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AUTHENTIC CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE – INSIGHTS FROM TRANSCARPATHTA

АВТЕНТИЧНА ДИТЯЧА ЛІТЕРАТУРА У ВИКЛАДАННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЯК ІНОЗЕМНОЇ – СПОСТЕРЕЖЕННЯ ІЗ ЗАКАРПАТТЯ

Nad-Kolozhvari E.A.,

orcid.org/0000-0003-1844-8674

Senior lecturer at the Department of Philology (English language)

College of Higher Education of Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian

Since the beginning of formal foreign language teaching, literature has always played an important role. Currently, modern language teaching trends suggest starting as early as possible; thus, the use of children's literature in foreign language teaching is undergoing a revolution. This situation encouraged us to examine the use of children's literature and the attitude of foreign language teachers to it.

One of the main ideas of using authentic materials, authentic storybooks – the original English texts – in the classroom is to “expose” the learner to as much real language as possible. The learner is exposed to real discourse and not the artificial language of course textbooks, which tend not to contain any incidental or improper examples. Extracting real information from a real text in a new or different language can be extremely motivating, therefore increasing students' motivation for learning by exposing them to ‘real’ language. Authentic texts can be motivating because they prove that the language is used for real-purposes by common people.

This article focuses on primary and secondary school English language teachers in a western county of Ukraine (N=118). The results of the qualitative research revealed that the teachers' general attitude to the use of children's literature is positive; they are aware of their advantages, but they practice avoidance. The majority of teachers do not apply children's literature in their foreign language teaching because the school curriculum is too congested and fast-paced; they do not have access to appropriate authentic children's literature; and they were not taught how to utilize authentic children's literature during their university years. Results suggest that teachers should be encouraged to use children's literature. Of course, the first solution is for schools themselves to support teachers, but it would be a significant step forward if this approach were also to be taken in in-service training.

Key words: authentic, children's literature, English language, foreign language, Transcarpathia.

Література була та є важливою складовою викладання іноземної мови з самого початку. Однак використання дитячих книжок під час навчання іноземних мов змінюється через сучасні тенденції у викладанні мов, які закликають починати вивчення іноземної мови якомога раніше. Ця обставина спонукала мене дослідити, як саме дитяча література використовується у навчанні і як до цього ставляться вчителі іноземних мов.

Однією з ключових цілей використання автентичних матеріалів у класі, таких як автентичні збірники оповідань (оригінальні англійські тексти), є «змусити» учня якомога більше контактувати з реальною мовою. Замість штучної мови підручників, які часто не містять випадкових чи недоречних прикладів, учень знайомиться зі справжньою мовою. Ознайомлюючи учнів із «справжньою» мовою, вчителі можуть посилити бажання своїх учнів навчатися, допомагаючи їм отримувати справжню інформацію з автентичних текстів новою, іншою мовою. Крім того, автентична література може надихати, оскільки вона демонструє, як використовують цю мову реальні люди.

Дана стаття зосереджена на вчителях англійської мови початкової та середньої освіти (N=118) у західноукраїнській області. У ній досліджується використання ними дитячої літератури під час викладання англійської мови та їхнє ставлення до неї. Результати якісного дослідження показали, що вчителі загалом добре ставляться до використання дитячої літератури; вони знають про її переваги, але уникають її використання. Через переповненість та поспіх шкільної програми, відсутність відповідної автентичної дитячої літератури та відсутність інструкцій щодо її використання в університетські роки більшість викладачів не включає дитячу літературу у процес викладання іноземних мов. Результати свідчать про те, що заохочувати вчителів користуватися дитячими книжками є хорошою ідеєю. Очевидно, що школи повинні допомагати вчителям, але було б великим кроком вперед, якби освіту, засновану на розповідях, оповіданнях, ширше поширювали та пропагували серед практикуючих вчителів.

Ключові слова: автентична, дитяча література, англійська мова, іноземна мова, Закарпаття.

Introduction. The given paper deals with the role of children's literature (CHL) in teaching English as a foreign language in Transcarpathia, Ukraine. According to the New Ukrainian School concept, general secondary foreign language teaching aims to develop foreign language communication competence in direct and indirect intercultural communication, ensuring the development of other key competencies and meeting the child's various needs. This programme sets out the main tasks and objectives of foreign language teaching and it places great emphasis on listening comprehension of the content of authentic texts and reading comprehension of authentic texts of different types and genres [1]. Therefore, it is self-evident that foreign language authentic children's literature has an essential place in the educational process.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The importance of utilising CHL, stories, and the storytelling technique has long been recognised on a global scale [3; 7; 16; 23]. They are part of the teaching culture because children appreciate stories by nature. Children can be highly motivated by authentic storybooks because they feel a strong sense of accomplishment after working with a real English book [7].

In the field of literature, several definitions of CHL can be found. Throughout this paper, the term given by [3, p. 1] is used: "Children's literature as a term is generally used to cover all literature for children and adolescents, including oral literature, reflecting the eclectic interests of children." We focus on English language literary texts that were not published for teaching purposes or any educational context primarily aimed for children.

An extensive body of scientific literature deals with the role of children's literature in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) or second language (ESL) [2; 3; 5; 7; 13; 16; 18; 23].

A thorough review of the literature indicates that a variety of approaches and viewpoints have been used to study and analyse the advantages of CHL in language instruction. One possible approach is extensive or free reading, an exciting and highly efficient way of language learning [11; 12; 15]. Secondly, research suggests that encouraging reading motivation and enjoyment can ignite interest in reading in a foreign language, which may have a favourable effect on the other factors that affect reading and related skills [7; 8; 9; 10; 20; 22; 23]. Thirdly, several studies have found that CHL helps develop visual literacy and language learning competence [5; 6; 17]. Fourthly, as Bland [3] suggested, content-based EFL classrooms are becoming more widespread. Theoretical studies have found an important link between reading fic-

tion in a foreign language and acquiring intercultural communication skills [10]. CHL can develop International Communicative Competence (ICC), increase intercultural awareness, and boost positive images of the other, building an awareness of cultural diversity within children's immediate worlds [21].

Setting objectives

The current study focuses on the use of CHL in Transcarpathian schools. The given research poses two main tasks:

1) To explore if teachers apply foreign language authentic children's literature when teaching EFL in Transcarpathia.

2) To investigate the attitude of EFL teachers to the use of children's literature.

To collect data, a self-administered questionnaire was developed. The first part of the questionnaire poses questions about the teachers' teaching experience and general circumstances at the school where they teach. The second part of the instrument deals with the application of children's literature in the FLT process. The last part of the questionnaire gathered information about the teacher's personal data. Before collecting data, a pilot test was conducted.

The study participants are the English teachers working in Transcarpathian schools with Hungarian language of instruction. The researcher managed to contact 98 schools personally and hand-delivered 154 questionnaires. To process the data SPSS v22 statistical program and Microsoft Excel were used.

Results. Altogether 118 secondary school teachers took part in the survey: 109 (92%) females and 9 (8%) males. 26% of the teachers are in their twenties, while most are in their thirties (51%). In addition, 14% of the teachers are between 41 and 50, and 9% of them are older than fifty years.

The participants had a variety of teaching backgrounds, from one year to approximately 40 years. Additionally, there are between 1 and 5 English teachers per school; nevertheless, there are typically 2 English teachers per school (45 schools). There is a considerable variation in the number of pupils per class. In some cases, the number of pupils is as low as 3, while in two schools, the number of pupils reaches 33 in one class.

One of the most important questions sought to determine whether teachers preferred other teaching methods over using textbooks in their classes. It was discovered that some teachers utilise no textbooks at all and instead favour alternative approaches. Almost 13% of the teachers of Year 1 pupils do not use a textbook while teaching English. In an open-ended question, we tried to reveal the reasons for avoiding textbook use. The answers can be summarised as follows. According to the teachers, the available

textbooks are a) boring; b) not authentic, c) too difficult, d) not age-appropriate for the pupils, e) do not contain sufficient exercises for practice. The audio material is g) not authentic; h) not available. Additionally, there are situations when the textbook is just not available at the school and the parents' financial situation prevents them from purchasing it.

One of the survey's questions also asked teachers to describe their impressions of their students' attitudes regarding the textbooks they use in class. 5% of teachers think that their students enjoy textbooks very much, compared to 59% who believe that students only enjoy them. However, 24% of teachers claim that kids do not like and find textbooks uninteresting. While 6% of teachers indicated they were unable to respond, another 6% said they had alternate ideas. Based on the teachers' answers, more than a quarter of students dislike the textbooks they have to learn from. Four language teachers also cited the lack of audio material as a growing issue. It is not entirely accurate, as there is available audio content for the textbooks, but it is unlikely that everyone can access it.

The research also tried to find out which textbooks are most commonly utilised by teachers. It was found that the vast majority of teachers use books published in Ukraine, with only a small number of foreign publications being used in different grades. For example, most teachers apply books by Alla Nesvit and Oksana Karpiuk, while foreign monolingual publications include Solutions and Headway 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press), New Opportunities (Longman).

It was crucial to learn what tools teachers use to teach English during the research. According to the teachers' responses, worksheets downloaded from the Internet were the most widely used teaching aid, while 10% of them did not use any at all. The same is true for audio materials: 89% of language teachers utilise them, yet in this study, 4% of teachers reported not having access to them, and 9 teachers (7.6%) never use them. The results are summarised in the following diagram (Figure 1).

The usage of authentic children's literature is one of the most pertinent to the research questions. Authentic storybooks only come in at number 10 when rating educational tools according to frequency. Only 28.8% of teachers use them in their lessons, 51.7% do not use them at all, and 19.5% would use them if they had access to them. The availability of CHL is a critical issue. Choosing texts carefully is essential while teaching EFL in primary and secondary education. Unfortunately, few schoolchildren in Transcarpathia have access to authentic foreign-language literature at home or even in the classroom. It is partially a result of the Transcarpathian people's low socioeconomic status and, on the other side, of the difficulty finding foreign language books, even in bookstores.

Our findings imply that some teachers may be reluctant to incorporate children's books into their foreign language instruction. There are two reasons why this can be the case: first, the study of children's literature is not included in the university courses that prepare teachers in literature; second, the methodological foundation for this is not covered in a separate course.

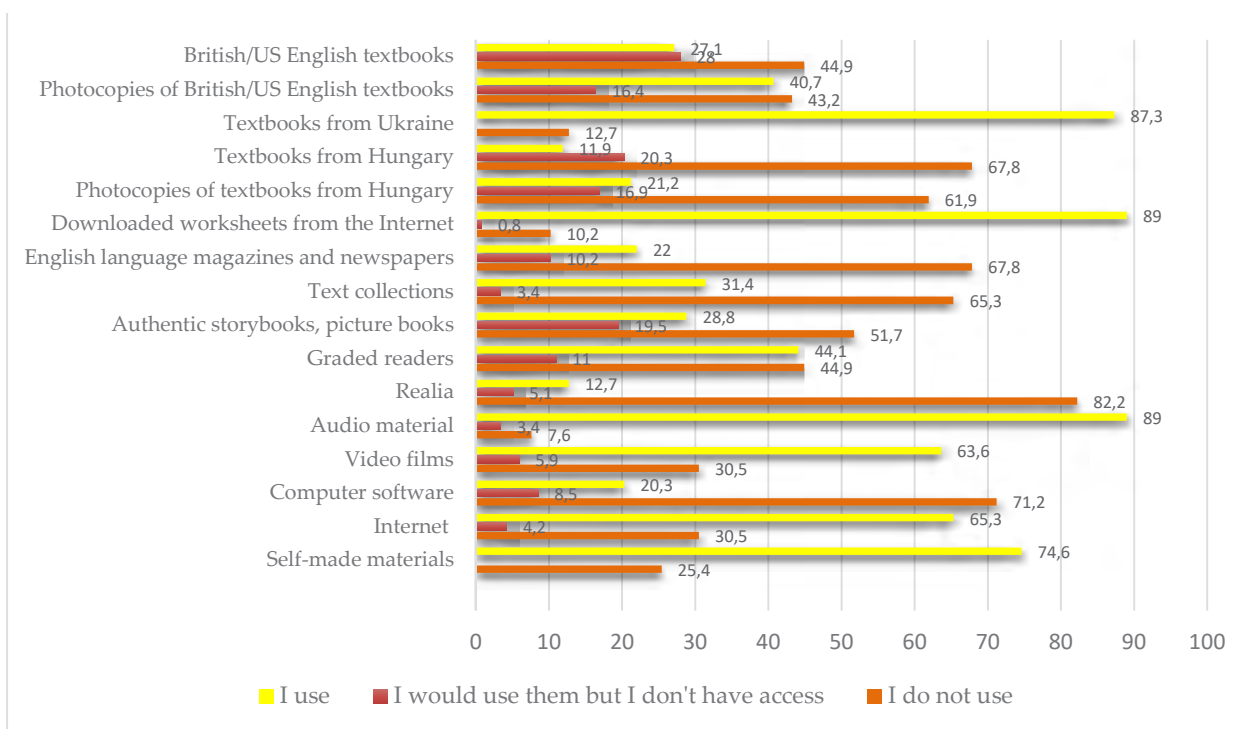


Figure 1. Percentage of teachers using different teaching aids

The use – or rather, non-use – of realia is another intriguing feature worth addressing. 82.2% of respondents openly admit that they do not include realia into the teaching process. In foreign language teaching, realia are real-life things that are used in the classroom to illustrate and teach vocabulary or to help pupils learn and produce. All this suggests that the result is regrettable and that teachers should be encouraged to use realia in the classroom.

The questionnaire included a separate open-ended question asking teachers directly whether they apply short stories and fairy tales in English lessons. The narrative responses to this question regarding the use of CHL were analysed using an open coding technique. 65% of the teachers use CHL in the English lessons, however, an overwhelming number of them emphasized that they apply it quite rarely.

Three teachers emphasised that they only use stories and tales found in the textbooks while two teachers also indicated that they only utilise CHL as summer or home reading assignments. A total of 33 respondents (28%) indicated that they do not use CHL in their lesson plans, while 8 teachers opted not to comment. Some notable justifications and observations have also been made by those who do not utilise children's literature. Five respondents expressed frustration with a lack of time, and the same number complained about overly hectic school schedules. This strategy is really helpful to one teacher, but she only applies it to individual lessons.

To explore the reasons why some teachers avoid stories in the teaching process, a multi-item Likert scale was designed. To check if the items measure the same target area, in other words, to measure the internal consistency reliability, the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was figured. The calculations confirmed the internal consistency of the 11-item scale: Cronbach Alpha=.993.

By highlighting only the most essential findings, it is obvious that most English teachers do not employ authentic stories in their classes due to the overburdening of the curriculum and the pressures of the school schedule. Around a third of teachers (32%) partly agree, and another third (32%) totally agree that they do not have access to colourful English storybooks. One of the pillars of this approach is the accessibility of a wide variety of storybooks. It should be feasible for teachers to choose books that are appropriate for the students' interests, age, and language proficiency from among a sufficient number that are available. It is crucial to choose literary texts that are accessible to pupils and have an interesting theme.

We also wanted to know how frequently educators use stories in their classrooms. Only two

teachers said they employ stories in every lesson, 21 (18%) teachers use stories once or twice a week, while 58 teachers (49%) apply stories once or twice a month. 32 (27%) teachers indicated that they never use stories and tales in English lessons. Five teachers pointed out that they do apply stories, but only very rarely. The same question was also examined from the perspective of authentic texts. The results only slightly differ from the above.

Discussion

In this paper, we have presented the most critical issues of our questionnaire on the use of CHL in teaching English as a foreign language. In conclusion, we would like to summarize the results.

EFL teachers do use CHL in the teaching process in Transcarpathia; however, they have to face some problems as well. The vast majority of teachers utilize children's literature and authentic texts in English classes once or twice a month; however, the way they are used does not always follow international methodological guidelines.

The general attitude of the teachers is positive; however, there are some sceptical and pessimistic teachers as well. They do consider the utilization of CHL necessary, and there are around ten teachers who think that CHL would be too difficult or beyond the children's abilities. They do not believe they are not flexible enough to use authentic tales, and they absolutely do not consider that children would dislike these stories. There were only two teachers who had already tried the use of CHL, but it did not work for them.

Based on the findings, the following implications for teachers can be summarised:

With the help of CHL, teachers can design interdisciplinary learning experiences for children that allow them to combine information, skills and inquiry methods from several topic areas. Teachers should be more open to modern pedagogical approaches and they should pay close attention to pupils' needs and interests;

The main pedagogical implications suggests that story-based education needs to be more widely disseminated and promoted among practising teachers; English teacher candidates should be encouraged to use CHL while at university; school management should support the purchase of foreign language CHL.

The open-ended answers revealed that some teachers struggle to envision using a storybook for up to 4-5 hours at first. Teachers must have a lot of enthusiasm, imagination, outstanding classroom management skills, and flexibility to use a story-based approach. That would result in professional and personal growth. However, kids often find it difficult to return to more traditional, explicitly written

EFL materials, which tend to stay at the bland and utilitarian level of basic dialogues and daily activities once they have applied children's books. Storybooks

address universal themes and provide opportunities for youngsters to experiment with ideas, feelings, and critical thinking.

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