

Four good reasons to use literature in primary school ELT

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The teaching of English as a foreign language in primary schools is gaining popularity throughout the world. Many countries are also using English in the upper grades as the vehicular language for all or part of the general curriculum. It is therefore important to identify the types of materials that best prepare pupils for academic work in L2. The traditional structurally-based texts and the newer, integrated, communicative courses might not be sufficient for the demands of the academic classes. On the other hand, a syllabus that is based, or that draws heavily on authentic children's stories, provides a motivating medium for language learning while fostering the development of the thinking skills that are needed for L2 academic literacy. Literature can also act as a powerful change agent by developing pupils' intercultural awareness while at the same time nurturing empathy, a tolerance for diversity, and emotional intelligence. This is an important consideration at a time when our world is becoming smaller, yet increasingly hostile.

Introduction

The practice of teaching foreign languages, especially English, in the primary school is not a new phenomenon. Several European countries have taught foreign languages in the primary grades for many years, while others are experimenting with the concept. English is also the instructional language in many countries¹, and we can expect this use of English to spread as access to the electronic communications network becomes available to ever-widening circles of learners. The question now is whether materials development has kept up with the changes in the goals of language instruction. While the traditional, carefully structured materials might be appropriate in cases where the aim is to provide exposure and enrichment, they may not be the best choice where the goal is to prepare children for English-medium instruction in the general curriculum. Traditional ELT materials may fail to provide adequate support for development of L2 academic literacy. Carefully selected children's literature, however, offers an alternative, motivating medium for foreign language acquisition. Children's literature is defined here narrowly as fiction written for children to read for pleasure, rather than for didactic purposes. This definition excludes 'basal readers', or 'reading scheme' books, which are developed around controlled vocabulary.

Children's literature is no stranger in North American or Australian ESL classes, where for many years literary circles and a rich variety of

reading response activities have been used to foster first and second language development. I will argue here that the use of children's fiction also has a number of justifications in primary school EFL instruction, particularly in those contexts where academic language proficiency is the goal.

The sustained human interest in a story over centuries, even millennia, is clear from the rich evidence of the epics, myths, legends, and folk tales that have thrilled, inspired, and entertained people since the times of Gilgamesh. I suggest authentic children's literature as an alternative to the traditional bottom-up approach to EFL, and offer four good reasons for using authentic literature in the primary school EFL class.

- First, authentic literature provides a motivating, meaningful context for language learning, since children are naturally drawn to stories.
- Second, literature can contribute to language learning. It presents natural language, language at its finest, and can thus foster vocabulary development in context. As Collie and Slater (1987) have pointed out, it stimulates oral language and involves the child with the text; it also provides an excellent medium for a top-down approach to language teaching.
- Third, literature can promote academic literacy and thinking skills, and prepare children for the English-medium instruction.
- Fourth, literature can function as a change agent: good literature deals with some aspects of the human condition, and can thus contribute to the emotional development of the child, and foster positive interpersonal and intercultural attitudes.

1 Motivation

First, children's fiction, with its primarily narrative form, responds to the universal human need for narrative (Hardy 1978). Story, which should be central to a first language program, is therefore equally justified in an EFL program.

Bruno Bettelheim (1986: 4) recognized the significance which reading material has for the developing child, and for the way the child learns to understand the world and him/herself. If reading material is 'so shallow in substance that little of significance can be gained', the act of reading 'becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one's life'. Although Bettelheim's remarks do not refer to L2 learners, one can easily draw an analogy between L1 reading material and the language used in an L2 class. One need only substitute the word 'language' for 'reading' in Bettelheim's statement to understand its significance in ELT instruction. Exton and O'Rourke (1993: 27–8) express a similar concern in an ESL context: reading and language activities generated by the typical basal reader texts fail to offer readers any satisfaction, and may actually foster a notion that 'reading and perhaps language in general involves the expenditure of effort upon texts that give back neither pleasure nor information in return'. In the ELT class, there is the added danger that the learners will see the new language in this light.

Machura (1995) presents a delightful anecdotal description of her experience with children's literature in Hungary. Her 'advanced

12 year-olds' enthusiastically worked through *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (a picture storybook for young children, by Eric Carle). The same story kept a kindergarten EFL class of 4 year-olds in Lebanon intensely occupied for four weeks (Ghosn 1997). The appeal of this story to such a large age span demonstrates the power of a skillfully constructed narrative represented through language that is both rich and predictable in its repetitious features. The superb illustrations undoubtedly add to the appeal as they not only clarify and extend the language but provide a visually aesthetic experience as well. (See Figure 1 on what to keep in mind when selecting stories.)

Theme

Universal themes; children everywhere can identify with fear, courage, hope, love, belonging, and the need to achieve. Universal themes are generative, allowing for a variety of spin-off activities.

Storyline

Clear, uncomplicated story-line with a satisfying, unmelodramatic conclusion. No flashbacks or complex, multifaceted characters for beginning learners.

Important: The storyline should appeal to the adult reader; a high quality children's story which allows for a variety of interpretations and is thus enjoyable to various age groups.

Language

A certain amount of amusing and predictable repetition, especially for beginning learners. Repeated grammatical structures and formulaic expressions that are made clear in the story context. Use of vocabulary that provides synonyms and alternative expressions.

Illustrations

Aesthetically pleasing illustrations that help to clarify the text; good illustrations provide opportunities for discussions in which the key vocabulary can be exploited.

FIGURE 1
Criteria for selecting
stories

2 Language learning

Judging from scores of books and articles in professional journals, children's literature has found a permanent place in many ESL classrooms. That is easy to understand, bearing in mind that literature is not only interesting to children, but also facilitates integration of the language skills. It can also offer predictable yet natural language which promotes word recognition, as well as opportunities for authentic reading and writing tasks, and it is not grammatically sequenced. All of these features are in line with the natural language acquisition theory.

Margaret Meek (1995: 6) makes an excellent point in noting that 'Stories teach children the verb tenses of the past and the future when they are intensely preoccupied with the present'. Yet most primary-level EFL texts have overlooked this potential and keep to the simple present, which is unnatural, especially since children's lives are largely organized around the narrative. David Crystal (1987) also strongly argues against this emphasis on simple present tense—a form of communication he sees as unnatural, except in a sports commentary. It seems to me that stories, with their often familiar 'story grammars', provide an ideal context for verb tense acquisition. Literature may also help L2 learners to internalize the new language by providing access to a rich variety of linguistic items and a context for their communication efforts. Literature, therefore,

seems to offer a medium that can create an acquisition-rich environment in the classroom context.

Literature is full of examples of real-life language in different situations, as Hill (1986) has pointed out, and offers a variety of models for communication. However, traditional EFL course books have been criticized as being 'stiff imitations of the dynamic spontaneity of real life', their characters as 'nice, decent, and characterless', and the situations 'generally unreal and dull' (Crystal 1987: 15). More recently, some interesting series for EFL classes have appeared on the market, but by and large, EFL course texts tend to be highly structured, albeit communicatively oriented and colorful.

Another significant point in favor of literature, as Bassnett and Grundy (1993: 7) have pointed out, is that

literature is a high point of language usage; arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language.

We should be careful not to retain the young EFL learners at the 'utilitarian' level of basic dialogues about mundane daily activities, or have them endlessly limited to the present tense. Yet that is still a common approach in many ELT texts, including even the newer ones. Part of the reason for this, of course, can be attributed to the constraints imposed by publishers seeking to reach the widest possible market for their materials.

It also seems to me that through the medium of literature we can provide young EFL learners with language experiences that will not only motivate and foster oral language, but also deepen their awareness of the target language in its written form. For example, the study of the writer's craft in quality stories can raise students' awareness of what language can do, and provide models for their own writing. Seven and eight-year old L2 learners (and some even younger ones) can examine the effect that amusing repetitious phrases or onomatopoeia have on their reading pleasure. They can then create their own similar texts, for example, by dictating to the teacher. (See Appendix 1 for a sample lesson sequence.) Ten to twelve-year olds will enjoy analyzing the vocabulary or grammar in the context of a captivating story or poem in order to make sense of the author's meaning.² In contrast, traditional EFL materials offer few such opportunities, and limited models for writing.

The excitement created by a good story is also likely to generate much more 'pupil talk' than the often rather artificial language texts. This sort of enthusiastic talk will also result in more opportunities for receiving feedback and for negotiating meaning, both of which are associated with L2 learning. (See Appendix 2 for sample titles with their potential language features to be exploited.)

3 Academic literacy³

The teaching of subject matter through the medium of a second language has become a fact in many countries, but for different reasons. EFL learners who are expected to study some or all of the academic

content in English will need to develop more than interpersonal communication skills and basic reading comprehension.

Krashen (1997: 21) has pointed out that ‘To become good readers in the second language children need to read in the primary language.’ However, studies cited by Krashen have shown that children in less developed countries are at a disadvantage compared to children in developed countries in terms of access to print and books. Thus, these already disadvantaged children may have little, if any, opportunity to read for pleasure in their first language. Moreover, the transmission-oriented, rote-learning approach to instruction still prevailing in many countries (despite everything that we know about learning) does not foster the sort of cognitive language development in L1 that might transfer to L2. Consequently, children may be ill-prepared for the L2 academic literacy required for success in the general curriculum, and so drop out of school early, especially where no compulsory education exists. The EFL program can help bridge the gap in the developing countries through a syllabus that includes a rich selection of authentic, high quality children’s literature in English, complemented with spin-off language development activities. Ideally, some of the literature will feature content familiar to the learners, thus making the new language easier to learn.

Academic literacy also requires critical thinking skills, and literature offers a natural medium through which students can be introduced to the type of thinking and reasoning expected in academic classes. These include looking for main points and supporting details; comparing and contrasting; looking for cause–effect relationships; evaluating evidence, and becoming familiar with the type of language needed to express the thinking. Also, good literature is often highly generative, allowing the teacher to expand the themes while making use of the new language in different contexts, and accommodating to student needs and interests. (See Appendix 2 for sample themes in popular titles.)

4 Literature as a change agent

Another compelling reason for using literature in a language class is the potential power of good literature to transform, to change attitudes, and to help eradicate prejudice while fostering empathy, tolerance, and an awareness of global problems. The power of literature in developing empathy and tolerance is well documented in research on multicultural literature and peace education, but so far the opportunities for communicating these sorts of socially beneficial themes have not been exploited in EFL programs. However, the fact remains that EFL learners around the world could become bridge-builders across cultures.

Literature, as Bettelheim (1986) has pointed out, can promote a gradual development of the understanding of self and the world. With this comes insight into the behaviors and feelings of others that is necessary for empathy, tolerance, and conflict resolution. Children’s stories present conflict in ways that are easy for young readers to identify with, and that enable them to empathize with characters experiencing conflicts and difficulties. Discussions about story conflict can also provide young readers with an opportunity to discover their own solutions, thus

developing the skills and insights they will need when dealing with conflict themselves (Schomberg 1993).

Multicultural literature has become a staple in ESL classes, and a rich variety exists of folk tales and ethnic-interest stories, suitable especially for the North American context. However, if children learning a foreign language are to gain insight into the target language culture, they should read high quality contemporary fiction which shows the characters in contexts that accurately reflect the culture of the English-speaking world today. When selecting folk tales, for instance, one should exercise caution and look for stories that mirror the prevailing cultural values and traditions of a people, and avoid stories that portray outdated customs and beliefs that may leave the young reader with impressions of 'funny', 'weird', or even 'dumb'.⁴

Finally, quality literature can be used to provide vicarious experiences that foster the development of emotional intelligence defined by Goleman (1995), which is essential for empathy and tolerance. Emotional intelligence is the understanding of feelings, both one's own and those of others, and the ability to use that knowledge in making decisions in life. It is also the ability to maintain an optimistic outlook in the face of difficulties. According to Goleman, emotional intelligence is learnt through experience, and interaction with others. He argues that in childhood, brain circuits are shaped by repeated emotional lessons. Empathy, for example, can become a life-long skill through appropriate learning experiences. Child development and the psychology of learning research has shown that vicarious experiences can also promote learning. High quality literature, too, seems to have the potential to provide, albeit at one remove, the much-needed experiences that will promote emotional intelligence. It can help the child to understand self and others better; it demonstrates that there is always hope, and that one can overcome even seemingly insurmountable obstacles; it can foster development of empathy and tolerance. In the developing countries, where high quality L1 literature may not be available or easily accessible to all children, the EFL program can provide the much needed literary experiences which can be related to the learners' own life experience and reality.

In the increasingly global world, language skills, intercultural awareness, and emotional intelligence are high priorities, especially in our struggle to create a more just and peaceful world. I have suggested that children's literature can provide a motivating medium through which these needs can be addressed in the EFL class. While literature can easily be used to supplement traditional ELT materials, it is also possible to structure an entire course for young learners around carefully selected stories and appropriate follow-up activities.

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Notes

- 1 Lebanon, for example, has implemented this practice since the 1940s.
- 2 An example of a 'different' grammar lesson can be found in Irma Ghosn (1997) *Grammar with*

Lewis Carroll? Modern English Teacher 6/4: 10–20.

- 3 Academic literacy here refers to the academic reading, writing, and thinking skills required for success in the general curriculum.

- 4 A typical example of this can be found in *Giant's Bride*, by Anita Stern (1994) in *World Folktales*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook.

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Appendix 1

Sample lesson sequence for *The Doorbell Rang* (Hutchins 1986)

Intended Audience

8–10 years old; beginner–high beginner

Activating prior knowledge

Examine the title and cover art; invite students to predict what the story will be about.

Introducing new language

While examining the cover art, introduce some of the vocabulary of the context (kitchen; at the table; on the table, etc.).

Read the story using the 'dialogue approach' where you stop to elaborate on the illustrations and text, providing more input and clarification; ask students for predictions before the repetitious refrains.

Invite choral reading.

Checking for understanding

Ask multi-level questions about the illustrations ('Is this grandma?' 'What is there on the table?' 'What do you think they will do?').

Depending on their age, invite students to re-tell the story using picture cards, flannel board, etc.

Have students complete cloze exercises.

Guided practice

Discuss the storyline, relating it to students' own experiences.

Volunteers dramatize the story.

Students dictate the story (or a summary of it) while you write their dictation on the board; use the opportunity to draw attention to key language.

Review the dictated story; invite students to make changes and corrections to create an opportunity to teach revising, editing, and proofreading.

Use the student-generated text for practice activities: jumbled sentences; cloze exercises; addition of adjectives/adverbs; change of verb tense, etc.

Independent practice

Encourage students to examine the author's way of making the story interesting, and invite them to write their own stories based on the pattern of the original.

Use the student-generated stories as reading and language review material.

Appendix 2 – Titles that have proved successful in the classroom

Author	Title/ Publisher	Age/proficiency	Themes	Potential language features to be exploited
Babbit, Natalie	<i>The Something in Walker</i> , Michael, ESL Addison-Wesley, 1989	10–12 intermediate	overcoming fear; similarities despite differences	prepositional phrases; change in point of view
Carle, Eric	<i>The Grouchy Ladybug</i> Harper Collins, 1977	6–10 beginner	co-operation; sharing	animal vocabulary; past tense of 'say' and 'fly'; formulaic expressions using 'Do you want to ..?'
Ghosn, Irma	<i>The Slow Little Snail</i> Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, 1999	8–10 beginner	empathy; tolerance for differences; animals	animal vocabulary; formulaic expressions; past tense of 'ask'; synonyms for 'answer'
Hutchins, Pat	<i>Rosie's Walk</i> Penguin, Puffin Books, 1968	6–8 beginner	barnyard animals	prepositions
Hutchins, Pat	<i>The Doorbell Rang</i> Scholastic, 1986	8–10 beginner high beginner	sharing; math	family vocabulary; past tense of 'say' and 'ring'; amusingly predictable repetition of phrases; 'as good as' / 'like'
Slobodkina, Esphyr	<i>Caps for Sale</i> Harper Trophy, 1987 (original 1940)	8–10 beginner high beginner	problem solving	Past tense of 'look', 'shake'; color words (excellent for TPR!)
Viorst, Judith	<i>Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day</i> Aladdin Books, Macmillan, 1972	8–12 high beginner	disappointment; empathy	1st person narrative; simple past tense; repetitious, predictable refrain; 'It was going to be.'; synonyms for 'bad'
Zolotov, Charlotte	<i>William's Doll</i> Harper, 1972	8–12 intermediate	dreams and desires; tolerance for diversity; (stereotyping)	simple past tense of several verbs; 'would'

For ideas on how to generate language activities from any story while respecting the story as such and not 'picking it apart', see **Ghosn, Irma**. 1999. *Caring Kids: Social responsibility through Literature. Teacher's Guide*. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin.