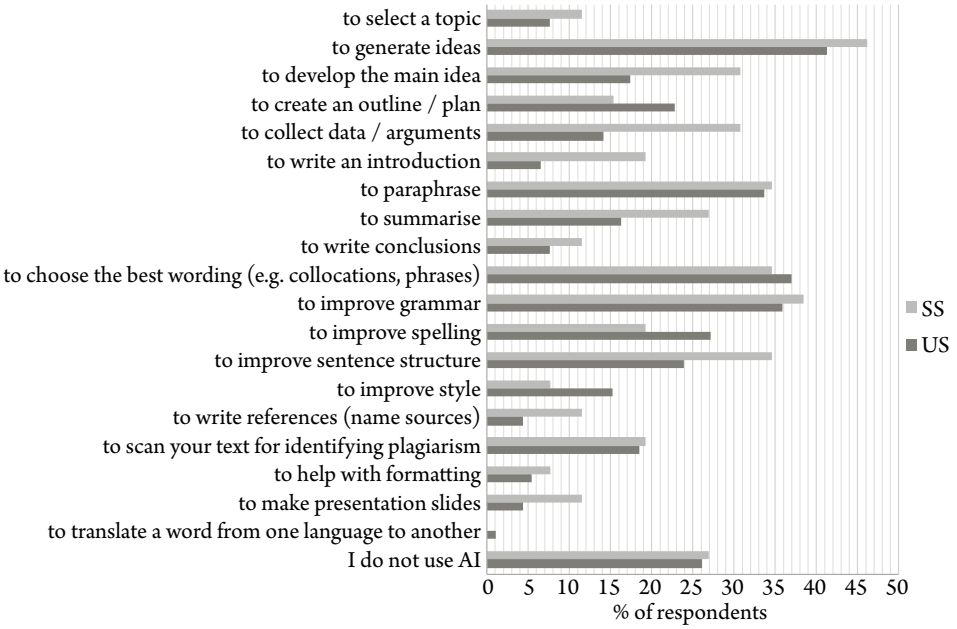

Figure 6 **Basic uses of AI tools in academic writing in English (%)**

The highest usage was registered for generating ideas, followed by such tasks as choosing the best wording, improving grammar and paraphrasing, where more than one third of the students in both groups utilised AI. The respondents from the group of SS reported higher usage across most tasks, with other notable peaks for improving sentence structure, developing the main idea, collecting data/arguments and summarising. In turn, US showed significant reliance on AI for creating an outline/plan and, surprisingly, for improving spelling.

The results suggest that both groups primarily see AI as a valuable resource for overcoming writer's block and initiating their work, as well as using AI in enhancing clarity and precision in writing. Whereas in building their academic writing proficiency, SS rely on AI for foundational writing skills and structuring their thoughts, US rely on AI tools for more advanced writing processes. This aligns with the higher complexity of their assignments, where spelling improvement serves to refine content for academic rigour. Still, lower reliance on AI for tasks such as writing conclusions and style improvement may hint at focusing on generating content rather than ensuring that the final product is cohesive and well-articulated, particularly among US.

Interestingly, a notable proportion of both groups reported not using AI at all, with higher non-use among SS, suggesting either a lack of necessity or unfamiliarity with such tools at earlier academic levels. Overall, the data highlights that while AI tools are leveraged for both basic and advanced writing tasks, university students utilise them more extensively, reflecting their greater academic demands and familiarity with technology.

However, it is important to note that more than a quarter of respondents claim not using AI tools in academic writing (27% for SS and 26% for US) (see Figure 5 above), which asks for further analysis. As it becomes clear from their answers, the two cohorts of respondents have different reasons for their refusal. According to SS, they often 'don't feel the need' to use AI because they 'have enough help for [their] studies' and believe writing on their own is easier than using AI tools, which may also mean their overall lack of AI experience or its irrelevance to academic tasks. On the other hand, US emphasise their desire to 'improve' their skills and argue that using AI 'significantly cheapens the learning experience.' They raise concerns about AI's 'accuracy, formulations, etc.,' and some consider it 'not recommended' or view it as 'plagiarism'. Lastly, they often prefer writing themselves 'as a matter of habit' to avoid issues with trustworthiness and academic integrity.

The attitudes are in harmony with the data on the perceived downsides of utilising AI tools for improving academic writing in English (see Figure 7). The analysis revealed that both groups identified significant concerns, albeit with some variation in emphasis.

The most prominent concern among US was 'accidental plagiarism', cited by 79 per cent of respondents, compared to 46 per cent among SS. Similarly, US expressed higher concern about 'overreliance on technology' and the 'risk of inaccurate corrections', with 'lack of creativity and originality' showing nearly identical high levels of concern among US and SS. These issues highlight a broader apprehension among US regarding the impact of AI on the integrity and quality of academic work. In turn, the SS responses suggest less familiarity or engagement with AI tools in academic contexts.

Further, both groups showed minimal concern regarding 'privacy' and 'unequal access', with these being the least cited downsides overall. This suggests that ethical and socio-economic challenges are perceived as secondary to issues of academic integrity and skill development.

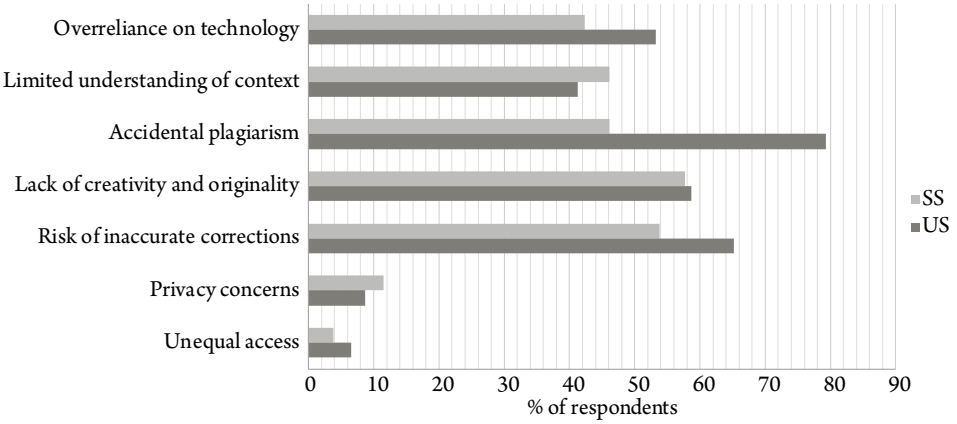

Figure 7 **Downsides of using AI tools for improving academic writing in English (%)**

The student comments further reveal a range of perspectives on the role of AI in academic writing, with common themes of scepticism, caution, and conditional appreciation. Many students are concerned that AI might harm essential learning skills by diminishing creativity and independent thought. As one student puts it, 'AI can only help to translate some words or give tips for improving style, but it cannot substitute [for a] human's brain.' Another echoes this sentiment, stating, 'I think AI is as much degrading as it is helpful.' Several students worry that using AI too frequently may undermine students' ability to think critically and generate original ideas.

A recurring concern is the risk of plagiarism. One student mentions that 'I would use it more often and for different reasons, other than just grammar check, if I wasn't so scared of accidental plagiarism.' This fear is widespread, as students acknowledge the potential consequences of unintentional plagiarism due to AI use. Some are also apprehensive about the quality of AI's responses, noting that it often lacks nuance and may provide misleading information. 'AI generators are really tricky,' one student writes, 'to use it fully for academic writing is a high risk as it often shares either misleading info or required analysis [that] is not fully covered.'

While many students recognise AI's limitations, some acknowledge its utility when used responsibly. 'AI is a great tool when used properly,' a student says, adding that it can be beneficial for grammar checks and idea generation. Another student notes, 'AI helps to make the structure more professional…[but] it also stops you from understanding [the] topic.' This reflects a balanced perspective, i.e., while AI can help streamline certain aspects of writing, it cannot substitute deep comprehension nor critical thinking. The view that AI should serve as a tool rather than a crutch leads to a suggestion for thoughtful incorporation of AI tools in a learning process: 'They should learn how to use AI to our advantage and not let it do the whole work for us.' Students should be taught 'the whole potential of AI usage…just to make [their] workflow faster and more enjoyable', which indicates a desire for better guidance.

However, several students are wary of AI's broader impact on society and education. One writes, 'If AI continues its fast development… and student access to chatbots and other forms of it continues being so unlimited, I fear it will eventually cause harm to the level of education.' Another shares a more philosophical concern: 'I'm scared of how far technology has gotten us.'

In summary, the students are split on the role of AI in academic writing. Many appreciate its potential to help with specific tasks like grammar, idea generation, and structuring, but most caution against overreliance on AI. They worry that it could impede creativity and deep understanding, and they stress the need for clear guidelines to prevent misuse and foster responsible AI use in education.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study underscore the growing role of AI-powered language learning tools in both general and academic contexts, revealing differences between

upper-secondary students (SS) and university students (US) in their perceptions, usage patterns, and motivations.

Overall, the students demonstrated high awareness of AI software, with ChatGPT and Duolingo being the leaders. ChatGPT emerged as the most widely used tool across both groups, valued for its versatility in generating ideas, structuring content, and addressing grammar issues. Whereas its lower usage in academic writing reflects concerns about credibility, the limited use of specialised editing tools such as Grammarly may indicate a lack of awareness or familiarity with their full potential.

Both SS and US demonstrate a shared understanding of AI as a supportive resource, yet their definitions highlight developmental differences in cognitive emphasis. While SS tend to focus on AI's broad potential for human assistance and creativity, US exhibit a more problem-solving-orientated view, with emphasis on specific tasks and cognitive functions. This suggests a need to introduce AI concepts at earlier stages of education to build a strong foundation for advanced digital literacy.

Motivations for using AI tools diverge, reflecting differences in educational priorities. While SS prioritise academic writing improvement and language skill development, likely influenced by the curriculum reform, US are driven by personal interest and research enhancement. This highlights the evolving role of AI tools in addressing distinct academic and personal needs across education levels.

Overall, the students express a balanced view of AI, appreciating its utility for specific tasks while cautioning against overreliance. Both groups emphasise the importance of integrating AI without compromising critical thinking or originality, their response implying the lack of clear guidelines and training.

Perceiving AI tools as effective, both groups still report infrequent use in academic writing. Furthermore, a quarter of the respondents did not express any opinion on the effectiveness of the use of AI tools in learning languages, which raised a question of potential underreporting due to the stigmatisation of AI in academic settings. Correlation analysis suggests that perceived effectiveness does not strongly influence frequency of use, particularly for US, indicating that external factors such as institutional policies or personal apprehensions may play a significant role.

Concerning AI application in academic writing, students do not seem to make any difference between using AI tools in learning English or academic writing. AI tools are primarily leveraged for foundational tasks such as idea generation, grammar improvement, and paraphrasing. While SS tend to rely on AI for basic writing skills and organisation, US use it for more advanced processes like outlining and refining content. Notably, concerns about plagiarism, overreliance on technology and diminished creativity are prevalent, particularly among US, reflecting deeper apprehensions about AI's impact on academic integrity and skill development.

Overall, these results suggest that AI tools serve as both foundational aids for less experienced writers and sophisticated resources for advanced academic tasks, reflecting varying needs and expectations across educational levels.

Several implications can be drawn from the present study:

- There is a need for systematic introduction of AI concepts at school to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of AI capabilities. Early incorporation of AI literacy into curricula can enhance students' ability to navigate and effectively utilise AI tools.
- AI tool application should be commensurate with language proficiency, and guidelines and tasks should be developed for beneficial AI tool application in the academic writing acquisition process at each language proficiency level.
- The teaching staff needs regular in-service training regarding the novelty in the AI tool offer as well as their application in teaching and assessing academic writing. For example, the introduction of editing and paraphrasing tools into a course of academic writing may aid teachers with assessment and feedback and help students with acquiring competence in academic writing. However, implementing a new assessment protocol is essential to uphold academic integrity.
- Institutions should develop clear policies and provide training on responsible AI usage to address concerns about plagiarism, academic integrity, and overreliance on automated writing tools and AI-generated content.

Overall, while AI tools hold significant promise for enhancing English writing acquisition, their effective integration into education requires addressing ethical and practical challenges to foster responsible and meaningful use at different levels of academic writing.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The responses from both SS and US writers suggest that AI tools are increasingly being adopted for various reasons, including efficiency, quality improvement, and language support. This finding highlights the need for further research to understand factors influencing students' decisions and to explore potential ways to preserve academic rigour and integrity in the process of wider adoption of AI tools for academic writing.

A larger number of institutions and age groups would help to make generalisations about the ongoing processes. However, in view of a quickly changing milieu, regular, even local, surveys would be even more beneficial.

Another grey zone is the teaching staff point of view, the attitudes often defined by uncertainty and fears and dependent on instructors' experience with AI tool application. The research into teachers' perspectives would undeniably aid the introduction and implementation of AI policies in education, which are to be many and changeable in years to come.

REFERENCES

Alharbi, W. (2023) AI in the foreign language classroom: a pedagogical overview of automated writing assistance tools. *Education Research International*, 1-15. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1155/2023/4253331

Baglione, L. (2008) Doing good and doing well: teaching research-paper writing by unpacking the paper. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 41 (3): 595-602. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/ S1049096508080803

Carvalho, L., Martinez-Maldonado, R., Tsai, Y.-S., Markauskaite, L. et al. (2022) How can we design for learning in an AI world? *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 3, Article 100053. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2022.100053

Casal, J. E. and Kessler, M. (2023) Can linguists distinguish between ChatGPT/AI and human writing?: a study of research ethics and academic publishing. *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, 2, Article 100068. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmal.2023.100068.

Chang, T.-S., Huang, H.-W., Li, Y. and Whitfield, B. (2021) Exploring EFL students' writing performance and their acceptance of AI-based automated writing feedback. In *Proceedings of the 2021, 2nd International Conference of Education Development and Studies (ICEDS '21)* (pp. 31-35). New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1145/3459043.3459065

Chen, Y. (2024) Enhancing language acquisition: the role of AI in facilitating effective language learning**.** In I. A. Khan, S. H. Halili, V. Balakrishnan and R. A. A Rauf (eds.) *Proceedings of the 2024 3rd International Conference on Humanities, Wisdom Education and Service Management (HWESM 2024)* (pp. 593-600). Dordrecht: Atlantis Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-253-8_71

Cheong, C. M., Luo, N., Zhu, X., Lu, Q. et al. (2022) Self-assessment complements peer assessment for undergraduate students in an academic writing task. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 48 (1): 135-148. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2022.2069225

Chung, H. Q., Chen, V. and Olson, C. B. (2021) The impact of self-assessment, planning and goal setting, and reflection before and after revision on student self-efficacy and writing performance. *Reading and Writing*, 34: 1885-1913. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-021-10186-x

Cotton, D. R. E., Cotton, P. A. and Shipway, L. R. (2023) Chatting and cheating: ensuring academic integrity in the era of ChatGPT. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 61 (2): 228-239. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2023.2190148

Council of Europe (2001) *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available from https://rm.coe.int/16802fc1bf [Accessed on 20 February 2024].

Didkovsky, M., Economides, A., Fominykh, M., Giordano, A. et al. (2021) *Digital Competences in Language Education Teachers' Perspectives, Employers' Expectations, and Policy Reflections*, 2nd ed. DC4LT Consortium. Available from https://www.dc4lt.eu/report/ [Accessed on 20 February 2024].

Dwivedi, Y. K., Kshetri, N. Hughes, L. Slade, E. L. et al. (2023) Opinion paper: 'So what if ChatGPT wrote it?' Multidisciplinary perspectives on opportunities, challenges and implications of generative conversational AI for research, practice and policy. *International Journal of Information Management*, 71, Article 102642. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijinfomgt.2023.102642

Eke, D. O. (2023) ChatGPT and the rise of generative AI: threat to academic integrity? *Journal of Responsible Technology*, 13, Article 100060. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrt.2023.100060

Enomoto, K., Warner, R. and Nygaard, C. (eds.) (2021) *Teaching and Learning Innovations in Higher Education*. Faringdon: Libri Publishing.

European Education and Culture Executive Agency: Eurydice (2023) *Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe 2023: digital competence at school*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available from https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/886074 [Accessed on 19 February 2024].

European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2019) *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*. Luxemburg: Publication Office of the European Union. Available from https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/569540 [Accessed on 20 February 2024].

Frattarola, A. (2021) A review of tertiarylevel writing courses in Singapore: pedagogical approaches and practices. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 43 (2): 368-383. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2021.1914546

Gupta, S., Jaiswal, A., Paramasivam, A. and Kotecha, J. (2022) Academic writing challenges and supports: perspectives of international doctoral students and their supervisors. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, Article 891534. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.891534

Hammad, M. (2023) The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) programs on writing scientific research. *Annals of Biomedical Engineering*, 51: 459-460. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10439-023-03140-1

Jo, C. W. (2021) Exploring general versus academic English proficiency as predictors of adolescent EFL essay writing. *Written Communication*, 38 (2): 208-246. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0741088320986364

Khalifa, M. and Albadawy, M. (2024) Using artificial intelligence in academic writing and research: an essential productivity tool. *Computer Methods and Programs in Biomedicine Update*, 5, Article 100145. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cmpbup.2024.100145

Khodadady, E. and Khodabakhshzade H. (2012) The effect of portfolio and self assessment on writing ability and autonomy. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 3 (3): 518-524. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4304/jltr.3.3.518-524

Maamuujav, U., Olson C. B. and Chung, H. (2021) Syntactic and lexical features of adolescent L2 students' academic writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 53, Article 100822. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2021.100822

Marzuki, Widiati, U., Rusdin, D., Darwin et al. (2023) The impact of AI writing tools on the content and organization of students' writing: EFL teachers' perspective. *Cogent Education*, 10 (2), Article 2236469. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2023.2236469

Nemati, M., Ghafoori, M., Birjandi, P. and Izadpanah, S. (2021) Self-assessment, peer assessment, teacher assessment and their comparative effect on EFL learners' second language writing strategy development. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 13 (28): 201-216. DOI: 10.22034/elt.2021.48543.2456

Nesi, H. and Gardner, S. (2012) *Genres Across the Disciplines*: *student writing in higher education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Praphan, W. and Praphan, K. (2023) AI technologies in the ESL/EFL writing classroom: the villain or the champion? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 62, Article 101072.

Radtke, A. and Rummel, N. (2025) Generative AI in academic writing: does information on authorship impact learners' revision behavior? *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 8, Article 100350. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100350

Roe, J., Renandaya, W. A. and Jacobs, G. M. (2023) A review of AI-powered writing tools and their implications for academic integrity in the language classroom. *Journal of English and Applied Linguistics*, 2 (1): 22-30. Available from https://doi.org/10.59588/2961-3094.1035 [Accessed on 20 February 2024].

Roxas, M. J. (2023) Collaborative research writing in the new normal: students' views, challenges, coping strategies, and takeaways. *Journal of Learning for Development – JL4D*, 10 (2): 297-311.

Tanjung, S. R. and Dewi, U. (2024) Enhancing students' writing ability through Quillbot: teachers' perspective. *SCOPE: Journal of English Language Teaching*, 9 (1): 458-463. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.30998/scope.v9i1.24862

Tardy, C. (2016) *Beyond Convention: genre innovation in academic writing.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Tate, T. P., Doroudi, S., Ritchie, D., Xu, Y. et al. (2022) Educational research and AI-generated writing: confronting the coming tsunami. EdArXiv. [Pre-print.] DOI: https://doi.org/10.35542/osf.io/4mec3

Tribble, C. (2015) Writing academic English further along the road: what is happening now in EAP writing instruction? *ELT Journal*, 69 (4): 442-465. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccv044

van Niekerk, J., Delport, P. M. J. and Sutherland, I. (2025) Addressing the use of generative AI in academic writing. *Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence*, 8. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeai.2024.100342

Virlan, A. Y. and Tomak, B. (2024) A Q method study on Turkish EFL learners' perspectives on the use of AI tools for writing: benefits, concerns, and ethics. *Language Teaching Research*, 1-24. DOI: 10.1177/13621688241308836

Warschauer, M., Tseng, W., Yim, S., Webster, T. et al. (2023) The affordances and contradictions of AI-generated text for writers of English as a second or foreign language. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 62, Article 101071. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2023.101071

Wette, R. (2021) *Writing Using Sources for Academic Purposes: theory, research and practice*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group.

Monta Farneste (Dr. Paed., Assoc. Prof. in Applied Linguistics) is currently working at the University of Latvia. Her research interests include teaching written communication and communicative grammar.

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0752-5021

Email: monta.farneste@lu.lv

Tatjana Bicjutko (M. Hum., researcher in Applied Linguistics) is currently working at the University of Latvia. Her research focuses on EAP, multilingualism in language education, and language management in upper-secondary and higher education.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9894-7555

Email: tatjana.bicjutko@lu.lv

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 51–68
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.04

LANGUAGE TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVE: DIGITAL COMPETENCE ENHANCEMENT CASE STUDY

ZIGRĪDA VINČELA and JANA KUZMINA
University of Latvia, Latvia

Abstract. The advancement of artificial intelligence and other related automation technologies has put forward new challenges at the tertiary education level, namely, the development of digital competence alongside the development of core knowledge, skills and competence of the study programme. These preconditions create favourable environments and justify the need to elaborate on digital competences in the humanities. To address these needs, the course *Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Language Technologies* has been designed as a part of the EU Recovery and Resiliency Facility project *Language Technology Initiative* and included in the BA study programme. The course comprises activities specifically targeted at the skills for language technology application for automated text analysis and synthesis and audiovisual material processing in students' professional activity and research. The goal of the present study was to uncover which digital competence areas are enhanced, what competence levels are reached by these activities according to the definitions in the DigComp 2.2 framework and pilot them. To reach the goal, the present exploratory case study focused on an in-depth investigation of the mentioned course, i.e., eight activities that aim at language technology skills were mapped according to DigComp 2.2 and piloted. This process revealed that the activities cover two competence areas at level 6 and level 7. The piloting results were summarised through the course performance metrics and the corpus analysis of students' questionnaires.

Key words: language technologies, digital competence, digital content, corpus, mapping, DigComp 2.2

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of technologies, artificial intelligence and other related automation technologies has put forward new challenges at the tertiary education level, namely the development of digital competence alongside the development of core knowledge, skills and competence of the study programme. Moreover, the National Development Plan of Latvia 2021-2027 lists 'knowledge, entrepreneurship, creativity, digital skills and technological competence' as 'critical for success in

the global economy, and a lack thereof poses the risk of lagging behind' (Online 1: 27). It also highlights the need for the economically active population of Latvia of all ages 'to increase their digital skills at different types of educational institutions' as well as encourages the educational institutions to create different curricula for improving digital skills from basic to advanced levels (ibid.: 34-35). The Regulations on the National Standard for Academic Education of Latvia set the following 'strategic goals for the first and second education cycles, i.e., to ensure that programme graduates are able to select and use information technologies responsibly and securely in their professional operations, research and life-long learning as well as in obtaining, creating and sharing digital content' (Online 2: cl. 3.2, trans. ours).

These preconditions create favourable environments and justify the need to elaborate on digital competences in the humanities. In order to address these needs, the EU Recovery and Resiliency Facility project *Language Technology Initiative* has been implemented. It aims to create higher education, research and industry synergy, facilitate innovation with maximum commercialisation, export potential in language technologies and increase the number of specialists with high-level digital skills who would apply these technologies skilfully for interdisciplinary product and service design. It presupposes the development in all prioritised applied knowledge and skills directions for recovery and transformation of national economy, i.e., national language resources and their analysis and use platforms, language models and tools for automated text analysis and synthesis, language technologies for audio-visual analysis, tools and infrastructure for inclusive education, as well as translation process automation. The project consortium consists of three leading universities of Latvia, i.e., the University of Latvia, Riga Technical University and Riga Stradins University; two research organisations, the Institute of Mathematics and Computer Science and the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Arts; as well as the language technology company *Tilde*.

To reach the primary goal of the project, i.e., to increase the number of specialists with high-level digital skills significantly by 2026, five study modules in language technology have been designed, intending to educate at least 820 users and developers of language technologies. The Faculty of Humanities provides language technology modules at bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels, covering 23 per cent of the total number of students.

Having considered the requirements of the National Development Plan of Latvia 2021-2027, the Regulations on the National Standard for Academic Education of Latvia, and the Cabinet of Ministers Regulations governing the EU Recovery and Resiliency Facility project *Language Technology Initiative*, the study module has been created as an integral part of the bachelor study programme. The module proposes the following goal: to facilitate the development of knowledge, skills and competence in digital humanities in English and Latvian studies to enhance the capability to solve complex linguistic problems related to language use, acquisition and research, using various language resources and digital text analysis tools.

The course *Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Language Technologies*, which is in the focus of the present case study due to the fact that it contributes most to reaching the required project KPI, is included in the language technology module at the bachelor level and is delivered within the study programme *English, European Languages and Business Studies*. Its objectives are to facilitate applied linguistics and language technology synergy while shaping students' understanding of theoretical, practical and research skills. The course also aims to highlight the application of acquired knowledge and developed skills in the professional context, thus developing critical thinking and forming analytical and research skills.

The course comprises activities specifically targeted at the skills for language technology application for automated text analysis, linguistic data extraction from text corpora, data synthesis and audiovisual material processing in students' professional activity and research.

Irrespective of the increasing topicality of digital competence in contemporary tertiary education settings, there are insufficient studies that focus on DigComp 2.2 (Online 3) descriptor application in designing field-specific activities aimed at digital competence advancement. The present exploratory case study contributes to filling in this gap by addressing the application of DigComp 2.2 descriptors in activity design and evaluation. The goal of the present study was to uncover which digital competence areas are enhanced and what competence levels are reached according to the descriptors defined in DigComp 2.2 by the activities designed and envisaged within the framework of the course *Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Language Technologies*.

Defining case context and boundaries has enabled the authors to shape the following research questions:

1) Which digital competence areas do the created activities help to enhance according to DigComp 2.2 descriptors?
2) Do the activities help students reach advanced or highly specialised levels of digital proficiency according to DigComp 2.2 descriptors?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND SUBJECTS

The research design, namely, exploring the situations in which the outcomes of the interaction are not clear beforehand, has determined the research method (Yin, 2003), which is an exploratory case study resting on data triangulation (i.e., activity mapping, course performance metrics and a student questionnaire). According to Casanave (2015: 119), it is focused on 'an in-depth investigation of a particular'. The particularity of the present case lies in uncovering digital competence areas and linking them with the competence levels reached through the digital activities to be implemented in the study course *Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Language Technologies* according to the definitions in the DigComp 2.2 framework. Researchers (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) propose to set boundaries when

implementing a case study as a research method, for example, by time, context or activity. In the context of the present research, an in-depth investigation applies, firstly, to the research of the case-pertinent package of documents: the National Development Plan of Latvia 2021-2027 and Regulations on the National Standard for Academic Education of Latvia, the parameters of the study programme, module description, course description, activity descriptions and DigComp 2.2. Secondly, the case comprises the package of eight types of field-specific digital competence-promoting activities. Finally, the case study includes the mapping and analysis of each activity according to the following instruments: (1) course objectives and (2) DigComp 2.2 dimensions – definitions of competence areas and competence levels. The subjects of the case study comprise 100 students who were enrolled and completed the course *Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Language Technologies* in spring 2024. After the course, the students anonymously completed a compact questionnaire containing four statements (based on Likert scales, see Rasinger, 2013) and two open-ended questions, which is a mandatory part of the University of Latvia quality management system: (1) What did you like the most in this course? (2) What would you suggest improving in this course? This approach was selected to obtain multi-faceted feedback on the digital task practice without immersing the students in 'information overload' (Rasinger, 2013: 68) by proposing a lengthier and guided questionnaire. The elicited answers obtained from Likert scale statements were viewed quantitatively, whereas the students' answers to open questions were arranged in files according to both questions and thematically categorised by the application of two corpus analysis approaches (with the help of *Sketch Engine*) – the extraction of wordlists (Jones, 2022: 127-129) to explore content words in concordance mode (Mauntner, 2022: 257) for thematic categorisation of students' feedback. Moreover, the following course performance metrics to ensure the triangulation of data were selected: course progression, instructor effectiveness, novelty of course content, self-tests, certifications and retakes. The choice of these criteria contributed to answering research question 2 and concerned intrinsic, extrinsic and interactive criteria of learner analytics (Ochoa, 2016). The data was collected from the learning environment *Moodle* in which the course was delivered and the University of Latvia Information System, which contains course exit questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed by all course participants, as it is a precondition for further semester registration.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concepts of digital literacy and digital competence have been extensively used in higher education discourse. Researchers Spante, Hashemi, Lundin and Algers et al. (2018) provide their systematic review, claiming that they are often used interchangeably; however, a distinction can be made if they appear in the policy, research or both and conceptualise solely technical skills or social practices.

Scholars who have considered the potential and the challenges of technology advent in language teaching during the first decades of the 21st century have addressed the conceptualisation of digital literacies (Chapelle and Hegelheimer, 2004; Godwin-Jones, 2021; Kern, 2021). Additionally, Kern (2021: 134) stressed that the digital literacy discussion was substantially speeded up by COVID-19 because it '[...] has put digital literacies at the heart of all learning'.

The researchers have conceptualised digital literacies in language teaching and studies taking into account the rapid advancement of new technology, versatility of the available tools and an immense growth of textual, visual and audio material on the web. Obviously, therefore, one of the commonly discussed digital literacy aspects researchers focus on is the skills promotion for managing texts, audio and visual material in various digital environments. For example, Chapelle and Hegelheimer (2004: 308) have emphasised, among a range of skills, the topicality of 'basic understanding of webpage design and creation [... of] how interactivity works on the web'. Another aspect refers to the challenges of digital content evaluation brought out by Godwin-Jones (2021: 6), who has emphasised that 'today few technical skills are needed to post content online', and therefore there is 'an overflow of online content so that separating the wheat from the chaff has become increasingly more difficult and time-consuming'. Further on, Godwin-Jones (ibid.) concludes that 'the emphasis has moved from how to use online tools and services, to how to find and consume trustworthy and personally appropriate content'. These aspects of digital literacies (web text management, tools evaluation, their relevant application and content evaluation) are summarised by Kern (2021: 143), who states that digital literacies in language teaching comprise 'listening, speaking, viewing, reading, writing, and critical thinking, along with the skills necessary to operate digital devices and navigate their various resources'. Kern thus has distinguished language acquisition-specific digital literacy skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and transversal skills (critical thinking, operation of digital devices and digital resource navigation). The inclusion of the transversal skill 'critical thinking' implies the applicability of the definition to critical digital literacy in language acquisition that is in the focus of recent studies, for example, by Satar, Hauck and Bilki (2023).

Researchers Spante et al. (2018) also signify the shift over time 'from a solely operational and technical focus on technology use towards knowledge-oriented cognitive, critical and responsible perspectives', which makes it possible to integrate digital literacy into any curriculum content. Their review highlights that the concepts are frequently used without definitions in policies and research, which is explained by their broader meaning, proliferation resulting in the inconsistency in referencing. Castaño Muñoz, Vuorikari, Costa, Hippe and Kampylis (2021) mention successful examples of integrating digital competence in the general curriculum using a transversal approach that encompasses different subjects in Australia, Finland and Estonia.

The development of digital literacies in the field of language acquisition and language studies correlates with the digital competence dimensions defined in

DigComp 2.2 'Digital Competence Framework for Citizens' (Online 3). The authors of DigComp 2.2, Vourikari, Kluzer and Punie, distinguish five competence areas: (1) information and data literacy, (2) communication and collaboration, (3) digital content creation, (4) safety, and (5) problem solving. As competence areas 1, 2, and 3 'can be traced to specific activities and uses' (ibid.: 7), they can contribute to the development of field-specific, i.e., in the context of the present case study, language studies-related digital competence. Whereas competence areas 4 and 5 cater for transversal skills development as they 'apply to any type of activity carried out through digital means' (ibid.) and tend to cut across the competence areas 1-3. Each of the five competence areas comprises the detailing of specific competences. In addition, DigComp 2.2 authors have proposed and worked out eight proficiency level descriptors. Each descriptor explicitly defines the expected attainment in each level and, therefore, is applicable for the distinction of the eight levels within any competence area. Thus, the descriptors of competences and levels form an applicable framework for defining digital competence advancement activities in light of the course, module, and the whole study programme goals they are contributing to.

Even if the topicality of digital competence is growing at the tertiary level due to job market demands, numerous studies, as Zhao, Llorente and Gomez (2021) have found, predominantly focus on questionnaire-based assessment of students' and teaching staff's overall digital competence level. The mentioned researchers' findings, however, reveal the lack of scholars' attention to field-specific practices of digital competence-promoting activities, hence the insufficiency of studies aiming at DigComp 2.2 descriptors application in field-specific digital competence-targeted activities, i.e., language technology application skills for automated text analysis. Similarly, numerous recent studies devoted to computer-assisted language learning (CALL) uncovered valuable insights and innovations concerning various aspects of digital literacy development practices, for example, the previously mentioned critical digital literacy (see Satar et al., 2023) that has contributed to the expansion of digital literacy conceptualisation, whereas without the involvement of DigComp 2.2 descriptors' discussion.

Finally, another factor to be taken into account when integrating digital literacy into a curriculum is unguided acquisition. On the one hand, modern students are considered 'digital natives', being confident with the use of digital technologies due to exposure. However, Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) contradict the concept due to the emergence of new technological solutions and rapid change. Pérez Escoda, Castro Zubizarreta and Fandos Igado (2016) as well as van Deursen and van Dijk (2014) add that previous personal experience, unguided exposure and use of digital devices is not sufficient for critical and responsible technology application, not only as a user but also as a producer. The research on digital competence at a workplace also verifies a gap between the present and required digital competencies of the workforce (e.g., Janssen et al., 2013; Ancarani and Di Mauro, 2018). It justifies the need for consistent and gradual competence building to become a confident, flexible and responsible adopter for academic and professional use.

To conclude, the following theoretical considerations will be applied in the case study. The conceptualisation of digital literacies in language teaching and studies focuses on the versatility of the available tools for textual and visual data processing and creation. The researchers propose to proceed with students' digital skill advancement for managing texts, audio and visual material in various digital environments as well as evaluating the tools and resources. Yet another consideration is students' ability to evaluate the credibility of sources and appropriateness of tools to present the data objectively. The activities will be selected and designed using these principles.

PROCEDURE AND RESULTS

This section uncovers the research procedure and results originating from each stage of the case study.

1 ACTIVITY MAPPING

The initial step of the case study comprised the creation of the course description for the 3 ECTS out of 6 ECTS course *Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Language Technologies*. As this course belonged to the module of the *Language Technology Initiative* project, its goal and objectives were envisaged to comply with the goal and objectives of the mentioned project module. Thus, the aim of the course to form and develop students understanding of digital humanities as a part of applied linguistics promotes the module aim that envisages students' competence enhancement in digital humanities, i.e., technology application for automated text analysis: linguistic data extraction from text corpora, data synthesis and audiovisual processing of language used in various contexts. Similarly, two course objectives were defined to comply with module objectives: The first objective, i.e., to facilitate the synergy of applied linguistics and digital humanities by forming students' understanding of integrated theoretical, practical and research skills, complied with the module objective promotion of students' skills for automated text and corpora analysis, leading to the synergy of applied linguistics and digital humanities. This objective was devoted to field-specific digital competence attainment by application of digital instruments for the selected linguistic feature analysis and their visualisation in order to characterise language use in context. The second course objective, to emphasise the use of the obtained knowledge and established skills in professional contexts, thus encouraging students' independent and critical thinking – analytical and research skill development – was targeted at transversal skills enhancement, which is also correlated with module objectives and targeted at the mentioned transversal skills promotion.

The definition of the goal and objectives for the course *Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Language Technologies* formed the basis for the second case study stage – the exploration of DigComp 2.2 descriptors. Their analysis confirmed that both field-specific, in this case language technology, as well as transversal

competence areas and their attainment level descriptors are topical for activity developers to meet the goal and objectives of the course. For this reason, activity mapping templates were created. The templates (see Table 1 and Table 2) were used as protocols for compiling data regarding digital competence areas and competence enhancement levels that each activity type envisaged according to the descriptors defined in DigComp 2.2.

The case study in total comprises eight activity types. Activities 1-4 (see Table 1) are aimed at linguistic data extraction practice from linguist-created corpora, text sampling for the creation of a micro corpus and the visualisation of the extracted data. Activities 5-8 (see Table 2) are aimed at digital content processing and creation practice.

Activity 1 aims at practising linguistic data extraction from English text corpora (available at English-corpora.org) by applying query syntax. This activity comprises two stages: the first, preparatory, stage envisages the exploration of the English corpora/sub-corpora metadata and linguistic feature query syntax options available on the website of the mentioned corpora management system. The metadata research, as noted by Egbert, Biber and Gray (2020), should involve detailed and critical assessment of the available information concerning text categorisation according to independent variables defined by corpus creators. Such critical evaluation complies with proficiency level 6 (critically assessing data, information and digital content) according to DigComp 2.2 descriptors. This preparatory stage

Table 1 **Mapping of corpus-based activities (Vuorikari et al., 2022)**

Title	Aim	Competence areas	Competences and DigComp 2.2 level
Activity 1: query creation and application	Query solutions for data extraction and filtering from English Corpora	1. Information and data literacy	1.2 Evaluating data, information and digital content 1.1 Browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content 6-7
Activity 2: digital content selection	Critical selection of digital sources for micro corpora	1. Information and data literacy	1.1 Browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content 1.2 Evaluating data, information and digital content 6
Activity 3: digital content transformation	Micro corpora text storage and management	1. Information and data literacy	1.3 Managing data, information and digital content. 6
Activity 4: digital data visualisation	Micro corpus data visualisation using *Voyant Tools*	1. Information and data literacy	1.1 Browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content 6-7

Table 2 **Mapping of digital content processing and creation activities (Vuorikari et al., 2022)**

Title	Aim	Competence Areas	Competences and DigComp 2.2 level
Activity 5: digital content processing	Solutions for automated annotation using CLAWS POS tagger and NLTK for Python	1. Information and data literacy	1.3 Managing data, information and digital content 6-7
Activity 6: database query and digital data visualisation	Relevant database query to compare grammatical phenomena across world languages; interpreting visualisation results on the map of World Atlas of Language Structures	1. Information and data literacy	Browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content 6
Activity 7: creating digital content	Creating and branching an interactive narrative using *Twinery* tool	3. Digital content creation	3.1 Developing digital content 3.3 Programming 6-7
Activity 8: selecting data visualisation tools	Selecting visualisation tools for creating digital narrative rich in multimedia (*Knight Lab*)	3. Digital content creation	3.1 Developing digital content 3.3 Programming 6-7

of the activity intends to contribute to students' competence in 1.2. Evaluating data, information and digital content, which is a part of the competence area information and data literacy. The second stage of the activity proposes the creation of queries to extract the selected linguistic features from the chosen sub-corpus as well as scanning and filtering of the extracted data to validate the created query by a more detailed observation of output; for example, the query for the extraction of the lemma 'woman' (The Corpus of Contemporary American English [COCA]) returns the data, including 'women', 'woman' and a word form 'womans'. Therefore, the subsequent concordance-based filtering of the output can, for example, uncover that the latter word form might stand for possessive cases, in particular, texts of a particular sub-corpus (e.g., 'The beauty of a womans heart'). Respectively, this activity stage caters for proficiency upgrading to level 7 according to DigComp 2.2 descriptors, i.e., the creation of solutions to complex problems that are related to browsing, searching and filtering of data, information and digital content. Query and their concordance-based verification practice is a stepping stone towards advancement of data extraction and filtering approaches for searching large-size data as well as the integration of this know-how in further academic studies and future professional practice.

Activity 2 aims at text sampling aspects that, according to researchers (see Egbert et al., 2022), involve domain and domain-internal categorisation challenges.

To address these challenges, Activity 2 envisages guided three-stage categorisation practice of British web news portal texts as the target domain. The first stage is devoted to the categorisation according to the thematic field, whereas the second stage is to the selection of news portals. In order to narrow the search to these two broad framing categories, the adapting and varying of searching strategies (proficiency level 6 according to DigComp 2.2) to extract texts is to be followed by their critical assessment to determine how far these information sources are reliable and comply with the two mentioned categorisation frames. The third stage of categorisation rests on critical evaluation of the extracted texts to create relevant sub-categories for their further grouping, for example, according to sub-themes, publication date and other variables. This activity caters to information and data literacy by enhancing the competences of browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content as well as their evaluation. This activity focuses on upgrading searching strategies 'to find the most appropriate content in digital environments' (Vuorikari et al., 2022: 10) and 'critically assess the credibility and reliability of sources of information and digital content' (ibid.: 11) that both comply with proficiency level 6 and is an indispensable competence in students further academic as well as future professional operations.

The purpose of Activity 3 is to practise text formats and their storage solutions for their subsequent automated analysis. The first stage of Activity 3 is the comparative observation of the way the same text is represented in different formats, for example, in its authentic environment – the World Wide Web – then extracted and converted into a Word or PDF document and/or plain text file. The follow-up discussion of the applicability of these formats and their preference for automated analysis of texts is the second stage of the activity. The third stage of Activity 3 is devoted to the format choices by students for the storage of their categorised texts that have been selected from British web news portals (see Activity 2) and are envisaged for their automated analysis practice. All three stages of the activity enhance the competence of managing data, information and digital content 'for the most appropriate retrieval and storage' according to DigComp 2.2 (2022: 11) and comply with proficiency level 6.

Activity 4 aims to enable students to evaluate and select *Voyant Tools* options for visualisation of linguistic data output. This activity is set up in two stages, the first of which is the observation and discussion (in small groups) of visualisation options available in *Voyant Tools* that can reveal the visualisation of linguistic output from diverse angles. For example, the tool distinguishing prominent lexical words (word clouds) and the tool uncovering their dispersion (e.g., bubble lines) visually reveal the role of these words from two different angles. The second stage of the activity envisages students' own solutions for the selection of relevant tools to provide explicit and viewer-friendly visualisation of the linguistic data that is extracted from their own micro corpora. Focusing on linguistic features and versatile visualisation options accounts for complex solutions regarding data extraction, filtering and output analysis in the digital environment of *Voyant Tools* and thus correlates with

proficiency level 7 relating to competence in browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content.
The second set of activities is devoted to text processing and data visualisation.

Activity 5 considers solutions for automated annotation using the CLAWS part-of-speech (POS) tagger and Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK) for Python, belonging to the information and data literacy competence area and developing managing data, information and digital content competences. The activity is set up in three stages: the preparatory stage to explore the functionality of the tools, set up the environment and import the necessary NLTK libraries; the first stage, i.e., the manual text processing to understand the expected results; and the second stage, the use of CLAWS and NLTK for automated text processing, involving basic programming in Python and the evaluation and analysis of the received data. Such a task setup paves the way from simple to more advanced automated text processing and develops students' knowledge on how to improve search results by using advanced features and customised queries of NLTK libraries (e.g., specifying an exact phrase for search or an item for tagging). The students learn to weigh the benefits and disadvantages of applying digital tools (e.g., processing larger amounts of texts or finding inconsistencies in part of speech or syntactic function tagging). The task is set in smaller groups, thus considering mixed digital abilities groups, where students create solutions to complex linguistic problems which are related to browsing, searching and filtering of data, information and digital content. They also integrate knowledge to contribute to professional practice as well as guide others, which correlates with level 7 competence of the DigComp 2.2 framework.

Activity 6 (database query and digital data visualisation) enables students to select the parameters for the linguistic analysis and, therefore, make a relevant database query to compare grammatical phenomena across world languages. The interface of the tool allows students to use geovisualisation results on the map of the World Atlas of Language Structures to make inferences on language structures and language contact. The activity is set in two stages, i.e., selecting the grammatical structures for the analysis and interpreting the results of geovisualisation. The tool and the activity itself develop students' understanding that the data collected and processed, for example, by online systems, can be used to recognise patterns (e.g., repetitions) in new data to optimise research findings and find the most efficient visual aids to communicate research results. Students can use data tools (e.g., databases, data mining and analysis software) designed to manage and organise complex information to support decision-making and to solve research problems, which also correlates with level 6 competence of the DigComp 2.2 framework.

Activity 7 (creating digital content) aims to assist students in creating and branching an interactive non-sequential narrative using the tool *Twinery* and schematically show the text rhetorical organisation. The activity consists of four stages, i.e., studying of the functionality of the tools and the basics of HTML, creating or selecting a narrative, branching it into rhetorical moves to place it in the tool in a segmented way and embedding multimedia into the narration.

The activity enables students to enhance the competences of developing digital content and basic programming, which enables them to research the rhetorical moves of the text and create, for instance, negotiation scenarios. The activity complies with level 6-7 competence of the DigComp 2.2 framework.

Activity 8 (selecting data visualisation tools) aims to enable students to evaluate the functionality of the *Knight Lab* suite and create a digital narrative rich in multimedia, focusing either on the text or the image or both. The activity involves the preparation stage, when students explore the functionality of the tools, select the right tool to fit the purpose of the research, create digital content rich in multimedia, and combine text and sound, text and maps, text, timelines and maps, etc. The tool is particularly useful for reflecting the historical flow of events on a map, juxtaposing two images on a map and describing their development in time, creating multimodal timelines of chronological narratives, etc. Students evaluate the tools and select them with accuracy, considering sophisticated representations of multimedia data so as not to be misleading and not to give a false sense of objectivity.

2 COURSE PERFORMANCE METRICS

The data on course performance has been collected from the learning management system *Moodle* and course exit questionnaires in the University of Latvia Information System luis.lv with the aim to assess if the activities help students achieve the required level of digital competence. Each section with activities is finalised with multiple-choice and true/false self-tests aimed at consolidating students' knowledge and preparing them for the final exam. The data reveals that each self-test has been completed by students at least once with the mean grade of 83.

Course progression data revealed that 94 out of 100 course participants completed the course as planned, with 3 students completing it one semester later due to Erasmus exchange and personal reasons, with one retake.

All students have received University of Latvia certificates outlining the number of credit points and the developed scope of digital knowledge, skills and competence mapped with the DigComp 2.2 framework.

The data on instructor effectiveness, novelty of course content and course systematic presentation are summarised in the questionnaire results below.

After the piloting of digital activities, students anonymously uncovered their attitude by indicating agreement/disagreement with the four statements included in Table 3 on a scale from 1 to 7, whereby 7 indicated their total agreement and 1 their total disagreement. In total, 100 students provided their feedback on the component Corpus-based Activities (CB), whereas 97 did on the component Digital Content Activities (DC). Regarding the first statement, 'Course goals and requirements are clearly explained', most of the students have expressed their agreement (CB mean score is 6.22, DC mean score is 6.25). Even if the majority of the students' responses show that they consider 'the study course […] well organised and systematic', this

Table 3 **Post-questionnaire (CB = 100, DC = 97)**

Statements	Corpus-based activities (CB) Digital content activities (DC)	Mean	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
1. Course goals and requirements are clearly explained	CB	6.22	48	37	9	3	1	2	0
	DC	6.25	45	30	14	5	1	2	0
2. Course content is novel and does not overlap with other courses	CB	6.32	51	38	5	5	0	1	0
	DC	6.22	42	42	7	5	0	1	0
3. Academic staff attitude was respectful and supportive	CB	6.46	61	29	6	3	1	0	0
	DC	6.11	43	39	7	4	1	1	2
4. The study course was well organised and systematic (e.g., topics were organised logically, lectures, seminars and / or lab tasks were interconnected the load was balanced throughout the semester a.o.)	CB	6.10	46	31	13	6	2	2	0
	DC	5.87	36	37	12	5	2	4	1

statement is supported by fewer students than the rest of the statements (CB mean score is 6.10, DC mean score is 5.87). As to statements 2 and 3 the majority of students' responses show that they see the course content as novel and delivered by supportive academic staff.

In addition, the students answered both open-ended questions: (1) What did you like about the course? and (2) What would you suggest improving in this course? Thus, students were encouraged to detail their insights from two angles. Their insights were explored and categorised by extracting a wordlist in *Sketch Engine*, viewing concordances of content words that unfolded the thematic range of students' insights. It was followed by manual sorting and manual thematic categorising of feedback because some of the students had provided their insights in English, whereas others in Latvian.

Table 4 reveals the categorised insights on Question 1. Concordance lines of four content words or nodes ('like', 'task', 'attitude' and 'course') revealed thematic aspects that fall in eight groups (categories C1.1-C4.1). The output of the node 'like' uncovered three positive aspects: firstly, (C1.1) the acquisition of knowledge and know-how to apply previously unexperienced digital tools, which corresponds to their agreement concerning the novelty of the course content; secondly, collaboration (C1.2) in small groups during the flow of activities; and thirdly, students' insights reveal their satisfaction with the involvement in practical activities (C1.3). The concordance of the node 'task' shows and, again, reinforces that students appreciate task novelty (C2.1) as well as the explicitness of task instructions and their structured, stepwise application (C2.3). The concordances of the node 'attitude' detail students' insights on teaching staff attitude during

Table 4 **Students' feedback on What did you like about the course?**

Selected content words	Concordance-based thematic categories
1. liked	C1.1: new knowledge, know-how, digital tools C1.2: work in collaborative groups C1.3: practical involvement in activities
2. task	C 2.1: new, previously inexperienced, curious C2.2: explicit, task instructions, their stepwise application
3. attitude	C3.1: interested, positive, supportive, encouraging
4. course	C4.1 useful, curious, C4.2. well structured

Table 5 **Students' feedback on What would you suggest improving in this course?**

Selected content words	Concordance-based thematic categories
5. course	C5.1 simplify the whole course structure C5.2 explicitly bring out the course component aims C5.3 make the whole course components more cohesive C5.4 arrange the 3 ECTS component as a standalone course C5.5 further bring out the practical value of the course
6. information	C6.1 more focus on application options of digital tools in the contexts beyond the course
7. work	C7.1 reduce the number of group work tasks

the implementation of activities, which they consider to be positive, interested, supportive and encouraging (C3.1). The final two categories (C4.1, C4.2) uncover the insights referring to the overall students' impression about the 3 ECTS component of the course contents ('useful' and 'curious') and the presentation manner that the students consider to be well structured, which correlates also with their impression about task instructions (C2.2).

Question 2 encouraged the students to further their reflection and reveal the aspects that, in their opinion, might be improved. Table 5 reveals the categorised insights of the students' feedback devoted to Question 2. The extracted wordlist uncovered that the content word 'course' was at the top of it and, as such, allowed extracting and categorising a range of insights. The grouping of concordances (C5.1-C5.4) revealed students' suggestion to place a greater focus on the explication of aims and structure of the 3 ECTS component in the context of the whole course, thus making all course parts more cohesive, or deliver this course component as a standalone course. The thematic category C5.5 reveals the students' suggestion to devote more time to bringing out the practical value of the digital tools-based activities beyond the course. Similar insights refer to the concordances of the node 'information' (C6.1), as they also reveal the students' suggestion to place a greater focus on digital tool application options beyond the course. The concordances of 'work' (C6.1) reveal suggestions to reduce collaborative work in small groups that contradict the insights grouped in category C1.2.

CONCLUSIONS

The review of the theories and the yielded data of the digital activity mapping and piloting enables the authors to draw the following conclusions:

1) The concepts of digital literacy and digital competence, which are fundamental for the present research, have been extensively addressed in higher education discourse, and researchers tend to use them interchangeably, with minor differences in the policies or research to refer to solely technical skills or also social practices.
2) The conceptualisation of digital literacies in language teaching and studies focuses on the rapid advancement of new technology, versatility of the available tools and an immense growth of textual, visual and audio material on the web. The researchers propose to proceed with the skills promotion for managing texts, audio and visual material in various digital environments as well as the evaluation of the tools and resources to be implemented in the appropriate way to be fit for the research purpose that is manifested in the DigCom 2.2 framework. There is also a shift of focus as to the credibility of sources and appropriateness of tools to present the data objectively. The abovementioned considerations have determined the setup and the flow of the activities in the case study, initiating the research by mapping.
3) The selective analysis of activities and their mapping with the DigComp 2.2 framework allowed identifying how far competence areas and competences at which the activities are aimed comply with the course and the whole module objectives. The case study results confirm that the activities of the course cover two competence areas: (1) information and data literacy and (3) digital content creation. The activities aiming at information and data literacy comprise the following competences at level 6 (advanced) and at level 7 (highly specialised): 1.1. Browsing, searching and filtering data, information and digital content; 1.2. Evaluating data, information and digital content; and 1.3. Managing data, information and digital content. The competence area digital content creation covers two competences at advanced level 6 and at highly specialised level 7: 3.1. Developing digital content and 3.3. Programming. These mapping results confirm that the intended focus of the course is language technologies.
4) The application of an open-ended questionnaire highlighted students' positive attitude and involvement, their stimulating and supportive environment while working in collaborative groups, and the explicit and gradual learning of new digital tools. The results suggested organising the seminar tasks as a standalone component of the course structure, which would make the course more cohesive. They also actualise highlighting course aims and the practical application of digital skills outside the course

context. Course performance metrics proved positive course piloting results, namely, high completion rate, low dropout and active interaction with course materials. In addition, the results of the open-ended and closed questions of the questionnaire confirmed its suitability to uncover various aspects of the course from the students' perspective. Both students' positive observations (for example, content novelty, clarity of task instructions and their presentation, and rich involvement in hands-on) and their concerns (for example, cohesiveness across the course components) are valuable additions to the course maintenance and upgrading agenda. Meanwhile the contradictory insights (for example, collaborative activities in small groups) provide grounds for a deeper analysis and decisions concerning the variation of activity modes throughout the course.

The mapped and piloted activities, in addition to field-specific digital competence advancement, contribute to overall digital competence expectations in contemporary job markets. They enable the students to make linguistic choices based on the results of data processing, propose solutions to professional discourse communicative situations, create linguistic data queries, critically select the digital content for corpora, manage, store and process textual data and efficiently visualise the textual results of their professional and research activity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The article has been designed with the support of EU Recovery and Resiliency Facility project *Language Technology Initiative*, No. 2.3.1.1.i.0/1/22/I/CFLA/002.

REFERENCES

Ancarani, A. and Mauro, C. (2018) Successful digital transformations need a focus on the individual, In *Digitalisierung im Einkauf* (pp. 11-26). Wiesbaden: Springer Gabler.

Castaño Muñoz, J., Vuorikari, R., Costa, P., Hippe, R. et al. (2021) Teacher collaboration and students' digital competence – evidence from the SELFIE tool. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 46 (3): 476-497. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2021.1938535

Casanave, C. P. (2015) Case studies. In B. Paltridge and A. Phakiti (eds.) *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* (pp. 119-135). London a.o.: Bloomsbury Academic.

Chapelle, C. and Hegelheimer, V. (2004) The English language teacher in the 21st century. In S. Fotos and C. Browne (eds.) *New Perspectives in CALL for Second Language Classrooms* (pp. 299-316). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

van Deursen, A. J. and van Dijk, J. A. (2014) The digital divide shifts to differences in usage. *New Media & Society*, 16 (3): 507-526. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813487959

Egbert, J., Biber, D. and Gray, B. (2022) *Designing and Evaluating Language Corpora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Godwin-Jones, R. (2021) Evolving technologies for language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 25 (3): 6-26. Available from http://hdl.handle.net/10125/73443 [Accessed on 7 January 2025]

Janssen, J., Stoyanov, S., Ferrari, A., Punie, Y. et al. (2013) Experts' views on digital competence: commonalities and differences. *Computers & Education*, 68: 473-481. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2013.06.008

Jones, C. (2022) What are the basics of analysing a corpus? In A. O'Keeffe and M. J. McCarthy (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics* (pp. 126-139). London and New York: Routledge.

Kern, R. (2021) Twenty-five years of digital literacies in CALL. *Language Learning & Technology*, 25(3): 132-150. Available from http://hdl.handle.net/10125/73453 [Accessed on 7 January 2025].

Kirschner, P. A. and De Bruyckere, P. (2017) The myth of the digital native and multitasker. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 67: 135-142. Available from https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0742051X16306692 [Accessed on 7 February 2025].

Mautner, G. (2022) What can a corpus tell us about discourse? In A. O'Keeffe and M. J. McCarthy (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Corpus Linguistics* (pp. 250-262). London and New York: Routledge.

Ochoa, X. (2016) Simple metrics for curricular analytics. *CEUR Workshop Proceedings*, 1590: 20-26. Available from https://ceur-ws.org/Vol-1590/ [Accessed on 8 February 2025].

Pérez-Escoda, A., Castro-Zubizarreta, A. and Fandos-Igado, M. (2016) Digital skills in the Z generation: key questions for a curricular introduction in primary school. *Comunicar*, 24: 71-79. Available from https://www.revistacomunicar.com/ojs/index.php/comunicar/article/view/C49-2016-07 [Accessed on 8 February 2025].

Rasinger, S. M. (2013) *Quantitative Research in Linguistics*. London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury.

Satar, M., Hauck, M. and Bilki, Z. (2023) Multimodal representation in virtual exchange: a social semiotic approach to critical digital literacy. *Language Learning & Technology*, 27 (2): 72-96. Available from https://www.lltjournal.org/item/1061/ [Accessed on 8 February 2025].

Spante, M., Hashemi, S. S., Lundin, M., Algers, A. et al. (2018) Digital competence and digital literacy in higher education research: systematic review of concept use. *Cogent Education*, 5 (1): 1-21. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2018.1519143

Stake, R. E. (1995) *The art of case study research*. London and New Delhi: Thousand Oaks.

Yin, R. K. (2003) *Case Study Research: design and methods*, 3rd ed. Los Angeles, CA a.o.: Sage.

Zhao, Y., Llorente, A. M. P. and Gomez, M. C. S. (2021) Digital competence in higher education research: a systematic literature review. *Computers & Education*, 168: 1-14. Available from https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360131521000890 [Accessed on 8 February 2025].

ONLINE SOURCES

[Online 1] *Latvijas Nacionālais attīstības plāns 2021.-2027. gadam* [The National Development Plan for 2021-2027] (n.d.) Ministru kabinets. Available from https://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/latvijas-nacionalais-attistibas-plans [Accessed on 2 January 2024].

[Online 2] *Regulations on the National Standard for Academic Education*. Regulations No. 240 of the Cabinet of Ministers of 13 May 2014, Amendments No. 558 of

the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia 3 October 2023. Available from https://likumi.lv/ta/id/346042-grozijumi-ministrukabineta-2014-gada-13-maija-noteikumos-nr-240-noteikumi-par-valsts-akademiskas-izglitibasstandartu-) [Accessed on 2 January 2024].

[Online 3] Vuorikari, R., Kluzer, S. and Punie, Y. (2022) *DigComp 2.2: the digital competence framework for citizens, Luxembourg: EUR 31006 EN, Publications Office of the European Union*. Available from https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC128415 [Accessed on 18 December 2023].

TOOLS

Bird, S., Klein, E. and Loper, E. (2009) *Natural Language Processing with Python*. Available from https://www.nltk.org/ [Last accessed on 8 February 2025].

CLAWS (1997) Lancaster: UCREL. CLAWS4: Microsoft Windows.

Klimas, C. (2007-2024) *Twinery*. Available from https://twinery.org [Last accessed on 8 February 2025].

Knight Lab (2017) Chicago: Northwest University. Knight Lab: Microsoft Windows.

Sinclair, S. and Rockwell, G. (2016) *Voyant Tools*. Available from http://voyant-tools.org/ [Last accessed on 8 February 2025].

CORPORA AND DATASETS

[WALS Online] Dryer, M. S. and Haspelmath, M. (eds.) (2013) *World Atlas of Language Structures (v2020.4)*. Available from https://wals.info [Last accessed on 8 February 2025].

[COCA] Davies, M. (2008-present) *The Corpus of Contemporary American English*. Available from https://www.english-corpora.org/coca/ [Last accessed on 9 February 2025].

Zigrīda Vinčela (Dr. philol.) is working as an associate professor in applied linguistics at the University of Latvia. Her main research interests involve corpus linguistics, language technologies, phonetics and phonology.

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1930-0970

Email: zigrida.vincela@lu.lv

Jana Kuzmina (Dr. philol.) is working as an associate professor in general linguistics at the University of Latvia. Her main research interests involve language technologies, descriptive grammar and genre analysis.

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8905-0124

Email: jana.kuzmina@lu.lv

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 69–80
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.05

ECOLOGY OF SELF: WOMAN'S SELF-DISCOVERY IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *SURFACING*

SANDRA MEŠKOVA
Daugavpils University, Latvia

Abstract. The present paper discusses the problem of a woman's self-perception in the environment degraded by patriarchal power relations and the pressures of contemporary consumer society, as depicted in Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (first published in 1972). Atwood's extensive and diverse writing is characterised by themes such as Canadian national and cultural identity, history, human rights, new humanism, ecological thinking, feminism, and issues of feminine identity. Women characters in Atwood's writing are affected by the brutality, blindness, and deadlock created by imperial, patriarchal, and ethnocentric power structures. Nevertheless, they are portrayed as capable of creative self-expression and rational self-reflection. Consequently, texts depicting a woman's self-discovery are of special significance in Atwood's writing. This is particularly evident in *Surfacing*, where the heroine engages in introspection regarding her family's genealogy, traces the imposed deformations of her experience, seeks the foundations of authentic feminine experience, and ultimately gains insight into her transformed perception of herself and her environment. The process of self-discovery in Atwood's novel is analysed in the framework of the French feminist school of *écriture féminine*, the theoretical perspectives of Alice Jardine and Rita Felski, as well as cultural ecology.

Key words: Canadian literature, cultural ecology, *écriture féminine*, feminine subjectivity, *gynesis*, Luce Irigaray

INTRODUCTION

In the context of the current concern about an ecological crisis, major importance is attributed to humans' well-being and sustainable relationships with the environment. Accordingly, the economic, social, environmental, anthropological, psychological, and other aspects of these issues have become objects of recent interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies. Their investigation requires a multifaceted perspective that could reveal the dynamic interaction of various forces and factors pertaining to the complex processes that are manifested in cultural and literary media. One

of such perspectives is set in the recently developed field of cultural ecology, attributing special significance to literature that, according to Zapf (2016: 3-4), functions like an ecological force within the larger system of cultural discourses. In *Literature as Cultural Ecology* (2016: 3), Zapf treats literature as a cultural form in which the living interrelationship between culture and nature 'is explored in specifically productive ways, providing a site of critical self-reflection of modern civilization as well as a source of creative cultural self-renewal'. He argues that literary texts provide a transformative site of cultural self-reflection and self-exploration, in which the historically marginalised and excluded are semiotically empowered and activated as a source of their artistic creativity (ibid.).

This idea was previously developed within feminist studies in relation to the cultural meanings attributed to women and femininity. In *Gynesis: configurations of woman and Modernity* (1985), American literary scholar and feminist theorist Alice Jardine argues that the crisis of modernity's master narratives – as theorised, for example, by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge* (1979) – is not gender-neutral. Since master narratives are produced by a masculine subject, their crisis may be interpreted as symptomatic of the broader crisis within androcentric culture. Jardine characterises this process as the tendency of master narratives to negate and radically reconceptualise their foundational premises, confront their 'otherness', and engage with it. This dynamic, she suggests, creates space for new possibilities of development and survival coded as feminine (Jardine, 1989: 25). Jardine introduces a specific term, *gynesis*, to denote the coding of the process of cultural self-regeneration as feminine. She defines *gynesis* as 'the putting into discourse of "woman"', a 'process diagnosed in France as intrinsic to the condition of modernity, indeed, the valorization of the feminine, woman' (Jardine, 1989: 25). She distinguishes two levels of *gynesis*: thematization of *gynesis* and participation in the process of *gynesis*. The former is mostly a feminist-inspired path chosen by women writers and theorists who write about women inscribing the feminine experience in culture, creating 'her story' as an alternative to 'his story', thus challenging the male dominance in culture. In this case, the inscription of a woman in the discourse is accomplished literally, and *gynesis* manifests as focusing on authentic images of women, feminine subjectivity, experience, and feminine difference. The latter path is related to a deeper understanding of the categories of the masculine and feminine, their reconceptualisation, and their transformation. Participation in the process of *gynesis* is associated with poststructuralism and deconstructionist and revisionist trends inspired by it, including the French poststructuralist feminist school of *écriture féminine* [feminine writing]. One of its key representatives, Luce Irigaray, in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), examines the history of Western philosophy to uncover how 'woman' has been constructed as the 'other' in relation to the masculine subject. Latvian philosopher Ieva Lapinska highlights Irigaray's claim that sexual difference is a defining issue of the present age. Lapinska (2012: 16-17) also foregrounds Irigaray's project of an ethics of sexual difference based on alternative, feminine values, concerns, and priorities, connected to the alternative model of feminine subjectivity, which, in turn, relies on rethinking

the relations of self and other. In the model of intersubjectivity, recognising and accepting the difference of 'other' is to work both ways, and it is about recognising and accepting different subjectivity constitutions and visions of the world (ibid.: 20). Irigaray's focus on sexual difference and the ethics of sexual difference as a key to accepting other forms of difference and civilised social life endows her philosophy with an ecophenomenological dimension. Stone, in *Luce Irigaray and the Nature of Sexual Difference* (2006), examines Irigaray's later philosophy, where increased attention is given to nature, the natural environment, and the natures of human beings. Though Irigaray's position may seem essentialist, Stone argues that it 'enables her to criticise existing society on the grounds that women's nature has never been allowed expression' (Stone, 2006: 3).

The positions of Irigaray and other theorists of *écriture féminine* have been manifested in numerous texts of diverse genres produced by women writers throughout the 20th century and into the present. As American literary scholar Rita Felski (1989) observes, one significant trend introduced by women writers since the early 20th century has been the emergence of narratives of feminine self-discovery. Felski reflects on the way feminine narratives of confession and self-discovery produce new stories, create a new paradigm, and create strategies of representation of women and their experiences, very often reflecting the ideological strains and resistances that women writers face in their work. Narratives of self-discovery engage with issues of feminine subjectivity searching for alternative social contracts, socio-symbolic configurations, and strategies of empowerment. In this respect, narratives of self-discovery relate to literature as an ecological force that, according to Zapf (2016: 28), operates 'as a sensorium and imaginative sounding-board for hidden conflicts, contradictions, traumas, and pathogenic structures of modern life and civilization, and as a source of constant creative renewal of language, perception, imagination, and communication'. This trend became particularly pronounced in the 1970s, when the aspirations of feminist thought and writing converged with emerging environmentalist and ecophenomenological perspectives, generating visions of the feminine as a potential force for socio-cultural regeneration.

A seminal author in this respect is Margaret Atwood (b. 1939), the renowned Canadian poet, prose and non-fiction writer, and cultural critic who is highly praised as one of the most important literary chroniclers of her time (Nischik, 2000: 1). Atwood's oeuvre has consistently drawn critical acclaim since the publication of her early novels, poetry, and critical essays on account of their engagement with urgent contemporary cultural issues and the writer's exceptional technique. Scholars who have studied Atwood's writing for decades, such as Howells (2021), Tolan (2007; 2022), and Nischik (2000), focus on the diversity of genres, richness of her literary techniques, and specific themes of Canadian national and cultural identity, history, human rights, new humanism and ecological thinking, feminism, and issues of feminine identity (Cooke, 2004). Palumbo and Hatch investigate how Atwood both revises and constructs Canadian cultural tradition with a particular sensitivity to manifestations of the imperial, patriarchal, and ethnocentric power (Nischik, 2000).

Stein (2013: 184), in her research of Atwood's dystopian novels, brings out the benefits of the alliance between feminism and environmentalism, as it provides a framework for analysing the dysfunctional social/economic systems at the root of social injustices and environmental ills. This is well illustrated by women characters in Atwood's writing who are affected by the brutality, blindness, and deadlock created by imperial and patriarchal power. However, it is also emphasised that women characters in Atwood's novels, though often portrayed as victims of power, are capable of creative self-expression and rational self-reflection (Pearlman, 1993: 53).

Woman's self-discovery is a significant motif of Atwood's writing in connection to the dominants of her oeuvre, as summarised above. This motif was introduced in *Surfacing* (1998; first published in 1972), Atwood's second novel. The present paper analyses the process of a woman's self-discovery and the way it outlines a different model of sociality and cultural awareness as depicted in *Surfacing* by referring to the French feminist school of *écriture féminine*, drawing on the theoretical perspectives of Jardine and Felski, as well as cultural ecology.

IN SEARCH OF SELF

Atwood's novel *Surfacing* depicts the autodiegetic narrator's introspection regarding her family's genealogy as she traces the imposed deformations of her experience, seeks the foundations of authentic feminine experience, and ultimately gains insight into her transformed perception of herself and the surrounding environment.

The narrator's revelation of herself as a woman is closely related to the revelation of Canadian cultural and national identity. The narrator's name is not mentioned, yet she is a woman of a certain generation, living in a certain time and environment – Canada in the 1960s, characterised by the prevailing mood of that period. It involves the looming threat of war during the Cold War era, when survival wisdom and an awareness of the fragility of life were of special significance. It also highlights the awareness of the dangers posed by technocratic civilisation, the manifestations of American cultural imperialism and consumer ideology, the expansion of urbanisation at the expense of natural environments, and, consequently, the contrasting tensions between civilisation and nature. Furthermore, it addresses women's emancipation and the public backlash against it. Thus, the narrator's awareness of her feminine identity not only affects her inner world and psychic structure but is revealed within a specific historico-cultural context, shedding light on the state of crisis in it and pointing to an alternative way of survival based on feminine values, priorities, and respect for others. Referring to Jardine's concept of *gynesis* as a tendency for cultural self-renewal in a situation of collapsed masculine master narratives, *gynesis* can be traced in *Surfacing* within the context of Canadian culture. *Gynesis*, or the confrontation of culture with its otherness in gender terms – essentially, the reflection of the feminine within an androcentric culture – forms the conceptual framework of the novel. In this context, the feminine is revealed as an alternative in a situation where culture and society have reached a dead end, and

the story of the narrator's self-discovery grows into a narrative of alternative survival for both culture and society. The major elements of the thematization of *gynesis* in the novel include modelling the narrative voice to bring out its feminine gender; revealing the formation of feminine experience in the patriarchal socio-cultural context as a series of deformations; searching for authentic feminine subjectivity; and questioning the continuity of the newly revealed femininity. Atwood has consistently addressed these fundamental feminist issues since her first novel, *The Edible Woman* (1969), as well as in her poetry from the 1960s. The ongoing exploration of these themes in her writing has received much attention from such scholars as Hirsch (1989) and Howells (2005; 2014).

Though the narrator remains nameless, the narration reveals a distinct subject position and conveys a coherent worldview based on an alternative, feminine system of values. In this way the author avoids marginalising the feminine narration ('herstory') but attributes the feminine gender to the generally human subject whose narration is focused on the subject's — feminine subject's – genealogy. Hirsch (1989: 140) notes its parallels with the French feminist idea of the significance of the pre-Oedipal phase in the genesis of the feminine subject. Through introspection into the depths of her selfhood, the narrator makes a journey through its many layers consisting of deformations caused by the patriarchal socio-cultural environment. These layers entail family relations, marriage, upbringing, and traces of traumatic experiences. Ultimately, the narrator reaches the deepest foundation of authentic feminine subjectivity – the bond between mother and daughter.

It is essential that the psychic process of constructing feminine subjectivity is connected to the external social and cultural context. The narrator's traumatic experiences reflect the deformations imposed by this environment. Features of the pre-Oedipal subject organisation are projected in alternative forms of the young woman's worldview, such as an unmediated bond between nature and humanity, an ecological awareness of the unity of the entire living world, and a sense of responsibility for the damage inflicted upon nature by technocratic civilisation. Additionally, male-female relations are envisioned outside the constraints of the patriarchal power hierarchy. The revelation of feminine subjectivity is paralleled by the depiction of the negative consequences conditioned by the patriarchal structure in society, culture, and interpersonal relations, portraying the emergence of an alternative model rooted in feminine subjectivity. However, the sustainability of this model is questionable, as illustrated by the open ending of the novel that does not make it clear if the narrator will remain on the island or respond to her boyfriend's calls and return to the social world and previous relations, possibly modified by the insights she has gained.

The narrator's introspection is depicted during her journey from Toronto to an island in the north of Canada, where she spent her childhood and from which she has received news of the sudden disappearance of her elderly father. She is accompanied by her married friends Anna and David, as well as her boyfriend Joe, whose marriage proposal she is reluctant to accept. Through the motif of the journey and the portrayal of four different characters – united not only by this

trip but also by a shared environment they each perceive differently – the author outlines the environment and society that have constituted the narrator's lifeworld but which she is willing to abandon, as she plans to remain on the island.

The road leading from Toronto to the north, where relatively untouched nooks of nature, such as the island with the father's house, are still preserved, establishes the conceptually essential opposition of nature and civilisation, realised in both space and time (the shrinking natural space being connected with the receding past), and within the narrator's consciousness. By returning to the island and the origins of her self, the narrator shifts from historical consciousness into a mythic one, structured by dichotomies such as the sacred versus the profane and the life-sustaining versus the destructive, with the individual's life project melting into the cyclicity of cosmic circulation. Furthermore, the opposition of nature and civilisation frames the contrast between Canadian and American identities, with extreme manifestations of civilisation – such as technocratic thinking and consumerist ideology – being linked to American imperialism that threatens the national and cultural identity of Canadians:

> It doesn't matter what country they're from [...], they're still Americans, they're what's in store for us, what we are turning into. They spread themselves like a virus, they get into the brain and take over the cells and the cells change from inside and the ones that have the disease can't tell the difference. (Atwood, 1998: 97)

The narrator associates the American identity with Anna, David, and partly also with her boyfriend Joe, and does not want to return to their world, which has left its traumatising impact on her as well.

Recognising her distorted experience is a crucial stage in the narrator's progress to self-awareness. Above all, it is the recognition of the roles imposed on her, which previously seemed natural and self-evident, because they correspond to the cultural constructions of femininity. They are related to the stereotypical notion of women as objects of male pleasure:

> [...] pink on the cheeks and black discreetly around the eyes, as red as blood, as black as ebony, a seamed and folded imitation of a magazine picture that is itself an imitation of a woman who is also an imitation, [...] captive princess in someone's head. (Atwood, 1998: 123)

Atwood compares the positionality of a woman as an object to a mechanism that mediates and alienates a woman from herself, ultimately resulting in a state of self-division: 'I'd allowed myself to be cut in two. Woman sawn apart in a wooden crate, wearing a bathing suit, smiling [...]; only with me there had been an accident and I came apart' (Atwood, 1998: 79).

The narrator's experience of insensitivity can be interpreted as a bodily reaction to the self-division imposed upon women in patriarchal society. This also affects motherhood, a role most closely associated with women within such systems. The climax of the narrator's deformed experience in the final part of the novel is

the memory of an abortion, a consequence of an unsuccessful relationship with a married man. This traumatic experience reveals the woman's position as a victim situated at the intersection of two basic ideologies of patriarchy: motherhood and the nuclear family. According to the former, childbearing is a natural expression of a woman's essence and feminine sexuality. The latter assumes that the child is primarily a product of marital union and that extramarital relations fall into a risk zone. In case of a *faux pas*, it is the woman whose body is directly involved in the painful and morally traumatising operation, while the man who has participated in conception may stand aside. The trauma of abortion is revealed in the novel as the apex of the narrator's confrontation with societal expectations, roles, and behaviours imposed on her. This traumatic event and its repression serve as the central source of her fragmented and desensitised experiences, culminating in a profound disconnection from herself: 'I was emptied, amputated; I stank of salt and antiseptic; they had planted death in me like a seed' (ibid.: 105).

Along with recognising the deformations of her experience, the narrator continues to search for the foundation of an authentic feminine identity, tracing both paternal and maternal heritage in her consciousness. This process unfolds as a progression from paternal to maternal identification. According to Hirsch (1989: 143), the transition from the search for the father to the search for the mother is the major turning point in the narrator's self-discovery, which paves the way for the recognition and working through the deepest traumatic layers in her psychic structure. In this sense, Atwood's novel anticipates the opinions of *écriture féminine* theorists, particularly those of Irigaray (2007; 2013), about the importance of maternal identification in the formation of the feminine subject and language.

In search of her lost father, the narrator's major revelation concerns his metamorphosis (Hirsch, 1989: 143). Interrogating her father's old friend and neighbours and examining his documents, papers, and notes, the narrator realises that the traces left by her father do not match the image she has held of him since childhood. Supplementing these discoveries with hypothetical constructions of her father's personality, the narrator realises how unfamiliar and incomprehensible he has become to her – or perhaps had always been. This process illustrates the separation of the symbolic father, as a psychic construct, from the real human father. As the idealised image of her father dissolves, the narrator's symbolic disposition also weakens. She sees her father as an ageing, possibly senile man whose actions have become unpredictable and recalls misconceptions in her father's words that she had always believed to be true. She is not given the chance to meet her father again. After several days on the island, she is informed that a body of a drowned man has been found that is no longer identifiable, but judging by certain signs, it is her father. It makes no sense staying on the island anymore; her companions are packing to leave, yet the narrator's quest remains unresolved, and she secretly decides to stay without any explanation to others.

The narrator further confronts memories of her mother, who died some time earlier. Both in her lifetime and in her final days in the hospital, the mother's behaviour appears strange and incomprehensible. The severed connection in

the narrator's memories is represented by the iconic image of her mother feeding jays. The mother's silence and absence, both literal and figurative, mark the maternal inheritance in the daughter's consciousness. The loss of paternal identification thus creates a space for, and a necessity of, maternal identification:

> It would be right for my mother to have left something for me also, a legacy. His was complicated, tangled, but hers would be simple as a hand, it would be final. I was not completed yet; there had to be a gift from each of them. (Atwood, 1998: 109)

However, it must be noted that maternal identification in this novel is suggested but not psychologically elaborated as a long and complex process. As a result, the central conceptual position of the novel – an alternative vision of the world rooted in feminine subjectivity – remains largely declarative. It lacks the psychological justification found in other narratives of feminine self-discovery or self-revelation, where maternal identification supplies solid ground for the formation of feminine subjectivity and is explored in greater detail. One such narrative is *A Woman in Amber* (1995) by Agate Nesaule, which comprises a story of healing from the trauma of war and exile made possible by the narrator forgiving her mother and establishing a close emotional bond with her (Meškova, 2010). Atwood's version aligns with the perspective of another theorist of *écriture féminine*, Julia Kristeva, who highlights the problematic nature of maternal identification for women. According to Kristeva, identifying with 'mother' means identifying with lack, which, in the symbolic order of language, culture, and society, positions women as castrated and marginalised. In becoming a mother, a woman becomes an object of identification for her daughter, thereby handing down a model of negative feminine identification. The positive model of motherhood is represented by the relationship between mother and son, with the Virgin Mary and Jesus serving as its paradigm in Western culture (Kristeva, 1986).

Losing her paternal identification, which had previously provided a relatively stable symbolic positionality, the narrator also abandons the landmarks of the symbolic language for expressing her experience and understanding the course of life. The narrator's sense of reality changes: she feels compelled to escape the confines of an artificially closed space – a house, a garden – discarding excess clothing and household items and, through a purification ritual, establishing a bodily connection with nature. Ultimately, she senses her individuality becoming fluid:

> Something has happened to my eyes, my feet are released, they alternate, several inches from the ground. I'm ice-clear, transparent, my bones and the child inside me showing through the green webs of my flesh, the ribs are shadows, the muscles jelly, the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark. (Atwood, 1998: 133)

The feminine subject is situated outside the symbolic order – sociality, culture, and language. Although the narrator's survival in this new reality

is not depicted in an attractive light – she eats raw food, does not wash, and starts avoiding the domestic space – distancing herself from the symbolic order that bears the negative marking of patriarchy in the novel acquires a positive connotation as it enables her to give up the position of a victim assigned to women: 'This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing' (Atwood, 1998: 140).

IN SEARCH OF NEW SOCIALITY

The newly developed understanding of feminine power presupposes an expansive responsibility for sustaining life, caring for all living beings, and addressing the question of how this power may be enacted. This understanding is linked to the narrator's dilemma at the end of the novel: should she remain on the island, outside of sociality, historicity, and language, in an alternative feminine time-space structured differently and according to different laws than the masculine, or should she respond to Joe's calls, as he has returned for her, and rejoin him – in the domain of language and societal norms: 'we will have to talk'; 'for us it's necessary, the intercession of words'; 'we can no longer live in spurious peace by avoiding each other, the way it was before, we will have to begin' (Atwood, 1998: 141). Her final question is that of trusting the man: 'To trust is to let go. I tense forward, towards the demands and questions, though, my feet do not move yet' (ibid.). Even if it can be answered affirmatively, the novel remains open-ended: 'The lake is quiet, the trees surround me, asking and giving nothing' (ibid.).

Regarding the possibility of a woman with positive self-awareness establishing an equal relationship with a man transformed by *gynesis*, the novel offers no automatic resolution, particularly in the context of a crisis in patriarchal culture. However, Hirsch's (1989: 145) interpretation reveals a strong desire for such a possibility as she argues that the narrator chooses to return to Joe and to urban life. Without major transformations in the structure of patriarchal society, the feminine continues to serve as the material for patriarchal culture fantasy production (Jardine, 1989: 46). This is the reason for a rather sceptical interpretation of *gynesis* by those feminist theorists who consider that cultural fantasies about the feminine are the means of reproducing the patriarchal system (Moi, 1991; Bowlby, 1996: 273). Feminist political theorist Carole Pateman (1988) examines contemporary debates surrounding patriarchy and its connection to the social contract. She argues that a critical element in the reproduction of patriarchy and the asymmetrical power relations it entails lies in 'the patriarchal construction of sexual difference as political difference' (Pateman, 1988: 34). Accordingly, she asserts that '[M]odern patriarchy is fraternal, contractual and structures capitalist civil society' (ibid.: 25). It affects the meanings attributed to femininity and masculinity, as well as the socio-cultural forms of their engagement and interaction. Political sociologist Filiz Akgul (2017) contributes to this debate reminding that patriarchy is produced within

the construction of gender and affects the construction of selfhood, which affects all spheres of the society and results in male supremacy. In this context, Irigaray's (2007) urge for the necessity of constructing a feminine symbolic reveals efforts to seek an alternative to the patriarchal order.

Surfacing presents an idea of continuity in newly established femininity as related to motherhood. According to Hirsch (1989: 144), the narrator solves her major problem – her inability to become a mother – through a process of maternal identification. The trauma of the imposed abortion, experienced by the narrator as the most violent manifestation of patriarchy in her life, is healed along with her feminine self-discovery and the empowerment it brings. It is metaphorically conveyed by the narrator's dive into the depths of the lake in search of the cave drawings found in her father's notes. Viewing the underwater scenes, she has a vision of an object she associates with her unborn child. This is the turning point of her subjective metamorphosis, marking her acceptance of motherhood.

Conceiving a baby and the future visions related to this in the final part of the novel approve of the search for an alternative model of a mother-child relationship. First, the very process of childbirth labour is imagined as free of the patriarchal control:

> This time I will do it by myself, squatting, on old newspapers in a corner alone; or on leaves, dry leaves, a heap of them, that's cleaner. The baby will slip out easily as an egg, a kitten, and I'll lick it off and bite the cord. (Atwood, 1998: 119)

According to Hirsch, motherhood for the narrator is a way of expressing her newly gained sense of femininity in close connection to her body:

> My back is on the sand, my head rests against the rock, innocent as plankton; my hair spreads out, moving and fluid in the water. The earth rotates, holding my body down to it as it holds the moon; the sun pounds in the sky, red flames and rays pulsing from it, searing away the wrong form that encases me, dry rain soaking through me, warming the blood egg I carry. (Atwood, 1998: 131)

However, due to the metamorphosis of the father figure, which becomes the basis for the narrator's shifting perception of men, space is created within the mother-child relationship for the inclusion of a transformed father. This opens a possibility for evolving the pre-Oedipal, asocial mother-child dyad into a mother-child-father triad, symbolising a new form of sociality that marks the novel's open ending. While the narrator does not explicitly move into it, the reception of the novel, particularly in interpretations, as noted earlier, reads the narrator's decision to respond to Joe's call as a move toward this new paradigm. This underscores the productivity of the *gynesis* within the text and highlights how closely the envisioned model of sociality, a newly empowered woman healed from patriarchal traumas, a transformed man, and a transformative child – aligns with the imaginary constructs of modern culture.

CONCLUSION

Atwood's novel *Surfacing* explores the question of how to live in the lifeworld that is perceived as deformed and experienced as devastating. The answer found by the autodiegetic narrator in the novel may be summarised as revolving around hope, habitat, and hard work. Hope centres on survival and continuity. The habitat is nature, understood as a realm beyond the control of patriarchy, where it seems to be possible to practice alternative feminine values. The hard work of establishing a new sociality involves a critical examination and reconstruction of one's sense of identity and the surrounding lifeworld. Western culture provides a huge potential for practicing ecology, including the ecology of self, evidenced by the close attention to the human condition it has always held, directed both outward, toward the natural world and the lifeworld in which humans live, and inward, to the depths of consciousness, the complexities of identity, and the dynamics of becoming a thinking, social, and caring subject. Feminists would emphasise that this involves becoming a woman, relating to men, and children, and offering a different model of sociality and cultural awareness. The question, then, is not so much whether technocracy, imperialism, consumerism, and other systems will be abolished or kept in check, but how women relate to and engage with these systems, especially in a habitat grounded in relating to herself. Atwood's novel, written at the height of feminist and ecophenomenological thought in the 1970s, aligns with Zapf's (2016) assertion that literature, as a medium of radical civilisational critique, provides a sustainable, generative matrix for the continuous self-renewal of the civilisational system.

REFERENCES

Akgul, F. (2017) *Patriarchal Theory Reconsidered: torture and gender-based violence in Turkey*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bowlby, R. (1996) Flight Reservations: the Anglo-American/French divide in feminist criticism. In M. Eagleton (ed.) *Feminist Literary Theory: a reader* (pp. 230-233). Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Cooke, N. (2004) *Margaret Atwood: a critical companion*. Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press.

Felski, R. (1989) *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hirsch, M. (1989) *Mother/Daughter Plot: narrative, psychoanalysis, feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Howells, C. A. (2021) Introduction. In C. A. Howells (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Margaret Atwood* (pp. 1-13). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howells, C. A. (2014) *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian women novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*. London and New York, NY: Routledge Revivals.

Howells, C. A. (2005) *Margaret Atwood*. London: Red Globe Press.

Irigaray, L. (2013) *In the Beginning, She Was*. New York, NY a.o.: Bloomsbury.

Irigaray, L. (2007) *Je, Tu, Nous: towards a culture of difference*. New York, NY, and London: Routledge.

Irigaray, L. (1985) *Speculum of the Other Woman* (trans. G. C. Gill). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Jardine, A. (1989) *Gynesis: configurations of woman and Modernity.* Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press.

Kristeva, J. (1986) Stabat Mater. In T. Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (pp. 160-186). Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Lapinska, I. (2012) *Identitāte un citādība* [Identity and Otherness]. Rīga: LU Filosofijas un socioloģijas institūts.

Meškova, S. (2010) Daughter figures in Latvian women's autobiographical writing of the 1990s. In M. Cornis-Pope and J. Neubauer (eds.) *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: junctures and disjunctures in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Vol. 4, pp. 167-175). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Moi, T. (1991) *French Feminist Thought: a reader.* Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Nischik, R. M. (2000) *Flagpoles and Entrance Doors*: Introduction. In R. M. Nischik (ed.) *Margaret Atwood: works and impact* (pp. 1-12). Rochester: Camden House.

Pateman, C. (1988) *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Pearlman, M. (1993) *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Stein, R. (2013) Sex, Population, and Environmental Eugenics in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*. In G. Gaard, S. Estok and S. Oppermann (eds.) *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (pp. 184-202). New York, NY: Routledge.

Stone, A. (2006) *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Tolan, F. (2022) *The Fiction of Margaret Atwood*. London a.o.: Bloomsbury Academic.

Tolan, F. (2007) *Margaret Atwood: feminism and fiction.* Amsterdam and New York, NY: Editions Rodopi B. V.

Zapf, H. (2016) *Literature as Cultural Ecology*: *sustainable texts.* London a.o.: Bloomsbury Academic.

TEXTS ANALYSED

Atwood, M. (1998) *Surfacing*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.

Sandra Meškova (Dr. philol.) is working as Associate Professor in Literary and Cultural Studies at Daugavpils University, Latvia. Her research interests involve literary theory, feminist and gender studies, life writing and comparative literature.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8929-6914

e-mail: sandra.meskova@du.lv

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 81–97
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.06

SILENCING AND DISTANCING: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF STRATEGIES THAT NEGATE MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT WITH ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

JESSICA MURRAY
University of South Africa, South Africa

Abstract. Through a close, critical reading of three novels that were published in 2021, this article will explore the ways in which authors expose how silencing and distancing are mobilized as discursive strategies that marginalize the voices of characters who are concerned about the impact of environmental destruction. The novels are *Damnation Spring* by Ash Davidson, *The High House* by Jessie Greengrass, and *Something New Under the Sun* by Alexandra Kleeman. These strategies create a false binary between 'us' and 'them', and they serve to scupper attempts at meaningful collective action against ecological damage. Through my engagement with the primary texts, I will demonstrate how gender, race, and class shape the construction of the voices that sound the alarm about harm to the natural world. Perceived differences (or distances) in terms of gender, race, and class enable community members to dismiss particular voices, and this mode of silencing facilitates the perpetuation of the status quo. In all three selected novels, the authors signal the dangers of maintaining the status quo by representing the impact of environmental degradation on both contemporary and future communities. The authors make it very clear that no amount of privilege will protect characters if their natural environments remain under anthropocentric attack.

Key words: climate change, *Damnation Spring*, distancing, environmental damage, silencing, *Something New Under the Sun*, *The High House*

This article offers a close, critical reading of three contemporary novels to tease out literary representations of the ways in which silencing and distancing operate as two central strategies that are mobilized to negate attempts to engage with environmental destruction and its consequences in a meaningful way. The authors of the three selected novels represent characters who need to navigate silencing and distancing, and they expose the dynamics through which their characters

are confined and contained in service of the perpetuation of the status quo. These novels allow readers to experience the characters' struggles, and the representations enable readers to identify disempowering strategies that prevent change and curtail agency. The authors are clearly sympathetic to their characters' struggles, and their portrayals invite readers to critique the silencing and distancing mechanisms that they are confronted with. I will demonstrate that characters are silenced by other characters or institutions represented in the novels when they attempt to challenge the conventional, anthropocentric modes of being in the world, and I will unpack how this silencing is inflected by markers of difference such as race, class, and gender. The characters who refuse to accept the status quo are treated as insane, hysterical, ridiculous, brainwashed, dangerously out of touch with reality, 'not one of us', or a combination of all of these, and other characters attempt to dismiss, or at least diminish, their environmental concerns as a result. The second strategy I will explore is distancing. In this article, the dynamics of distancing are primarily twofold. First, characters suggest that there is a distance between those who seek alternative, more respectful ways of engagement with the environment and so-called ordinary people. This distance rests on the construction of an 'us versus them' binary that is shaped by profoundly different ways of understanding and of being in the world. Second, the authors of all the selected novels signal how people avoid dealing with environmental damage because they are able to convince themselves that the distance between them and those who will feel the effects of a changing environment most acutely is so great that they do not need to deal with it. In this case, the perceived distance is mostly physical and geopolitical. I will explore how both these forms of distancing gain traction with the majority of community members and leave the dissenting voices marginalized, at least for substantial parts of the texts. This is significant because the imminence of the threat means that time matters, and delaying concrete action, even temporarily, exacerbates the threat. I will also demonstrate how the authors signal both the danger and the impossibility of sustaining such distancing mechanisms. The primary texts were all written by women, and they were all published in 2021. They are *Damnation Spring* by Ash Davidson, *The High House* by Jessie Greengrass, and *Something New Under the Sun* by Alexandra Kleeman. The first novel is set in a recognizable contemporary reality where the effects of environmental damage are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. The other two novels depict (near) future worlds where it is no longer possible to avoid direct engagement with the consequences of climate change.

Contemporary literary engagements with the changing environment tend to be accommodated by the ever-expanding genre of climate change fiction (commonly referred to as cli-fi), and two of the selected texts (*The High House* and *Something New Under the Sun*) align with Evans's (2017: 96) definition of cli-fi as 'literary works that describe the impact of anthropogenic climate change'. Evans seeks to broaden the understanding of cli-fi from its original meaning, as created and conceptualized by Bloom. She argues that, rather than regarding cli-fi as a 'coherent genre' (ibid.: 95), the term is broad enough to encompass a range of literary genres and that its concern with climate futures must be read in conjunction with its focus

on climate justice. Rather than the dystopian postapocalyptic fiction that tends to be associated with cli-fi, Evans (ibid.: 96) notes that, in some of these texts, 'climate change operates in the background of character-driven plotlines' while in others 'climate change operates across background and foreground, interacting with individualized plotlines as well as narrative themes'. While *Damnation Spring* does not engage with climate change as we understand it today, its focus on the human and environmental consequences of ecological destruction and the themes it addresses make it relevant to an analysis of contemporary literary representations of harmful human impacts on the natural world. Evans (ibid.: 95) makes the following argument that resonates strongly with the analysis that emerges in the rest of my article:

> Representations of climate futures matter in terms of climate justice, or the effort to combat the way that climate change is disproportionately caused and disproportionately experienced along lines of privilege. Climate justice narratives thus require an attention both to the likelihood of climate injustice in the future and to the way that such injustice is rooted, and indeed ongoing, in the present moment.

These 'lines of privilege' and the notion of 'climate justice', I will demonstrate, become fault lines along which the strategies of distancing play out in my selected texts. My own engagements with cli-fi and with literatures of the natural world have also been shaped by the work of Ghosh, who offers an extended and convincing critique of the conflation of literary explorations of climate change with science fiction. He interrogates why it is 'as though in the literary imagination, climate change were somehow akin to extraterrestrials or interplanetary travel' (Ghosh, 2016: 7). Ghosh (ibid.: 27) argues that climate change effects cannot be treated as phenomena that are removed from our current reality because this would ignore the very obvious fact 'that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time'. Although I will return to Ghosh's work later in my analysis, I am raising it here because of his description of the failures of contemporary culture to deal with climate change as 'the great derangement' and because he regards 'complacency' about the effects of climate change as 'itself a kind of madness' (Ghosh, 2016: 35). His work thus offers further insight into the argument I am offering because of the way in which he locates madness not in the attempt to expose the effects of environmental degradation but in the attempt to deny it or resort to complacency.

The analytical focus on how identity markers such as gender, race, and class are mobilized to perpetuate silencing and distancing offers rich scholarly opportunities to deploy the theoretical tools of ecofeminism and intersectionality. Kings (2017:63) traces intersectionality to the work of Crenshaw and notes that it 'began as a metaphorical and conceptual tool used to highlight the inability of a single-axis framework to capture the lived experiences of black women'. Its usage has been developed and expanded to encompass many different iterations of overlapping and intersecting forms of oppression, and contemporary scholars find it

useful in analyses of experiences beyond those of Black women. Ergas, McKinney, and Bell (2021: 15) draw particularly insightful linkages between intersectionality and the environment when they argue that '[o]ver the past several decades, rich empirical work has demonstrated the connections between social inequalities and ecological degradation, making clear the importance of analyzing environmental problems through an intersectional lens'. They convincingly demonstrate that 'environmental justice' (ibid.) is a complex topic that demands interrogation through an intersectional viewpoint. As the close reading of the selected novels will reveal, such an intersectional approach that engages seriously with the ways in which characters are located at the intersections of gendered, racial, and class identities facilitates more nuanced understandings of how they are marginalized in conversations about the environment. Ecofeminism has its own roots in intersectional spaces, particularly where 'feminist, environmental, and activist thought' (ibid.: 17) found points of alignment, commonality, and cross-fertilization. While there are many strands and versions of ecofeminism, they all share a common 'stance that the oppression of women is deeply and critically connected to the domination of nature and that solutions to environmental problems must incorporate feminist perspectives' (ibid.: 17-18). In the rest of this article, the theoretical tools of intersectionality and ecofeminism will complement the work of Ghosh as I tease out how silencing and distancing are represented in the selected texts.

In *Damnation Spring,* Davidson represents a working-class community that is increasingly divided by rifts between characters who insist that environmental advocacy is a threat to their way of life and characters who insist that complacency and denial are no longer viable options. Davidson's text can be read as a continuation of the conversations that were started by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which explored the dangers of pesticides. *Damnation Spring* is set in a logging village in California between 1977 and 1978, and the central protagonists are the Gunderson family, consisting of Colleen, Rich, and their young son, Chub. The impact of logging on the local landscape, antipathy towards the environmental activists who want to save what is left of the redwood trees and Colleen's series of miscarriages are established as prominent themes early in the novel. My analysis will explore how these themes intersect in myriad ways and how silencing and distancing function to facilitate the community's complacency in the face of a clear and immediate threat. Within the brief first chapter, Davidson signals all the prominent concerns that will shape the characters' experiences in the rest of the novel. Jim Mueller, a mostly peripheral character, refers to 'this new environmental bullshit' as 'just paperwork' (Davidson, 2021: 7) that serves little purpose other than adding to the load of hardworking loggers. Rich reflects on how short men would often try to provoke fights with him in bars, and he concludes that the dangerous type of logging that is done in their community drew such men to the work in the first place, '[a]s if falling the biggest timber on Earth could make up for the North Coast's smallest pecker' (ibid.: 9). With this reflection, Davidson is suggesting the tendency to associate environmental destruction with traditional constructions of masculinity, and she is simultaneously offering a critique of such an association. The men who heckle Rich

seek to compensate for a sense of failed masculinity by engaging in logging, but, as Rich's comment makes clear, these efforts are doomed to failure. Even though other men in this novel (including Rich but especially Daniel, who will be introduced later) are represented as good people who are receptive to alternative, more respectful engagement with the environment, this short, seemingly unimportant comment suggests that Colleen will need to confront a set of problematically masculinized assumptions about the environment when she later tries to question the impact of the logging companies' actions. The final central theme that is raised in this opening chapter comes from Lark, who spent his life as a logger and lost his best friend, Rich's father, in a logging accident. Lark notes that the 'real timber's gone' (Davidson, 2021: 10), and that attempts to replenish what has been lost are mostly artificial and essentially a performative exercise in futility. He is also unambiguous in his identification of the major culprit: 'Two thousand years to grow a forest, a hundred years to fall it. No plague like man' (ibid.). Lark's reflections echo Ghosh's (2016: 32) argument that there is an 'intimate connection' between humans, the changing environment, and the consequences of ecological destruction because 'we have all contributed in some measure, great or small, to their making'.

These concerns set the scene before Davidson introduces the main protagonist, Colleen, in the second chapter. Colleen works as an unofficial midwife in the local community, and her character is infused with a quiet sense of sadness, grief, and loss. The previous year, she had suffered a miscarriage at five months, and this was not her first one: 'Five by Rich's count, three more she'd never spoken of' (Davidson, 2021: 13). When Colleen runs into an old boyfriend, Daniel, who is now a scientist back in town to investigate the environmental damage emanating from the logging industry, it is the first inkling she gets that there are problems with local contamination levels. Daniel insists that the water is 'making people sick' and that it is affecting the 'whole community' (ibid.: 39). This concern and Daniel's voice are, however, mostly dismissed by other characters because he is an outsider on a number of levels. First, he is college-educated, and, unlike the rest of the village, he is not dependent on logging for his livelihood. Second, and most important, he is part of the Yurok tribe in a town where people had bumper stickers on their cars with slogans like 'Save a fish, can an Indian' (ibid.: 41). Daniel's experiences are thus shaped by the way his class and racial identities intersect and differ from those of the rest of the community. Some of this antipathy comes from the fact that, after local salmon fishing was banned, the Yuroks won a case at the Supreme Court that allowed them to continue fishing in the traditional ways as they had done 'since time began' (ibid.: 40). The work of Powys Whyte (2018) provides insight into other characters' attitudes toward Daniel, particularly regarding their hostility about fishing rights. Powys Whyte (ibid.: 278) focuses on relationships between Indigenous and settler communities, especially in relation to environmental justice, and he identifies 'contexts where at least some people are capable of accusing Indigenous peoples of clamoring for "undeserved privilege"'.

Daniel's voice and the representations of how his voice is silenced are especially important in larger discussions about how to intervene in environmental

destruction because, as Ghosh (2016: 87) correctly notes, the 'discourse around the Anthropocene, and climate change generally, remains largely Eurocentric'. Ghosh convincingly argues that this Eurocentrism needs to be challenged in engagements with the natural world's preservation. The dismissal of Daniel and his concerns is also clearly racialized, and the local people do not care about his warnings regarding damage to the community because they do not regard their communities as the same. It is also noteworthy that the bumper sticker slogans about saving the fish by limiting the fishing rights of the Yurok people emanate from the same sections of the community that regard the logging destruction of entire Redwood forests as their right. There are thus already ruptures within this community when it comes to how its members view the treatment of the environment, and these fissures are both racialized and gendered. Schuldt and Pearson (2016: 495) explore how race and ethnicity shape polarization in reactions to climate change, and they find 'that public divides on climate change may often be rooted in identity processes, driven in part by a motivation to associate with others with similar political and ideological views'. Colleen, who is a respected member of the community, is the voice that can potentially make a difference, and she finds herself at least curious about Daniel's claims. Piotrowski (2017) uses conceptual tools from Deleuzian theory to make a useful argument that can be deployed to understand the dynamics that come into play when some characters' voices on environmental destruction are heard while those of others are dismissed. She notes that

> political subjectification in environmental movements needs to be understood in light of what I call *hypocrisy micropolitics*, namely affective events that *fold* (Deleuze 1988) environmental activists' and audiences' authenticities along fabrications of a/legitimacy, non/belonging and non/credibility. (Piotrowski, 2017: 844)

Daniel and the environmental activists are not regarded as either legitimate or credible because they are not constructed as credible in the narratives that this community develops to make sense of their work and their world.

As Colleen slowly and tentatively starts questioning the status quo, Davidson makes it clear that she is operating within a context of extreme hostility to environmental activists. These activists are referred to by the townspeople as 'jokers' and 'clowns' who 'care more about trees than people' (Davidson, 2021: 49) and are 'shitting all over the American dream' (ibid.: 150). They are also called 'longhairs' (ibid.: 70) to position them as out-of-touch hippies who fail to conform to conventional standards of masculinity. In his *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, Kimmel (2006: 174) notes how hippies, 'with their long hair and flowing, feminine clothes', came to signify a rejection of traditional constructions of masculinity. As far as the locals are concerned, they constitute an active threat to their livelihoods, and people say that being a park ranger '[m]ight be the only job left around here, if those hippies got their way' (Davidson, 2021: 74). Obach (2004: 71) critiques what he refers to as the 'classic jobs-versus-the-environment dispute' by exploring common ground between labor organizations and environmental justice

movements. Barca (2012: 69) offers an extended account of the dynamics that shape and actively perpetuate the division between workers and environmental activism:

> The alienation between labor and environmental movements, so frequently experienced – in the US and elsewhere – to have become an unquestioned commonsense assumption is in fact the result of a political battle taking place historically and therefore needs a historical explanation. The 'jobs-vs.-the environment' discourse has been construed in connection with the international business cycle, and with the imposition of neo-liberal politics: in 'mature industrialized countries', such as the US, that discourse evolved and acquired social hegemony between the end of the 1970s and the first 1990s, when it has been finally opposed by a recovery of social movements struggling for environmental justice and ecological democracy.

While a further exploration of this 'historical explanation' is beyond the scope of the article, it is significant to note that this division and distance have been constructed to serve particular power interests. The current scholarship on environmental justice movements focuses to a much greater extent on the common interests of workers and the environment, and it challenges what Barca (2012: 70) refers to as 'the lack of alternatives, and the "job blackmail", that had shaped the terms of the "jobs-vs.-the-environment" discourse in the western world'.

Colleen is shocked when she sees the extent of the damage that has been done to the forests through logging, and she notes that it has taken on a new dimension. She 'heard herself gasp: mud and slash, branches and trash trees piled into tepees to be burned, hills crisscrossed with debris as far as the eye could see – a barren wasteland' (Davidson, 2021: 17). The next line sees her turn back to Chub as Davidson makes it clear that Colleen's first priority is her family, and it is the threat to her family that moves her to action. Despite the resistance from her community, Colleen becomes increasingly unable to ignore her growing sense that something is very wrong as she is exposed to more women having babies with birth defects. These include Melody, whose baby was born missing the top of his skull and part of his brain and died shortly after birth (ibid.: 129), and Helen, whose baby was born with '[n]o brain in his head' (ibid.: 180) as well as the Yancy baby who had 'anencephaly' (ibid.) and 'Evangeline's granddaughter [who also] had a baby like that' (ibid.). When Colleen becomes convinced by Daniel's hypothesis that the pesticides that are sprayed by the logging companies have been 'bioaccumulating' (ibid.: 205) over the decades and are now causing harm to animals and people, Rich dismisses them both by saying that the 'stuff is approved by government' and asking, 'Why would they approve something that if it wasn't safe?' (ibid.: 208). Rich is establishing a clear distance between the law-abiding, hardworking loggers and the fringe consisting of hippies and outsider scientists, and Colleen struggles to negotiate this distance even as her unease grows. Colleen's gendered and working-class identities intersect in ways that directly shape her ability to speak against the environmental damage. As will emerge below, the experiences of the women in this community

confirm the core ecofeminist insistence that women's and nature's vulnerability to exploitative extractivist practices are interwoven and interconnected in ways that make it all the more important to amplify rather than silence women's voices in discussions of environmental justice.

Part of Colleen's challenge is that she is located in a community where the blame is mostly placed on women. When she starts considering the role of the pesticides in her miscarriages, her main question is 'What if it wasn't anything she'd done wrong?' (ibid.: 208). Shortly after these reflections, her friend Marsha also reveals that she had lost a baby who had been born without a brain and with 'webbed feet' (ibid.: 226) but '[t]hey said it was from drinking' (ibid.). Marsha questions this medical opinion and admits that she 'drank a few' (ibid.) but dismisses that as the reason because her other two children were healthy. In what is a basic description of gaslighting, Helen tells Colleen how she feels as follows: 'Like someone's trying to convince me something's wrong with me. Like I don't want to see what I see' (ibid.: 250). The women consider whether the husbands' occasional violence is to blame and, while they are willing to consider this possibility, they refuse to engage with 'those hippies [who] are trying to blame it on the sprays' (ibid.: 227). Women, and particularly mothers, are regarded as irrational in their suspicions, and this is articulated by one of the characters as follows: 'Doesn't matter how safe it is, approved by the EPA [environmental protection agency] and all. Somebody convinces a woman these sprays are making her kids sick, it's like trying to talk sense to a damn bear' (ibid.: 233). The townspeople blame the environmental activists for creating distance within their community (by suggesting these dangers to women) by saying that 'these tree huggers are trying to set friend against friend, family against family' (ibid.: 228). These activists are so far removed from their way of life that they are easily dismissed as threatening outsiders, and their influence, as suggested above, is so corrupting that it makes it impossible to have rational conversations on the topic with women. Here the author demonstrates how silencing and distancing operate in tandem to enable the destruction of the forests, rivers, and the environment on which this community is dependent to continue its very existence.

In *The High House*, Francesca is a scientist who tries to warn people of the imminent threat posed by climate change, but, for most of the novel, her son, Pauly, and her stepdaughter, Caro, are the ones who need to deal with the consequences of this threat. The title refers to the home that Francesca prepares for her children, and it functions as a type of ark because of the increased water levels. Caro describes how the first distance Francesca tried to bridge was a type of cognitive dissonance that enabled people to separate their usual lives from a future that, it was becoming increasingly clear, would be fundamentally altered by climate change:

> She [Francesca] didn't have the habit that the rest of us were learning of having our minds in two places at once, of seeing two futures – that ordinary one of summer holidays and new school terms, of Christmases and birthdays and bank accounts in an endless, uneventful round, and the other one, the long and empty one we spoke about in hypotheticals, or didn't speak about at all. (Greengrass, 2021: 11)

Francesca struggles to understand how '[t]hey could act as though it's a myth to frighten them […] instead of the imminently coming end of our fucking world' (ibid.). The distance is also manifesting as ruptures within this family as Caro knows that when Francesca 'said "they" she meant father, too, and me' (ibid.). Francesca's inability to bridge this distance ultimately makes her an ineffective advocate for what she cares about most, namely getting people to understand the urgency of the climate situation and to act accordingly. Caro reflects that, as she got older, 'crisis slid from distant threat to imminent probability and we tuned it out like static, we adjusted to each emergent normality and we did what we had always done' (ibid.: 19). What they had always done included things that contribute directly to climate change, such as 'the commutes and holidays' (ibid.) and the unbridled consumerism that is signified by 'the Friday big shops' (ibid.: 20). Caro explains that they 'did these things not out of ignorance, nor through thoughtlessness, but only because there seemed nothing else to do' (ibid.). People did this even as the danger grew, and Caro describes this new, unacknowledged reality as 'the thing that only she [Francesca] could look at straight' (ibid.). Ghosh (2016: 5) describes the impact of this seemingly slow change and people's repeated adaptations to a 'new normal' when he notes that, although the effects of climate change often confront us 'with sudden and deadly violence […] more often it does so with a quiet insistence'. The reality is that the 'freakish weather events of today […] are animated by cumulative human actions' (ibid.: 32). As far as Caro is concerned, Francesca's behavior becomes increasingly frenetic, and, as their relationship becomes more strained, she wishes for a return to their usual ways of life.

When people are no longer able to deny that 'things were getting worse' (Greengrass, 2021: 38), they resort to distancing themselves from the first casualties of climate change to whom they are directly exposed. Caro sees the displacement of people by flooding in Gloucestershire, York, and Hull, and she finds it striking that their plight is not met with any type of empathy. Instead, they seem to be blamed as individual victims, with people insisting that '[t]hey must have known that their homes were vulnerable' (ibid.). Caro's reflections signal the distancing mechanisms that people are mobilizing in order to cling to the illusion of safety and to facilitate going about their lives as usual:

> We were protected by our houses and our educations and our high-street shopping centres. We had the habit of luck and power, and couldn't understand that they were not our right. We saw the situation was bad, elsewhere, but surely things would work out, because didn't they always, for us? (Greengrass, 2021: 38)

The 'us' that is presumably protected here is a white, university educated, Western, middle-class cohort. Eventually Caro is forced to recognize what Francesca saw all along, namely that 'no power, no wealth or name or habit of ease would save us in the end' (ibid.: 48). Importantly, Caro signals the profoundly unequal impact of the effects of climate change when she admits that they 'are all at the mercy of the weather, but not all to the same extent' (ibid.).

While Caro is growing up and finding Francesca distant and unlikable, Francesca is actually busy getting the titular high house ready for Caro and Pauly as a refuge. In this endeavor, she enlists the help of Grandy and his granddaughter, Sally. Sally mistrusts and dislikes Francesca because she assumes that she is an outsider who is silently 'mocking' and concealing a 'trace of contempt' (ibid.: 100) for them. When the rising water levels in the United Kingdom force Caro and Pauly to take refuge in the high house, Sally finds herself sharing Caro's admission: 'We had been watching people drown for years, and the only difference was that they had always been a long way off from us, before' (ibid.: 149). She is now quite shocked by the level of apathy they displayed in their spaces of privilege as they 'sent money, perhaps, if the pictures were bad enough, and then [they] went on as [they] always had' (ibid.: 149-150). The stark reality is articulated as follows: 'Their deaths, although we didn't like to say so, were not really a disaster to us, because disaster would only come when it had our own face on it – and now here it was' (ibid.: 150). Although Francesca and her family are represented as more educated city dwellers and of a higher socioeconomic class than Sally and Grandy, Sally in her little rural village engaged in similar distancing techniques to avoid direct engagement with the impact of climate change. Norgaard (2012) explores the dynamics that enable people to mobilize their privilege and to construct themselves as 'innocent' even as they are actively complicit in the perpetuation of climate change. Her research contends that '[p]eople in nations with higher carbon emissions are not only less likely to be impacted by direct effects of climate change, but they are also less likely to show concern regarding climate change' (ibid.: 2). She uses her findings to argue that, in 'today's globalized risk society, perceptions of near and far, immediate or abstract are politically charged social constructions' (ibid.). Although the working-class community depicted by Davidson is very differently situated in terms of socioeconomic privilege than characters like Caro, its members' location as white people in the United States does offer some buffer against the impact of climate change that is not available to people in most of the Global South. When Caro and Sally refer to the difference between 'us' and a 'them' that are a 'long way off', they are engaging in 'reproducing transnational environmental privilege' in ways that are fundamentally racialized and classed (Norgaard, 2012: 1). As Norgaard argues, the very understandings of closeness and remoteness are constructions that take shape through politicized assumptions about who is one of 'us' and who is one of 'them' and, by extension, whose experiences of climate change matter and whose experiences can be ignored.

For most of the novel, Caro regards Francesca as distant, furious, wrapped up in her work, and neglectful of her son. Francesca does indeed display a frenetic energy as she attends summits, gives speeches, and writes columns in which she tries to warn people that looking away is no longer an option. She argues that 'if we are in mourning for anything, it is for a time when we could turn our backs' (Greengrass, 2021: 27), and insists that everyone, regardless of how they are located, needs to understand that 'anxiety is a perfectly reasonable response to what we are living through' (ibid.: 30). Verlie (2022: 2) argues that

> our capacity to feel is rarely acknowledged as a legitimate way of knowing climate change. Public and academic approaches to human-climate relations still tend to normalise and advocate scientific modes of climate knowledge, which promote mental comprehension of statistics and graphs through disembodied abstraction.

Francesca's range of feelings, from the few times Caro spots 'a gap in her fury' to the times when 'she looked neither fierce nor righteous but only rather sad' (Greengrass, 2021: 31) or when her face was 'taut with fury' (ibid.: 22), are all reactions that matter and that signify much more than what Caro sees, namely an angry woman. According to Verlie (2022: 2), current research is 'increasingly finding that climate denial's apparent opposite, climate anxiety, is one of the major barriers to climate action'. For Francesca, however, her anxiety does not translate into apathy. Rather, she channels it into very concrete action that ends up keeping her children alive and safe for a few more years. Verlie (ibid.) believes that 'if we are to adequately respond to climate change, we need to consider humans' ability to feel climate as a serious and powerful mode of engagement'. Although Francesca's transformative, albeit small-scale, actions are informed by her visceral engagement with the reality of climate change, she remains unable to work meaningfully with the feelings of other characters in the book. The way in which she 'feels climate' thus facilitates real change within her small family, but she ultimately fails to extend that change to larger spaces when such wide engagement is necessary to effect meaningful change.

Alison and Patrick in *Something New Under the Sun* inhabit an American landscape that is recognizable but also so different that 'real' water, rather than a mysterious synthetic version, has become a luxury item that only the rich and famous can afford. This unsettling coalescence of the familiar and the strange is, according to Ghosh (2016), a defining characteristic of the contemporary reality of climate change. In his analysis, Ghosh draws on the work of George Marshall (2015: 95), who explains that '[c]limate change is inherently uncanny: Weather conditions, and the high-carbon lifestyles that are changing them, are extremely familiar and yet have now been given a new menace and uncertainty'. While the main narrative is driven by Patrick, who is in California for a film deal, Alison is the character whose concerns about climate change are most audibly expressed and most decisively silenced. Like Francesca, whose actions are driven by her love for Pauly, Alison cannot avert her gaze from the omnipresent environmental destruction because she knows that their daughter, Nora, will be forced to live with its worst consequences. She tries to share her concerns with Patrick as follows:

> I look at Nora and I know there's no future for her, and it tears my heart in two. And what makes me feel crazy is that all around me, everywhere, people are driving cars and buying propane grills and eating double cheese burgers, and not one of them acts like they're dying, even though they are. Not one of them sees what I see, and that means we have no chance. (Kleeman, 2021: 27)

Alison correctly identifies the apathy around her as a cause for major concern, but, like Francesca, she remains unable to effect any social or systemic change. Patrick effectively distances himself from Alison's fears by telling her that she should 'get help' and 'go see someone' (ibid.: 27). While the drastic climate changes might be new, there is nothing new under the sun about a man silencing a woman by questioning her mental health. The gendered dismissal of a woman's concerns as indicative of hysteria signals that Alison's experiences are profoundly shaped by her gender.

Alison's shock at people's insistence on going about life as usual mirrors Francesca's anger at the apathy she perceives all around her. Norgaard's work sheds light on these reactions, or lack thereof, that they struggle to understand. She seeks to understand exactly how members of a community in the Global North manage 'to construct a sense that climate change was a distant problem that would affect other people long before it reached them, or create a sense that responsibility for the problem lay in other quarters' (Norgaard, 2012: 11). She finds that 'the invisibility of climate change in daily life was socially produced using tools of order and tools of innocence' and, 'as a result, information from climate science was known in the abstract, but disconnected from, and invisible within political, social or private life' (ibid.: 17).

Through sufficient repetition of these practices that structure daily life, which are reinforced by other community members, people can simultaneously know what is happening to the climate and relegate this reality to a distant problem that is neither their responsibility nor of immediate concern to them. Ghosh (2016: 145) makes a provocative point that allows us to think differently about the lack of urgency and the apathy of many of the characters in the novels when he argues that 'global inaction on climate change is by no means the result of confusion or denialism or a lack of planning: to the contrary, the maintenance of the status quo *is* the plan'.

While Patrick is in California, Alison and Nora go to Earthbridge, which she describes to him as a 'nature retreat' and 'a sort of […] support group' (Kleeman, 2021: 28). Earthbridge is structured according to an ecofeminist ethos where respect for the environment and for women's modes of engagement with loss are prioritized. As part of the Earthbridge activities, they meet daily to share 'a list of losses [they have] suffered over the last twenty-four hours' (ibid.: 141). The losses cover everything from something as seemingly small as a species of moth to large glaciers. They gather to cry, share their feelings and their fears, and mourn for what has been lost. As part of the mourning process, they seek to establish what Ingalsbee (1996: 270) describes as 'radical empathy with non-human others', and they acknowledge the joy and the value that these others would have found in life. In a series of imaginative exercises that comprise a eulogy for a now extinct moth species, the group members try to understand life from the moth's perspective as they imagine '[h]ow beautiful its life must have been to witness while it was allowed to live' (Kleeman, 2021: 142). These sentences signal both how challenging it is for people to imagine an other without centering the human (the implied witness here

is human, as is the 'we' that suffered the losses) and the power of the human who 'allowed' life. Patrick responds with a mixture of sarcasm and mocking dismissal as he asks, 'What does that mean, mourning? For a glacier?' (ibid.: 141). The mourning of a glacier is not a new phenomenon, and Kleeman's inclusion here can be read as an intertextual reference to Marybeth Holleman's (2019) poem entitled 'How to grieve a glacier'. Although Patrick clearly finds the notion of mourning for a moth or a glacier ludicrous, this Earthbridge practice is a manifestation of ecological grief. In their *Mourning Nature: Hope at the Heart of Ecological Loss and Grief*, Ashlee Cunsolo and Karen Landman (2017: 16) argue that it is necessary to 'disrupt the dominance of human bodies as the only mournable subjects'. The phrases 'environmental grief' and 'ecological grief' can be traced back to the work of Kevorkian (2019), and Cunsolo and Ellis (2018: 275) build on this work to define ecological grief as 'the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change'. In Patrick's new circle of acquaintances, neither respectful concern for the more-than-human world nor regarding parts of that world as mournable is taken seriously. Jay tells him about a deer who 'drowned in [his] swimming pool' and says that they 'like to joke that [they] should have put the pool cover on' (Kleeman, 2021: 35). Brenda tells him that he should not blame himself because the 'world is a place where terrible things just *happen*' (ibid.: 35). The list of actions Alison mentions above (that people blithely continue engaging in) signals that the opposite is true when it comes to climate change. It is certainly true of a deer whose habitat has been so comprehensively compromised that a swimming pool becomes a viable source of water. None of these things just happen for no reason. They happen because of specific choices human beings make and continue to make even when the consequences of their decisions are literally floating dead in their backyards.

When Patrick reflects on the wildfires that have become a part of daily life in California, he cannot completely escape the impact this has on the area's animal population, whose members increasingly have nowhere left to run. He hears the 'sound of small life fleeing from the fire, scurrying towards more fire elsewhere' (Kleeman, 2021: 105). The casual cruelty of his apathy is stunning: 'Terrible, definitely. But it's not really an emergency, he thinks, putting on his signal and shifting into the fast lane, if you can drive around it' (ibid.). His general unwillingness to take responsibility for his experiences is reflected in his relationship with Alison, whom he blames when Nora develops insomnia. With more than a hint of condescending mansplaining, he '[c]learly explained' to her that 'their daughter was acting out the residue of her mother's trauma, distilling and concentrating her doomsday attitude' when she just wants, according to Patrick, for their lives to 'go back to normal' (ibid.: 108). These sleep problems start after what is represented as a type of psychotic break for Alison, but there is no suggestion that Nora fails to understand that they are, in fact, living in a space of emergency that has not been caused by her mother. Significantly, she starts sleeping again after Alison facilitates a, admittedly, limited but caring reconnection with nature by building a 'planting

box in the backyard and assign[ing] her the task of seeding the small garden' (ibid.). Although this intervention is directly linked to a normalization in her sleeping patterns, Nora does not become distanced from the reality of the climate threat, and she 'continued to write long apocalyptic screeds' (ibid.).

The incident that culminates in Alison's breakdown is the one that eventually leads her and Nora to Earthbridge, where they seek to cultivate a more meaningful engagement with nature and a more constructive way of dealing with their climate change anxiety. Alison describes the incident in a way that could easily have been a description of the current climate scenario: 'As with most catastrophes, she knew it hadn't happened all at once' (ibid.: 147). She shares a number of experiences that resulted both in her complete inability to go about life as usual and in her growing distance from Patrick. Many of her memories revolve around the suffering of animals, and she recalls a particularly bad fight she had with Patrick 'over whether Nora should be raised vegetarian or whether, on the other hand, she should eat her daily fill from the limbs and torsos of big, sloe-eyed animals that had never lived a day without being destined for the slaughterhouse' (ibid.: 148). She comes to see lawns as 'a perfect illustration of her unfreedom', and she wants to replace their own lawn with 'harder perennial grasses' that would not need 'fertilizer made from synthesized nitrogen' or 'toxic herbicides to keep off the weeds' and to complement that with a 'small vegetable garden' (ibid.: 149). Her plans, however, are thwarted by the local bylaws that allow only lawns, of which the aesthetic appeal must be maintained regardless of the cost to the larger environment. After receiving this news, Alison spends an evening

> looking at photos of dead whales, their stomach bulging with plastic, acid-bleached coral the pale color of zombie skin, the horrifying videos of animal abuse, and the equally horrifying videos of abused animals too hurt to move being lifted up and carried away whimpering by humans seeking donations for their South Asian animal rescue organizations. (ibid.: 150)

Unlike Patrick, she is not able to cognitively 'drive around' any of this, and she then goes out into the night and destroys their lawn before moving on to those of her neighbors. Patrick insists on mental health treatment, and this increases the distance between them. She tells him that she has never felt as bad as when she remembers 'getting ordered by [him] to take [her] handful of pills and look away' (ibid.: 144) from the reality of the environmental destruction around her. What Patrick sees as Alison's irrational obsession with lawns can be read in terms of Ghosh's conceptualization of the 'climate crisis [as] also a crisis of culture' (2016: 9). He explains that '[c]ulture generates desires – for vehicles and appliances, for certain kinds of gardens and dwellings – that are among the principal drivers of the carbon economy' (Gosh, 2016: 9-10). He uses lawns as one of the examples to unpack this point, and his argument suggests that someone like Alison is far from insane. In fact, she is actively exposing and challenging what he has called 'the Great Derangement':

> When we see a green lawn that has been watered with desalinated water, in Abu Dhabi or Southern California or some other environment where people had once been content to spend their water thriftily in nurturing a single vine or shrub, we are looking at an expression of yearning that may have been midwifed by the novels of Jane Austen. The artifacts and commodities that are conjured up by these desires are, in a sense, at once expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being. (ibid.: 10)

The lawns, like the holidays, commutes, and consumerism that are critiqued in *The High House*, did not 'just happen'. They are the result of complex cultural constructions, and the consequences of being complicit in the perpetuation of the desire for these cultural artifacts can be linked directly to the destruction of the natural environment. Like the characters in *Damnation Spring* who choose to believe that the sprays are safe because they are told this by the EPA and the government, Patrick tries to reassure Nora by resorting to similar authority structures when she is afraid of the fires raging near her father. He tells her that she need not worry because they 'have all the best people working on it, and Los Angeles is a major city. Major cities don't just get destroyed by fire' (Kleeman, 2021: 218). The unspoken aspect of this claim is that major Western cities in so-called first world countries do not just get destroyed by fire. Nora remains unconvinced, and, to some extent at least, Patrick is correct. This destruction does not 'just happen'. Rather, it is the result of a combination of specific individual and larger social and systemic choices and the refusal to engage with the mounting evidence that those choices have destructive consequences. It appears that Nora has stopped believing these false reassurances, and she realizes that the old ways of living are simply no longer viable, as she explains to another group of children at Earthbridge: 'The long game of temporary comfort, like playing musical chairs in a burning room, is nearing its end' (ibid.: 278). Alison, in turn, regards Patrick as 'a fool still begging to buy capitalism's plummeting stock' (ibid.: 280). Her comment is signaling the role of neoliberal capitalism in climate change, which has been widely debated by scholars. Even when they acknowledge that the issues are much more complex than a simple allocation of blame to capitalism would imply, they argue that capitalism's part in shaping our current crisis cannot be denied (see, e.g., Klein, 2014, and Chakrabarty, 2017). Meanwhile, in California, the novel draws to a close with the following description of the stubborn insistence on maintaining the status quo and on believing that privilege will protect itself successfully: 'Ditches have been dug around glowing, smoking earth, a moat to defend the big, expensive houses, their lawns and landscaping still green' (Kleeman, 2021: 346). Even as the world burns, people are still attempting to shore up an illusory distance between themselves and those who will be impacted by environmental destruction.

Colleen, Daniel, Francesca, and Alison all navigate terrains that are represented as resistant to recognizing the destructive impact of human choices on the environment. This article has demonstrated the various ways in which

their voices are silenced and marginalized in communities that construct different iterations of distance between 'us' and 'them'. Other characters feel able to ignore their warnings about the imminence of the threat that is posed by environmental destruction and climate change. In some cases, they do so by appealing to authority structures that are essentially empty shells, and, in other cases, by insisting that the consequences of climate change do not affect people like them. In fact, attempts to engage with actions that harm the environment are regarded as the real threat to their livelihoods and ways of life. Although he draws on contemporary examples from contexts that are far removed from the settings of my selected novels, Ghosh (2006: 5) issues a salutary warning about the wide reach of climate change when he argues that his cases 'prove once again that there is no difference between the without and the within; between using and being used'. He calls on literature and cultural production more broadly to respond to the demands of this historical moment by exposing and critiquing our complicity in climate change rather than perpetuating the concealments and evasions that allow societies to ignore the impact of environmental destruction. This article has offered a literary analysis of how selected novels represent the cognitive and discursive maneuvers that enable people to participate in and perpetuate activities that damage the environment. In addition, I have illustrated how this environmental destruction and climate change harm all members of the represented communities, including those who are convinced that their various layers of privilege will protect them.

REFERENCES

Barca, S. (2012) On working-class environmentalism: a historical and transnational overview. *Interface: a journal for and about social movements*, 4 (2): 61-80.

Carson, R. ([1962] 2002) *Silent Spring*. Boston: Mariner Books.

Chakrabarty, D. (2017) The politics of climate change is more than the politics of capitalism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34 (2-3): 25-37.

Cunsolo, A. and Ellis, E. (2018) Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss. *Nature Climate Change*, 8: 275-281.

Cunsolo, A. and Landman, K. (2017) Introduction: to mourn beyond the human. In A. Cunsolo and K. Landman (eds.) *Mourning Nature: hope at the heart of ecological loss and grief* (pp. 3-26). Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Ergas, C., McKinney, L. and Bell, S. E. (2021) Intersectionality and the environment. In B. S. Caniglia, A. Jorgenson, S. A. Malin, L. Peek, D. N. Pellow and X. Huang (eds.) *Handbook of Environmental Sociology* (pp. 15-34). Geneva: Springer.

Evans, R. (2017) Fantastic futures? Cli-fi, climate justice, and queer futurity. *Resilience: a journal of the environmental humanities*, 4 (2/3): 94-110.

Ghosh, A. (2016) *The Great Derangement: climate change and the unthinkable*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Holleman, M. (2019) How to grieve a glacier. *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 25 (2): 441-442.

Ingalsbee, T. (1996) Earth first! Activism: ecological postmodern praxis in radical environmentalist identities. *Sociological Perspectives*, 39 (2): 263-276.

Kevorkian, K. (2019, May 3) On environmental grief and the rights of nature. *Seeing the Woods*. Available from https://seeingthewoods.org/2019/05/03/environmental-grief-and-the-rights-of-nature/ [Accessed on 6 June 2022].

Kimmel, M. (2006) *Manhood in America: a cultural history*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Kings, A. E. (2017). Intersectionality and the changing face of ecofeminism. *Ethics and the Environment*, 22 (1): 63-87.

Klein, N. (2014) *This Changes Everything: capitalism vs. the climate*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Marshall, G. (2015) *Don't Even Think About It: why our brains are wired to ignore climate change*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Norgaard, K. M. (2012) Climate denial and the construction of innocence: reproducing transnational environmental privilege in the face of climate change. *Race, Gender & Class*, 19 (1-2): 80-103.

Obach, B. K. (2004) *Labor and the Environmental Movement: the quest for common ground*. London: MIT Press.

Piotrowski, M. (2017) 'Authentic' Folds: environmental audiences, activists and subjectification in hypocrisy micropolitics. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 31 (6): 844-856.

Powys Whyte, K. (2018) On resilient parasitisms, or why I'm skeptical of indigenous/settler reconciliation. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 14 (2): 277-289.

Schuldt, J. P. and Pearson, A. R. (2016) The role of race and ethnicity in climate change polarization: evidence from a U.S. National Survey Experiment. *Climate Change*, 136: 495-505. Available from https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10584-016-1631-3 [Accessed on 1 June 2022].

Verlie, B. (2022) *Learning to Live with Climate Change: from anxiety to transformation*. London: Routledge.

ANALYSED TEXTS

Davidson, A. (2021) *Damnation Spring*. London: Tinder Press.

Greengrass, J. (2021) *The High House*. London: Swift Press.

Kleeman, A. (2021) *Something New Under the Sun*. New York, NY: Hogarth.

Jessica Murray (PhD, Full Professor in English Studies) is currently based in the College of Graduate Studies at the University of South Africa. Her research interests include climate change fiction, critical animal studies and vegan studies.

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8383-2459

Email: murraj@unisa.ac.za

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 98–111
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.07

OLIVE SENIOR'S TRANSCULTURAL ECOPOETICS

NICOLE OLLIER
Université Bordeaux-Montaigne, France

Abstract. The titles of most books written by Jamaican poet Olive Senior point to her passionate preoccupation with nature: trees (*Talking of Trees* (1985), *The Pain Tree* (short stories, 2015)); the canopy (*Over the Roofs of the World* (2005a)); gardens (*Gardening in the Tropics* (2005b)); plants; and birds. Her *Hurricane Stories* set the landmarks of hard times when poor families had to rebuild what the wrath of nature had destroyed, when single mothers organized their children's help to mend the ruined ecosystems of their lands. Women tend vegetable gardens and build a sustainable economy to feed their families, including their improvident husbands. Senior's transcultural ecosystem is her language to evoke the diaspora, centuries of exploitation of the Caribbean land and its inhabitants by colonization, from Christopher Columbus to modern tourism, or the lure of exile. Wasted land can be salvaged thanks to traditional values. Our thesis is that nature and women use the same strategies of rebellion, resilience, and resistance to overcome the predatory attitude of the (post-)colonizer and give us a lesson of hope and trust in ultimate victory. Senior's creolized language itself is a transcultural ecosystem born of the hybridized cultures melded in her ecopoetics.

Key words: transculturality, ecopoetics, ecofeminism, Caribbean, poetry, Olive Senior

INTRODUCTION

Jamaican poet Olive Senior was invited in residence to Bordeaux in the spring of the publication of the bilingual anthology of her poems (Senior, 2014b). On one occasion, she was asked to read her poetry for a multicultural technology class in a lycée, in my presence and that of their English teacher. One smiling, intrigued Black student asked her, 'You are white; you speak as if you were Black. What *are* you?' She answered that her father was a Spanish Jew, but that on her mother's side, there was such a mixture she could not even tell: Black, Indian, possibly Chinese, and, she felt confident, Taino and Arawak, those natives whom European settlers had erroneously believed they had eradicated. She claimed to bear all that multifarious heritage. Senior's works exemplify high ecological consciousness, as her poems study relationships in the environment and show concern with saving

natural resources; she also is an ecofeminist, examining the connections between woman and nature. Her early literary career was devoted to initiating children to the flora and fauna of her native island, which elected her Poet Laureate in 2022. She is the author of the *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage* (Senior, 2003), several children's books, and a book about West Indian workers building the Panama Canal (Senior, 2015), as well as *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-Speaking Caribbean* (Senior, 1991). These illustrate her natural, historical, sociological, and scientific preoccupation with subaltern people's dedication to survival. The sole title of her book, *Gardening in the Tropics* (Senior, 2005b), which concerns most of our present analysis, summarizes the spirit of her writing, focused on the land of the Caribbean, what bounties can be grown for locals to survive if not thrive on, and fighting against the sometimes hostile natural elements such as the memorable hurricanes, whose violence and compass inscribe them in local and national history.

Her most prominent characters, humble but strong women, speak in a vernacular tongue, often creole; they grow plants, and raise families, are agents in the micro-economy, though potential victims of foreign powers. They remain resilient and combative, thanks to their faculty of 'relating' to the natural world in the sense of Glissant's 'poetics of relation': 'We know that the Other is within us' (1990: 39) and resonates in the way we conceive and we feel. The article is organized as follows: we shall see the poet as an archivist, even an archaeologist of colonial history; then we shall focus on the role of women's strength and resilience drawn from their relation to the earth; and shall finally observe that beyond being related, plants and humans represent the same fight and offer a vision of a world where flora and inhabitants are united in the same struggle of survival against the elements, but also against (post-)colonial predatory forces. This war, however, will prove to hold promises.

THE POET AS ARCHIVIST OF COLONIAL HISTORY

1 LANDSCAPE AS HISTORY

Like Glissant and Walcott, Senior is deeply concerned with history. In his poem *The Sea is History* (364-367), Derek Walcott refers to the Middle Passage, to 'tribal memory', buried in 'that great vault. The sea.' In Olive Senior's poetry, *landscape* is history; history goes as far back as the conquest of the New World by Europeans. When reading to audiences, she always begins with her poem 'Meditation on Yellow', which spans 500 years of misuse of the land, denounces Western colonialism and its exploitation of her island, as well as its replication by modern tourism 400 years later. Her personae are women uninterested in material possession or monetary values, who might admit fair trade and banter but not the pilfering of the island's bounties. The chambermaid and waitress in a hotel for tourists underline the work the natives have put in to produce consumer goods for Europeans to monopolize: sugar, coffee, bananas, oranges, cocoa, and aluminium. As Muñoz Martínez asserts,

'the economic success of products like sugar, coffee, and bananas came with an excessive environmental and human cost to the colonized land' (2022: 165).

> I've been slaving in the cane rows
> for your sugar
> I've been ripening coffee beans
> for your morning break
> I've been dallying on the docks
> loading your bananas,
> I've been toiling in orange groves for your marmalade
> I've been peeling ginger
> for your relish
> I've been chopping cocoa-pods
> for your chocolate bars
> I've been mining aluminium
> for your foil (Senior, 2005b: 14)

What is described is a regular looting of the island's soil and subsoil, its farming crops, craftsman's production, and mineral resources. This vision of visitors' attraction to the goods to be relished in the tropics addresses us to Muñoz Martínez (2022) in her study of what she terms tropical materialism. She examines the 'wasting practices' brought by colonialism and how conversely indigenous people resorted to 'alternative modes of relating to nature' (ibid.: 165). The persona of the native woman here condemns this never-satisfied greed and wasteful usage; the predatory lust addresses both nature and material wealth:

> But still they want more… […]
> Though I not quarrelsome
> I have to say: look
> I tired now
>
> I give you the gold
> I give you the land
> I give you the breeze
> I give you the beaches
> I give you the yellow sand
> I give you the golden crystals
> And I reach the stage where
> (though I not impolite)
> I have to say: lump it or leave it
> I can't give you anymore (Senior, 2005b: 15-16).

She too claims time for herself, a well-deserved rest, enjoying the sun and the sea, and even 'real tea' with 'Seville orange marmalade' (ibid.: 16). She associates domestic work for tourists with a kind of modern slavery. The cane field metaphor bears that connotation: 'I cane-rowing their hair / with my beads' (ibid.: 15). To her, these invaders are alien to the mysteries and magic of the place and must

change their mentality: 'I want to feel / […] You don't own the tropics anymore' (ibid.: 16).

Gold is the color of the precious metal, but the persona showcases that it is also that of piss, an equalizing fact that erases the supposed defect of locals being 'a shade too brown' (ibid.: 13): '[…] despite the difference in our skins / our piss was exactly the same shade of yellow' (ibid.: 12). Thus, this postcolonial invasion of wasteful visitors, linked to the allusion to human excrements, points to the era of what Armiero (2021: 9-12) calls 'Wasteocene', the age of waste, in the wake of the Anthropocene leading to it — in which Olive Senior plants her setting. For Muñoz Martínez:

> Olive Senior's work actively engages in debating the challenges of the Wasteocene, evidencing that colonialism plays a central role in imposing toxicity upon these islands, where the plantation system has wasted lands and lives for centuries. […] the common traumatic history of domination can be encapsulated by a semiotics of waste, wasting and toxicity. (2022: 175)

From the very arrival of the Europeans, in the opening lines, the indigenous poetic subject is tempted to poison the colonizer: 'You landed here at El Dorado […] Had I known I would have / brewed you up some yellow fever-grass / and arsenic' (ibid.: 11). The indigenous persona acquires not only a sense of legitimacy but also a confidence in a form of personal invulnerability: 'You cannot erase / the memory of my story' (Senior, 2005: 17).

Glissant theorized about roots in the Caribbean, described as not immobile: 'the mystery of the root, nuanced by the variations of errantry' (1990: 33, trans. mine). He saw that mobility in 'The image of the rhizome, […] identity is not entirely in the root, but also in the Relation' (ibid.: 31, trans. mine). In Senior's poem, the female indigenous persona is quite vocal, ironical, and direct, and questions the legitimacy of the European presence. She claims her anchorage in her native land, and she boasts her ability to enjoy the delightful osmosis with it in a way usurpers cannot.

> You cannot catch
> My rhythm
>
> (for you have to born
> With that) (Senior, 2005b: 17)

Bucknor (2009: 60) describes 'Senior's tonal turbulence' and the strategy of 'cunning' used by her personas.

2 COLONIALISM, WESTERN RELIGION, WHEN LIGHT BRINGS OBSCURITY

The initial scourge in the Caribbean, colonialism, mostly by European – among whom the Spanish – not only brought an ecological catastrophe, deforestation causing the absence of rain, and machines laying waste to thousands of acres, but also justified the ruin through a manipulative Christian religion. It obscured

the truth just as the smoke from the forest fires obscured the sun. The pinpoints of light through the canopy used to characterize the traditional way of cultivating the land: 'There could have been pinpricks of light filtering through the leaves to mirror the stars of heaven, invert the Pleiades' (Senior, 2005.: 96). The parsimonious, modest way of cultivating was respectful of earth's resources: 'We never took more than we needed' (ibid.: 95) and 'we took up so little space' (ibid.), which kept people safe from hunger: 'There was enough / in the jungle to provide gardens for everyone' (ibid.: 96). In a religious context, the word 'garden' suggests a garden of Eden, associated with a paradise and traditionally bound by high walls, and the cosmic connection with the stars presupposes some natural spirituality, preserving nature, with nature protecting its gardeners.

Until Spanish settlers imposed a violent upheaval, 'you disemboweled it [Earth], you forcefully / established marks of your presence all over it' (ibid.: 96). The imported religion is seen as mortiferous: 'Why did those / who speak of Light wear black, / the colour of mourning? […] Why on a dead tree did they nail the bringer of light, one Cristo, torture and kill him […]?' (ibid.). Bucknor (2020) analyses 'seeing the light' as accepting superior, advanced European practices, as well as accepting Christ as the 'Light of the World,' (Matthew 5:14-16). It also means conversion, 'people moving from a world of darkness into God's eternal light of salvation: 'You told us your / one God had the power to bring us the true light' (Senior, 2005: 94). Bucknor concludes, 'Senior here begins to expose an irony that letting in light ultimately meant "creating darkness," destroying nature and creating havoc in people's lives' (ibid.: 41) and that 'we could learn an ecological rather than an economic approach from a Taino world view' (ibid.: 42).

The ghosts of the native victims shed an embarrassing shade of guilt on the settlers: 'We are always there as some dark stain in your diaries and notebooks' (ibid.: 108). While the emancipated native retrospectively considers the empowerment of the land's true heirs: 'Now I have time to read (and garden), I who / have spent so many years in disquiet, / living in fear of discovery, / am amazed to discover, Colonist, / it was you who feared me. Or / rather, my audacity' (ibid.: 110).

The succession of invaders has destroyed the land's splendor and natural riches. A bitterly ironical elegy mourns the beauty of an over-exploited island on the brink of extinction. Senior's 'Rejected Text for a Tourist Brochure' (2005a) sends an ironical invitation:

> Come see my land
> before the particles of busy fires ascend;
> before the rivers descend underground; before coffee plantations
> grind the mountains into dust; before
> the coral dies; before the beaches disappear
>
> Come see my land
> Come see my land
> And know
> That she was fair. (ibid.: 53)

Senior uses bitter irony to methodically denounce the damage done in the sea, in the air, above, and underground, while natives had used humble determination, respectful perseverance, and adaptation to nature's whims in order to survive.

3 SALVAGING AND SURVIVAL AFTER HURRICANES

This 'invitation' functions both as a warning against the destruction of the island, and as an archive of what could be preserved. It goes along with other historical landmarks, such as the memorable hurricanes that leave their imprint on families, and become so many victories, or disasters, or recoveries, one replaced by the next, with just the difference of the date by which they are remembered and archived. The former generations teach the younger ones to resist and rebuild, like those grandparents in 1903. The grandfather was able to read the signs of birds and clouds in the sky and knew when to 'batten down': 'my grandfather had learnt / from his father and his father before him / all the ways of orchestrating disaster' (Senior, 2005: 20), while the grandmother acts as Noah's wife, as well as choir director for the children. Indeed, Bucknor (2020: 35) writes in *Conceptual Residues of Imperialistic Ruination*, 'While in "*Hurricane Story, 1944*," salvaging happens in the context of changed economic circumstances, in "*Hurricane Story, 1903*," […] For the grandparents who relied on spiritual divination, including the ability to read the land, salvaging was more than just facing the natural disaster.'

Women can be the victims of nature's violence, when it spoils their elaborate vital business, their bread-earning activities. Olive Senior admires those humble women who contribute to the economy of the island through their workforce, their imagination, and determination to succeed. Hence her portrayal of the soaring international trade of a higgler whose business was put in jeopardy by the 1988 hurricane, which prevented the planes from taking off and almost ruined her trade. The poet captures the persona's creole to voice her disgust: 'Lawd! Life so soak-up / and no bail out. To raatid!' (Senior, 2005: 56).

WOMEN'S STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE

1 MEN'S FAILURE AND TREASON

In many of Olive Senior's poems, some men are no help in adversity. While the women strive to save the sinking boat during the tempest, their male companions in extreme cases become aggravating burdens. Such is the case of the improvident husband, encouraged by his mother to think of himself above his condition, of the white collar class: 'He […] could never turn back to the muck / when his hands had been clean for so long […]' (Senior, 2005b: 27). She is the one who feeds the family, and when in need, 'She turned back to the soil' (ibid.: 25). The cooperation between woman and kitchen garden allows her not only to put food on the plates, but to derive a sustenance from carrying her crops to the market

to sell. In the French Antilles, described as a matrifocal society, woman is frequently called 'fanm poto-mitan', the pillar holding the structure of the family in post-slavery black Antillean society, centered around the mother and mother figures as Stéphanie Mulot (2013) evokes it. In the absence of men, women take the reins. Mulot's (ibid.: 24, trans. mine) thesis is that 'Caribbean matrifocality is the fruit of the processes of cultural and identity creolisation'.

The gardening of Senior's persona harmonizes with benevolent mother earth; she cultivates gently and empathetically: she sings for her crops as a fertilizer, her femininity becomes a cooperative agent: 'My mother... / crooned hymns in the garden / to her skellion tomatis pumpkin melon … (nothing like a pregnant woman to encourage / pumpkin and melon)' (Senior, 2005b: 25). This woman raises her children the way she grows her vegetables, with loving authority, firmness and care, and the narrator, her child, shows admiration and gratitude: 'My mother clapped her hands and […] / ordered us to grow straight / like skellion' (ibid.: 26). The sequel to the narration of the poem is a tongue-in-cheek understatement displaying the gap between the husband's worthlessness in proportion to his wife's abnegation: 'Monday Tuesday Wednesday our mother worked in the fields / Thursday Friday she went to market / Saturday she left him money on the dresser / He took it and went to Unity Bar and Grocery got drunk / came home and beat her /… / Sunday she went to church and sang' (ibid.: 27). Olive Senior (1991) wrote about how women make do in the Caribbean, and her naming the bar 'Unity' serves as ironic commentary on the disintegration of family unity and their divorce.

Among the disasters that affect Caribbean women, is their men's treason, the way they forsake their supporting lovers once they have made money, while the next step up the social ladder for the man is marrying a younger, rich, and fair-skinned woman. The Jamaican woman who sees her man thus betray her, takes solace in the children she has conceived and raised, and the certainty of having her place and meaning in her own world: 'I had not known my life was rooted' (Senior, 2005b: 60). She appropriately uses a vegetal metaphor, 'rooted'. Mulot (2013: 38, trans. mine) asserts that 'the focal mother and the absent father are constructed images, conceived along the thread of a particular history, and reactivated in each family via the raising of the children'. DeCaires Narain (2011: 88) convincingly argues that 'Embeddedness in the soil does not represent a secure, rooted identity in Senior's poems but provides a space for reflection and for momentary respite from the vicissitudes of history'. Plants are as much known for their ability to spread and multiply through sending their spores flying in the air as through their rhizomes in the soil. The woman who is rooted through her children is rooted extensively, and with mobility and 'errantry' according to Glissant's rhizome theory.

2 POWERFUL, ACTIVIST, RESISTANT WOMEN EMPOWERED FOR ECOLOGY

If higglers have become empowered women in the Caribbean economy, it is because their ancestors, Caribs, Arawaks and Tainos, already had a tradition of gardening to

sustain the agro-economy of the island, which ultimately led to its defence: 'When the warriors went away / — to war or voyages — it was the / women who kept the gardens going and sometimes […] / […] they banded together and / took up arms to defend the territory' (Senior, 2005b: 97).

Resistance to imperialistic foreign capitalists sometimes comes not on the part of powerful politicians or highbrow philosophers, but from women perceived in the colonizer's eyes as helpless and innocuous old crones. Industrial cultivation and mineral exploitation of the subsoil exhaust, spoil and soil the land. In this apocalyptic setting, a local male has surrendered to the temptation of money and accepted a suspicious compromise. Yet there survives a loyal old woman who resists, bent on eradicating predators. She predicts that, allied as she is to nature, she will win: 'I always repossess it, inch by inch. With the help of the steadfast tropical sun, wind, and rain, with the help of the / termites, the ants, the wood lice, and / the worms, I always reclaim.' (ibid.: 106) This self-empowered woman will not capitulate, but ally with nature in a common crusade of reconquest of the land and tradition, with no need of caterpillars or guns.

3 AGAINST MONOCULTURE; WOMEN ALLIED WITH MOTHER EARTH

The legend of 'The Tree of Life', which God gave the inhabitants of the earth, and which produced every single necessary piece of food, unveils the mystery of Caribbean survival. For God required humans to chop down that tree, the metaphor of the dangers of monoculture, a cause of deforestation, of the impoverishment of the earth and of a greater dependency of farmers. The persona in the poem has adopted this model of separating her different cultures: 'I'm sticking to the plan / of having all my food, my seasonings and / medicines mixed up in one ground. For if / He wanted us to plant just one thing / in the garden, why did He make us chop / The Tree of Life down?' (Senior, 2005b: 94)

Senior shows how to avoid toxicity by remaining faithful to traditions. Muñoz Martínez reminds one that 'colonialism plays a central role in imposing toxicity upon these islands, where the plantation system has wasted lands and lives for centuries.' Senior (2020: 175) reminisces upon a time when indigenous practices could coexist sustainably with nature, a balance violently interrupted by the conquest and colonization of the islands. The narrator in the poem 'Advice and Devices' boasts better results than those following the government man's advice consisting of using pesticides and fertilizers, that produce tasteless vegetables. Her secret: 'Live Right and / Do Good.' Her first rule is paying respect to Mother Earth. She then reveals her traditional devices, inspired by superstition and old wisdom tips, spells, and gardening according to the moon. The ancient Taino or Carib rituals, begging mother earth to be pardoned for felling a tree, also present in Walcott's poetry (Walcott, 1990: 3-6), are kept as a model for the tiller's relating to the earth: 'before you fell / a tree or pull a weed, be sure / to ask pardon to dig, with a / sprinkling for Mother Earth's / sake' (Senior, 2005b: 111). The woman

cares for the earth, empathises with it: 'I keep the crops happy, treat them right, so they'll pull out their best for me to take to the agricultural fair and madden everyone there' (ibid.: 114). Her choices are proven correct by the fact that her products earn the first agricultural prizes. Muñoz Martínez (2022: 176) indicates: 'Senior's poetry, [favors] ancient forms of working with and not against the land [and suggests] turning towards indigenous and local knowledges and breaking of toxic normativity'.

PLANTS ARE HUMAN

1 PLANT, IMPERSONATION OF WOMAN

Yet the highest plea for ecology comes from plants, the actors in various scenes, endowed not only with feeling but also with will, guile, even the power to beguile, seduce and entrap. In *Meditation on Yellow* already, endemic trees were the exuberant victors against colonialism, and were impersonated as emancipated, liberated young women:

> You cannot stop
> Those street gals
> Those streggehs
> Allamanda
> Cassia
> Pui
> Golden Shower
> Flaunting themselves everywhere (Senior, 2005b: 17)

Bucknor (2009: 61) even speaks of 'the audacious streggeh voice' as the dominant voice of the poems — *streggeh* being a creole word to describe rebellious young women, and here the wild plants that follow no rules: applied to the 'voice', it describes all this rulelessness, native refusal to submit, obey or observe imposed limits or an imported imperialistic law. The superimposition of vegetal and woman is even more blatant in the poem 'Plants', which plays with their disseminating apparatus, from the 'burrs on your sweater' to 'surf-riding / nuts bobbing on ocean, parachuting seeds' (Senior, 2005: 63) and ends up in a vast colonizing scheme. They are humorously described as sexually daring for conquest, mildly indecent, and obsessional. 'From the way they breed […] from their exhibitionist / and rather prolific nature, we must infer / a sinister not to say imperialistic // grand design. […] Maybe you haven't quite taken in the / colonizing ambitions.' (ibid.) Flowers are shown as temptresses, fallen girls; the whole vegetal system is a vast breeding enterprise, slightly amoral but immensely ambitious: 'Innocent, / that sweet fruit, that berry, / is nothing more than ovary, the instrument to seduce / you into scattering plant progeny. […] They'll outlast us […] plants gone to seed, / generating the original profligate, / […] improvident, weed' (ibid.: 63-64).

The consoling refuge of nature induces a spiritual solitude of meditation for the young persona in the breeze-ruffled enclosure of bamboos. The poet thus recalls her youth in Cockpit County when, as the child of a large family, raised by wealthier aunts, she avoided domestic chores by hiding in bamboos to read books. She compares her rustling hiding place to a 'bamboo cathedral' (ibid.: 81), which she preferred to any church and which is another echo of Walcott's (1992: 366) 'groined caves with barnacles […] our cathedrals' from the poem 'The Sea is History'; nature and natural spirituality coming before and above any imported religion.

2 BANANA, POISON IN THE BONES

No longer a child, the daughter of a banana grower is concerned with ecological issues. At a time when the contamination by chlordecone in the French Caribbean and eco-inequality are severely denounced, the poem 'My Father's Blue Plantation' resonates: the persona's father would spray on his bananas a treatment against leaf spot disease, the fungicide could not but affect his body and shorten his life: 'my father […] lets that / Hot Tropical Sun pour down to fill his / blue lungs and warm his old and vegetating bones' (Senior, 2005b: 86). Muñoz Martínez (2022: 168) describes the process as 'the predominance of toxicity disguised under neoliberal labels of development' and reminds one that the banana tree, imported from Asia during the conquest, turned into monocrop, was bound to develop diseases, which the government tried to eradicate by the spraying of copper sulphate and hydrated lime, a blue fungicide to increase productivity (ibid.: 169). That blue chemical has impregnated the farmer's lungs and even his bones, the enticing color of the tropical sky and sea has become the color of his lethal disease. The trade of bananas imported from Asia echoes the trade of pepper, another commodity imported from the Orient to Europe in medieval times, reputed for serving as rent, dowry, or tax, and hence closely linked to its unstable and somewhat deceptive monetary value.

3 PEPPERCORN: THE NEGRO SLAVE IN THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

Senior (2007: 46) plays with that popular phrase, 'pepper rent' in the lines 'I'm of little value, like a peppercorn / rental', though pepper allegedly created the fortune of Lisbon in Portugal. In her cult of the vegetal and animal life, Senior associates the plant with the story of slavery in the Caribbean islands. Transported goods, like peppercorns, become the impersonation of a captured, enslaved black man, thrown into the hull of a ship for the Middle Passage, mercilessly tossed about, suffering from dehydration. The poem becomes a witty exercise superimposing the vegetal and human bodies and ends with a plea against racism: 'Disgorged, spilled out, shell-shocked / […] parched and dried, my head / emptied […]' (ibid.: 46). The resilience of the prisoner aboard long outlives the ocean passage: 'survivors stay pungent / and hot. You can beat me senseless, / grind me down, crush me to bits, to / powder. You can never lose my bite / on your tongue, my hold on your

senses: / forever I'll linger and cling' (ibid.: 47). Until the final thrust: 'peel off / my black skin, you'd be pleased — / or shocked — to discover: I'm white below' (ibid.: 47); a pledge for equality between Black and white people, all the same. As a virtuoso, Olive Senior manages to unfold the metaphor and play on the human and vegetal meanings of 'black and shrivelled,' 'parched and dried,' 'crush me,' and uses a final tongue-in-cheek derisive pun: 'we can pepper / your arse with shot.' (ibid.: 46) alluding to the physical power of pepper on the allegedly less dignified parts of the human body, therefore humbling the consumer.

4 BODY OF THE CANE OR OF THE NEGRO SLAVE

The metaphor of the peppercorn is replicated by the no-less chilling one of the sugarcane, whose husk must be crushed to free the sweet juice, just as the forced Black workforce was beaten and crushed to produce the sugar (Senior, 2007: 82). Besides, extensive planting of sugarcane is condemned in 'Sweet Bwoy': 'I burn / human fuel' (ibid.: 49), 'I give you harvest: full bell. / An illusion. I sap the soil, end / fertility. I'll drive you to penury' (ibid.: 50), and 'I'm / your foremost addiction' (ibid.). The exploiter gets caught in the gear of a physical addiction which will cost him his health on top of his money. Senior could not be more explicit; the trade is well explained by Tomich (2016) and can apply to its neighboring sugar islands:

> Sugar was the foundation of the golden age of West Indian prosperity during the eighteenth century. Probably the most sought-after commodity of the period, [...] Its consumption increased steadily throughout the century as its use and that of its complements, coffee, tea, and cocoa, were incorporated into the diet of ever-broader strata of the European population.' (Tomich, 2016: 51)

A mercantile system with little competition as colonial producers had a monopoly on their respective markets. From an ecofeminist viewpoint, let us add the strong impact on women's ever harder daily lives due to their being placed 'at the forefront of feeling the increasing constraints of environmental change' (Lauwers, 2016: 4). What is more, Lauwers (ibid.: 6) includes 'specieism' and 'naturism' in the struggles of feminism. For her, the domination of nature uses the same justifications as those for the domination of humans, namely – quoting Warren (1990: 130 – 'gender, racial or ethnic, or class status'. Warren (ibid.: 131) also claims that the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women have ensured 'the subordinations of both'.

It is our contention therefore that Olive Senior, while placing herself in that tradition, chooses strong, rebellious women, and presents a nature, which, while being female, is also rebellious, resilient, full of resources, and able to defend, even avenge itself in a pacific, but powerful and efficient fashion: creating an impenetrable jungle as a protective barrier in 'The Knot Garden' (Senior, 2005b: 87) using drought, and termites, and 'lice' and natural 'inhabitants' in 'The Immoveable Tenant' (ibid.: 101-107). This resistance gives one hope; the Wasteocene may be rampant, yet it should not be considered in Senior's gardens as a victor.

CONCLUSION: EAT, THIS IS MY BODY

One need not be addicted to sugar to be aware of its production. Mother earth and a woman's body are a continuum. Feeding is accomplished across generations through women, the grandmother figure acting as an agent of wisdom, caring love, and transmission. The grandmother who feeds her grandchild cocoa tea with cane sugar and nutmeg feels as though she is feeding her with the bones of the ancestors turned to dust, which have fertilized the earth, and metaphorically because of those ancestors' sacrifice, for they have worked themselves to death to feed others. 'You drink up, / child. For this our bodies / turned to dust. Ground // into fields of sugar cane, of cocoa-walks, / of nutmeg groves' (Senior, 2005b: 68). The grandmother, an archivist, participates in cultural ecology, by transmitting to the child an awareness of the close relationship between the vegetal, mineral, animal, and humans. This brings Narain (2011: 87) to declare that 'Senior's "gardening poems" might be read as performing the very "complicity of relation" which Glissant heralds.' The persona in 'The Knot Garden' remarks the 'amazing fecundity' of nature (Senior, 2005b: 88) thanks to the intricacy of 'entertwined' roots. This prevents the postcolonial exploiter's plane to land in this dense tropical jungle, and detours it to some faraway fiscal paradises such as the 'Cayman Islands, or Liechtenstein, or Geneva.' (Narain, 2011: 89) – those countries that deprive nations from benefiting from financial resources to invest in public services.

Senior chooses her ancestors and connects with them through the relic of an old fragment of pottery she finds on the Caribbean soil: 'My spirit ancestors are those / I choose to worship and that / includes an I that existed / long before me. // Baptismal certificates are mute / while the whisper of a clay fragment / moves me to attempt this connection // I cry out / to you.', she declares in 'To my Arawak Grandmother' (Senior, 1985: 11). Does she choose her history? Or does she privilege faith in the origins? She would like to feel the true heir of the Taino, as in her poem 'Taino Genesis' (Senior, 2007: 18-19), and of the Arawak lineage, be the embodiment of the ancient ecoculture, the voice of a transcultural ecopoetics that spans generations. She could be the higgler's spokeswoman, erupting her exhaustion in her vernacular, or creole: a nurturing ecological matriarch, ecopoet of 'her kind'. Glissant (2009: 135, trans. mine) showcases the crucial role of poets in political satire: 'Poets are, when they are willing, the truest and most acute pamphleteers'. It certainly is intriguing to see Caribbean female poets writing so obsessively and meditatively on gardens. Let us mention Lorna Goodison's poems 'To Us, All Flowers Are Roses' (1995: 40-41) 'From the Garden of the Women Once Fallen' (ibid.: 40), or 'In City Gardens Grow No Roses As We Know Them' (ibid.: 13-17), to name but a few; vegetable gardens become emancipatory activities, an assertion of mental and spiritual liberation for the slave woman, they feed families, provide medicinal herbs for curing, they are a salvation, become the emblems of survival, resilience, independence, empowerment, and freedom, again through women. Senior certainly appears as the truest and most acute advocate of an ecocritical vision of the Caribbean. Her message to me from

October 1, 2024, announced that she had moved back from Canada to Kingston, on her native island of Jamaica, and that, among other publication projects, she was working on an anthology of a combination of Jamaican poems with 'stunning photos of trees' (O. Senior, personal communication, October 1, 2024) as well as on a historical novel set in 1513, the 'last days of the encounter of the indigenous Taino and the Spanish' (ibid.). Included was the picture of the garden she grows. In other words, she pursues her archivist's and ecopoetic indigenous mission. Ecopoetry has remained the core of her creativity, the source, or fuel of her literary energy, and has been inscribed as a mode of living for this gardener of words and plants.

REFERENCES

Armiero, M. (2021) Wasteocene: stories from the global dump. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108920322

Bucknor, M. A. (2009) Sounding Off: performing ritual revolt in Olive Senior's *Meditation on Yellow*. *Mosaic: an interdisciplinary critical journal*, 42 (2), SOUND Part II: 55-71 Available from https://www.jstor.org/stable/44030214 [Accessed on 3 December 2024].

Bucknor, M. A. (2020) Conceptual residues of imperialist ruination: waste, weeds and the poetics of rubbish in Edward Baugh's *Black Sand* and Olive Senior's *Gardening in the Tropics*, 28 (1), April: 33-45.

Glissant, E. (1990) *Poétique de la relation, Poétiques III* [Poetics of Relation, Poetics III]. Paris: Gallimard.

Glissant, E. (2009) *Philosophie de la relation, poésie en étendue* [Philosophy of Relation, Poetry in Extension]. Paris: Gallimard.

Goodison, L. (1995) *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses*. Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Henrichs, K. (2021) Eco-narratology and contemporary American fiction. Theses and Dissertations. 2789, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Available from https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/2789 [Accessed on 4 December 2024].

Lauwers, M. (2016) Angles and '*limes*' in American studies: ecofeminism in the research field. *Angles: new perspectives on the Anglophone world*, (3). Available from https://journals.openedition.org/angles/1649 [Accessed on 7 December 2024].

Mulot, S. (2013) La matrifocalité caribéenne n'est pas un mirage créole [Caribbean matrifocality is not a Creole miracle]. *L'Homme,* EHESS: 159-191. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/lhomme.24691

Muñoz Martínez, Y. (2022) Gardening in polluted tropics: the materiality of waste and toxicity in Olive Senior's Caribbean poetry. *ETropic: electronic journal of studies in the tropics*, 21 (2): 162-179. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.21.2.2022.3907

DeCaires Narain, D. (2011) *Olive Senior*. Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers.

Senior, O. (1985) *Talking of Trees*. Kingston, Jamaica: Calabash.

Senior, O. (1991) *Working Miracles: women's lives in the English-Speaking Caribbean*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.

Senior, O. (2003) *Encyclopedia of Jamaican Heritage*. Kingston, Jamaica: Twin Guinep Limited.

Senior, O. (2005a) *Over the Roofs of the World*. Toronto: Insomniac Press.

Senior, O. (2014b) *Un Pipiri m'a dit / A Little Bird Told Me*, bilingual anthology (trans. dir. by P. N. Ollier). Bègles: Castor Astral.

Senior, O. (2015) *Dying to Better Themselves: West Indians and the building of the Panama canal*. Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.

Tomich, D. W. (2016) *Slavery in the Circuit of Sugar: Martinique and the world-economy, 1830-1848*. 2nd ed. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Walcott, D. (1990) *Omeros*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Walcott, D. (1992) *Collected Poems 1948-1984*. London: Faber & Faber.

Walcott, D. (1998) *What the Twilight Says*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Warren, K. (1990) The power and promise of ecological feminism. *Environmental Ethics*, 12 (2), Summer: 125-146. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics199012221

ANALYSED TEXTS

Senior, O. (2005b) *Gardening in the Tropics*. Toronto: Insomniac Press.

Senior, O. (2007) *Shell*. Toronto: Insomniac Press.

Nicole Ollier (Professor emerita) in American literature (especially poetry, minorities, and Caribbean literature), Translation, Gender and Cultural Studies at Bordeaux-Montaigne University, France. She created a translation group which has published several anthologies of poems, including one of Olive Senior's.

https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2999-0092

Email: Nicole.ollier@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 112–124
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.08

HEALING ATTACHMENTS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND* AND ANURADHA ROY'S *ALL THE LIVES WE NEVER LIVED*

ADRIANA ELENA STOICAN
Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

Abstract. The paper provides a comparative analysis of imaginative literature by Jhumpa Lahiri and Anuradha Roy, contemporary authors connected to Bengal, India, by virtue of cultural inheritance (Lahiri) and birth (Roy). Born in the same year, Lahiri and Roy enjoy global recognition, and the novels selected for analysis, *The Lowland* (2013) and *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018), display thematic commonalities that support a comparative discussion. More specifically, both novels tackle the issue of children's abandonment and their manners of coping with trauma by developing special connections to nature. Therefore, the analysis starts from the novels' environmental focus, which seems to correlate the characters' interest in their physical worlds with possibilities of healing. By discussing the contexts of their traumas and the subsequent bonds they establish with nature, the article examines the type of message constructed by Lahiri and Roy regarding a possible dissolution of the boundaries that configure the relation between humans and their environment. The analysis relies on a close reading of the texts that blends cultural studies, trauma theories, and environmental criticism, establishing whether the relation between the human and the non-human transcends a dual configuration, thus hinting at possibilities of planetary thinking and transcultural ecopoetics.

Key words: cultural ecology, environmental ethics, planetary thinking, trauma, transcultural ecopoetics

INTRODUCTION

What kind of connections can one establish between two contemporary women authors whose lives seem separated by vast physical and cultural borders? Thinking about Jhumpa Lahiri and Anuradha Roy, one first registers their obvious common bond with India represented by Jhumpa Lahiri's Bengali origins and Anuradha Roy's birth in Kolkata and her current life in Northern India. Apart from this element, however, a closer look may unravel more shared aspects in these two authors' trajectory and work. First, both of them belong to the same generation, being born

in 1967; they both write in English and have links, albeit different, with the West: Jhumpa Lahiri's diasporic inheritance led her from England to the United States and later on to Italy, while Anuradha Roy did part of her education in England, at the University of Cambridge. Last but not least, from the perspective of their literary profession, both Lahiri and Roy have achieved worldwide success, and their novels represent important manifestations of a global English literature that connects diasporic itineraries with local coordinates. Apart from these commonalities, what actually motivates the present comparative discussion is a thematic similarity displayed by two of their novels, Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) and Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018; henceforth as *All the Lives*), namely, the topic of mothers who abandon their families in order to seek personal fulfillment.

The plot of *The Lowland* is initially placed in Kolkata, around the late 1940s, when two brothers (Subhash and Udayan) are born. In the late 1960s, Subhash applies for a PhD in the United States, while Udayan joins the Naxalbari movement. Brutally repressed by the police, this insurgency triggered a chain of violent confrontations between the guerrilla revolutionaries and the Indian state. Udayan is eventually executed by the police, while his parents and wife, Gauri, witness the whole scene. After his brother's death, Subhash temporarily returns to India and finds out that Gauri is pregnant. Wishing to save her from isolating widowhood, Subhash proposes to Gauri, and she accepts to be his wife. In America, Gauri gives birth to a girl, Bela, but her marriage with Subhash does not work. Gauri eventually chooses an academic career, secretly leaving for California, where she gets a teaching position. While Gauri's own struggle represents an important theme of the novel (see Note 1), this paper examines the impact of her decision on Bela, correlating the daughter's traumatic experience with a gradual development of her environmental interests.

In parallel, *All the Lives* unfolds the life recollections of Myshkin, an abandoned son, whose memories place the action of the novel in a temporal frame that encompasses family events from the late 1920s to the late 1990s, placed in India and Indonesia. Alternating the storytelling between the young and the old Myshkin's perspectives, the narrative voice records how his mother, Gayatri, feels trapped in her marriage when all she wants is to become a painter. Although she genuinely cares about her young son, at some point Gayatri's interactions with European artists in India eventually trigger her major decision to secretly leave the family. While initially planning to take Myshkin with her, this action fails, as the child cannot get back from school at the established time. Gayatri leaves without waiting for Myshkin, a fact that will inflict a permanent wound on him. While her own struggles to reconcile traditional roles with individual aspirations deserve close scrutiny, this topic will be dealt with in a future article. The present analysis considers Gayatri's departure as the trigger of Myshkin's predicament, focusing on the significance of Myshkin's coping mechanism through his ethics of care for the local nature.

Blending literary and cultural studies, trauma theories, and environmental humanities, the paper aims to establish the type of affiliations developed by the main characters with their surroundings and the significance of these connections from an ecocritical perspective.

THEORETICAL DIRECTIONS

The theoretical foundation of the present essay considers the connection between imaginative literature and ecocritical studies in an attempt to illustrate the often-neglected ecocultural potential of literature as an 'explorative form of cultural knowledge and creativity' (Zapf, 2016: 12). More specifically, the argument considers Zapf's assumption that there is 'a cultural ecology of literature' (ibid.: 3) that places it in a mediating position between the cultural studies' anthropocentric approach to nature as a 'discursive human construct' (ibid.) and radical ecocentrism that argues for the indisputable supremacy of nature. Focusing on the characters' interactions with their environment, the essay aims to explore the following aspects: Is nature glorified as an entity with intrinsic value, or is it subordinated to human supremacy? Do these novels constitute sites of 'critical self-reflection of modern civilisation' (ibid.) by raising ethical issues regarding the relationship between humans and their environment?

Along similar lines, Minter (2021: 194) developed the idea of 'transcultural ecopoetics' as a 'general term in the analysis of environmental literature that emerges where cultures meet, interact, and are mutually transformed into a third space, something new'. Given its link with the ecocritical project, this notion of the transcultural operates with an extended conception of culture that includes both human 'socio-aesthetic formations' (ibid.) and non-human entities, also looking at ways in which the non-human element may contribute to the creation of meaning. As a continuation of Zapf's cultural ecology, the notion of transcultural ecopoetics expands the concept of culture to include the non-human as part of the cultures that enter into dialogue. Consequently, the encounter between human characters and non-human entities in literature may be discussed in terms of transcultural contacts likely to generate new and more inclusive forms of knowledge. Considering these reflections, an important question is whether Lahiri and Roy present the non-human element as an active part in the creation of (transcultural) meaning and reciprocal changes via its interactions with Bela and Myshkin.

At the same time, the discussion also considers Gayatri Spivak's argument for a planetary thinking that would enable the transgression of the human/non-human dichotomy, allowing for an enlarged conceptualization of identity in the global context:

> If we imagine ourselves as *planetary subjects* rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, *alterity remains underived from us*; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. And thus to think of it is already to *transgress*, for, in spite of our forays into what we metaphorize, differently, as outer and inner space, what is above and beyond our own reach is not continuous with us as it is not, indeed, specifically discontinuous. We must persistently educate ourselves into *this peculiar mindset*. (Spivak, 2003: 73; emphasis added)

Therefore, the shift to planetary thinking opens up expanded modes of conceiving identity, allowing humans to position themselves differently in relation to the otherness epitomized by nature, as both similar and different from it, thus transcending the restrictions of dual thinking. By examining Myshkin's and Bela's positioning towards nature, this essay aims to establish whether Lahiri and Roy advance this type of planetary vision in their imaginative literature.

The present analysis also considers a body of trauma theories in discussing the characters' attempt to deal with their loss by forging specific bonds with nature. Trauma represents 'a very peculiar type of wound' (Marder, 2006: 1), 'a state of mind which results from an injury [...] a devastating and damaging experience' (Heidarizadeh, 2015: 789). The anguish inherent to this affliction produces 'repeated, uncontrollable, and incalculable effects that endure long after its ostensible "precipitating cause"' (Marder, 2006: 1). Moreover, in order to talk about the occurrence of a trauma, two coordinates must be present: first, an external event that is not in itself traumatic and, second, the memory of this first moment, which is relived so that it is 'the internal reviviscence of this memory that becomes traumatic' (Caruth and Laplanche, 2001: para. 7). Therefore, trauma is characterized by repetitiveness, as the wounded individual is haunted by the memories of the initial shock: ' – the experience that Freud will call "traumatic neurosis" – emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind' (Caruth, 1996: 2).

Another facet of a traumatic occurrence is represented by its initial incomprehensibility, generated by the shock/violence of the triggering event. In other words, the victim of a traumatic occurrence is overwhelmed by the intensity of this experience and therefore unable to process its entire significance. Hence, the triggering event will come into being belatedly, reflecting the victim's partial understanding of what has happened: 'What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known' (ibid.: 6). For the purpose of the present analysis, it is important to note that it is not the first moment of the traumatic event that is unsettling, but rather the manner in which the victim's inability to fully comprehend it translates as 'unfinishedness and repetition' (Nadal and Calvo, 2014: 3). Following Caruth's analysis, I would suggest that both Myshkin's and Bela's stories situate them within 'a double telling [...] between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival' (Caruth, 1996: 8). For each of them, losing their mother in early childhood implies an equally heavy-handed possibility to survive that places nature at its center.

THE TRAUMA OF ABANDONMENT

All the Lives represents a series of Myshkin's reflections regarding the impact of his mother's departure, from childhood to his old age. The temporal span of his affliction indicates the long-term effects of the traumatic wound (Marder, 2006: 1).

After his mother's disappearance, Myshkin is tormented by feelings of despair, alienation, and confusion: 'in the first few months when I woke up and did not find my mother [...] the *emptiness* was a *shock*, like waking from one of those dreams where you are falling from the sky – falling forever with nothing below' (Roy, 2018: 181; emphasis added). The character's confessions reveal a chain of agonizing moments when the pain of abandonment seems unbearable. The idea of shock points to the initial incomprehensibility of the traumatic event that leaves the boy unable to process the significance of his mother's departure. Moreover, the fact that Myshkin keeps remembering his mother and the effects of her disappearance illustrates the repetitive nature of trauma that surfaces through his recollections.

Myshkin's life involves dealing with a fundamental sense of absence, longing and isolation. His mother's disappearance represents the central axis of his new existence to the point of its being perceived as a symbol of his utter incompleteness: 'From being a real person, she was turning into the concentration *of all that I longed for in my life and did not have*' (Roy, 2018: 220; emphasis added). Myshkin's pining for a life that includes his mother reveals the depth of his wound that triggers a constant desire to be reunited with the lost parent. The character's longing for Gayatri reinforces the 'unfinishedness and repetition' (Nadal and Calvo, 2014: 3) of his traumatic experience, a consequence of his inability to fully comprehend the significance of Gayatri's decision.

In this context of torment, it is significant to register Myshkin's self-perception through an analogy with the vegetal dimension: '*Were I a plant, I would be the shade-loving* one that grows below a tree in the far corner of the garden where nobody spots it or plucks its flower for a vase' (Roy, 2018: 226; emphasis added). How can one interpret Myshkin's parallel between himself and an aloof plant? Can it be the case that his traumatic background facilitates easier communication with the non-human dimension? By further exploring the character's bond with nature from childhood to adulthood, the analysis aims to account for the dynamics of this relationship. At the same time, the argument also considers Bela's evolution after her mother's surreptitious departure.

When Bela and Subhash return from a trip to India, they find their house in America empty. After Gauri's sudden desertion, Bela becomes reserved and isolated and her school performance drops: 'She no longer seemed connected to the other students, the counselor said. In the cafeteria, at the lunch table, she sat alone. [...] She became *thinner, quieter, keeping to herself* on weekends' (Lahiri, 2013: 168; emphasis added). Bela displays more severe symptoms of depression than Myshkin, such as suicidal tendencies. However, while Myshkin struggles with his own thoughts and intuitions, Bela benefits from psychological counselling. This helps her partially deal with the implications of the first moment of her traumatic experience. For example, she understands that her mother's absence will represent a definitive coordinate of her own being: 'She [the counsellor] said that her mother's absence would always be present in her thoughts' (ibid.: 202). This explanation indicates the haunting nature of trauma – its 'unwitting reenactment' (Caruth, 1996: 2) by the affected individual. The belated and repetitive nature of Bela's

traumatic experience is also suggested by the analogy between the mother's absence and a foreign language that has to be studied for years: 'Her mother's absence was like another language she'd had to learn, its full complexity and nuance emerging only after years of study, and even then, because it was *foreign*, a language *never fully absorbed*' (Lahiri, 2013: 200; emphasis added). The idea of an incomprehensible mother tongue suggests that Bela tries to cancel her connection with Gauri, ignoring her Bengaliness in order to deal with the 'unbearable story of survival' (Caruth, 1996: 8). In this respect, she is different from Myshkin, who longs for his mother and strives to preserve his bond with her. However, despite Bela's rejection of anything related to her mother, at some point she realizes that the traumatic effects of Gauri's absence represent a permanent facet of her identity: '*Everything in Bela's life has been a reaction*. I am who I am, she would say, I live as I do because of you' (Lahiri, 2013: 202; emphasis added). These reflections imply that Bela eventually understands she has to integrate and not deny the long-term effects of her trauma. Thus, she is aware of the way she has been shaped by the significance of the first traumatic moment and knows that rejecting it would mean undoing a part of herself.

By considering the development of Myshkin's and Bela's relationship with the non-human, the discussion establishes whether nature is subordinated to human purposes or is regarded as an entity with 'intrinsic value' (Garrad, 2004: 21). In this way, the argument aims to check if the specifics of this bond suggest anything about the idea of literature as 'cultural ecology' (Zapf, 2016: 3) and the possibility of 'transcultural ecopoetics' in the form of exchanges between humans and the environment (Minter, 2021: 194).

THE HEALING BOND WITH THE NON-HUMAN: AESTHETICS AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

Myshkin's connection with the world of nature is cultivated from an early age, before his mother's withdrawal from the family. Interestingly, it is in the company of Walter Spies, one of Gayatri's foreign friends (see Note 2), that the boy experiences some of the most meaningful interactions with the surrounding world. The German artist-traveler initiates Myshkin's deeper understanding of the natural forces, enlarging his comprehension of the non-human. One of Myshkin's memories points to a moment when Walter Spies finds him lying on the grass and asks the child whether he has been listening to the earth; surprised by the question, Myshkin wants to know whether Walter can 'hear the sound of the earth' (Roy, 2018: 129). Spies' affirmative answer confirms his ability to perceive the 'everlasting' (ibid.) voice of the earth compared to the force of thunder. This episode introduces Myshkin to a special conception of nature as a 'mighty being' (ibid.), i.e., an animated dimension that facilitates the interaction between the human and the non-human. Another memory of his initiation is located by Myshkin in the summer of 1937, during a holiday in the mountains. After a night of heavy rain, Walter inquires about the number of sounds Myshkin could hear during the storm; while the boy

mentions only two sounds (the rain on the roof and thunder), Spies can list a wide range of vibrations; Spies' acute awareness of nature's manifold messages impresses Myshkin as it reveals the possibility of a profound connection between humans and the environment. Myshkin's childhood exposure to nature involves his initiation into the specificities of the environment by means of 'physical immersion in the landscape' (Heise, 2008: 29). If one considers the premise that 'a place is seen, heard, smelled, imagined, loved, hated, feared, revered' (Walter, 1988, cited in Buell, 2005: 63), then Myshkin's attitude to nature certainly reveals this kind of sensorial and emotional approach. Whether influenced by Walter's viewpoint or not, gradually Myshkin develops a strong attachment to the non-human world, to the point of preferring it as an exclusive form of comradeship:

> People think of my solitude as an eccentricity or a symptom of failure, as if I am closer to animals and trees because human beings betrayed me or because I found nobody to love. It is hard to explain to them that the shade of a tree I planted years ago or the feverish intensity of a dog fruitlessly chasing a butterfly provides what no human companionship can. (Roy, 2018: 70)

Love, affection and care definitely shape the character's sense of attachment to his native space, suggesting his ecological awareness and responsibility to nature. At this point, Minter's (2021: 194) notion of 'transcultural ecopoetics' may serve as an important theoretical tool in deciphering the coordinates of Myshkin's bond with nature. If we consider their interaction as an encounter between cultures, where each member of the encounter represents a different side (the human and the non-human), we may wonder whether both entities present in the meeting undergo transformation. Could it be the fact that the non-human dimension, represented by the local environment, provides more stable patterns of affiliation than the fleeting nature of human connections? I think that the answer is partially affirmative, especially if one considers the traumatic fabric of Myshkin's past. In his case, the family, supposedly the primordial source of security, has generated a definitive rupture in his structures of attachment and sensibility. Therefore, under these alienating circumstances, part of Myshkin's story of survival is to avoid the establishing of interpersonal relations and build a safer form of attachment:

> As a child, I would place my back against one of our trees and feel its reassuring *solidity*, its *immobility*. It was not going to move, it would never go anywhere, it was *rooted* to its spot. For as long as they are alive, trees remain where they are. This is one of life's few certainties. (Roy, 2018: 393; emphasis added)

One of the reasons why this particular connection may be beneficial to Myshkin is its perceived reciprocity that makes the character feel accepted. This interaction suggests that one can talk about the dynamics of transcultural ecopoetics through the exchange of values produced between nature and the human element. On the one hand, the environment provides the values of rootedness, permanence

and stability, precisely the coordinates that are lacking from Myshkin's traumatized profile. On the other hand, Myshkin transfers the values of unconditional care and responsibility to the non-human. His concern with nature's wellbeing also provides a sense of constant mission that helps him develop a pattern of enduring attachment: 'Plants don't ask you to shape a sentence or solve an equation, they ask only that you are *regularly, consistently, caring and watchful*' (ibid.: 105; emphasis added). Therefore, the idea of providing steady support to the non-human endows Myshkin with a feeling of purpose that assuages his sufferance.

The character's long-term commitment to nature is also revealed by his professional orientation, namely a career in horticulture. The branch of horticulture embraced by him is close to 'ornamental horticulture' and 'floriculture' (Jaskani and Khan, 2021: 5), having a strong aesthetic focus. Apart from that, Myshkin also develops an interest in drawing species of local flowers, such as *Magnolia grandiflora* (Roy, 2018: 395), zephyranthus lilies (ibid.: 394), *Nyctanthes arbortristis* (ibid.: 396), Queen of the Night (ibid.), *Plumeria rubra* (ibid.), oleander, hibiscus, etc. Myshkin's detailed description of these plants reveals not only his specialized knowledge of the local flora but also his urge to immortalize it. His passion for investing in the beauty and quality of the local landscape is also paralleled by his great affection for nature: 'I confess I too talk to trees I have planted' (ibid.: 392) / 'I knew every tree and the trees would know me' (ibid.: 250).

Interestingly, Myshkin's embrace of the non-human dimension seems to provide the only possible bond with his mother, herself also sensitive to the beauty of nature: 'Trees, grasses, the sun, the sky, the moon, these were closer to her than humans, they were her religion – as they have become mine' (ibid.: 391-392). Considering this parent-child common devotion to nature along with Myshkin's trauma, one may wonder why Myshkin does not reject something associated with the very person who has hurt him, as Bela does. Myshkin's caring attitude may reflect a manner of survival that enables him to maintain a sense of bond with the lost parent and thus assuage the pain of separation. The character's drawing talent echoes Gayatri's painting inclination, the main trigger of her departure. Each time he draws a certain flower, Myshkin correlates its detailed description with a moment from the past that included his mother. Therefore, the act of drawing, a reflection of Myshkin's love for nature, helps him partially retrieve Gayatri's presence. At the same time, Myshkin's choice to immortalize nature on paper indicates his need to preserve something dear in order to avoid a disturbing loss of stability. Drawing introduces an aesthetic dimension to Myshkin's caring attitude to nature. This aspect reveals the character's 'topophilia' (Yi-Fu Tuan, 1974, cited in Heise, 2008: 37), which reinforces the idea of Myshkin's affective investment in his surroundings.

The Lowland introduces Bela, another example of an abandoned child who develops special connections with the non-human dimension. The first sign of Bela's recovery as she undergoes therapy is her emerging interest in nature studies and biology in high school and her involvement in recycling projects and writing petitions. She graduates college with a major in 'environmental science' (Lahiri, 2013: 173),

writing a senior thesis on 'the adverse effects of pesticide runoff in a local river' (ibid.). After college, Bela chooses to work as 'an agricultural apprentice in the field. Putting in irrigation lines, weeding and harvesting, cleaning out animal pens. Packing crates to sell vegetables, weighing them for customers on the side of the road' (ibid.: 173-174) on a farm in Western Massachusetts, 'not terribly far' (ibid.: 173) from Subhash. On the one hand, her refusal to continue her education with graduate studies illustrates a rejection of her mother's academic choices, associated with the root of Bela's problems. On the other hand, this hands-on approach to nature represents a connection with Bela's real father, a fact that reminds Subhash of his brother's militant stance:

> Over the years her work started merging with a certain *ideology*. He saw that there was a spirit of opposition to the things she did. She was spending time in cities, in blighted sections of Baltimore and Detroit. She helped to convert abandoned properties into community gardens. She taught low-income families to grow vegetables in their backyards, so that they wouldn't have to depend entirely on food banks […] She was opposed to eating food that had to be transported long distances. To the patent of seeds. *She talked to him about why people still died from famines, why farmers still went hungry. She blamed the unequal distribution of wealth* […] What we consume is what we support, she said, telling him he needed to do his part. She could be self-righteous, as Udayan had been. (Lahiri, 2013: 175; emphasis added)

This passage reveals the strong dimension of social justice that underlies Bela's concern for the environment. In her case, the environmental interests appear to be a continuation of a family tradition. For example, her stepfather, Subhash, pursues a research career in marine chemistry in the United States. Her genetic father, Udayan, was a sympathizer of the Naxalite movement, which opposed the landlords' feudal ownership and taxation policies (Mustafi, 2012: para. 2). Although Udayan's political involvement was not strictly related to environmental causes, it involved a strong militant core whose spirit surfaces in Bela's own activities.

As well as in Myshkin's case, Bela's ecological awareness involves an attachment to her native space that motivates her involvement in local agriculture. A difference between Bela and Myshkin is that she does not channel her environmental attention to a single place but to what I call varieties of the local: 'It became her life: a series of jobs on farms across the country, some close by, others far. Washington State, Arizona, Kentucky, Missouri' (Lahiri, 2013: 174). This itinerary entails that Bela decides on a nomadic condition that seems a perfect fit for her ecological projects: 'She lived without insurance, without heed for her future. Without a fixed address' (ibid.) / 'She's a *nomad*' (ibid.: 193; emphasis added). Bela's nomadism indicates a dedication to the local nature, similar to Myshkin's, but manifested differently. In creating this character, Lahiri resonates with the premises of American environmentalist thought that promotes the 'local as the ground for individual and communal identity and as the site of connections to nature that modern society

is perceived to have undone' (Heise, 2008: 9). Therefore, through Bela, Lahiri imagines a second-generation South Asian American woman, who openly adheres to the values of America as a birthplace. Her nomadic stance, absent from Myshkin's profile, represents an important point of intersection with the Americans' self-definition as 'a highly mobile people, nomads without roots forever on the road' (ibid.: 48). Therefore, Bela's nomadic choice involves her alignment with American mainstream values. Her adherence to local traditions of thought may express her need to create stable structures of attachment by forging a strong connection with local nature. Seen from this angle, Bela seems to share Myshkin's strategy of coping with trauma by building healing bonds with the environment. In other words, this suggests that, as part of the exchange produced in the transcultural ecopoetics, the non-human provides Bela with a sense of stability. At the same time, by emphasizing Bela's aim to use local resources responsibly, Lahiri prioritizes the idea of becoming 'self-sufficient in terms of food and energy' (ibid.: 30), focusing on 'local production, consumption […] egalitarianism' (ibid.: 31). While Bela does not display an affectionate bond with nature like Myshkin, her commitment to an ethics of care denotes a similar attachment to nature as an identity coordinate.

SHARED TRAUMAS: TRANSGRESSING THE HUMAN/NON-HUMAN BINARY?

Myshkin's sense of mission is represented by his commitment to improving the landscape of his native town. At the same time, Bela's involvement in local agriculture, her rejection of imported foods, and her attempt to educate people into growing 'vegetables in their backyards' (Lahiri, 2013: 175) also reveal her care for the local, imbued with a feeling of a personal and social mission: 'At times Bela's second birth felt more miraculous than the first. It was a miracle to him that she had discovered *meaning in her life*' (ibid.: 176; emphasis added). Can one state that Bela's and Myshkin's green agendas (Garrad, 2004: 3) are strictly matters of creating a story of survival? I would say that their dedication to improving their surroundings does reveal an altruistic spirit, an ethics of care that benefits their communities as well.

Trying to filter the authors' position regarding environmental responsibility through trauma theories, I suggest that in both novels the non-human introduces the idea of nature as an organism in need of (human) care. Therefore, the characters' bond with nature may be regarded as an interaction between equally traumatized entities. This special encounter reveals 'the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound, survival through new forms of contact with others' (Caruth, 1996: 8). Myshkin's and Bela's bonds with nature reveal a strong dimension of human care for the non-human, animated by their willingness to listen to the trauma of the wounded nature that may result in a process of mutual healing. This element introduces a thought-provoking intersection between literature and

ecopsychology, a field that 'recalls and recognizes the relationship between nature and people, leading to the inevitable healing process for both' (Biswas, 2022: 93).

Getting back to Zapf's idea regarding the potential of literature to position the nature-culture interrelationship between anthropocentrism and radical ecocentrism, I think Roy attempts to cancel the human/non-human binary, deconstructing the idea of human supremacy over nature. This aspect is illustrated by Myshkin's selfless dedication to nature, more in the spirit of 'deep ecology' (Garrad, 2004: 21). In this respect, an illustrative scene from *All the Lives* reveals how human affection for the surrounding nature has the potential to erase the borders between people and the environment: At some point, the municipality decides to cut down forty-four neem trees (planted by Myshkin) in order to use the space as a construction site. Old Myshkin does everything in his power to prevent this, but his efforts are ignored by the authorities; once he understands that their fate is sealed, he acts in a way that illustrates the deep emotional bond that he has established with nature: 'The day it became clear that the death of my trees was inescapable, I plucked all the roses and hibiscus in my garden. I went to each neem tree on Atkinson Avenue and placed a flower at its base' (Roy, 2018: 184). His bringing flowers in anticipation of the trees' death indicates that the character makes no distinction between a person and a plant. This gesture, along with the fact that Myshkin spends the night guarding the trees, forms an ecological transgression of the human/non-human duality.

In reverse, Bela's environmental projects hint at a stronger 'instrumental approach to nature' (Garrad, 2004: 21), whose resources are used, albeit responsibly, for the benefit of local communities. By contrast, Myshkin's interventions upon the local landscape seem to privilege nature's wellbeing, its 'intrinsic value' (Garrad, 2004: 21), rather than people's interests. At this point, the difference between Bela's and Myshkin's affiliations with nature is also suggested by the fact that Bela's projects are devoid of Myshkin's aesthetic drive. However, as a common point, Myshkin also displays a sense of socio-political purpose, albeit weaker, that intersects with Bela's more pronounced ecological mission. For example, Myshkin participates in the planting of 'several thousand trees' (Roy, 2018: 184) in order to transform deserted areas into inhabitable space. This implies that his ecological concerns sometimes carry instrumentalist connotations, as they target social well-being. Analyzing the characters' attitudes to nature in Spivak's terms, one may say that Roy conveys a stronger sense of planetary thinking, since Myshkin seems to transcend the boundary of alterity between him and nature. Conversely, Lahiri introduces a predominantly instrumental outlook, where nature is treated with responsibility but as a distinct entity meant to ultimately serve human purposes.

CONCLUSIONS

By employing a similar mechanism of trauma, namely children's abandonment, Lahiri and Roy shape characters who form specific bonds with local nature in their attempt to process the initial traumatic moment. As they get involved in their

surrounding environments, Bela and Myshkin manifest different ethics of care. While Myshkin's connection with the non-human relies on a deep emotional and aesthetic bond, Bela's involvement in ecological projects reveals an intense sense of responsibility in exploring the resources made available by the local nature.

Seen from an ecocritical angle, the characters' different attitudes to the non-human element suggest the authors' different visions regarding the dynamics of the human/non-human binary. On the one hand, Roy advances the possibility of transgressing this dichotomy, given that Myshkin's attitude to local nature gets closer to a deep ecological vision that contains the ingredients of planetary thinking. Consequently, in terms of transcultural poetics, this example suggests a transcultural transfer between nature and culture: the non-human provides Myshkin with the desired values of rootedness, stability and settlement, while he rewards nature with an ethics of care and immortalization via art. On the other hand, Lahiri's message seems to align with an environmental ethics that prioritizes a utilitarian approach to nature, whose resources are responsibly exploited to the benefit of local communities. Therefore, in this case, the human/non-human binary is maintained while the transcultural poetics is achieved: nature receives human responsible supervision while it gives back a sense of healing stability. By creating this dialogue between traumatized human characters and nature, both authors hint at the possibilities of mutual healing. In this way, Lahiri and Roy create a transcultural space of ecological awareness that mediates the nature-culture relation. This aspect illustrates the position of imaginative literature as a 'site of critical self-reflection of modern civilization' (Zapf, 2016: 3).

NOTES

Note 1. A detailed discussion of Gauri's choice to abandon her family for the pursuit of an academic career is provided in Stoican, A. E. (2018) Diffused gender codes and transcultural outcomes in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Lowland'. In A. Zamfira, C. de Montlibert and D. Radu (eds.) *Gender in Focus* (pp. 160-177).

Note 2. Walter Spies (1895-1942) was a Russian-German artist, ethnographer and translator whose name is linked to the development of modern professional Balinese art. Spies' research interests and work took him to Java Island (1923-1926) and Bali (1926-1942), respectively. The goal of Spies' multidirectional research was to contribute to the 'preservation of a large Balinese cultural-historical heritage' (Senokosova, 2018: 65).

REFERENCES

Biswas, R. (2022) Ecology. An Introspection. In M. Nita and S. Pal (eds.) *Environmental Management* (pp. 92-100). Ghaziabad: N.B. Publications.

Buell, L. (2005) *The Future of Environmental Criticism: environmental crisis and literary imagination*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Caruth, C. (1996) *Experience, Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore, MD and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Caruth, C. and Laplanche, J. (2001) *An Interview with Jean Laplanche*. Available from https://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.101/11.2caruth.txt [Accessed on 15 August 2024]

Garrad, G. (2004) *Ecocriticism*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Heise, K. U. (2008) *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet the Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Heidarizadeh, N. (2015) The significant role of trauma in literature and psychoanalysis. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 192: 788-795. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.06.093

Jaskani J. M., and Khan A. I. (2021) Horticulture: an overview. In A. S. Khan and Z. Khurram (eds.) *Horticulture: Science & Technology* (pp. 3-22). Faisalabad: Institute of Horticultural Sciences, University of Agriculture. Available from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/348621593_Horticulture_An_Overview#fullTextFileContent [Accessed on 19 July 2024]

Marder, E. (2006) Trauma and literary studies: some 'enabling questions'. *Reading On*, 1 (1): 1-6. Available from https://readingon.s3.amazonaws.com/issue1/articles/Marder/RO%20-%202006%20-%20Marder.pdf [Accessed on 12 August 2024]

Minter, P. (2021) Transcultural ecopoetics and decoloniality in *meenamatta lena narla puellakanny: Meenamatta Water Country Discussion*. In S. Cooke and P. Denney (eds.) *Transcultural Ecocriticism Global, Romantic and Decolonial Perspectives* (pp. 191- 220). London a.o.: Bloomsbury Academic.

Mustafi, M. S. (2012) Naxalbari: the cradle of India's bloody class war. *India Ink*. 11 July. https://archive.nytimes.com/india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/11/naxalbari-the-cradle-of-indias-bloody-class-war/

Senokosova, A. (2018) The cinematographic works of an artist Walter Spies about Balinese culture: ethnographic spectacles in the social-cultural context of 1930-s. In *International Conference on Social Science, Humanities & Education* (pp. 64-69). Available from https://www.dpublication.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/ICSHE-1-P-115.pdf [Accessed on 20 March 2024]

Spivak, G. C. (2003) *Death of a Discipline*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

TEXTS ANALYSED

Lahiri, J. (2013) *The Lowland*. New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf.

Roy, A. (2018) *All the Lives We Never Lived*. New York, NY a.o.: Atria Books.

Adriana Elena Stoican (Dr. Philol.) is currently teaching English for Business Communication at the Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Her research interests include Romanian literature of the diaspora, South Asian American studies and transnationalism.

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9791-3540

Email: elena.stoican@rei.ase.ro

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 125–142
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.09

TEACHER AND PEER SUPPORT AS KEY FACTORS IN EFL LEARNERS' SPEAKING ANXIETY AND PROFICIENCY IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

AHMAD TAUCHID
Nahdlatul Ulama Sunan Giri University, Indonesia

Abstract. Studies have explored strategies to reduce speaking anxiety; however, the role of teacher and peer support in influencing speaking anxiety and proficiency in online settings remains understudied. These issues are particularly significant in online education, where students may experience isolation and decreased interaction, making supportive teaching practices essential. To address this gap, this study aims to investigate how teacher and peer support affect English as a Foreign Language learners' speaking anxiety and proficiency. A true experimental design was employed, involving 26 students from a private university in Indonesia. Data were collected from speaking test scores and a closed-ended questionnaire administered before and after the intervention. Performed via IBM SPSS 22, the results of the paired sample t-test analysis revealed that learners who received both teacher support and peer support experienced a significant reduction in speaking anxiety, with a large effect size. Additionally, there was a significant improvement in speaking proficiency, with an exceptionally large effect size, highlighting the importance of teacher and peer support in enhancing speaking skills. These findings imply the importance of integrating teacher and peer support in language learning environments, particularly online settings, to foster a supportive and stress-reduced atmosphere that promotes learners' psychological well-being, their speaking proficiency, and overall language acquisition success.

Keywords: teacher support, peer support, speaking anxiety, speaking proficiency, online learning

INTRODUCTION

Addressing speaking anxiety is vital for improving English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' proficiency, especially in the context of increasing online learning. Speaking anxiety can hinder communication skills and lead to avoidance behaviors, negatively impacting language acquisition. The shift to online learning has

intensified these anxieties due to technological challenges and virtual interactions. Effective strategies to mitigate speaking anxiety include creating a supportive classroom environment, employing collaborative learning techniques, and integrating technology such as video feedback. Educators are encouraged to implement targeted interventions that build learners' confidence and enhance their speaking ability. By fostering inclusive and engaging online experiences, educators can significantly improve EFL learners' speaking proficiency and reduce anxiety levels, leading to better language outcomes.

The transition to online education has necessitated the implementation of supportive teaching practices to mitigate challenges such as student isolation and reduced interaction (Palaming, 2022; Bicjutko and Odiņa, 2024). This shift towards online learning has underscored the importance of creating an engaging and interactive learning environment that fosters a sense of community among learners (Cherif et al., 2019; Stanley and Martin, 2019). Studies have consistently shown that effective online teaching requires a shift from traditional pedagogical methods to strategies that promote learner-centered instruction, feedback, and assessment (Asfah, Rahman and Fitriyani, 2022; Chaves, 2022; Wu, 2024). Furthermore, research has highlighted the significance of social presence, teacher support, and peer interaction in online learning environments (Guan, 2023).

Moreover, the lack of nonverbal cues and face-to-face interaction in online learning environments can lead to feelings of disconnection and isolation among learners (Bicjutko and Odiņa, 2024). Therefore, it is essential for educators to adopt innovative teaching practices that prioritize learner engagement, motivation, and success in online learning environments. This can include the use of multimedia resources, interactive discussions, and collaborative group work to foster a sense of community and social presence among learners (Cherif et al., 2019; Palaming, 2022). By doing so, educators can create an online learning environment that is supportive, engaging, and effective in promoting learner success.

Although existing studies have explored the roles of support systems and strategies in alleviating speaking anxiety, relatively little attention has been given to the impact of teacher and peer support on speaking anxiety and proficiency within online learning settings. This oversight is particularly notable, given the increasing importance of online learning in EFL education. As online learning environments continue to evolve, it is essential to investigate the factors that influence EFL learners' speaking anxiety and proficiency. The lack of research in this area is surprising, given the potential benefits of online learning for EFL learners, such as increased flexibility and accessibility. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by examining the effects of teacher and peer support on EFL learners' speaking anxiety and proficiency within online learning settings, providing valuable insights for EFL educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to optimize online learning environments and promote more effective language learning outcomes.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the dynamics of teacher and peer support in reducing speaking anxiety and enhancing proficiency among

EFL learners. By addressing the underlying challenges faced in online education, this research offers guidance for educators to develop more effective support mechanisms and strategies. As a result, this study contributes to the field of English language teaching by offering an understanding of the role of teacher and peer support in online education. These findings provide actionable recommendations for educators and policymakers to design interventions that effectively address speaking anxiety and proficiency challenges. This research also contributes to the ongoing discourse on enhancing EFL pedagogy by highlighting the importance of personalized support for learner success.

THE ROLE OF TEACHER AND PEER SUPPORT IN REDUCING SPEAKING ANXIETY IN EFL LEARNERS

The role of teacher and peer support in reducing speaking anxiety among EFL learners is a critical area of research, given the pervasive nature of speaking anxiety in language acquisition contexts. Speaking anxiety is a prevalent phenomenon among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), characterized by feelings of apprehension and nervousness when required to communicate in English. This anxiety can significantly hinder learners' performance and engagement in language learning contexts. Research indicates that speaking anxiety often stems from various factors, including fear of negative evaluation, lack of confidence, and concerns about making mistakes in front of peers (Christy, Jufri and Mukhaiyar, 2021; Alazeer and Ahmed, 2023; Suhardi, 2024). These feelings are particularly pronounced in situations that require public speaking or oral presentations, where the stakes of performance are perceived to be higher (Feng, 2024; Utari, 2024).

The measurement of English speaking anxiety has been approached through various validated scales and questionnaires. One of the most widely used instruments is the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), developed by E. K. Horwitz, M. B. Horwitz, and Cope (1986). This scale assesses anxiety specifically related to foreign language learning contexts, including speaking (Pan, 2023). Another relevant tool is the Public Speaking Class Anxiety Scale (PSCAS), which focuses on anxiety experienced during public speaking tasks (Rianti, Syahid and Qamariah, 2022). These instruments typically employ Likert-type scales to quantify anxiety levels, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how anxiety affects learners' speaking abilities.

In addition to these standardized measures, qualitative methods such as interviews and open-ended questionnaires have been employed to gain deeper insights into the specific causes and manifestations of speaking anxiety among learners (Zulkiflee and Nimehchisalem, 2022; Sari, 2023). For instance, studies have highlighted that students often report anxiety related to their perceived inadequacies in vocabulary and pronunciation, which can lead to avoidance behaviors in speaking situations (Al-Mukdad, 2021). Furthermore, research has

shown that anxiety can vary significantly based on individual differences, such as gender, age, and prior language exposure, which underscores the importance of context in understanding and addressing speaking anxiety (Taddese, Gessel and Han, 2021; Liu, 2023).

Speaking anxiety can significantly hinder learners' performance and engagement in EFL classrooms, necessitating effective strategies for mitigation. Both teacher interventions and peer support mechanisms have been identified as pivotal in alleviating this anxiety. Teacher support is fundamental in creating a safe and encouraging learning environment. Research has indicated that teachers can significantly influence students' anxiety levels through their instructional strategies and emotional support; for instance, teachers who employ positive reinforcement and create a supportive atmosphere can help reduce the fear of negative evaluation, which is a primary source of anxiety for many EFL learners (Rafada and Madini, 2017; Abusahyon et al., 2023). Furthermore, teachers can implement structured speaking activities that gradually increase in complexity, allowing students to build confidence over time (Inada, 2021). This progressive approach not only enhances speaking skills but also fosters a sense of security among learners, thereby reducing anxiety levels (Abrar et al., 2016; Asif, 2017).

Peer support also plays a crucial role in mitigating speaking anxiety. Studies have shown that learners who perceive higher levels of social acceptance and support from their peers tend to experience lower anxiety levels (Al-Khotaba et al., 2019; Matrić, Brumen and Košir, 2019). Collaborative learning activities, such as group discussions and peer feedback sessions, can facilitate a supportive network where students feel more comfortable practicing their speaking skills (Femilia, 2023). Moreover, peer interactions can normalize the experience of anxiety, as students realize they are not alone in their struggles, which can further alleviate feelings of isolation and apprehension (Aini and Lubis, 2023; Theriana, 2023). The shared experience of learning and practicing together can foster a sense of community, which is essential for reducing anxiety (Azarfam and Baki, 2012).

In addition to emotional support, the implementation of specific strategies by both teachers and peers can further enhance the learning experience; for instance, teachers can introduce relaxation techniques and coping strategies that students can employ before speaking tasks (Sugiyati and Indriani, 2021). Similarly, peers can encourage each other to adopt these strategies, creating a collective approach to managing anxiety (Femilia, 2023). The integration of technology, such as the use of social media platforms for practice, has also been shown to reduce anxiety by providing a less intimidating environment for learners to express themselves (Seth and Yeboah, 2021; Wijaya, 2023).

Both teacher support and peer support are integral to reducing speaking anxiety among EFL learners. Teachers can create a nurturing environment through positive reinforcement and structured activities, whereas peer support fosters a sense of belonging and shared experience. Together, these elements contribute to a more effective and less anxiety-inducing learning atmosphere, ultimately enhancing learners' speaking proficiency and confidence.

TEACHER AND PEER SUPPORT AS DETERMINANTS OF SPEAKING PROFICIENCY IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In online learning environments, teacher and peer support are critical determinants of speaking proficiency, particularly in language learning contexts. The role of teacher support is multifaceted, encompassing emotional, instructional, and organizational dimensions. Research has indicated that perceived teacher support significantly enhances students' self-efficacy, which in turn positively influences their self-regulation and engagement in online learning activities (Zhou, Zhao and Kaabar, 2022; Yan-ping and Liu, 2023; Miao, 2023); for instance, Miao's (2023) highlighted that teacher autonomy support fosters self-efficacy, thereby enhancing students' engagement in online learning. This is particularly relevant in language learning, where confidence in speaking ability can significantly impact proficiency outcomes.

Moreover, the organization of online instruction is vital for effective learning experiences. Teachers who implement a structured and predictable learning environment – through consistent schedules and clear communication – help mitigate the challenges students face in online settings (Liao et al., 2021). This structured approach not only supports students' learning but also fosters a sense of community and belonging, which is essential for language acquisition. The findings of Liao, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Zhu, Jantaraweragul, Christie, et al. (2021: 5) emphasize that organized online instruction can alleviate frustration and enhance students' learning experiences, thereby contributing to their speaking proficiency.

Peer support also plays a crucial role in enhancing speaking proficiency in online learning environments. Collaborative learning opportunities, where students engage with peers, can lead to improved language skills through practice and feedback (Atmojo and Nugroho, 2020; Rasmitadila et al., 2020). The importance of peer interaction is underscored by the notion that social presence in online learning can significantly affect students' motivation and engagement, which are critical for developing speaking skills (Miao and Ma, 2022). Studies have shown that when students perceive a strong sense of community and support from their peers, their willingness to participate in speaking activities increases, thereby increasing their proficiency (Shannon and Clarke, 2022).

Furthermore, the integration of technology in online learning environments can facilitate peer interactions and support. Tools such as discussion forums, video conferencing, and collaborative platforms allow students to engage in meaningful conversations, practice their speaking skills, and receive immediate feedback from both peers and instructors (Furqon, 2020; Rao, Torres and Smith, 2021). This technological support not only enhances the learning experience but also provides a platform for students to express themselves and develop their language skills in a safe and supportive environment.

Teacher and peer support are integral to fostering speaking proficiency in online learning environments. Effective teacher support enhances students' self-efficacy and engagement, whereas a structured learning environment and peer interactions create a collaborative atmosphere conducive to language learning. As online education continues to evolve, understanding and implementing these supportive elements will be essential for improving language proficiency outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study aims to examine the effects of teacher and peer support on EFL learners' speaking anxiety and proficiency. To achieve this, a true experimental design is utilized, which is particularly advantageous for several reasons. First, a true experiment allows for precise manipulation of the independent variables – teacher and peer support – ensuring that these factors are systematically tested in isolation. The participants were randomly assigned to three groups: a control group, a teacher support group, and a peer support group. The control group received no additional support, while the teacher support group received regular feedback and guidance from the instructor, and the peer support group participated in collaborative activities and discussions with their peers. By controlling for extraneous variables and minimizing selection bias, the design significantly enhances the internal validity of the study. This control enables a clearer attribution of any changes in speaking anxiety and proficiency directly to the interventions, rather than to other outside influences. Furthermore, the true experimental design enables the establishment of strong cause-and-effect relationships, providing robust evidence of how specific types of support can directly influence learners' speaking outcomes. The ability to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of teacher and peer support makes this design the most rigorous and reliable method for addressing the research questions.

2 HYPOTHESES

This study explores how teacher and peer support impact EFL learners. Both teacher support and peer support are expected to play a significant role in influencing learners' emotional and academic outcomes. In particular, the study investigates how these support systems may alleviate speaking anxiety and enhance speaking proficiency in online learning environments. Therefore, two main hypotheses are formulated as follows:

H_1: Peer support and teacher support significantly reduce EFL learners' speaking anxiety in online learning environments.

H_2: Peer support and teacher support significantly improve EFL learners' speaking proficiency in online learning environments.

3 SAMPLE

The sample for this study consisted of 26 students from a private university in Indonesia, all of whom were enrolled in the English education program. These students were currently in their fifth semester of study. Among the 26 participants, 17 were female, and the remaining 9 were male. English is considered a foreign language for these students, as they primarily use it in the classroom setting. Outside of class, their daily communication is conducted in their native languages, either Javanese or Indonesian. This bilingual environment plays a significant role in their language learning experience, as they switch between their mother tongue and English depending on the context, with English being predominantly used in academic settings.

4 DATA COLLECTION

Data for this study were collected from speaking test scores and a closed-ended questionnaire administered to students enrolled in an online EFL course. The questionnaire, adapted from Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., and Cope (1986), consisted of 10 questions (see Table 1) designed to measure anxiety levels.

Table 1 **English speaking anxiety (ESA) scales adapted from Horwitz et al. (1986)**

No	Questionnaire	Scale		
1	How anxious do you feel when speaking English in front of your classmates during online sessions?	1	2	3
2	How nervous do you get when you are asked to respond in English during a live online discussion?	1	2	3
3	How much anxiety do you experience when recording a video of yourself speaking English for an assignment?	1	2	3
4	How uncomfortable do you feel when you have to give an oral presentation in English online?	1	2	3
5	How anxious are you about making grammatical mistakes while speaking English online?	1	2	3
6	How much does the fear of being judged by peers affect your confidence when speaking English online?	1	2	3
7	How anxious do you feel when speaking English in a breakout room with a small group of peers?	1	2	3
8	How nervous do you get when your online English-speaking performance is being graded?	1	2	3
9	How much does the lack of immediate feedback in online English-speaking make you feel uncertain or anxious?	1	2	3
10	How anxious are you about technical issues (e.g., internet disruptions) affecting your English-speaking performance online?	1	2	3

*1 = Low anxiety, 2 = Medium anxiety, 3 = High anxiety

The speaking test, based on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking assessment criteria, assessed students' speaking performance through a series of tasks, including a 3-minute individual presentation and a 2-minute group discussion. The speaking test was scored by two independent raters, and inter-rater reliability was calculated to be 0.85. The data collection process spanned 16 weeks. During weeks 1 to 7, students participated in online classes delivered through traditional lecture-based teaching methods without any additional support. In week 8, students completed a pretest, which consisted of a speaking test and the questionnaire. From weeks 9 to 15, students received targeted interventions in the form of online teacher support (e.g., personalized feedback and guidance via video conferencing) and online peer support (e.g., collaborative discussions and activities via online forums). Finally, in week 16, students completed a posttest, which consisted of a final speaking test and the questionnaire once again. The pretest and posttest scores were compared to examine the changes in anxiety levels and speaking performance over the course of the study. To address the potential issue of novelty, we controlled for the amount of time students spent together in the online course and ensured that the pretest and posttest measures were identical. Additionally, we accounted for any potential differences in student engagement and motivation by collecting data on their online participation and activity levels throughout the study.

5 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

To ensure the validity, reliability, and consistency of the paired sample t-test results obtained via SPSS, a series of rigorous steps was undertaken. Initially, the assumptions underlying the test were assessed, with the Shapiro-Wilk test employed to evaluate the normality of the differences between paired scores. The homogeneity of variance was subsequently tested via Levene's test, which confirmed the equality of variance across the groups. To maintain reliability, the same cohort of participants was utilized for both the pretest and posttest, thereby ensuring that the measurements remained consistent. Finally, descriptive statistics were applied to identify any potential measurement errors, thereby reinforcing the robustness and precision of the analysis.

6 DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis for this study employed a paired sample t-test using IBM SPSS Statistics 22 to examine the influence of teacher and peer support on students' English speaking anxiety levels and performance. Prior to conducting the t-test, preliminary tests were performed to ensure the assumptions were met. The Shapiro-Wilk test was applied to assess the normality of the pretest and posttest scores, with results indicating $p > 0.05$, confirming normal distribution. Additionally, Levene's test verified the homogeneity of variance ($p > 0.05$), ensuring that the data met

the required conditions for the t-test. The analysis compared the mean scores of the pretest and posttest to evaluate changes, with statistical significance identified by a p-value < 0.05. To quantify the magnitude of the observed effect, Cohen's d was calculated, providing a measure of the effect size to complement the significance testing.

RESULTS

The data from 26 students who participated in an online EFL course and received a targeted intervention aimed at reducing speaking anxiety and improving speaking proficiency are presented (see Appendix). The intervention consisted of online teacher support, including personalized feedback and guidance via video conferencing, and online peer support, including collaborative discussions and activities via online forums. The students' anxiety levels were measured on a scale from 1 to 3, where 1 represents low anxiety, 2 represents medium anxiety, and 3 represents high anxiety. Speaking proficiency was evaluated via a score ranging from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating better speaking ability. The scores from both the pretest and posttest provide insight into how the intervention may have impacted the students' anxiety levels and their speaking proficiency in the online learning environment.

The data in the Appendix also indicate a general trend of improvement in both speaking anxiety and speaking proficiency among the students after the intervention. For speaking anxiety, most students showed a reduction from preintervention to postintervention, with the majority of students moving from moderate or high anxiety levels (ranging from 2 to 3) to a lower anxiety level (1). This suggests a notable decrease in anxiety, which could positively impact their performance. In terms of speaking proficiency, all students exhibited an increase in their scores postintervention, with improvements ranging from modest increases to more substantial ones, such as Student ID 1, who improved from 40 to 70, and Student ID 2, who improved from 45 to 75. This pattern indicates that the intervention had a positive effect on both reducing anxiety and enhancing speaking proficiency across the board. The consistent improvement in speaking proficiency combined with the decrease in anxiety suggests that the intervention was successful in fostering a more comfortable and effective speaking environment for students.

Table 2 presents the results of a paired sample t-test comparing the pretest and posttest scores for two variables: anxiety level and speaking performance. The table includes data for 26 students, with the mean and standard deviation (SD) for both the pretest and posttest scores for each variable. Additionally, it provides the results of tests for normality and homogeneity, as well as the correlation coefficient (r), t-values, p-values, and effect sizes (d) for each comparison. The anxiety level scores and speaking performance scores were both significantly improved after the intervention, as indicated by the statistical analyses provided in the table.

Table 2 **Paired sample t-test**

Variable	Group	*N*	Mean	*SD*	Test of Normality	Test of Homogeneity	*r*	*t*	*p*	*d*
Anxiety Level	Pretest	26	2.15	0.543	0.215	0.68	0.006	9.733	0.000	2.86
	Posttest	26	1.23	0.43	0.422					
Speaking Performance	Pretest	26	42.92	3.543	0.834	0.056	0.359	–21.18	0.000	12.81
	Posttest	26	66.69	5.206	0.176					
α value 0.05 (5%) for test of normality, test of homogeneity, and *p*										

The data in Table 2 clearly reveal that learners who received both teacher support and peer support experienced a significant reduction in speaking anxiety compared with those who did not receive such support. The support group had a mean anxiety level of 1.23 (*SD* = 0.430), which was significantly lower than that of the unsupported group, whose mean anxiety level was 2.15 (*SD* = 0.543). The statistical analysis, which was based on a t-test, yielded a t-value of 9.733, with a p-value of 0.000. This p-value is much smaller than the conventional threshold of 0.05, suggesting that the difference between the two groups is statistically significant and unlikely to have occurred by chance. In addition to the statistical significance, the effect size (Cohen's *d* = 2.86) indicates a very large practical effect. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, an effect size of 0.80 or greater is considered large, and a value of 2.86 is far beyond this threshold. This large effect size suggests that the intervention – teacher and peer support – had a powerful effect on reducing speaking anxiety, implying that such support is highly effective in addressing the issue. Moreover, the r-value of 0.006 indicates a positive correlation, suggesting that as the amount of teacher and peer support increases, speaking anxiety decreases, although the correlation is relatively small. Nonetheless, the very large effect size combined with this positive correlation reinforces the conclusion that teacher and peer support is not only statistically significant but also highly influential in alleviating speaking anxiety, demonstrating the strong and practical benefits of such support in educational settings. The results support the hypothesis H_1, indicating that peer support and teacher support significantly reduce EFL learners' speaking anxiety in online learning environments.

Table 2 presents the results of the study, which investigated the impact of teacher and peer support on EFL learners' speaking proficiency in an online learning environment. Specifically, the students participated in an online EFL course, which was delivered through a learning management system (LMS) and included synchronous and asynchronous online activities. The students were randomly assigned to either a control group or an experimental group. The control group (n = 13) did not receive any additional support, while the experimental group (n = 13) received both teacher support and peer support. The teacher

support included personalized feedback and guidance via video conferencing, while the peer support involved collaborative discussions and activities via online forums. The results show that learners who received both teacher support and peer support experienced a significant improvement in speaking proficiency compared with those in the control group. The experimental group had a mean speaking proficiency score of 66.69 (*SD* = 5.206), which was substantially higher than that of the control group, whose mean score was 42.92 (*SD* = 3.543). The results from the *t*-test analysis revealed a *t*-value of 21.180, with a *p*-value of 0.000, which is much smaller than the standard threshold of 0.05. This finding indicates that the observed difference in speaking proficiency between the two groups is statistically significant and highly unlikely to be due to random chance. Furthermore, the effect size of 12.81 (Cohen's d) is exceptionally large, far exceeding the threshold for a large effect, which is generally considered to be $d = 0.80$ according to Cohen (1988). This extremely large effect size underscores the profound impact that teacher and peer support had on improving speaking proficiency. Such a large effect suggests that this intervention not only produced statistically significant results but also had a meaningful and substantial impact on learners' ability. In addition, the positive correlation indicated by the *r*-value of 0.359 suggests that as the level of teacher and peer support increases, so does speaking proficiency. Although the correlation is moderate in size, the very large effect size and the positive correlation together provide strong evidence that teacher and peer support can play a key role in improving learners' speaking proficiency, making this an important factor in educational interventions aimed at enhancing language skills. The results supported the hypothesis H_2 that peer support and teacher support significantly improve EFL learners' speaking proficiency in online learning environments.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that learners who received both teacher support and peer support experienced significant improvements in both speaking anxiety and proficiency. Specifically, they showed a substantial reduction in speaking anxiety, with a large effect size confirming that such support is highly effective in alleviating anxiety in online learning environments. Additionally, the data demonstrated a significant improvement in speaking proficiency, with an exceptionally large effect size providing strong evidence that teacher and peer support play crucial roles in enhancing EFL learners' speaking skills in these settings.

The findings of this study strongly align with existing literature that emphasizes the critical role of both teacher support and peer support in enhancing speaking proficiency and alleviating speaking anxiety among learners. The significant reduction in speaking anxiety and the improvement in speaking proficiency observed in this study mirror the findings of previous studies that underscore the importance of teacher support in creating a safe and supportive learning environment. As indicated by Rafada and Madini (2017) and Abusahyon et al. (2023), teachers

can substantially influence students' anxiety levels by fostering a positive and encouraging atmosphere. This can be achieved through various instructional strategies, such as providing positive reinforcement and creating a safe environment where students are less likely to fear negative evaluation. These strategies are essential in addressing the primary source of anxiety for many EFL learners – fear of judgment during speaking activities. The research findings that teacher support plays a crucial role in reducing speaking anxiety are supported by the work of Inada (2021), who highlights the importance of structured speaking activities that gradually increase in complexity. These activities allow students to build confidence over time, reduce their anxiety, and enhance their speaking ability. By progressively challenging learners in a supportive setting, teachers help them feel more secure and capable in their speaking tasks, which directly contributes to reducing anxiety, as also suggested by Abrar et al. (2016) and Asif (2017). Moreover, the emotional support that teachers provide creates an environment where students feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes, which is key to improving their speaking proficiency. This connection between teacher support, anxiety reduction, and proficiency enhancement is consistent with the findings of this study, which suggests that teacher support plays an instrumental role in fostering a productive and anxiety-free learning environment.

In addition to teacher support, peer support has emerged as a critical factor in mitigating speaking anxiety and enhancing speaking proficiency. The literature on peer support consistently emphasizes the positive impact of peer interactions in reducing anxiety and improving language skills. According to Al-Khotaba et al. (2019) and Matrić et al. (2019), learners who perceive higher levels of social acceptance and support from their peers are less likely to experience anxiety. Peer support can create a network of emotional reassurance, allowing learners to practice speaking without the fear of being judged or criticized. The findings of this study align with these observations, as learners who received both teacher support and peer support showed a significant reduction in anxiety levels. This sense of community that peer interactions foster is essential in mitigating the isolation and apprehension that often accompany language learning. The collaborative activities mentioned by Femilia (2023), such as group discussions and peer feedback sessions, allow students to feel more comfortable practicing their speaking skills in a supportive environment. These collaborative learning activities also normalize the experience of anxiety, as students realize that they are not alone in their struggles. This shared experience of facing and overcoming challenges together not only helps alleviate anxiety but also strengthens the sense of belonging and connection within the learning group, as suggested by Aini and Lubis (2023) and Theriana (2023). The positive correlation between peer support and speaking proficiency found in this study further reinforces the literature, as it suggests that as peer support increases, so does proficiency, supporting the view that peer interactions are fundamental in improving language skills.

Moreover, the integration of technology in online learning environments has emerged as an important factor in enhancing both teacher support and peer

support. The findings of this study are consistent with those of previous studies suggesting that technology can facilitate peer interactions and provide a more supportive environment for students to engage in speaking activities. The use of online platforms such as discussion forums, video conferencing, and collaborative platforms allows students to engage in real-time conversations, receive immediate feedback from both peers and instructors, and practice their speaking skills in a less intimidating setting. According to Seth and Yeboah (2021) and Wijaya (2023), these technological tools reduce the anxiety associated with face-to-face communication by providing students with a platform to practice at their own pace, away from the direct pressure of classroom interactions. The current study's focus on online learning environments further supports these findings, as it highlights how such technological tools can alleviate anxiety and improve speaking proficiency by offering more opportunities for interaction and feedback. Furthermore, the structured online environment, as emphasized by Zhou, Zhao, and Kaabar (2022) and Miao (2023), contributes to students' self-efficacy, which is crucial for enhancing language proficiency. The ability to engage with peers and teachers in a structured and predictable manner helps students feel more confident and motivated to participate in speaking activities. This structured approach to online learning, as described by Liao et al. (2021), can alleviate the frustrations that students often experience in less organized environments, which in turn enhances their overall learning experience and speaking performance. Therefore, the combination of teacher and peer support, alongside the integration of technology, plays a significant role in both reducing anxiety and improving speaking proficiency in online learning environments.

The findings of this study provide strong evidence for the importance of teacher and peer support in reducing speaking anxiety and enhancing speaking proficiency, particularly in online learning contexts. The results confirm and extend the existing literature, which consistently underscores the role of emotional and instructional support in mitigating anxiety and fostering speaking skills. Through positive reinforcement, structured activities, and emotional encouragement, teacher support has been shown to significantly reduce students' anxiety levels and increase their confidence in speaking tasks. Similarly, peer support provides a sense of community and reassurance, which is essential in overcoming feelings of isolation and apprehension during language learning. The collaborative nature of peer interactions not only helps reduce anxiety but also contributes to improved speaking proficiency through shared experiences and constructive feedback. Moreover, the integration of technology in online learning environments enhances the effectiveness of both teacher support and peer support by providing students with a safe, low-pressure environment to practice speaking and receive immediate feedback. By combining emotional support with structured instructional strategies and technology, this study reinforces the critical role that teacher and peer support play in enhancing EFL learners' speaking proficiency and alleviating anxiety, thereby making a significant contribution to the literature on online language learning.

CONCLUSION

This study offers valuable insights into the significant role of teacher and peer support in alleviating EFL learners' speaking anxiety and enhancing their speaking proficiency within an online learning environment. The findings suggest that learners who received both teacher support and peer support experienced substantial reductions in speaking anxiety, with a large effect size indicating that such support is highly effective in mitigating anxiety in online learning contexts. This result implies that teacher and peer support are crucial in creating a supportive and less stressful environment for learners, which is essential for their psychological well-being and overall success in language acquisition. Additionally, the data revealed a significant improvement in speaking proficiency, with an exceptionally large effect size, highlighting that teacher and peer support are integral to improving speaking skills. This suggests that a collaborative approach, where learners feel encouraged and guided both by their peers and instructors, plays a pivotal role in fostering language development, particularly in settings that may otherwise contribute to increased anxiety due to the challenges of online communication.

Despite these promising outcomes, several limitations to this study should be addressed in future research. One of the key limitations is that the research was conducted within a specific online learning context, which may not fully represent the diverse range of online learning platforms or formats used by different educational institutions worldwide. The study primarily focused on a synchronous online environment, and future research could explore whether similar effects are observed in asynchronous or hybrid learning settings. Additionally, the study did not examine the potential influence of technological factors, such as internet connectivity or platform usability, which could also impact the effectiveness of teacher and peer support in online learning. Furthermore, while the study highlights the positive effects of teacher and peer support, it does not consider the variation in learners' personal backgrounds, such as their prior language proficiency levels, learning styles, or cultural differences, which may also shape their experience and outcomes in online settings. To address these gaps, future studies could investigate how different types of online learning platforms (e.g., video conferencing, forums, collaborative tools) compare in terms of their effectiveness in reducing anxiety and improving speaking proficiency. It would also be valuable to explore how factors such as learner motivation, technological access, and the role of cultural context influence the relationship between support mechanisms and language learning outcomes. Finally, longitudinal studies could help shed light on the long-term impact of teacher and peer support on learners' anxiety and proficiency, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the sustained benefits of such support in online learning environments.

REFERENCES

Abrar, M., Failasofah, F., Fajaryani, N. and Masbirorotni, M. (2016) EFL student teachers' speaking anxiety: the case in one English teacher education program. *IJEE (Indonesian Journal of English Education)*, 3 (1): 60-75. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15408/ijee.v3i1.3619

Abusahyon, A. S. E., Almukhales, R. A., Makhashen, S.S. and AlHarthi, R. E. (2023) The effect of speaking anxiety on EFL Saudi learners' performance. *International Journal of Membrane Science and Technology*, 10 (3): 3212-3222. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15379/ijmst.v10i3.3233

Aini, N. and Lubis, Y. (2023) Investigating EFL students' speaking anxiety: a case study at English department of UINSU. *English Franca Academic Journal of English Language and Education*, 7 (1): 35-46. DOI: https://doi.org/10.29240/ef.v7i1.6959

Alazeer, A. and Ahmed, Z. (2023) Students' speaking anxiety in EFL classroom. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 8 (2): 100-107. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.82.14

Al-Khotaba, H., Alkhataba, E., Abdul-Hamid, S. and Bashir, I. (2019) Foreign language speaking anxiety: a psycholinguistic barrier affecting speaking achievement of Saudi EFL learners. *Arab World English Journal*, 10 (4): 313-329. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol10no4.23

Al-Mukdad, S. (2021) The cause of speaking anxiety of pre-intermediate EFL learners and its effects on their oral performance. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 11 (5): 580-585. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1105.18

Asfah, I., Rahman, M. and Fitriyani, F. (2022) Teachers' perceptions of online challenges in junior secondary schools teachers in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. *International Journal of Humanities and Innovation*, 5 (3): 86-89. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33750/ijhi.v5i3.159

Asif, F. (2017) The anxiety factors among Saudi EFL learners: a study from English language teachers' perspective. *English Language Teaching*, 10 (6): 160-173. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v10n6p160

Atmojo, A. and Nugroho, A. (2020) EFL classes must go online! Teaching activities and challenges during COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. *Register Journal*, 13 (1): 49-76. Available from https://journalregister.iainsalatiga.ac.id/index.php/register/article/view/4051 [Accessed on 12 February 2025].

Azarfam, A. and Baki, R. (2012) Exploring language anxiety regarding speaking skill in Iranian EFL learners in an academic site in Malaysia. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 1 (2): 153-162. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7575/ijalel.v.1n.2p.153

Bicjutko, T. and Odiņa, I. (2024) Teacher educators' foreign language anxiety in face-to-face and online modes. *Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture*, 14: 4-20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.14.2024.01

Chaves, M. (2022) The community of inquiry instructional strategies impact on student satisfaction on remote learning. *Recoletos Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 10 (1): 191-204. DOI: https://doi.org/10.32871/rmrj2210.01.14

Cherif, A., Adams, G., Harris, J., Movahedzadeh, F. et al. (2019) Front line strategies for improving student success in online education. *Research Journal of Education*, 59: 167-176. DOI: https://doi.org/10.32861/rje.59.167.176

Christy, A., Jufri and Mukhaiyar (2021) The effect of speaking anxiety on students performance in speech class. In *Ninth International Conference on Language and Arts (ICLA 2020)* (pp. 241-245). Dordrecht: Atlantis Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2991/assehr.k.210325.043

Cohen, J. (1988) *Statistical Power Analysis for the Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

Femilia, P. (2023) Gender-based EFL students' speaking anxiety: poetry performance. *Journal of Language Intelligence and Culture*, 5 (2): 129-138. DOI: https://doi.org/10.35719/jlic.v5i2.129

Feng, Y. (2024) A study on the causes and influences of foreign language speaking anxiety in college students. *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media*, 73 (1): 70-75. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/73/20241062

Furqon, M. (2020) Film-based resources in asynchronous online learning. *Edulangue*, 3 (1): 17-28. Available from https://doi.org/10.20414/edulangue.v3i1.2009 [Accessed on 12 February 2025].

Guan, Y. (2023) Research on the effect of online learning and influencing factors of university students based on questionnaire survey. *Journal of Education Humanities and Social Sciences*, 13: 337-344. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v13i.8157

Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B. and Cope, J. (1986) Foreign language classroom anxiety. *The Modern Language Journal*, 70 (2): 125-132. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1986.tb05256.x

Inada, T. (2021) Teachers' strategies for decreasing students' anxiety levels to improve their communicative skills. *English Language Teaching*, 14 (3): 32-41. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v14n3p32

Liao, Y., Ottenbreit-Leftwich, A., Zhu, M., Jantaraweragul, K. et al. (2021) How can we support online learning for elementary students? Perceptions and experiences of award-winning K-6 teachers. *Techtrends*, 65 (6): 939-951. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-021-00663-z

Liu, X. (2023) Exploring foreign language anxiety in China. *Journal of Education Humanities and Social Sciences*, 8: 2471-2474. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54097/ehss.v8i.5015

Matrić, M., Brumen, M. and Košir, K. (2019) The role of social relationships in children's active EFL learning. *Psychology of Language and Communication*, 23 (1): 302-329. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/plc-2019-0014

Miao, J. (2023) Teacher autonomy support influence on online learning engagement: the mediating roles of self-efficacy and self-regulated learning. *Sage Open*, 13 (4): 1-13. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440231217737

Miao, J. and Ma, L. (2022) Students' online interaction, self-regulation, and learning engagement in higher education: the importance of social presence to online learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13 (1): 1-9. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.815220

Palaming, A. (2022) Online instructional strategies. *Epra International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 8 (5): 176-179. DOI: https://doi.org/10.36713/epra10171

Pan, J. (2023) Research on the phenomenon of foreign language anxiety based on individual differences of learners. *Creative Education*, 14 (9): 1759-1772. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2023.149113

Rafada, S. and Madini, A. (2017) Major causes of Saudi learners' speaking anxiety in EFL classrooms. *International Journal of English Language Education,* 5 (1): 54-71. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5296/ijele.v5i1.10645

Rao, K., Torres, C. and Smith, S. (2021) Digital tools and UDL-based instructional strategies to support students with disabilities online. *Journal of Special Education Technology,* 36 (2): 105-112. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0162643421998327

Rasmitadila, R., Aliyyah, R. R., Rachmadtullah, R., Samsudin, A. et al. (2020) The perceptions of primary school teachers of online learning during the covid-19

pandemic period: a case study in Indonesia. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 7 (2): 90-109. DOI: https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/388

Rianti, R., Syahid, A., and Qamariah, Z. (2022) The effectiveness of pair work activities on students' speaking anxiety and speaking ability. *Jurnal Educatio FKIP UNMA*, 8 (4): 1471-1477. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31949/educatio.v8i4.3760

Sari, F. (2023) The correlation between students' anxiety (cognitive, affective, behavior) and speaking performance. *Jall (Journal of Applied Linguistics and Literacy)*, 7 (2): 252 -261. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25157/jall.v7i2.11464

Seth, A. and Yeboah, J. (2021) The speaking difficulties of Chinese EFL learners and their motivation towards speaking the English language. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17 (1): 56-69. Available from https://www.jlls.org/index.php/jlls/article/view/2394 [Accessed on 12 February 2025].

Shannon, C. and Clarke, D. (2022) *How teacher presence engages and supports online female postgraduate students at an Australian regional university* [Poster presentation]. 39th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education, ASCILITE 2022, Sydney, Australia. DOI: https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2022.98

Stanley, M. and Martin, C. (2019) Training model for online nurse educators. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 9 (6): 82-87. DOI: https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v9n6p82

Sugiyati, K. and Indriani, L. (2021) Exploring the level and primary causes of public speaking anxiety among English department students. *Journal of Research on Language Education*, 2 (1): 57-66. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33365/jorle.v2i1.906

Suhardi, S. (2024) English education freshmen' experience on language learning anxiety. *SALIENCE*, 4 (2): 91-97. DOI: https://doi.org/10.60155/salience.v4i2.479

Taddese, E., Gessel, D., and Han, X. (2021) Chinese language learning anxiety: The case of international students in northeast normal university. *Indian Journal of Science and Technology*, 14 (18): 1434-1441. DOI: https://doi.org/10.17485/ijst/v14i18.26

Theriana, A. (2023) Understanding the strategies employed by EFL learners to overcome speaking anxiety in the classroom. *NextGen*, 1 (2): 33-44. DOI: https://doi.org/10.58660/nextgen.v1i2.38

Utari, L. (2024) Speaking anxiety in oral presentation of EFL students. *JEFLE*, 3 (2): 64-74. DOI: https://doi.org/10.26418/jefle.v3i2.61253

Wijaya, K. (2023) Strategies to overcome foreign language speaking anxiety in Indonesian EFL learning contexts. *LLT Journal a Journal on Language and Language Teaching*, 26 (1): 214-227. DOI: https://doi.org/10.24071/llt.v26i1.4450

Wu, L. (2024) Relationships between faculty concerns teaching methods in online education and technology use in teaching. *Journal of Education and Educational Research*, 11 (2): 137-142. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54097/frtmem08

Yan-ping, R. and Liu, T. (2023) Effect of online English learners' perceived teacher support on self-regulation mediated by their self-efficacy. *Porta Linguarum Revista Interuniversitaria De Didáctica De Las Lenguas Extranjeras*, 40 (1): 215-233. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30827/portalin.vi40.26930

Zhou, W., Zhao, L. and Kaabar, M. (2022) The effect of teachers' support on learners' online self-regulated learning: mediating analysis based on self-efficacy. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 17 (17): 207-217. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v17i17.34027

Zulkiflee, M. and Nimehchisalem, V. (2022) Speaking anxiety among single-gender and co-educational schools students in an online learning context. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 12 (4): 438-459. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4236/ojml.2022.124032

APPENDIX

Table 3 **Pretest and posttest data**

Student ID	Speaking Anxiety (pre)	Speaking Anxiety (post)	Speaking Proficiency (pre)	Speaking Proficiency (post)
1	2	1	40	70
2	2	1	45	75
3	2	1	43	74
4	3	2	41	80
5	3	2	42	64
6	2	1	47	63
7	2	1	38	66
8	1	1	44	67
9	1	1	39	65
10	2	2	36	69
11	3	2	38	61
12	2	1	41	60
13	3	2	46	70
14	2	1	45	70
15	2	1	50	72
16	2	1	44	66
17	2	1	40	62
18	3	1	41	63
19	2	1	44	68
20	2	1	42	64
21	2	2	45	60
22	2	1	48	61
23	2	1	43	65
24	3	1	50	73
25	2	1	41	66
26	2	1	43	60

Ahmad Tauchid (Dr.) is an English lecturer at the Nahdlatul Ulama Sunan Giri University, Indonesia, in the English Education Department. His research interests include English teaching, online teaching, and technology-enhanced education.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8216-7263

Email: atauchid2@gmail.com

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture Vol. 15, 2025: 143–165
https://doi.org/10.22364/BJELLC.15.2025.10

HOW DO ADVANCED L2 LEARNERS DEMONSTRATE PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE BY ALIGNING LINGUISTIC CHOICES WITH THEIR INTERPRETATION OF THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN ORAL DISCOURSE?

EDIT WILLCOX-FICZERE
University of Westminster, United Kingdom

Abstract. As more students pursue international education, the ability to communicate effectively in English-speaking environments has become essential. This also includes understanding the social and cultural nuances of language use, or pragmatic competence, which requires effective teaching and assessment methods. Traditional pragmatic assessments often focus on specific speech acts and employ discourse completion tasks. However, these approaches may not fully capture the dynamic and context-dependent nature of pragmatic language use. This research aimed to contribute to the improvement of pragmatic assessment and teaching by examining how pragmatic competence is demonstrated by B2-C2 level language learners when making requests. To achieve this, the research analyzed the relationship between language production and learners' context analysis in spoken interactions. Thirty international university students at B2-C2 levels participated in two role-play scenarios and subsequent interviews to explore how their language use reflected their understanding of the contexts. A mixed-methods approach was adopted for data analysis. Qualitative analysis was employed to explore the nuances of speech production and interview data, complemented by quantitative analysis of participants' evaluations of perceived imposition. The findings revealed that as proficiency levels increased, students demonstrated a deeper understanding of the social context and were better able to adapt their speech accordingly.

Key words: L2 pragmatic competence, sociopragmatics, pragmalinguistics, advanced L2 learners, oral interaction

INTRODUCTION

The globalization of recent decades has led to an increased movement of people. As individuals move to new countries, they often bring with them the cultural and linguistic norms from their native language and society. This is especially relevant

in the context of the rising number of international students studying in British universities. While English as a global language can facilitate communication, it is unclear whether a purely linguistic ability is enough for people from diverse cultural backgrounds to effectively interact. This topic has spurred significant research in both sociology and linguistics. Sociologists have examined how newcomers' social communication styles impact their integration (e.g., Geraghty and Conacher, 2014), while linguists have focused on the relationship between language form and social meaning in the field of pragmatics (e.g., Leech, 1983; Thomas, 1983).

Pragmatic competence, involving both social and linguistic aspects, has long been seen as an important part of effective communication in an L2. In the past, it was often considered a component of overall language ability (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983) and communicative competence (Bachman, 1990). More recently, it has also been recognized as a separate area of research and identified as a construct that could be included in language teaching and assessment. However, to accomplish this, such a construct needs to be precisely defined. The early development of pragmatics was significantly influenced by three key theories: Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1975), focusing on the actions performed through language, such as requests or apologies; Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), emphasizing the social importance of maintaining and safeguarding the 'face' or self-image of both the speaker and the listener during communication; and Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), focusing on how speakers and listeners work together to understand the intended meaning of utterances, recognizing that what is implied often goes beyond the literal words spoken. These theories later informed the development of basic concepts in pragmatics, namely pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics (Leech, 1983). The former involves linguistic devices needed for communication, while the latter comprises social rules and behaviors in the target language. Thus, according to Leech (ibid.), mistakes in pragmalinguistics would mean using incorrect language, while mistakes in sociopragmatics would imply a lack of awareness of what is appropriate in a given social context. Crystal (1997) later included these concepts in one of the most widely accepted definitions of pragmatics, which places language use in social interactions as its focus. He defines pragmatics as 'the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication' (Crystal, 1997: 301). Despite general agreement on the basic concepts, a clear and precise definition of pragmatic competence continues to be elusive (Roever, 2011). This is because the nature of pragmatic competence is greatly influenced by the specific circumstances of each context (Grabowski, 2016). This ambiguity poses challenges for teaching, assessing, and even describing pragmatic competence accurately.

Many existing pragmatic assessments are rooted in models of communicative competence (e.g., Bachman and Palmer, 2010), which draw heavily on the above-mentioned Speech Act theory (Searle, 1975) and Politeness theory (Brown and

Levinson, 1987). However, these theories have been criticized for their emphasis on individual cognition and isolated utterances, overlooking the contextual and interactive nature of language use (Roever, 2011; Kasper and Ross, 2013). As Kasper and Ross (2013) argue, a focus on individual functions may not fully capture the sequential nature of communication, as interactions often involve multiple communicative functions. Moreover, recent research employing conversation analysis (CA) has successfully demonstrated the developmental trajectory of learners' turn-taking abilities and pragmalinguistic resources (Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2012; Pekarek-Doehler and Berger, 2018). As a result, researchers recently have been advocating a discursive approach to study L2 pragmatic competence rooted in CA.

This perspective led to efforts to integrate models of communicative competence with discursive pragmatics (Kasper, 2006; Felix-Brasdefer, 2019) and to employ CA in assessing L2 pragmatic competence within interactive contexts (Youn, 2015; Ikeda, 2017). These studies departed from the traditional discourse completion tasks prevalent in research of the 1990s and early 2000s, opting for role-plays as assessment instruments. To complement such focus on interactive language use in assessing L2 pragmatic competence, this study also examines the alignment between speakers' contextual analysis and language use within extended discourse. As Cohen (2020) points out, greater awareness of the strategies that respondents employ to produce their answers could enhance assessment quality by providing a more comprehensive understanding of their thought processes and pragmatic awareness, thus leading to more accurate evaluation of their responses. Furthermore, if L2 learners are expected to make informed linguistic choices, as House (2007) posits, it is imperative to determine the intentionality behind these choices. While questionnaires have been utilized previously (Ikeda, 2017), interviews offer a more nuanced exploration of speakers' thought processes regarding the social context and have been employed in this research.

A further consideration is whether L2 pragmatic development is primarily influenced by proficiency or by the length of exposure to the L1 language and culture. Various research studies (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig and Bastos, 2011; Grabowski, 2013; Roever and Al-Gahtani, 2015) suggest that pragmatic competence improves as language proficiency increases, but some imply that the length of stay in the target environment has more impact on such development (e.g., Roever, 2005). Despite such debates, most studies indicate a correlation between higher proficiency levels and increased pragmatic ability. For example, Al-Gahtani and Roever (2012) found that more proficient learners employed more pre-expansion leading up to the communicative act (e.g., projecting the upcoming request before verbalizing the request) whilst examining the sequential organization of requests in L2 speech. Some researchers found that proficiency levels are linked to the development of grammatical features such as modality (Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig, 2000), formulas (Bardovi-Harlig, 2009), and syntax (Yamashita, 1996), while others discovered that proficiency has an impact on the use of lexical features in speech acts, such as intensifiers (Bardovi-Harlig, 2009) and modality markers (Barron, 2003).

Another key pragmatic concept to consider is appropriacy, which evaluates the suitability of language use in a specific social context. Hymes (1972) introduced this idea as a cornerstone of communicative competence, highlighting the importance of understanding cultural norms and expectations. However, the determination of appropriateness can be subjective, as individual perceptions and social backgrounds influence judgments, even within a single L1 speech community (McNamara and Roever, 2006). Consequently, the subjective and culturally specific nature of these norms renders L2 pragmatic assessment and teaching particularly difficult (Thomas, 1983). In an attempt to solve this issue, House and Kasper (2000) advocate a more descriptive approach to data in order to avoid judgmental evaluations and prescriptive rules. By combining the analysis of participants' speech when analyzing the data with semi-structured interviews, this study sought to understand the interplay between their linguistic choices and social perceptions. However, rather than imposing external standards of appropriateness, the analysis focused on understanding how participants' linguistic choices reflected their own communicative intentions.

This study investigated the speech production of B2-C2 level L2 speakers when making requests within extended discourse in two distinct academic contexts. This speech act, with its extended sequences, and the dialogic task format provided opportunities to examine both sequential organization and language use in interaction. The goal was to gain a deeper understanding of L2 speakers' pragmatic competence by analyzing (1) the sequential organization of extended L2 discourse and (2) how the identified features and the employed pragmalinguistic choices to mitigate imposition, taking into consideration social factors (i.e., power, imposition), reflect the speakers' perception of context as expressed in the interviews. Such an approach combined an etic or outsider's perspective (interviews) with an emic or insider's perspective (examining social actions within speech), as suggested by Seedhouse (2005).

Based on this aim the following two research questions were formulated:

1) How do B2-C2 learners organize speech sequentially?
2) To what degree do B2-C2 learners assess the given context, and how well does their speech production reflect this assessment?

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on data collected for a thesis (Ficzere, 2019). To address the research questions, a mixed-methods design within a CA framework was employed. The qualitative analysis of interactional features and interview comments was complemented by a quantitative analysis of participants' evaluations of imposition. This methodology enabled the examination of the intricate cognitive processes underlying the assessment of social context and the production of contextually aligned L2 speech. Stimulated verbal recalls facilitated the exploration

of participants' mental processes, while the descriptive analysis of their produced speech provided insights into the realization of these processes.

1 PARTICIPANTS

Thirty international university students, evenly divided between male and female, participated in the study that took place between 2014 and 2016. Their ages ranged from 19 to 54, with a relatively consistent age distribution across the three proficiency levels: B2 (median 21.5), C1 (median 24.5), and C2 (median 23.5). They were from diverse L1 backgrounds, primarily European, Asian, and Arabic language families. Each proficiency level included ten students, representing a balanced mix of nationalities. Proficiency was assessed based on IELTS/TOEFL scores, converted to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) using established conversion tables (Cambridge English; TOEFL, 2010).

The participants' length of stay in English-speaking countries varied from two months to five years, with C2 learners having the longest exposure and B2 learners the shortest. The B2 and C1 groups showed little variation in terms of exposure, but the C2 group was more diverse. Although this variation could be seen as a limitation, it was hoped that examining the pragmatic performance of C2 learners with less L1 exposure would shed some light on whether pragmatic competence is primarily linked to language proficiency or length of stay.

2 TASK DESIGN

The two speaking tasks required participants to express requests in role-playing scenarios. These scenarios were designed to simulate real-life university situations and were based on suggestions from a pilot study. The tasks varied in terms of power constellation (i.e., professor/student, flatmates) but maintained a high degree of imposition. Participants were expected to assess the specific context and adapt their language accordingly.

The task instructions were kept concise and informative to minimize cognitive load and ensure that participants focused on pragmatic features rather than idea generation. The tasks included:

- Task 1 (henceforth *T1*): Ask a professor to explain your assessment results that were unexpectedly low.
- Task 2 (henceforth *T2*): Ask your flatmate to clean more.

3 INTERVIEWS

After completing the tasks, participants took part in semi-structured interviews, aided by prompts to stimulate recall. As Kormos (1998) points out, interviews can provide valuable insights into cognitive processes, even though

the researcher may sometimes need to make inferences (Zheng, 2009). In order to encourage open discussion, the number of pre-designed questions was kept minimal, allowing participants to delve into any aspects they found important. The interviews began with questions about the learners' personal backgrounds (e.g., *How long have you been in the UK? How is the UK culture different from your own?*), and then shifted to their understanding of each task context (e.g., *How demanding was this request? How difficult was it to handle this situation?*). The conversation gradually evolved to explore cultural issues and pragmatic challenges. The aim was to transition from a broader cultural perspective to a more language-specific focus, gaining insights into how context analysis might have influenced language use.

4 DATA ANALYSIS

To address research question 1 regarding sequential organisation, including pre-expansion, speech production was analyzed qualitatively. Conversation analysis was used to identify interactional moves, including:

- Projecting the upcoming request (Roever and Kasper, 2018)
- Giving an account to support the request (Schegloff, 2007)
- Stating the problem that necessitated the request (Al-Gahtani and Roever, 2012)

While these categories were informed by existing research and pilot studies, conclusions about their actual usage were drawn based on the analysis of the data.

To ensure reliability, six of the thirty transcripts were reviewed by two coders. The transcripts were broken down into units of analysis according to the identified categories in the pilot studies, achieving a 91 percent agreement rate. To maintain consistency, every utterance was coded, and when new functions emerged, previously coded transcripts were reviewed and recoded as needed.

To answer research question 2, a primarily qualitative analysis of semi-structured interview data was conducted, supplemented by a quantitative analysis of imposition. Furthermore, pragmalinguistic devices (e.g., intensifiers, hedges, politeness markers), as outlined by Blum-Kulka et al. (1989), House and Kasper (1981), and Ikeda (2017), were identified and analyzed in the participants' speech to determine their function in mitigating imposition within the given context and to ascertain whether their usage aligned with the participants' self-reported perceptions of the social context. All participants' views of imposition were assessed using a Likert scale of 1 to 4. This 4-point scale ensured a clear distinction between more or less imposing contexts, avoiding neutral responses. Due to the small sample size ($N = 10$ per level), descriptive statistics (mean and median) were used instead of inferential statistics. While this may be a limitation, it was deemed acceptable given the depth of analysis possible with a smaller dataset. The participants' open comments were categorized based on factors such as the interlocutor's

potential reaction, responsibility, and the nature of the relationship. Following Saldana (2015), an open coding strategy was used to identify codes directly from the data. The coding process prioritized the participants' language, but this was supplemented by the researcher's terms when necessary. These comments were used to compare speech production with the participants' perceptions of context.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data indicated a steady rise in the frequency of turns taken, as language proficiency increases (Table 1). The average number of turns per person increased from 11.4 at B2 to 15.6 at C2. A noteworthy observation is that the speech output at the C1 level exhibited a closer resemblance to B2 production than to C2 production, particularly when examining median values. The confidence intervals (CIs) presented in Table 1 suggest that the observed mean differences between proficiency levels are not statistically significant. To establish a definitive relationship between learners' proficiency levels and the quantity of speech production, further analysis using inferential statistics on a larger sample is required.

The participants' assessments of the level of imposition across different task contexts (Table 2) revealed a general consensus, although minor variations were observed. While both B2 and C2 participants perceived a slightly higher degree of imposition in *T2* (equal power) compared to *T1* (unequal power), C1 participants reported the opposite. As with the speech production data, the confidence intervals in Table 2 indicate that the average differences between proficiency levels in terms of perceived imposition are not statistically significant. To firmly establish a connection between proficiency levels and learners' evaluation of imposition, more in-depth analysis using inferential statistics on a larger sample is needed.

Table 1 **Descriptive statistics of participants' speech production**

	Turns per person per task		
	M/median	**SD**	**95% CI**
B2	11.4 / 10	2.99	11.4 ± 1.853 [9.547, 13.253]
C1	12.5 / 10.75	4.26	12.5 ± 2.640 [9.860, 15.140]
C2	15.6 / 15	5.98	15.6 ± 3.706 [11.894, 19.306]

Table 2 **Descriptive statistics of participants' evaluation of imposition**

	***T1* (*S* < *H*)**			***T2* (*S* = *H*)**		
	M (median)	**SD**	**95% CI**	**M (median)**	**SD**	**95% CI**
B2	2.4 / 2	1.075	2.4 ± 0.666 [1.734, 3.066]	2.5 / 3	1.18	2.5 ± 0.731 [1.769, 3.231]
C1	2.9 / 3	.876	2.9 ± 0.543 [2.357, 3.443]	2.4 / 2	1.075	2.4 ± 0.666 [1.734, 3.066]
C2	2.4 / 2.5	1.35	2.4 ± 0.837 [1.663, 3.337]	2.7 / 2.5	1.6	2.7 ± 0.992 [1.708, 3.692]

1 B2 SPEECH PRODUCTION

Most B2 participants engaged in some pre-expansion before verbalizing the request. This typically involved projecting the upcoming request, presenting a problem statement, and an account. However, some B2 participants exhibited abruptness due to limited pre-expansion. For instance, in Excerpt 1 (*T1*: unequal power), the request immediately follows the greeting (line 1), and only the interlocutor's request for clarification in lines 2 and 4 prompts the participant to provide context with a problem statement in line 3 and a confirmation of the problem in line 5.

Excerpt 1: *T1* – Disappointment with essay result, *S* < *H*

1) S9: Excuse me professor. Can you explain for me (0.1) what is my (.) mistake?
2) I: I'm sorry?
3) S9: I think that (0.1) I deserve more than this mark. Why you give me like this?
4) I: Erm oka::y this is about your last essay?
5) S9: Yes.

These results align with previous research (Youn, 2015; Ikeda, 2017), demonstrating that intermediate learners frequently make requests abruptly without sufficient, if any, preparatory moves. The current study suggests that this tendency persists to some extent at the B2 level.

In their analysis of the *T1* context, B2 participants expressed feeling mostly in control due to the familiar nature of the given situation. This also seems to be reflected in the relatively low imposition they have assigned to this task (mean 2.4 – see Table 2). Participants at this proficiency level tended to view the roles in this task as more business-like, not very dissimilar to those of a retailer and consumer. For example, in their context evaluations, several participants mentioned the 'hearer's' (henceforth *H*) general responsibility (e.g., '*it's his job*', '*you have the right to ask*'), which could perhaps be the reason for the limited use of downtoners (total token: 20, 45% '*just*' and 55% '*maybe*') to lessen the impact of the request. Interestingly, one participant who made similar comments did, in fact, use several downtoners (e.g., '*just*' in lines 5 and 6 in Excerpt 2), thus perhaps somewhat contradicting their context evaluation.

Excerpt 2: *T1* – Disappointment with essay result, *S* < *H*

1) S8: Good morning professor.
2) I: Good morning.
3) S8: How are you by the way?
4) I: Fine. How can I help you?
5) S8: I just (.) I just wondering about my grades (.) for the essay (0.1) becau::se (.) I mean

6) like (0.1) I (.) from my point of view (.) I followed the instructions? > I just like to
7) know < what's what's wrong with the essay?
8) I: Mmm.
9) S8: I was not (0.1) very happy about the grades.

Another characteristic of B2 speech was a tendency for the participants to prioritize their own goals over cooperation and responsiveness to the interlocutor's input. For instance, in Excerpt 3 (*T2*: equal power), after projecting an upcoming request (line 1), the participant presents the problem (line 3) and the request (line 4), followed by several turns aimed at clarifying the issue. The interlocutor repeatedly objects to the request (lines 5, 8, 12-13, 23), causing the participant to hesitate ('*yea:::h*' in lines 6, 9, 16, and 19). While they acknowledge the interlocutor's objections, the participant's repeated problem statements seem accusatory (e.g., '*It's still a mess.*' in line 6 but also see 9, 17), partially due to their word choice. The high frequency and similarity of turns during this phase (i.e., repeated blocking, problem statements, and clarifications) suggest a lack of initiative on the participant's part to move the conversation forward and produce a new first pair part. This is particularly evident when the interlocutor's hesitation (lines 18, 20) does not request further clarification. Only when the interlocutor finally grants the request (line 25) does the interaction progress. The interlocutor's response is still hesitant (line 25); however, this time the participant picks up on it and suggests a future solution (line 26), albeit tentatively ('*maybe*'). Ikeda (2017) also observed the use of repetition in L2 language use, but it seems that repeated moves, as can be seen in Excerpt 3, can create a similar effect. Additionally, by using the pronoun '*you*' frequently, the participant's speech primarily focuses on the interlocutor's responsibility and actions, rather than emphasizing cooperation. Nevertheless, there are indications that the participant is aware of the need for mutual effort and a shared goal ('*we*' in line 11).

Excerpt 3: *T2* – Problem with flatmate, *S* = *H*

1) S2: Yeah (.). Hi Janet. I've got like (0.2) a serious problem (.) to talk with you (0.1)
2) I: ye::ah.
3) S2: about. You're not clean enough? (0.1) the kitchen a::nd (living room) untidy? (0.2)
4) I would like (0.3) mo::re cleaning?
5) I: But I have. I cleaned last week
6) S2: Yea:::h but (0.1) it's still (0.2) a (.) me:ss (0.2) dirty? I would like you (.) to be (0.1)
7) mo::re (0.2) tidy? (0.1) and more (.) organise.
8) I: I I think I'm tidy enough.
9) S2: Yea::h but (0.1) it's not that (.) enough? Like (.) compared to me?

10) I: Mmm.
11) S2: Yes. We're flatmates (0.1) we need to (.) help each other? (0.1) to do the [cleaning]?
12) I: [Yeah] but you you leave some
13) things around as well.
14) S2: (0.3) ye:s
15) I: your cups, (.) your dirty cups?
16) S2: Yea:::h (0.2) but (0.1) sometimes (.) I'm in a hurry? (0.1) to ( ) to my morning class? So:: it's
17) one cup (0.1) but your things is (.) all over the place.
18) I: Mmm.
19) S2: Yea:: (0.1) especially in the (0.1) bathroom?
20) I: Mmm.
21) S2: I think you like (0.2) or maybe you have like (.) hair fallings? I think (.) you need to do like
22) (0.1) pick up some hair fallings (0.2) from the sinks? so the water not ( ) the sink.
23) I: Mmm. But it's true for your hair too.
24) S2: But I'm always cleaning (.) after I finish (.) my shower? I always (.) clean up.
25) I: (0.2) Mmm. You know I'll try (.) but I think (.) I do sort of clean and try to be tidy.
26) S2: Maybe (0.1) you need to like (.) cleaning maybe (0.2) toilet? (.) maybe three times a month?

In their analysis of the *T2* context, B2 participants indicated a somewhat lower imposition (mean 2.5 – see Table 2) and mentioned feeling more in control due to the equal power dynamic in this task. In their evaluation, there were frequent references to their relationship with H (e.g., '*flatmate is just like a brother*'), H's general responsibility (e.g., '*It's their duty*', '*If you live with someone, respect the rules*'), and some implied references to language use (e.g., '*You don't have to be polite with them... be direct*', '*I'm telling her*'). Somewhat contradicting this sense of power, participants used a significant number of understaters (e.g., '*a bit*' – to underrepresent the force of the request) and downtoners (e.g., '*maybe*' in Excerpt 2, line 26 – to lessen the impact of the request on H) in their speech, potentially to minimize the impact of their request.

Overall, the analysis revealed that B2 participants engaged in some pre-expansion before making requests but often disregarded or perhaps misunderstood H's input throughout the interaction. In terms of conversational control, they appeared more assertive in *T2* (equal power), although this did not always help the conversation progress, while in *T1* (unequal power), they relied more on H's guidance. Their interview responses and language suggested that their primary focus tended to be on personal concerns.

2 C1 SPEECH PRODUCTION

The speech of participants was generally well structured at this level, with most using several pre-expansion moves (e.g., providing an account – *'I have followed all the instructions'*; problem statement – *'I was expecting a little bit more in the mark'* in Excerpt 4, lines 1-2) to build rapport and provide support before making their requests. This typically included greetings, giving an account, and stating the problem. In *T2* (unequal power), C1 participants took almost twice as many turns (mean 8.2) before getting to the main request compared to Task 1 (mean 4.8). Interestingly, despite this, the perceived level of imposition was higher in *T1* (2.9 as opposed to 2.4 in *T2*). While there were individual variations, it was clear that unlike at the lower B2 level, C1 participants skillfully managed the interaction, eliminating the need for clarification on the interlocutor's part.

In *T1* (unequal power), most C1 participants often deferred to H to guide the conversation. They also tended to focus on the past rather than offering proactive solutions and moving the interaction forward. In Excerpt 4, for example, in lines 9-11, the participant restates the problem, demonstrating their understanding of the interlocutor's explanation in lines 4-8, and provides context. They then accept the interlocutor's explanation of the problem in lines 14-15. However, it is H who takes the lead in advancing the conversation by suggesting a future course of action in line 16.

Excerpt 4: *T1* – Disappointment with essay result, *S* < *H*

1)	S14:	Erm we::ll, erm (0.2) I have followed <u>all</u> the instructions (.) in the assignment bu::t
2)		(0.1) and I was expecting a little bit (.) <u>more</u> in the mark that (.) I've <u>got</u>. So:: can you
3)		<u>please</u> explain to me (.) based on what <u>criteria</u> you have assessed my my assignment?
4)	I:	Well, I actually remember your assignment quite <u>well</u>. Erm you had some some good
5)		<u>ideas</u> there, however, there was one big <u>problem</u> with it. You know (.) there're <u>two</u>
6)		main <u>theories</u> a::nd two main <u>sources</u> in this field, it's Smith and Jones, and <u>neither</u> of
7)		them was mentioned in your assignment. And they're really <u>basic</u> (.) you've (.)
8)		everything starts from <u>there</u>.
9)	S14:	So: it's the (.) basically it's the (I didn't) use those two sources a::nd my:: assignment
10)		(.) >I <u>believe</u> that I've found like< (.) <u>better</u> sources than <u>those,</u> that's why I I didn't
11)		<u>use</u> them.
12)	I:	Well, you used quite a <u>few</u>, and some of them were <u>good</u> but not as <u>important</u> as these

13) So basically you used some, they were good, but not as important as these two.
14) S14: Okay, I guess it was my:: (.) research that was a little bit bad, that's why I didn't find
15) them
16) I: Yeah, so::: in the future you need to consider and prioritise the sources that you're
17) using.
18) S14: Oka:y. Thank you very much.
19) I: Is that all right? Does that explain?
20) S14: Yeah.
21) I: Okay, all right. All right then.
22) S14: See ya.

C1 participants perceived a higher risk of offending H in *T1*, leading to a more cautious approach. The somewhat higher imposition in this task (mean 2.9 – see Table 2) was often attributed to H's potentially negative reactions to the request (e.g., '*it feels like questioning their knowledge*'). These comments suggest C1 participants believed that without careful phrasing, the request could be seen as offensive and lead to a negative response. Despite such concerns, the use of lexical modifiers to soften the request was somewhat limited in their speech production. This could indicate that participants at this proficiency level either did not fully intend to minimize the impact of the request or were unable to effectively do so. On the other hand, some participants, such as the one who produced Excerpt 4 above, despite emphasizing H's duty (e.g., '*his duty to give explanation*'), still used a number of understaters to mitigate their request's force (e.g., '*a little bit*' in lines 2 and 12).

Generally, C1 participants demonstrated a strong understanding of H's cues and responded accordingly. For instance, in Excerpt 5 (*T2*: equal power), the participant displays sensitivity to H's hesitant and uncertain responses by offering supportive and non-confrontational replies. H's hesitation in line 4 leads to the participant using a hedge ('*erm*') in line 5 before providing more specific details. Additionally, when H presents a blocking statement in lines 11-12, the participant effectively counters with a problem statement in line 15 and an account in lines 18-20 before reaffirming the request in line 24. It is notable that the participant initiates the new phase of problem-solving (lines 27-32) by producing a first pair part in line 27. However, H subsequently takes more control of the conversation towards the end, concluding the current phase in line 35 and proposing to end the interaction in line 37.

Excerpt 5: *T2* – Problem with flatmate, *S* = *H*

1) S16: Janet, I need to speak with you.
2) I: Right?
3) S16: E::rm this is something has been bothering me (.) for some time.
4) I: Mmm.

5) S16: Erm, erm (0.1) I need to talk to you about the kitchen.
6) I: Oka::y?
7) S16: Erm (0.1) you don't really clean it well. You keep (.) you keep the dirty plates (.)
8) the::re. The foo::d (0.1) on top of them (0.1) it dries. You should at least wash it with
9) water a::nd so: it doesn't (.) so if someone wants to use the place it doesn't (.) it
10) becomes easier to clean (.)
11) I: I cleaned last time. You know, last week, I remember I did a big cleaning. I cleaned
12) up here everything that was in the kitchen.
13) S16: But last wee::k (0.1)=
14) I: Yeah
15) S16: =But the other days you're (0.1) you're not doing it.
16) I: But you leave dirty stuff around as well. I saw you leaving your mug and a plate in the
17) kitchen, I don't think it's only me.
18) S16: Erm I do clean my stuff bu::t (0.1) ( ) erm I do clean my stuff, I always clean my stuff.
19) That's only when I was sick I couldn't, and tired, I couldn't do that but I always clean
20) my stuff.
21) I: But that's the thing isn't it, that we're both studying (.) and sometimes there're
22) assignments.
23) You're busy, I'm busy so:: I do leave stuff around but it's not just me, is it?
24) S16: Yeah (0.1) but I would appreciate it if you (.) give it more effort to do that and clean
25) I: Well, you know, I'll try as much as I can but it's (.) sometimes we're so busy and we
26) just have to go to lectures. (0.2)
27) S16: Okay, so: (.) how about it we split (.) the work between us?
28) I: Mmm.
29) S16: I could (.) I could do like (.) Monday, Wednesday, Thursday (.) I'll be doing the
30) dishes, and the other days you'll be doing it.
31) I: Oka::y, well, you know we can try, we can try. See how it works.
32) S16: And we try to stick to it. And if there's a day that you're busy I can switch with you ()
33) I: Yeah, that sounds reasonable. I mean I don't want to have a bad relationship so::
34) S16: Yeah.

35) I: Okay. Why not, let's try and see how it works.
36) S16: Okay.
37) I: All right. See you then.
38) S16: Okay.

C1 participants assigned lower imposition to this task (mean 2.4 – see Table 2), possibly due to the balanced power relationship. When explaining the perceived lower imposition, they emphasized H's general responsibility (e.g., '*she has to clean and can't get away from it*') and the shared nature of the task (e.g., '*both responsible*'). Their language production suggested that they adapted their requests to the situation. For instance, in Excerpt 6, the participant demonstrates a nuanced approach to expressing their dissatisfaction. After considering H's potential feelings (what they said in the interview: '*the suggestion is that you don't clean, which is offending*'), they employ a downtoner ('*you don't really clean*', line 7) to soften the criticism. However, recognizing H's other responsibilities (what they said in the interview: '*she's expected to work*'), the participant then strengthens the request with a slightly firmer suggestion ('*you should at least*', line 8).

Excerpt 6: *T2* – Problem with flatmate, *S = H*

1) S16: Janet, I need to speak with you.
2) I: Right?
3) S16: E::rm this is something has been <u>bothering</u> me (.) for some <u>time</u>.
4) I: Mmm.
5) S16: Erm, erm (0.1) I need to talk to you about the <u>kitchen</u>.
6) I: Oka::y?
7) S16: Erm (0.1) you don't really clean it <u>well</u>. You keep (.) you keep the dirty plates (.)
8) <u>the::re</u>. The foo::d (0.1) on top of them (0.1) it dries. You should at <u>least</u> wash it with
9) <u>water</u> a::nd so: it doesn't (.) so if someone <u>wants</u> to use the place it doesn't (.) it becomes easier to <u>clean</u> (.)

Overall, C1 participants consistently engaged in a structured pre-expansion before making their requests and generally responded to H's cues throughout the interaction. In terms of conversational control, they seemed to be more assertive in *T2* (equal power), while in *T1* (unequal power), they relied more on H's guidance. Additionally, C1 participants shifted their focus from individual concerns to shared responsibilities.

3 C2 SPEECH PRODUCTION

Most C2 participants carefully structured their speech, using multiple pre-expansion moves before making their requests. These moves often included projecting the upcoming request, providing context, and stating the problem. The number of turns taken before the request was significantly higher in *T2*,

involving an equal power constellation (mean: 11.2), compared to *T1* (mean: 4). While there were individual variations (SD: 9.7 in *T2*), the overall trend was toward using more turns.

A defining characteristic of many conversations at this proficiency level was C2 participants' ability to not only respond to H but also to actively drive the conversation forward. By providing first pair parts, they frequently introduced new topics or proposed solutions, demonstrating initiative. This proactive approach was evident in both tasks, setting C2 participants apart from C1 participants, who primarily took the lead only in *T2*, involving an equal power constellation. For instance, in Excerpt 7 (*T1*: unequal power), after acknowledging H's explanation (line 9 '*that's completely understandable*'), the participant initiates new requests in lines 9-10 and 15-16.

Excerpt 7: *T1* – Disappointment with essay result, *S* < *H*

1) S24: Excuse me professor. Do you think you have a minute to discuss my essay?
2) I: Yes.
3) S24: Becau::se I had a really ( ) time writing it and I thought I did really well so:: I was
4) really disappointed with my grade, and >I was just wondering if you could tell me<
5) what I did wrong o::r have (another) chance to rewrite it?
6) I: Well, erm, I remember your essay. You had some really good ideas but unfortunately
7) you forgot to mention one crucial author a::nd his theory in this field, a::nd that was
8) the biggest problem. I mean (.) it's basic, his ideas are basic in this field so::
9) S24: Okay, all right. That's completely understandable to me. Do you think in that case (.)
10) you could maybe give me another chance (.) to rewrite the essay using that theory?
11) I: Well, unfortunately, it's all been finalised now (.) the marks all the marks, however,
12) it's not the end of your course. You could still work on it (.) and in future, just
13) prioritise your sources.
14) S24: Okay.
15) I: You know, who is important, who isn't so important.
16) S24: Okay. Thank you for the feedback, and next time maybe I can come to you before (.)
17) > if that would be possible for me< to:: really decide on the authors (I should)
18) mention?
19) I: Of course, feel free to do so.

C2 participants in *T1* generally viewed their requests as reasonable (e.g., '*It's reasonable to ask.*'). To justify the perceived lower imposition (mean 2.4 – see Table 2), they often cited H's responsibilities and their own rights (e.g., '*She should be able to justify the decision as I'm paying for the service.*'). The majority of participants expressed similar views, while 20 percent also acknowledged the sensitive nature of the task (e.g., '*It's a very delicate situation and can be taken as a complaint.*'). This context evaluation is likely to have influenced their use of intensifiers and lexical modifiers. While intensifiers were generally widely used to emphasize the request (e.g., line 3 '*really disappointed*'), lexical modifiers were also employed to mitigate its impact (e.g., line 4 '*just wondering if you could*'; line 9 '*you could maybe*'). This suggests that participants' language choices were possibly informed by their assessment of the context.

At this proficiency level the meaning of participants' utterances was clear, with no need for clarification from H. They frequently demonstrated strong empathy and anticipated potential objections to their requests. In Excerpt 8 (*T2*: equal power), for example, the participant begins with a greeting, followed by a problem statement (lines 3, 4, and 6). They then acknowledge H's situation (lines 9, 10) and soften the request by replacing the original demand ('*I'd like you to…*', line 13) with a suggestion ('*How about…*', line 13). The participant's approach may suggest an anticipation of potential resistance from H, prompting them to adjust their communication accordingly.

Excerpt 8: *T2* – Problem with flatmate (*S* = *H*)

1) S22: So: Janet.
2) I: Yeah?
3) S22: We've been living together since erm a couple of months now and erm I've started to
4) notice that (0.1) ou::r bathroom, as well as the kitchen,=
5) I: Mmm.
6) S22: =have been kind of (.) left untidy after you've used them, which I've picked up the ( )
7) and cleaned them for now, which is okay
8) I: yes?
9) S22: because we both come from different backgrounds and different (0.1) I guess we're
10) raised differently, but in the future I'd like to, if it continues, (0.1) I guess erm (0.1)
11) the=
12) I: yes.
13) S22: =living conditions (.) >I'd like you to< (.) how about a little more (.) or even institute
14) a plan in when and where somebody should e::rm=
15) I: mmm
16) S22: =clean the communal areas?

C2 participants were aware of the potential for their requests to be perceived as offensive in this task. The slightly higher perceived imposition (mean 2.7 – see Table 2) was often attributed to H's possible interpretation of the request (e.g., *'You're telling someone that they're messy and dirty.'*; *'How the flatmate interprets it can be imposing.'*) and the participants' own self-awareness (e.g., *'I felt egoistic for wanting to oppose her.'*). These comments demonstrate a close examination of the context, including H's feelings and an attempt to anticipate their response to the request. For example, the participant in Excerpt 9 demonstrates their consideration of H's potential attitude (what they said in the interview: *'I have to say "you're not clean" which could damage the relationship'*) when using a downtoner to lessen the impact of their message (line 9 *'a little bit untidy'*) while also indicating mutual responsibility (line 9 *'we share'*). The participant also demonstrates awareness of the potentially face-threatening nature of the request (what they said in the interview: *'I am doing the face threatening'*) by using a subjectivizer (*'I was wondering'*) to lessen the assertive force in the request.

Excerpt 9: *T2* – Problem with flatmate (*S* = *H*)

1) S30: Hi Janet.
2) I: Hi.
3) S30: How are you today?
4) I: Not too bad. Yourself?
5) S30: Not bad. How're your classes?
6) I: Yeah, yeah great. Fairly busy but yeah, they're great.
7) S30: Okay. All right. E:rm I::: (0.1) I'm about to say something not very nice. I hope you
8) don't .mind. E:::rm I:::'m primarily (.) a person who's quite erm quite obsessed with
9) cleaning. Erm and I find that e::rm erm some of the communal areas that we share in
10) this <a::re a little bit untidy>? So::: I in (.) it's been sort of going on for for quite a few
11) months now so:: >I was.wondering whether< you:: (.) could (0.1) help (0.1) doing
12) something about it

Overall, C2 participants consistently employed structured pre-expansion before making requests and were attentive to H's responses throughout the interaction. In terms of conversation dynamics, they were equally assertive and guided the conversation in both tasks. Like C1 participants, they shifted their focus from personal concerns to shared responsibilities, but to an even more pronounced degree. The analysis of their interview comments indicated that participants' language choices seemed to be influenced by their assessment of the context.

4 COMPARISON OF PERFORMANCE

All proficiency levels demonstrated some degree of pre-expansion in their speech. In *T1* (unequal power), the number of turns employed in pre-expansion was similar across all three levels (see Table 3), although C2 participants used slightly fewer turns than their B2 or C1 counterparts. In *T1* (unequal power), turns tended to be longer than in *T2* (equal power). Necessary pre-expansion moves, such as accounts, were often included in single turns, and requests were typically made directly. This may be attributed to the busy nature of H's role (i.e., tutor), thus adhering to the cooperative principle of being brief (Grice, 1975). In contrast, *T2* (equal power) saw an increase in shorter turns, especially at the higher proficiency levels (see Table 3). This aligns with Galaczi's (2014) findings that more proficient learners tend to employ shorter turns more frequently. It should be added that context also plays a role in this regard; requests can be more direct in certain situations (e.g., addressing someone busy) but may require more caution and involve several turns in others to avoid causing offense. Pragmatically competent speakers are able to adjust the amount of pre-expansion based on their context evaluation. The data indicates that this ability was evident across all three proficiency levels, but there was a noticeable improvement in its manifestation as proficiency advanced. In *T1*, pre-expansion decreased, while in *T2*, it increased when a potential threat to H's face was perceived. Such attention to detail should be considered when evaluating pragmatic competence.

It was also observed that C1 and C2 participants demonstrated a stronger ability to listen attentively and respond to H's turns. They displayed greater sensitivity to H's circumstances and their focus has shifted from individual interests to mutuality, a finding consistent with previous research. For example, Youn (2015) observed that more advanced speakers used linguistic devices (e.g., hedges, pauses) in challenging contexts, while Ikeda (2017) noted that advanced speakers often expressed mutual understanding to foster collaboration and show empathy. Similarly, C2 speakers in this study employed expressions, such as '*That makes sense*' and '*That's completely understandable*', after H's dispreferred responses. C1 and C2 participants were also more skilled at building upon H's turns by providing specific details, which aligns with previous research (e.g., Galaczi, 2014; Lam, 2018). Moreover, C2 participants not only built upon H's statements but also actively steered the conversation in both power constellations. They often initiated new phases, such as proposing solutions after discussing the problem.

Table 3 **Descriptive statistics of the number of turns in pre-expansion**

	***T1* (*S* < *H*)**			***T2* (*S* = *H*)**		
	M/med.	**SD**	**95% CI**	**M/med.**	**SD**	**95% CI**
B2	4.4 / 5	2.5	4.4 ± 1.549 [2.85, 5.94]	6.2 / 3	5.43	6.2 ± 3.36% [2.85, 9.56]
C1	4.8 / 5	3.32	4.8 ± 2.058 [2.742, 6.858]	8.2 / 7	6.47	8.2 ± 4.010 [4.190, 12.21]
C2	4 / 4	3.01	4.4 ± 1.866 [2.534, 6.266]	11.2 / 8	9.72	11.2 ± 6.024 [5.176, 17.22]

The analysis of interview comments revealed that all the participants considered the social contexts; however, this analysis gained depth with increasing proficiency. Whilst most participants at all three levels considered H's potential reaction, H's general responsibility, and the nature of the relationship, C1 and especially C2 participants' comments also referred to mutual responsibility (e.g., C1: '*common goal*') and the consequences of their action (e.g., C2: '*The task is not imposing, but the consequences can be damaging.*'). This aligns with the analysis of C1-C2 participants' speech production in this study (i.e., use of pragmalinguistic devices to lessen the force of their requests, more pre-expansion when face-threat to H is deemed higher), suggesting that more proficient learners not only strive towards collaboration and mutual understanding during interaction but are also conscious of this focus and can articulate their thought processes in this regard. While this does not necessarily indicate a deeper understanding of sociopragmatic expectations, such as those governing the lecturer-student relationship, more proficient learners may possess the cognitive resources to actively listen, analyse the conversational context, and adapt their language flexibly within the time constraints of real-life interactions. This enables them to navigate dynamic linguistic interactions, adjusting their language use to the context, whilst simultaneously considering both their own and their interlocutor's intentions.

CONCLUSION

The study used a mixed-methods approach to examine how B2-C2 learners demonstrate pragmatic competence in extended oral interaction and articulate their thought processes during context analysis. Findings revealed that the frequency of turn-taking increased with proficiency (see Table 1), and participants at all three levels used pre-expansion (e.g., projecting the upcoming request, stating the problem) before verbalizing the request and adjusted its length according to the given social context. Conversation analysis also revealed that as proficiency increased, participants shifted their focus from individual concerns to mutual involvement and collaboration. Interview data further highlighted the depth of their contextual analysis, including consideration of H's reactions and the consequences of their actions. This seems to suggest that more proficient learners have more cognitive capacity to analyze the social context in greater depth, especially during the online nature of live interaction, and align their pragmatic language use (e.g., downgraders '*just*'/'*a bit*'/'*possibly*', to soften the force of a request), as well as their turn-taking, with their communicative goals. In other words, they have the ability to apply their pragmatic knowledge effectively in real-world contexts, taking into account not only the participants' social roles and the power dynamics but also the sensitivity of the context within such social parameters. This could indicate that, as Bardovi-Harlig (2013) claims, being more proficient helps with the development of pragmatic competence. However, it is possible that increasing linguistic knowledge also allows for enhanced cognitive capacity, enabling learners

to evaluate social contexts and adapt their language use simultaneously, thus contributing to the development of pragmatic competence.

Previous studies (Ikeda, 2017; Youn, 2015) focused on sequential organization and pragmatic language use when analyzing L2 oral interaction; however, this study added semi-structured interviews to explore the depth of participants' contextual analysis before and during speech. It is argued here that understanding L2 learners' thought processes regarding the given social context is essential when assessing their speech production and also during class instruction when focusing on the development of pragmatic skills. Although it might be time-consuming, without such understanding it is impossible to effectively teach or assess L2 pragmatic competence. Therefore, it is proposed that L2 learners should be given autonomy and be actively involved in pragmatic performance assessment and classroom activities:

1) Assessment: Test-takers should evaluate given social contexts in terms of power dynamics and imposition before completing the task (e.g., using a simple Likert scale). This would enable the test-takers to consider the context before speech and examiners to gain insight into how learners perceive the social context, rather than relying on their own assumptions. Additionally, it would also allow examiners to assess whether learners' speech production aligns with their understanding of the context, indicating conscious choices about language use, or if there are discrepancies.
2) Classrooms: To complement awareness-raising activities, students should also analyze social contexts in terms of power dynamics and imposition to establish their own communicative objectives. They should then reflect on how their evaluation of the context and their use of turn-taking and pragmatic language features may have impacted their ability to successfully achieve these goals.

By prompting learners to articulate their thoughts regarding social context evaluation and setting their own goals regarding what they intend to achieve in an interaction, it is possible to cultivate their pragmatic development and empower them to make informed decisions about language use while respecting their own cultural and linguistic identity.

REFERENCES

Al-Gahtani, S. and Roever, C. (2012) Proficiency and sequential organisation of L2 requests. *Applied Linguistics*, 33 (1): 42-65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amr031

Bachman, L. (1990) *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing.* Oxford a.o.: Oxford University Press.

Bachman, L. and Palmer, A. (2010) *Language Assessment in Practice.* Oxford a.o.: Oxford University Press.

Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2009) Conventional expressions as a pragmalinguistic resource: recognition and production of conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics. *Language Learning*, 59 (4): 755-795. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2009.00525.x

Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2013) Developing L2 pragmatics. *Language Learning*, 63 (1): 68-86. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2012.00738.x

Bardovi-Harlig, K. and Bastos, M.-T. (2011) Proficiency, length of stay, and intensity of interaction and the acquisition of conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 8 (3): 347-384. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/iprg.2011.017

Barron, A. (2003) *Acquisition in Interlanguage Pragmatics: learning how to do things with words in a study abroad context*. PhD thesis. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company. Available from https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=253227 [Accessed on 17 February 2018].

Blum-Kulka, S., House, J. and Kasper, G. (eds.) (1989) *Cross-cultural Pragmatics: requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Brown, P. and Levinson S. D. (1987) *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cambridge English IELTS-CEFR Comparison Table. Available from https://www.ielts.org/ielts-for-organisations/common-european-framework [Accessed on 5 August 2014].

Canale, M. (1983) From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In J. Richards and R. Schmidt (eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 2-27). London: Longman.

Canale, M. and Swain, M. (1980) Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1 (1): 1-47.

Cohen, A.D. (2020) Considerations in Assessing Pragmatic Appropriateness in Spoken Language. *Language Teaching*, 53 (2): 183-202.

Crystal, D. (1997) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. 2nd ed. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Felix-Brasdefer, J. C. (2019) Speech acts in interaction: negotiating joint action in a second language. In N. Taguchi (ed.) *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Pragmatics* (pp. 17-30). London: Routledge.

Ficzere, E. (2019) *An Investigation into Assessing ESL Learners' Pragmatic Competence at B2-C2 Levels*. PhD thesis. Luton: University of Bedfordshire.

Galaczi, E. D. (2014) Interactional competence across proficiency levels: how do learners manage interaction in paired speaking tests? *Applied Linguistics*, 35 (5): 553-574.

Geraghty, B. and Conacher, J. E. (2014) *Intercultural Contact, Language Learning and Migration*. London: Bloomsbury.

Grabowski, K. (2016) 11. Assessing pragmatic competence. In D. Tsagari and J. Banerjee (eds.) *Handbook of Second Language Assessment* (pp. 165-180). Berlin and Boston, MA: De Gruyter Mouton. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614513827-013

Grabowski, K. (2013) Investigating the construct validity of a role-play test designed to measure grammatical and pragmatic knowledge at multiple proficiency levels. In S. J. Ross and G. Kasper (eds.) *Assessing Second Language Pragmatics* (pp. 149-171). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Grice, H. P. (1975) Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and Semantics* (pp. 41-58). New York, NY: Academic Press.

House, J. (2007) What is an 'Intercultural Speaker?'. In E. A. Soler and M. P. S. Jorda (eds.) *Intercultural Language Use and Language Learning* (pp. 7-21). Dordrecht: Springer.

House, J. and Kasper, G. (1981) Politeness markers in English and German. In F. Koulmas (ed.) *Conversational Routine* (pp. 157-185). The Hague: Mouton.

House, J. and Kasper, G. (2000) How to remain a non-native speaker. In C. Riemer (ed.) *Cognitive aspects of foreign language learning and teaching* (pp. 101-118). Tübingen: Narr.

Hymes, D. (1972) On communicative competence. In J. Pride and J. Holmes (eds.) *Sociolinguistics: selected readings* (pp. 269-293). Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Ikeda, N. (2017) *Measuring L2 Oral Pragmatic Abilities for Use in Social Contexts: development and validation of an assessment instrument for L2 pragmatics performance in university settings*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

Kasper, G. (2006) Beyond repair: conversation analysis as an approach to SLA. *AILA Review*, 19 (1): 83-99. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1075/aila.19.07kas

Kasper, G. and Ross, S. J. (2013) Assessing second language pragmatics: an overview and introductions. In S. J. Ross and G. Kasper (eds.) *Assessing Second Language Pragmatics* (pp. 1-40). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kormos, J. (1998) Verbal reports in L2 speech production research. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32 (2): 353-358. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/3587590

Lam, D. (2018) What counts as 'responding'? Contingency on previous speaker contribution as a feature of interactional competence. *Language Testing*, 35 (3): 377-401.

Leech, G. (1983) *Principles of Pragmatics*. London: Longman.

McNamara, T. F. and Roever, C. (2006) *Language Testing: the social dimension*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Pekarek Doehler, S. and Berger, E. (2018) L2 interactional competence as increased ability for context sensitive conduct: A longitudinal study of story-openings. *Applied Linguistics*, 39: 555-578. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amw021

Roever, C. (2011) Testing of second language pragmatics: past and future. *Language Testing*, 28 (4): 463-482. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532210394633

Roever, C. and Al-Gahtani, S. (2015) The development of ESL proficiency and pragmatic performance. *EFL Journal*, 69 (4): 395-404. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccv032

Roever, C. and Kasper, G. (2018) Speaking in turns and sequences: interactional competence as a target construct in testing speaking. *Language Testing*, 35 (3): 331-355. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532218758128

Salsbury, T. and Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2000) Oppositional talk and the acquisition of modality in L2 English. In B. Swierzbin, F. Morris, M. E. Anderson, C. A. Klee et al. (eds.) *Social and cognitive factors in second language acquisition: Selected proceedings of the 1999 Second Language Research Forum* (pp. 57-76). Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Press

Schegloff, E. A. (2007) *Sequence Organization in Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J. R. (1975) Indirect speech acts. In P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (eds.) *Syntax and semantics* (vol. 3, pp. 59-82). New York, NY: Academic Press.

Seedhouse, P. (2005) Conversation analysis as research methodology. In K. Richards and P. Seedhouse (eds.) *Applying Conversation Analysis* (pp. 251-265). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Thomas, J. (1983) Cross-cultural pragmatic failure. *Applied Linguistics*, 4 (2): 91-112.

TOEFL (2010) *Linking TOEFL iBT Scores to IELTS Scores – A Research Report ETS*. Available from www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/linking_toefl_ibt_scores_to_ielts_scores.pdf [Accessed on 5 August 2014].

Yamashita, S. O. (1996) *Six Measures of JSL Pragmatics* (Technical report No14). Honolulu: Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Centre, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Youn, S. J. (2015) Validity argument for assessing L2 pragmatics in interaction using mix methods. *Language Testing*, 32 (2): 199-225. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/0265532214557113

Zheng, Y. (2009) Protocol analysis in the validation of language tests: potential of the method, state of the evidence. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 5 (1): 124-137.

Edit Willcox-Ficzere (Dr., Lecturer) is currently working at the University of Westminster. Her research interests include pragmatic competence, politeness, and language assessment.

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4544-3449

Email: E.Willcoxficzere@westminster.ac.uk

Baltic Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture. Volume 15, 2025

Published by University of Latvia Press
Aspazijas bulvāris 5-132, Riga, LV-1050, Latvia
www.apgads.lu.lv

UNIVERSITY OF
LATVIA

ISSN 1691-9971