

Promoting social justice through dramatizing children's literature: Lessons from EFL classrooms in Türkiye

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Abstract

Social justice language education (SJLE) explores the ways in which language classrooms can be transformed to disrupt the existing oppressive policies and practices in schools and the society at large (Ortaçtepe Hart & Martel, 2020; Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023; Ortega, 2021). As an approach within SJLE, dramatizing children's literature can raise the awareness of learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) of social injustices across the world, help them voice their own experiences in the class, and contribute to their language development (Caldas, 2018; García-Mateus, 2021; Gualdrón & Castillo, 2018; Koss & Daniel, 2018). Focusing on the intersections of drama, children's literature, and SJLE, this qualitative case study explored a) a preservice EFL teacher's trajectory as a social justice educator, and b) the affordances of dramatizing children's literature on developing young learners' English language skills and awareness of social justice issues. Three picture storybooks, *Paper Bag Princess*, *William's Doll*, and *Amazing Grace*, were chosen and scripted for drama. Data were elicited through preservice teachers' observation notes and reflections as well as through semi-structured interviews with students. The results showed that dramatizing children's literature helped

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EFL young learners challenge their stereotypical beliefs regarding gender roles, gender inequalities, and racism. It also fostered their language development, especially in pronunciation (e.g., producing sounds), speaking (e.g., pitch and melody), and vocabulary by creating an entertaining and safe environment in which they could engage in contextualized language use. The study provides pedagogical implications in relation to how dramatizing children's literature can help disrupt social and educational injustices, transform students' stereotypical beliefs and biases, and promote empathy and critical awareness at large.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the attention given to the cognitive paradigms in the fields of language teacher education and applied linguistics has been challenged through a social justice turn (Ortaçtepe Hart & Martel, 2020; Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023; Avineri et al., 2019; Ortega, 2021). With the emphasis on integrating content and language through content-based instruction (CBI) and content and language integrated learning (CLIL), it has become more widespread to include language (e.g., vocabulary) and social justice (e.g., critical thinking) objectives within the language curriculum (Cammarata, 2016; Martel, 2022; Morton, 2016). By promoting learners' active and critical engagement with both language and content, a social justice approach to language education aims to create equitable and inclusive learning environments that challenge oppression and status quo in our societies by confronting the implicit and explicit messages conveyed through language education (e.g., content, materials, and policies) (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023; Hackman, 2005; Hastings & Jacob, 2016).

Yet, discussing social justice issues such as race and gender is not an easy task and can be particularly challenging with young learners, defined as those between 3 to 14-years old (Emery & Rich, 2015; Nunan, 2011; Pinter, 2017; Rich, 2014). Dramatizing children's literature, as a less conventional approach to think about social justice issues, has the potential to promote young learners' understanding of such complex issues. Actively involving them in the stories they read through dramatization (Adomat, 2012) and helping them see others' lives from different perspectives not only build empathy (Finger, 2018) but also develop their own consciousness in regard to their own identities and experiences (Kelin, 2007). Dramatizing children's literature also helps young learners understand the underlying sociopolitical conflicts and become global citizens who are informed about the issues in the world (Monobe & Son, 2014). Especially in countries such as Türkiye, where there is a strict national curriculum imposed by the ruling government (Yazan et al., 2023), drama could help challenge the false dichotomies and deeply held assumptions young learners have regarding gender and racial equity. The present study, by bringing a social justice approach to language education in Türkiye, aims to explore a) a preservice English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher's trajectory as a social justice educator, and b) the affordances and challenges involved in dramatizing children's literature to develop young learners' critical awareness and language skills.

2 | SOCIAL JUSTICE LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED

A variety of frameworks, such as multicultural education and anti-oppressive education, have been adopted to emphasize the role of education in confronting, challenging, disrupting, and transforming educational and societal inequities. More recently, social justice language education (SJLE) has emerged as a field to underline the ideological, political, and intersectional aspects of language education (Avineri et al., 2019; Glynn et al., 2014; Hawkins, 2011; Osborn, 2006; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas et al., 2009). By emphasizing the nexus of language and power, SJLE challenges the already existing social, economic, and educational status quo in our societies, and provides critical learning environments in which students strive for social, cultural, and economic transformation through collective action (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). SJLE fosters language teachers and learners' capacity to question the status quo, challenge oppression, and explore possibilities for a more egalitarian world (Hastings & Jacob, 2016; Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023; Yılmaz, Ortaçtepe Hart & Çelik, 2024).

As an interdisciplinary field, SJLE benefits from (critical) multicultural education, inclusive education, antiracist pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, anti-oppressive education, culturally responsive/sustaining pedagogies, critical language awareness, critical applied linguistics, and critical pedagogy. Freire's (2018) *critical pedagogy* underlines the role of the existing educational systems and programs in social, cultural, and economic regulation of the society and reproduction of the already existing inequalities. Critical pedagogy scholars, instead, promote transformative liberatory education, which aims to develop learners' critical consciousness and agency about their current life conditions and possibilities, and facilitate their engagement in social transformative action (Freire, 2018; Giroux, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008). Drawing from Freire's (2018) *critical pedagogy* which prioritizes the emancipation, empowerment, and transformation of oppressed groups, Ortaçtepe Hart (2023) proposes a social justice-oriented critical pedagogy that reconceptualizes the reciprocal relationship between schools, community, and the society at large. Acknowledging the role of social, economic, political, and cultural factors in shaping learners' identity and life experiences, a social justice-oriented pedagogy aims to transform the power relations that operate within and beyond schooling.

Various art-based techniques (e.g., role plays, drama, storytelling, and graphic novels) have been proposed by scholars who aimed to develop language teachers and learners' identities as allies, advocates, and activists (Linville & Whiting, 2019; Martin-Beltrán et al., 2020). For instance, Barter-Storm and Wik (2020) discussed the need for graphic novels in English language arts classrooms in the United States to discuss social justice issues. Visual and digital storytelling and counter-storytelling have also been emphasized, especially in relation to critical and antiracist pedagogies (Rolón-Dow, 2011; Matias & Grosland, 2016; Walker, 2018). These techniques not only provide language learners with authentic and multimodal input but also help build empathy towards the characters learners read about while also developing their critical consciousness.

2.1 | Dramatization of children's books

Informed by Freire's (2018) critical pedagogy that aims to disrupt and reconstruct social structures that are exploitative and detrimental, Augusto Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO) serves as a catalyst for social change by providing a transformative platform to raise the voices of oppressed and marginalized groups. A. Boal (1995) defines TO as follows:

A system of physical exercises, aesthetic games, image techniques and special improvisations whose goal is to safeguard, develop and reshape this human vocation, by turning the practice of theater into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and personal problems and the search for their solutions. (p. 14)

In other words, the concern of TO is not authentic representation of reality but the “transformation of reality by its spect-actors” (Baggage, 2019, p. 20). Through TO, the power dynamics that govern participants and characters are continuously assessed through a critical discourse. The work on such discourses allows for the “subversion of cultural norms” (Freebody et al., 2018, p. 9) because participants act in varied roles which lead to critical thinking and social action. TO promotes its participants' critical thinking skills by fostering diverse perspectives through the dramatization of different characters, as well as by the analysis of literary texts, the exploration of characters' lives, and continuous questioning (Shelton & McDermott, 2010; Taylor, 2021). TO also creates a safe environment to tell uncomfortable stories of, for instance, sexual abuse, in order to help challenge institutional power structures (Alexander, 2021; García-Mateus, 2021). TO, in this sense, not only raises awareness of sensitive issues but also fosters empathy by allowing individuals to assume someone else's social positions. TO also helps disrupt oppression and marginalization and transform societies through an examination of socially constructed phenomena (e.g., gender roles) which may be taken as naturally occurring (J. Boal, 2010; Freebody & Finneran, 2016).

The use of drama has a long history in second and foreign language education, with examinations of the ways in which drama can promote language learners' oral proficiency (Greenfader et al., 2014; Kao et al., 2011; Miccoli, 2003), fluency and comprehensibility (Galante & Thomson, 2016), motivation to learn (Dicks & LeBlanc, 2009), and confidence (Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004). Drama also provides language learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful and authentic language use where they can practice both receptive and productive skills in more communicative contexts that facilitate their overall second language (L2) development (Gill, 2013; Gualdrón & Castillo, 2018; Herrera & Murry, 2016).

With the growing interest in social justice issues in language classrooms, researchers have also explored how TO can promote youth activism to address the urgency of global economic and social crisis (e.g., Caldas, 2018; Duffy & Vettrano, 2010). For instance, Caldas (2018) drew the attention of second-year students in a dual language classroom to gender stereotypes using two storybooks (*Amazing Grace* and *William's Doll*). For the former storybook, the students were tasked with sharing their opinions on the storybook and dramatizing it. During their discussion, the boys in the classroom supported Grace, a Black girl, in her desire to play Peter Pan in the original story. However, when asked to act out Grace themselves, they struggled due to their socialization into the traditional masculine roles. Indeed, their reactions to acting out Grace mirrored those in the original story upon learning that Grace wanted to play the traditionally male role of Peter Pan. Similarly, showing strong disapproval for William's feminine characteristics in *William's Doll*, the same students resisted acting out William because they did not want to be labeled as “feminine.” In another study, García-Mateus (2021) used the poem *My Name is Jorge*, which tells the story of a Mexican boy forced to leave his home country with his family. A female student in the class who had a similar experience played the character Jorge. Dramatization of this poem enabled her to tell her peers and classroom teacher her undocumented immigration story in a safe environment. As illustrated in these studies, TO has brought forward the lived experiences, identities, and

emotions of marginalized and oppressed learners, who may never have had a chance to be heard of and seen in the language classroom.

2.2 | Social justice language education in Türkiye

Influenced by Islamic ideologies and neo-nationalism that emphasize Sunni Islam and Turkishness (Yazan et al., 2023), Türkiye constitutes a very interesting case to explore social justice language education. The country hosts the largest refugee population in the world, with approximately 3.6 million Syrians—1.2 million of them being school-age children (5–17)—and 500,000 asylum seekers from other countries, such as Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Erdoğan & Erdoğan, 2020, p. 247). Despite this explosion of multicultural and multilingual diversity in language classrooms, only a handful of researchers have explored critical and social justice-oriented pedagogies in Türkiye (e.g., Akayoğlu et al., 2022; Balbay, 2019; Yılmaz & Smyser, 2021). In a series of studies, Yılmaz et al. (2024) and Yılmaz et al. (2024) explored the role of social responsibility projects to help preservice English language teachers build bridges between their educational contexts, lived experiences, and community; develop their learners' and their own critical consciousness; and become advocates and activists to lead educational and societal change. Focusing on Socratic pedagogy that is rooted in questioning false dichotomies and deeply held assumptions, Balbay (2019) explored EFL preservice teachers' critical awareness of political, economic, and cultural dimensions of language education. Akayoğlu et al.'s (2022) virtual intercultural exchange program, on the other hand, aimed to develop EFL teachers' intercultural communicative competence in ways that would prepare them to work with culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. Studies have also indicated that Turkish EFL teachers, despite their desire to address social justice issues in their classrooms, encountered several factors such as conservatism and societal pressures that would inhibit their practice (Yazan et al., 2023), while some even indicated fear of losing their jobs and even persecution and jail (Yılmaz et al., 2024).

Despite the above-mentioned affordances of dramatizing children's literature as an approach for social-justice oriented language education (e.g., empowering learners to voice their own experiences, building empathy) (Caldas, 2018; García-Mateus, 2021; Gualdrón & Castillo, 2018; Koss & Daniel, 2018), a clear gap exists in the literature regarding the dramatization of children's literature as a social justice approach in EFL contexts such as Türkiye. This qualitative case study, therefore, aimed to explore a) a preservice EFL teacher's trajectory as a social justice educator, and b) the affordances and challenges of dramatizing children's literature in regard to developing young learners' critical awareness and English language skills. This study addressed the following research questions:

1. How can dramatizing children's literature serve as a technique to facilitate social justice language education?
 - a. What are the perceptions of a preservice English language teacher regarding the dramatization of children's literature as an approach to promote social justice in language classrooms?
 - b. In what ways does the dramatization of children's literature develop EFL young learners' critical awareness of social justice issues?
 - c. What role does the dramatization of children's literature have on EFL young learners' language development?

3 | METHODOLOGY

3.1 | Context and participants

The study was conducted with EFL young learners enrolled in a secondary state school (Grades 5–8) located in the northeastern part of Türkiye where the preservice teacher, who is also the third author, did his practicum at the time of the research. Through classroom observations and discussions with different teachers during his 2-semester practicum, the preservice teacher noted that the school accommodated several Syrian refugee students across almost all grades, including the classrooms of this study's participating students. For the present study, a total of 13 students were recruited, including 12 sixth-graders and one eighth-grader. Between the ages of 12 and 14, they were categorized as young learners, following scholars in the field (Emery & Rich, 2015; Nunan, 2011; Pinter, 2017; Rich, 2014). Nine were female and four were male-identifying; they all spoke Turkish as their mother tongue, along with learning English as a foreign language. These students were assigned to three distinct groups for the storybooks chosen within the scope of this research: Three were assigned to the group who worked on *Paper Bag Princess*, four to *William's Doll*, and five to *Amazing Grace*. Additionally, the only eighth-grade student took the role of the narrator across all three storybooks.

3.2 | Procedure for drama

The procedure pursued in this study included certain stages (see [Figure 1](#)). First, Necati, the preservice teacher (also the third author in this study), participated in a Social Justice in English Language Teaching (ELT) project carried out by the first two authors. This large-scale project, which aimed to build preservice EFL teachers' awareness and capacity to teach for social justice, provided trainings on different social justice issues including environmental education and sustainability development, gender equality in education, LGBTQ+-inclusive pedagogy, and immigration and peacebuilding. In addition to raising preservice teachers' awareness of these social justice issues, the project also aimed to cultivate a sense of advocacy by engaging its participants in a social responsibility project (SRP). Necati decided to pursue dramatizing children's literature as his SRP for two main reasons. First, one of the webinars of the Social Justice in ELT project focused on gender equality in education where a storybook called *Paper Bag Princess* was used to discuss gender stereotypes and inequality. Second, Necati had developed an interest in drama through the elective drama course he was enrolled in as part of his undergraduate degree.

Necati, based on his informal observations and supervised teaching at his practicum school, believed that children's storybooks were suitable for students' intellectual capacity and language proficiency due to their socioculturally enriched, linguistically accessible, and visually enhanced content (Emery & Rich, 2015; Garton & Copland, 2019; Shin & Crandall, 2014). His mentor teacher also occasionally brought similar storybooks to class, along with their animations on YouTube if available. The storybooks and their accompanying animations offered meaningful listening and reading activities during lessons especially because they were at a suitable language level for students and featured rich visuals that facilitated easy comprehension. Drawing on the knowledge and skills he acquired from the elective undergraduate drama course mentioned above, he was confident that dramatizing children's literature could create a safe and motivating environment to discuss sensitive issues while raising awareness and fostering empathy

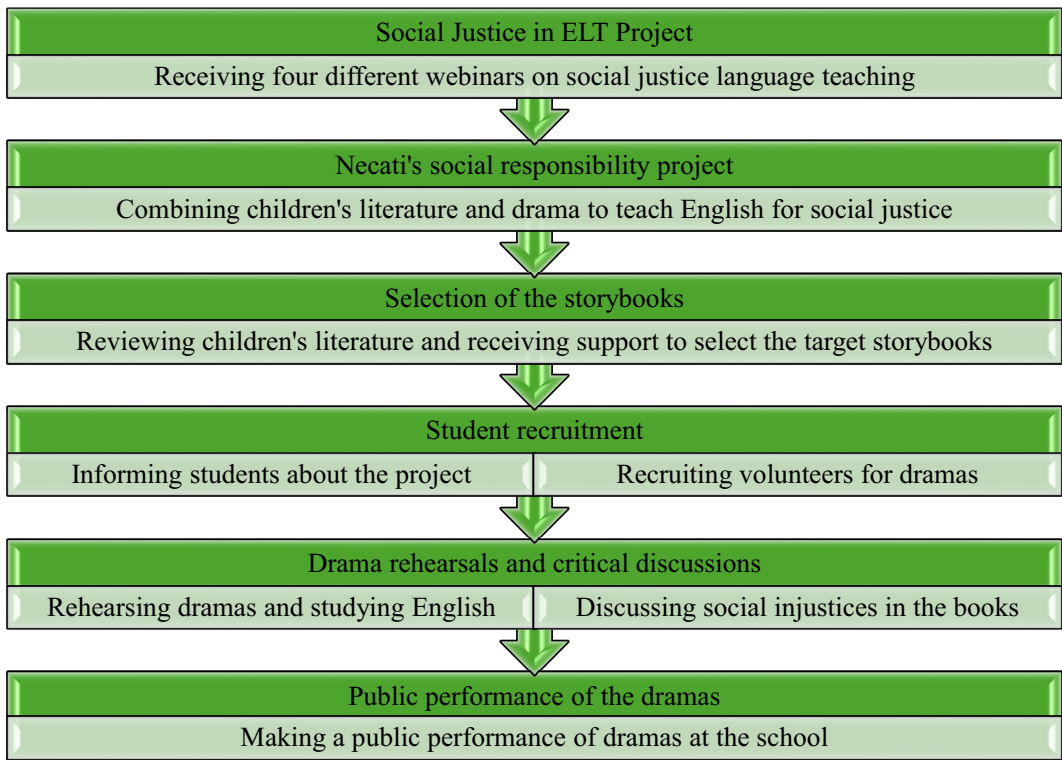


FIGURE 1 The study procedure.

(Alexander, 2021; García-Mateus, 2021). As a proponent of TO, Necati adopted dramatizing children's literature as a technique to teach English for social justice to the students in his practicum site located in northern Türkiye.

Necati, recognizing the innovative and creative potential of dramatizing children's literature, followed specific guidelines to implement his SRP (see Appendix A). He reviewed children's literature and sought assistance from the first and second authors to find similar storybooks. He selected three storybooks that revolved around gender and race: *Paper Bag Princess*, *William's Doll*, and *Amazing Grace*. The first book includes a reversed-gender story where a princess named Elizabeth saves a prince from a dreadful dragon that destroyed their castle. The second book is about a boy named William who wants to play with dolls instead of a ball, challenging stereotypes around masculinity. The last book is about a Black girl who wants to play the role of Peter Pan in a drama. The selection of these storybooks was informed by the emic perspective of the preservice teacher, as well as the first and second authors, within the Turkish context. The selection of the books was influenced by the consideration of particularities or contextual nuances of Türkiye as recommended by Kumaravadivelu (2003, 2006), as well as the participating learners' sociocultural background, intellectual capacity, and language proficiency.

Student recruitment for drama was voluntary, with Necati as the practicum teacher introducing the topic and activities to potential participants. Initially, several students volunteered to participate in the study but then withdrew due to concerns such as inadequate language proficiency, shyness, and prejudices about certain social justice issues. However, the three selected stories required a total of 13 students, and exactly 13 were willing to proceed. Before recruiting them, Necati contacted parents and provided detailed information about the study's purpose

and procedure. Parental permissions were obtained for both the dramas and subsequent interviews, motivated by the potential contribution to their children's English language development. Additionally, necessary permissions were granted by the school principal after being briefed on the books, drama, and overall process.

After student recruitment, rehearsals were conducted to work on both English language use and dramatization skills. Training and feedback included pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, along with acting-out skills like character portrayal, voice modulation, body language, emotion expression, and stage presence. Necati offered explicit feedback on pronunciation mistakes using online dictionaries on his mobile phone and sharing relevant YouTube links for the storybooks' audiovisual recordings. The rehearsals also delved into discussions on social justice issues extant in the dramas, emphasizing plot analysis (e.g., identifying social justice themes) and character exploration (e.g., examining oppression and real-life parallels). This approach aimed to cultivate a critical understanding of social justice issues, such as gender inequality and racism, among the students.

Rehearsals for each drama took place twice weekly over 2 months, lasting 20 minutes to 1 hour. However, Necati faced challenges due to limited institutional support in terms of time and space and therefore carried out the rehearsals during lunchtime and breaks between lessons in the classroom. Despite these challenges, Necati's mentor teacher carried out institutional monitoring during this process by attending some rehearsals. Following the rehearsals, students made a public performance to a diverse audience, including their classmates, teachers, school administrators, and parents. Based on Necati's informal observations, approximately 40 people attended this public performance. After the performance, Necati engaged in informal conversations with parents, seeking their perceptions on students' overall performance and insights into gender- and race-based inequalities. During these conversations, Necati observed that parents showed great happiness and pride due to their children's great performance and abilities of communication in English.

3.3 | Data collection

To gather data, this research utilized a triangulation method, employing three distinct instruments: field notes and reflections provided by the preservice teacher (Necati) on his experiences of running the drama activities, and semi-structured interviews conducted with the participating students. The primary motivation behind the use of these three different data sources was to enrich and corroborate the findings of the study through the perspectives of both the preservice teacher and the participating students (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999).

Necati, who carried out the drama activities in this study, kept track of his SRP through his observation-based field notes. These field notes not only reflected the nature of the rehearsals but also included Necati's feedback on participating students' language and performance skills, which allowed the authors to explore the development of students' English language skills.

Necati also reflected on his experiences by answering reflective questions prepared by the first and second authors (see Appendix B). His written responses to these questions delved into his conceptual awareness of social justice, prior pedagogical exposure to social justice, reasons and concerns for participating in this study, challenges faced during the drama activities, suggestions and strategies for overcoming these challenges, perceived contributions of dramatizing children's literature, and finally his opinions on future directions for social justice education.

Lastly, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participating young learners to explore the ways in which dramatizing children's literature helped them raise their critical awareness while also developing their language skills (see Appendix C). These audio-recorded interviews, approved by young learners' parents at the beginning of the project, explored their own experiences of various injustices within their local environments. The interviews also delved into the participants' perspective on global and local social justice concerns, along with the strategies they proposed for overcoming social inequalities within their immediate communities. The length of these audio-recorded interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes. Of the 13 students, seven of them, all sixth-graders, agreed to take part voluntarily in the semi-structured interviews. Particular attention was given to recruiting students from all the three drama shows to elicit their reflections on each story. As a result, the researchers interviewed one student from *Paper Bag Princess*, two from *William's Doll*, and four from *Amazing Grace*.

3.4 | Data analysis

Data analysis followed four stages: data management, formation of emergent ideas, classification of codes and themes, and data validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Seidman, 2019) (see Appendix D for sample coding). First, the researchers created a shared folder in which they organized the data from both the preservice teacher and EFL young learners. Second, each researcher downloaded this shared folder to their computer to carry out analysis individually in order to ensure validation in the final stage of data analysis. They individually read the entire transcription of the data several times and wrote memos in the margins. These memos formed the emergent ideas and descriptive summaries of the data by providing a synthesis of the rough data as meaning units for subsequent analysis.

Third, the researchers described, classified, and interpreted the data by building detailed descriptions, applying codes, developing themes, and then providing an interpretation through the lens of their own and the related literature. Based on the memos created in the preceding stage, they initially outlined their interpretations of the perspectives held by both the preservice teacher and the students in relation to dramatizing children's literature for social justice language learning. Then they coded the data and developed themes across related codes using a codebook which included entries as theme, code, meaning units, and examples of a segment of text from the data set. The rationale behind the use of this codebook was to ensure a smooth validation process in the final stage of data analysis. They (re)viewed the data set several times to classify and interpret the codes and themes appropriately.

Finally, they applied two different techniques to ensure data validation: peer debriefing for the data elicited from the students and member checking for the data from the preservice teacher. For peer debriefing, the researchers scheduled an online meeting during which they reviewed and deliberated on their respective analyses of the data collected from the participating students. Through comparing and contrasting their individual analyses, they engaged in extensive discussions, ultimately refining and finalizing their codes and themes with the development of a new codebook. As for member checking, the first researcher arranged an online meeting with Necati and solicited his final accounts to ensure whether the ongoing data analysis represented his experiences and perspectives. Based on these accounts, some minor adjustments were made to enhance the clarity of certain codes.

3.5 | Researchers' reflexivity

In a study that delves into race- and gender-based inequalities that derive from hierarchical power relations, it is of paramount importance that the authors of this study discuss their own positionality and the ways in which they tried to navigate the power relations involved throughout the different phases of data collection and analysis. The first two authors of this study are the project investigators of the large-scale project on social justice language education which focused on promoting EFL teacher's capacity to integrate environmental education and sustainability development, gender equality, LGBTQ+-inclusive pedagogy, and immigration and peacebuilding into their classrooms. The third author, Necati, as a participant of this larger project carried out an SRP (i.e., dramatizing children's literature) which formed the basis of this article.

There were, thus, different power relations involved between the first two researchers and the third author, as well as between the third author and his EFL learners who participated in the dramatization activities. The first two authors, throughout their project, benefited from Freire's (2018) critical pedagogy which allowed them to position themselves as facilitators and learners at the same time, breaking the hierarchies between themselves and the project participants. The third author, on the other hand, was not in a position of power when interacting with EFL young learners. He participated in this educational context as a preservice teacher, operating under the supervision of both his mentor teacher at the school and a faculty member from his university. Throughout a 3-month period, he formally taught English for 4 hours weekly, closely supervised by his mentor teacher in the classroom, with no responsibilities in assessment and marking. Notably, since the dramatization activities were extracurricular and dependent on children's voluntary participation, the third researcher served as a facilitator and guide, helping students develop both their acting-out and language skills through drama.

4 | FINDINGS

The findings of the study will be presented in relation to (a) the preservice teacher's (Necati) perceptions regarding the challenges and affordances of dramatizing children's literature for social justice language education, (b) the development of EFL young learners' critical awareness of social justice issues, and (c) the contributions of dramatizing children's literature on EFL young learners' English language development.

4.1 | Challenges and affordances of dramatizing children's literature

During his practicum, Necati faced numerous obstacles while implementing the drama activities, but he effectively surmounted them. These challenges included his role as a volunteer preservice teacher rather than a full-time staff member, navigating administrative issues with his mentor teacher and the school principal, and encountering constraints concerning student recruitment and rehearsal logistics.

Since social justice manifests social, cultural, and political features that may create conflicts with the social, cultural, and political realities of particular contexts, its integration in the language classroom often creates tensions for students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and communities at large (Hastings & Jacob, 2016; Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023). The initial challenge

Necati encountered was discouragement from his classmates, who were also preservice English language teachers doing their practicum during the study. Necati attributed this discouragement to their reluctance to step out of their comfort zones and their unwillingness to embrace new initiatives, such as teaching language for social justice. According to Necati, his undergraduate program followed a conventional approach to language education, perceiving it “merely as teaching grammar, vocabulary, and certain language skills like reading and writing.” Necati, on the other hand, was highly motivated to take initiative in order to challenge these traditional teaching practices and implement a more innovative approach aimed at enhancing students’ motivation for language learning and broadening their worldview, specifically through dramatizing children’s literature for social justice.

Necati also faced challenges from people at the school where he did his practicum. His mentor teacher and school principal conceived teaching language for social justice as *indoctrination* and showed resistance to the implementation of the drama activities. Being aware of the power dynamics in the school context and his identity as a practicum student in this context, Necati believed perseverance and effective communication was key to handling these problems:

I did not fear and hesitate to tell the truth to people. I defended what I believed in. I showed my students the aims of the study, what they would do, the scripts, everything very clearly. As a result, they trusted me and their faith in the study increased. Sometimes there were administrative problems; there were people who saw social justice like a bogeyman; and I was treated as if I was brainwashing the students. However, after the students’ final performance, I received positive feedback, especially from families. Many stakeholders (teachers and the administrative staff) abandoned their negative attitudes towards such activities after seeing the final performance.

Being committed to the power of drama for social justice, Necati communicated the purpose and flow of his drama activities very clearly to his students, his mentor teacher, and the school principal, which helped him continue this project with his young learners. Based on his reflections and observation notes, it is clear that Necati underlined several affordances of using drama in the language classroom. First of all, Necati emphasized the effectiveness of drama as a technique “to create real-life-like contexts in which language education gained further meaning and learners had the opportunity to acquire the target language, while also having fun.” He also viewed children’s literature as authentic materials that “contain cultural information, reflect real-world language use, and facilitate a more creative approach to language teaching and learning.” He affirmed that “the dramatization of children’s literature offers strong potential to teach English for social justice because it facilitates an authentic and problem-oriented approach to language education.”

Regarding research with children on social justice as an area of research yet to be thoroughly explored, especially within the Turkish context, Necati mentioned that “the use of drama raised students’ social justice awareness, while transforming their notions of social justice through critical thinking and cultivating their self-confidence.” He added that the students raised their awareness of social injustices and transformed their biases through a critical lens while also “developing their English language skills (particularly, pronunciation and speaking skills).” Moreover, students’ final performance promoted their self-confidence as “they had an opportunity to publicly exhibit their performance skills and knowledge of the English language.”

4.2 | Raising EFL young learners' awareness of social justice through drama

All the young learners involved in the study expressed that, through dramatizing children's literature, they initially became aware of the social justice issues depicted in the storybooks, subsequently connecting them critically to their own life experiences and the world. This study uncovered two significant outcomes concerning the learners' understanding of social justice issues: challenging gender inequality and racism, and reshaping perspectives by questioning the social and cultural norms.

For disrupting gender inequality and racism, all participating students highlighted that the three storybooks challenged both gender stereotypes and racist views, transcending gender binary and race-based discrimination. Reflecting on her experience in dramatizing *William's Doll*, Student 4 stated:

Because [William] was a boy, he was expected to play with toys for boys, but not with dolls. Actually, there is a gender difference related to toys. That is, while girls should play with toys for girls, boys should play with toys for boys. ... Indeed, this is a totally wrong notion because everyone should be free to play with whatever they want.

This reflection of Student 4 illustrates how the orthodox associations between genders and toys embodies and perpetuates gender stereotypes and binaries that prevail across the world, indicating the need to challenge such established gender norms and to promote freedom and inclusivity for all (Caldas, 2018; García-Mateus, 2021). Similarly, Student 2 emphasized that drama activities enabled him to become aware of “what others suffer due to gender inequality” and “how they feel when they are excluded or marginalized.” Student 2 also related this social justice issue to his own life: “I cannot buy a toy freely. For example, my father forced me to play basketball. I am not allowed to make my own decisions. I am expected to do what he wants.” Students also pointed out the gender roles in their homes, that “while mothers deal with all the housework, fathers do nothing at home” (Student 4).

Observing gender inequality as a central social justice issue, the students noted that the dramatization of *Amazing Grace* and *Paper Bag Princess* showed how stereotypical gender roles could be reversed. As Student 3 explained,

Girls or women do not have to act out female roles in a play. They can also perform male roles. Similarly, boys or men can perform female roles. We should not discriminate between genders.

Similarly, Student 2 also reflected on how gender stereotypes manifest in real life:

Just like in the case of William who wanted to play with dolls but not cars, people often say that girls cannot wear this color, or this color is not for boys because this is a female color or male color. ... I used to think that because the princess was female and thus weak, she could not save the prince.

As seen in these comments, dramatizing children's literature helped disrupt the traditional gender-color association and canonical portrayal of women as weak and thus to be saved by men. It also

allowed learners to question gender stereotypes perpetuated both in educational systems and in the larger society. Student 6 stated,

I used to think that boys like cars and girls like dolls, but the dramatization of these stories changed my ideas. For example, the boy [William] liked dolls, and the princess saved the prince but not vice versa. These examples changed my notions of social justice quite a lot. I learned that girls could also do and succeed. This project definitely changed my ideas substantially, and I like this change.

Through this study, the participating students started to problematize the social and educational status quo, discover alternative ways of being, and transform their established notions for a better and fairer world. Drawing attention to the benefits of drama as a technique for engaging learners in real-life language use (Gill, 2013; Gualdron & Castillo, 2018; Samantaray, 2014), the students confirmed the positive impact of dramatizing children's literature on their perspectives regarding various social justice issues (e.g., Caldas 2018). They also underlined the benefits of the post-rehearsal discussions in developing their critical awareness of social justice issues prevailing across their local and global contexts. For instance, Student 4 pointed to racism as an engraved social justice issue in Peter Pan and emphasized the importance of "equality among everyone—either White or Black" as an indispensable tenet and value to build a fair world. Linking this specific case to the circumstances of Syrian immigrants in Türkiye, where schools, including her own, across the country have several immigrant students, the student emphasized the importance of providing equal opportunities for everyone.

In addition to these perceived affordances, the EFL young learners also suggested ways to enrich the content of dramas and their overall experience. They recommended extending the storyline of the already existing books. Student 6, for instance, stated,

We could have dug deeper into the stories. We could have shown what the prince and princess did afterwards. For *Amazing Grace*, I would insert one more scene in which [Grace's] friends looked at her sadly and regretfully. ... For *William's Doll*, I would insert a new scene in which William played with his dolls.

In terms of the social justice dimension of the storybooks utilized, the young EFL learners recommended incorporating narratives that tackle various social justice themes. Specifically, their suggestions encompassed topics such as peacebuilding and immigration, environmental education and sustainable development, and animal rights and protection. Additionally, they advocated for expanding these storybooks by integrating additional scenes to facilitate more extensive dramatic interpretations. They emphasized that such extensive dramatizations could aid in deeper immersion into the subject matter and foster a more nuanced understanding of the social justice issues being addressed.

4.3 | EFL young learners' language-related gains through drama

When introduced to this study, all the students reported excitement since they had strong interest and motivation in learning English, thus perceiving this project as a unique opportunity to develop their language skills (e.g., speaking and vocabulary) and learn about different social injustices in the world (e.g., gender inequality, gender stereotypes, and racism). Nevertheless,

some raised concerns in regard to the study such as learner characteristics (i.e., timidity and anxiety) and (lack of) linguistic competence. For instance, Student 4 stated feeling hesitant to take part in the study “due to her anxiety and stage fright,” but overcame her reservations through Necati’s encouragement and support.

The EFL young learners also experienced various language- and performance-related challenges during the study and applied different strategies to manage them. Language-related challenges included a lack of confidence and difficulties related to pronunciation (e.g., accurate pronunciation, intonation, and pitch) and memorization of script lines. Regarding pronunciation-related difficulties, Student 7 illustrated her endeavor for accurate pronunciation through her focus on the word “eyes,” stating “This word is actually pronounced as /aɪz/, but I knew it as /eɪs/.” She added that she learned the accurate pronunciation of this word thanks to this project. As for the memorization of the scripts, Student 2 stated, “I had difficulty memorizing my lines. I also faced challenges when trying to sound like an old woman. It was a problem because I felt rather shy.” Additionally, he admitted feeling anxious about reciting his lines in the final performance, fearing potential disappointment of his teachers and parents.

In addition to the challenges of accurate pronunciation and line memorization, some students faced difficulties related to prosody, particularly with intonation and stress. For example, Student 4 recounted her experience of being assigned the role of an elderly woman, which required her to both speak and act accordingly. She encountered significant difficulties in producing the appropriate voice and intonation for an elderly woman and felt considerable embarrassment during her performance, concerned that her peers might ridicule her. She explained, “While speaking, I did not sound like an old woman and indeed speaking and acting out like an old woman was really embarrassing for me because I was worried that my friends would laugh at me.” However, she noted that with the support of the preservice teacher and her peers in the play, she was able to overcome her challenges and embarrassment.

Regarding performance-related challenges, they included performing certain actions and adapting to the characters in the stories, such as doing ballet, conveying a grandmother’s mood appropriately, and walking like a grandmother. Student 1, for instance, struggled with ballet in her performance:

I did ballet in the drama. I had to work hard to do it successfully. ... I memorized my lines easily and could read them accurately, but doing ballet was the only thing that was challenging.

The students’ reports indicated three key panaceas that helped them get over these challenges: intensive and extended practice, teacher and peer feedback, and family support. For example, Student 6 who had to do ballet did some readings on it, watched videos of people doing ballet, and rehearsed at home multiple times to perform better. Some of them also reported rehearsing with their friends in school or at home, along with receiving assistance from their families. Necati’s feedback during the rehearsals also contributed to their English language competence and performance. Student 6 stated,

I asked [Necati] for the pronunciation of some words. He read and recorded them for me. I listened to these words at home over and over. The recordings helped me a lot to learn their accurate pronunciation.

The participating students also showed increased motivation to learn English, expanded their vocabulary, and developed their pronunciation and speaking skills in a community of practice created through dramatizing children's literature (e.g., Gill, 2013; Gualdron & Castillo, 2018; Herrera & Murry, 2016). Student 6, for instance, mentioned that the study contributed to her vocabulary knowledge by learning what the newly introduced words mean, how they are pronounced, and how they are used in context. Regarding the use of the new vocabulary items, she underscored the benefits of the dialogues (the scripts) to contextualize these words. They improved their pronunciation and speaking skills through abundant practice and Necati's guidance and feedback. Student 7, for instance, mentioned "I studied pronunciation a little more. I listened to the pronunciation of words to better pronounce. There were pronunciation videos; I watched them. ... So, this project was beneficial for pronunciation." Similarly, Student 5 stated, "My speaking has become more fluent. I used to read very slowly and word by word in the past, but now I can read much faster and better."

Apart from promoting language gains and raising social justice awareness, all students developed a sense of achievement and self-confidence through the positive feedback of their peers, teachers, and parents, as well as a sense of community built through the interactions and cooperation during the rehearsals. Therefore, they expressed a strong aspiration to participate in similar studies in the future. Student 5 stated,

I would definitely take part in such projects because we had great fun. Such projects are useful to improve fluency in English and raise awareness on social justice issues. ... It might be interesting to focus on gender equality, ... men doing cleaning and women working, ... or a rich person and a poor person to show they are equal.

The students showed further motivation to participate in such studies, especially after observing positive changes in the negative attitudes of many parties involved in the process of the study (e.g., peers, teachers, and administrative staff). They also made recommendations to improve their performance through more assistance in rehearsals and a better setup of the stage. Student 1, for instance, mentioned her need for further ballet practice by stating, "I could have learned to do ballet much better. ... For example, I could have attended a ballet class for a few days to dance better." Student 4 emphasized the importance of the stage set to improve the authenticity when performing drama: "for *William's Doll*, a miniature school could have been used instead of a desk to represent the school." These comments also hint that the EFL young learners in this study cultivated an interest towards theater, and appreciated its help to build a community of practice that engenders a sense of achievement and self-confidence.

5 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Several conclusions and implications arise from the findings of this study. First, the incorporation of drama activities provided an authentic context for enhancing the comprehension of meaningful communication and practical language use among young EFL learners (Burlinska, 2016; Gualdron & Castillo, 2018; Nguyen & Do, 2017; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008; Samantaray, 2014). Moreover, engaging learners in various social roles bolstered their language proficiency, particularly in pronunciation, speaking, and vocabulary acquisition. These results affirm the benefits of drama-based activities in language learning, such as script memorization, pronunciation drills, and vocabulary contextualization, for enhancing fluency, accuracy, and lexical knowledge (Galante & Thomson, 2016; Gill, 2013; Herrera & Murry, 2016).

Second, this research demonstrates that even modest interventions, such as the extra-curricular drama activity that was focused on in this study, can contribute to learners' critical awareness in ways that help them question aspects of their lives, experiences, and practices within their families. For instance, through the rehearsals, the EFL young learners had a chance to question and challenge their previously held stereotypical beliefs about gender roles and manage to apply this awareness to their own lives (i.e., examining gender roles in their own families). The study also underscores that integrating social justice topics into language education programs is feasible across various age groups (Cowan & Maitles, 2012). Confirming previous studies on the ways in which drama can challenge individuals' stereotypical beliefs (e.g., Caldas, 2018; Downey, 2005; García-Mateus, 2021; Koss & Daniel, 2018; Souto-Manning, 2009), the present study highlighted how drama can be employed to develop a perception of the world "not as a static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 2018, p. 83), and thus contribute to social transformation, at least to some extent, to build a just and equitable world. However, it would be premature to conclude that the impact of drama activities, in terms of EFL learners' awareness of social justice issues such as race and gender, endured over time or resulted in educational or societal action for change. Future research stands to gain from embracing a longitudinal and community-oriented methodology to delve into how learners' awareness translates into tangible results, potentially reshaping larger societal and economic disparities.

Third, the findings indicate the inherent risks involved in social justice language education, as educators who integrate social justice issues into their teaching may face accusations of "indoctrination" and "ideological imposition." They may also be criticized for challenging "taken-for-granted assumptions" and disrupting the "political and social status quo" (Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016, p. 593). In countries such as Türkiye, where teachers and scholars may feel pressured and silenced regarding social justice issues due to potential consequences such as job suspension, termination, persecution, and legal repercussions (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023; Yazan et al., 2023), the risks become even more pronounced. Necati, despite facing institutional resistance during the initial phases of this study, successfully overcame these obstacles through perseverance and effective communication. As he was not a full-time teacher within the institution, the typical power dynamics between teachers and principals did not constrain him, affording him a degree of flexibility and autonomy not usually experienced. His journey highlights the pivotal role of teacher agency in embedding a social justice framework within classrooms. Without such agency, setbacks influenced by the diverse attitudes of stakeholders may jeopardize the sustainability of any social justice initiative.

While this study was not intended to be broadly applicable, some readers might perceive the sample size as too small and the data as limited in its breadth. Nevertheless, our research sheds light on a context often overlooked, offering value by amplifying voices from underrepresented backgrounds. In doing so, our study aligns with the calls for diverse global perspectives to challenge the dominance of Western-centric viewpoints and to promote epistemic justice within applied linguistics and language education (Ortaçtepe Hart, 2023; Selvi, 2024). Future studies conducted in similar underrepresented contexts are essential for moving beyond a Western, Anglocentric understanding of social justice. These studies can contribute to a deeper understanding and targeted addressing of social, cultural, and economic disparities arising from both global and local issues.

This research carries significant implications for language teacher educators, language teachers, and learners themselves, advocating for the integration of a social justice perspective into their educational practices. The utilization of drama activities, as demonstrated in this study, provides language teachers with a potent tool not only for nurturing their students' critical thinking but also

for establishing meaningful connections with them, emphasizing their diverse backgrounds and identities within the classroom (Freebody & Finneran, 2016; González et al., 2005). By utilizing dramatic interpretations of children's literature to enhance students' awareness and empathy, language educators can establish platforms that promote the examination of real-world issues through a critical lens, ultimately challenging educational and social inequalities on a broader scale.

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APPENDIX A

Guidelines for dramatizing children's storybooks

1. Selection of appropriate storybooks: Choose storybooks that are suitable for the language proficiency and intellectual capacity of the target learners. Ensure that the selected storybooks address relevant social justice themes that align with the learning objectives of the activity and lesson.
2. Student recruitment: Begin by selecting students who will participate in the activity. Aim for a diverse group (e.g., including both male and female students).
3. Rehearsal preparations: Schedule rehearsal sessions to focus on both English language proficiency and dramatization skills. Ensure that students understand the purpose and expectations of the activity.
4. Skill development: Provide training and feedback during rehearsals, covering not only language aspects such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, but also acting skills like character portrayal, voice modulation, body language, emotion expression, and stage presence.
5. Feedback mechanism: Offer explicit feedback during rehearsals (e.g., addressing pronunciation errors using online dictionaries or relevant resources). Share audio-visual recordings of the storybooks via platforms like YouTube to aid comprehension and pronunciation.
6. Incorporate social justice discussions: Integrate discussions on social justice issues present in the storybooks into rehearsals. Encourage students to analyse plot elements to identify social justice themes and explore characters' experiences with these social justice issues

and real-life parallels. Foster a safe and respectful environment for open dialogue and exploration.

7. Performance preparation: Guide students in preparing for their performance by reviewing their roles, refining their language use and acting skills, and ensuring a deep understanding of the story's themes and messages.
8. Public performance: Organize a public performance where students can showcase their dramatized versions of the storybooks to an audience, such as classmates, teachers, or parents.
9. Reflection and follow-Up: Encourage audience engagement and reflection following the performance to reinforce learning outcomes and encourage continued dialogue on social justice topics.

APPENDIX B

Sample reflection questions for the preservice teacher

Conceptual awareness

1. Did you know the term *social justice* before this project?
 - If yes, what did you know about it?
 - If no, what were your first ideas or opinions about it?
2. What social injustices do you see in the world? In your local environment? In Türkiye?
3. What reasons, do you think, are behind those social injustices and how can we overcome them?

Pedagogical exposure.

1. Have you ever studied/explored/discussed social justice issues while learning English as a second language?

The Social Justice in ELT project

1. Why did you participate in the Social Justice in ELT project?
2. How did you find the training provided during the webinars and feedback sessions?

Your own social responsibility project

1. Did you experience any challenges or difficulties before, during and after your project?
2. What do you think about the contributions of your own social responsibility project for the larger goal of achieving social justice?
3. What challenges and/or problems can teachers face when using such activities/projects in their classrooms?
4. What can be done to overcome these challenges and/or problems?

Future directions

1. Do you think you will be able to integrate social justice issues into your language classrooms in the future?
2. What challenges and/or problems might arise and what can be done to overcome these?

APPENDIX C

Sample interview questions for students

1. Why did you participate in this project?
2. What challenges/problems did you encounter during this project? How did you overcome these challenges/problems?
3. In what ways has this project contributed to you as a language learner?
4. How did your family and friends react to your participation in this project at first? How were their reactions at the end of the project?
5. Would you consider participating in such projects in the future?

APPENDIX D

Sample qualitative coding for data analysis

Interview question for students:

In what ways has this project contributed?

- In what ways did this project affect your English language learning?
- In what ways did this project contribute to your perspectives on social justice?

Theme	Researcher A	Researcher B	Final codes after negotiation
Benefits of dramatizing children's literature	<p><i>Code I:</i> Development of English language competence</p> <p><i>Meaning units:</i> Improving reading skills, developing speaking skills and pronunciation, showing how English can be used beyond four walls</p> <p><i>Code II:</i> Raising awareness on social justice</p> <p><i>Meaning units:</i> Changing opinions, challenging gender stereotypes (e.g., associations between genders and toys), empowering women, fostering gender equality</p>	<p><i>Code I:</i> Improving English language skills</p> <p><i>Meaning units:</i> Memorizing new words, learning correct pronunciation, learning new words, receiving feedback on pronunciation, contextualizing language use</p> <p><i>Code II:</i> Promoting social justice awareness</p> <p><i>Meaning units:</i> Questioning gender stereotypes, disrupting traditional gender-toy associations (e.g., boys play with cars and girls play with dolls), transforming opinions</p>	<p><i>Code I:</i> Developing English language competence</p> <p><i>Meaning units:</i> Improving pronunciation and speaking skills (fluency), developing vocabulary knowledge, contextualizing language use</p> <p><i>Code II:</i> Promoting social justice awareness</p> <p><i>Meaning units:</i> Challenging gender stereotypes (e.g., the association between genders and toys), empowering women, fostering gender equality, transforming opinions</p>

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