



## The Role of Authentic Children's Literature in Primary EFL Teacher Training

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### Abstract

*This paper analyses the role of authentic children's literature in the training of prospective primary EFL teachers. The focus is not on children's literature as a teaching tool, despite its fundamental importance (Ghosn 2002, Linse 2007, Masoni 2017, 2018), but rather on the beneficial effects that an immersion in and critical awareness of authentic children's literature can have on trainee EFL teachers' sense of efficacy. On the basis of ongoing research in the setting of a university course in primary education, I argue that children's literature should play a major role in EFL teacher training programs, first of all because it grants access to the English language as used by, with and around children, and secondly because exposure to children's literature grants prospective teachers a knowledge of the culture and imagination of childhood embedded in the target language (Kramersch 2009). I argue that these and other factors can have important effects on trainee teachers' ability to experience a sense of authenticity when learning and teaching the FL, as well as on their future ability to communicate with children in meaningful ways. A reflection on how children's literature can help prepare EFL teachers calls for a reconsideration of the profile of the EFL teacher and of university EFL teacher training practices. Should we design teacher training courses that draw heavily on authentic children's literature, with a view to enabling prospective teachers to feel more confident in using the target language, even despite limited proficiency (at times)? Can this approach contribute to fostering creativity and independence in prospective teachers' future teaching practices? These and other questions will be discussed through findings from ongoing personal research.*

**Keywords:** *primary EFL teacher training, children's literature;*

### Introduction

There is a growing body of research on the benefits of using children's literature in the EFL primary classroom, as a motivating and emotionally conducive means to acquire natural language in context and develop intercultural competence [1, 5, 10, 11]. But children's literature acts in powerful ways also upon teachers, and in particular upon trainee teachers looking to become effective communicators and cultural mediators in a world where teaching a foreign language, especially English, means equipping children with the ability to look at the world through the eyes of the Other [7].

Children's literature should find a prominent role in teacher training, not just as a teaching tool that prospective teachers must learn to use in the classroom, but rather as a means of personal growth, which can help them develop critical language awareness and intercultural awareness, experience a sense of authenticity as learners and prospective teachers, and ultimately enhance the quality of their relationship with the target language and culture. I argue this also on the basis of research conducted by the author among students enrolled on a Primary Education degree in an Italian university, over six years of teaching a course and conducting workshops on the uses of storytelling and authentic children's literature in the EFL primary classroom. These students will teach English as well as other subjects, but do not specialize in FLT. At the beginning of each course, many students declared they would rather not teach a foreign language as they did not feel comfortable speaking it. The work on children's literature also stemmed from a need to help students find their voice in the FL.

### So, what do books do (for trainee teachers)?

Children's books are constantly updated sources of language in use. They display the language of children, the language used by adults to interact with children: they equip teachers with a knowledge of what children say, how children express emotions, how emotions are expressed around children, what emotion-laden words are used around children, what metaphors, what euphemisms. Books are full of daily language, common and recurrent phrases that form a sort of substratum of language native speakers take for granted. Most of these phrases realise speech acts that characterise everyday life: they tell us how people apologise or promise, for example, and with what words. This kind of language is often the most difficult to acquire for the FL learner who might be proficient in more



complex registers, but feel uneasy when having to react informally to what people say or do. Yet, this everyday language is the kind of language a primary EFL teacher needs to master in order to communicate with children. Books contain endless expressions such as “I won’t do it again”, “you poor thing”, “buckle your shoes”, “now it’s your turn to seek”, “lick it before it drips”, that represent recurring items of communication with children, the equivalents of which we would take for granted in our native code. Yet, as basic as they might seem, they are often formulaic in nature. Frequent usage often turns sentences into set expressions that can only be learned as they are and could not be put together by combining separate items of language according to grammar and syntax rules: indeed, for this reason, many of the ‘ordinary’ expressions we find in books would be classified as B2+ or even C1, thus beyond the linguistic level required of primary school teachers in many European countries. We do not learn this kind of language in the EFL classroom, and even the most proficient teachers sometimes lack the knowledge of these basic instances of spontaneous interaction with children. Books can fill this gap and hand teachers plain and real language they can readily use and which helps them utilize fundamental speech acts in the FL classroom.

Trainee teachers showed particular appreciation for these expressions which sounded like “real English language” and made them feel they were acquiring language that is truly spoken and currently in use. There is a sense of synchronicity and simultaneity in this language that gives students access not only to a **speech community** of English language users, but also to a “**discourse community**” comprising “the common ways in which members of a social group use language to meet their social needs”. Indeed the language of books reflects the target language culture: through authentic books we find out about “the topics [people] choose to talk about, the way they present information, the style with which they interact, in other words, their **discourse accent**” [6, p.6-8], as Kramsch refers to the different values and meanings people place on verbal interaction and often on the same words. For example, the ways adults speak to children in books mirror the social idea of how adults should relate to children and this in turn is shaped and reshaped by debates on child rearing, child education, etc...This is invaluable knowledge for prospective teachers wishing to communicate language as culture [4] and not just language plus items of culture.

Books also give prospective teachers access to another fundamental aspect of culture: the imagination [6]. Stories provide teachers with knowledge of the metaphors, dreams and imaginings that characterize the world of children and reflect the wider society in which they live. Through these images and metaphors the reader can gain a much deeper understanding of the culture of the target language speakers. This means taking up the perspective of the people who use that language every day.

## **Authentic Children’s Books in Teacher Training**

During a series of workshops on the uses of narratives in the primary classroom, students were provided with many titles, around thirty including books read in their entirety and extracts, so as to provide an immersion in children’s literature in the English language. The books were mostly modern or contemporary classics, ranging from *The Tiger who came to tea* by Judith Kerr, to *The Gruffalo* by Julia Donaldson. Students were also encouraged to bring other titles into the classroom and comment on them during the workshops.

During each meeting books were first of all read, translated, discussed and commented from a linguistic and cultural point of view. The students’ attention was drawn to language chunks, linguistic features such as rhymes and alliterations, repetition, narrative structures, especially those, such as cumulative tales, which are particularly popular in the English language narrative tradition. This was a way of raising language awareness and helping students reflect on language, a quality which many agree is fundamental [2,9,12] for future EFL teachers. Despite limited proficiency and occasional difficulties with the language (the students CEFR levels ranged from A2 to B1), students engaged very actively in this work of analysis and discussion, by asking questions and reasoning about language.

The ‘simplicity’ of the subject matter lowered affective filters and provided an “anxiety-free zone where foreign culture” and language could “be freely discussed and explored” [3]. From the point of view of language learning, students were surprised by the number of words and phrases they learnt through children’s books. In a questionnaire administered at the end of the workshops, 96% of the students felt they had learned new words from books, 98% declared they had learned new expressions, 100% agreed that picture books could be a source of learning also for them as learners. Indeed, as simple as their language can be, such books are also designed to expand children’s linguistic knowledge by exposing them to complex vocabulary, and for this reason they can be valuable learning sources also for adult learners.



Students were able to brush up on A1 structures and existing language knowledge in the context of stories, confirm knowledge, and clarify concepts and rules that they had not fully grasped up to then and did not know how to use, while also learning advanced B2+ and even C1 structures. Books provided safe ground for language revision and awareness, but also the right amount of challenge to make students feel they were advancing in their knowledge. Because they were naturally drawn towards this genre of literature, students were also willing to play with the language: many of them appreciated the possibility of experimenting with narrative structures, rhymes, metaphors, as shown by their creative writing productions.

The other important aspect that boosted their confidence was that from books they were able to draw language they could use in the classroom [12]: 99% declared they learned useful classroom language from books, and 92% agreed that stories will help them communicate with children, 100% said they will use picture books in class. They recognized the communicative potential of the language of books as a most valid help for their future practice and declared being more willing to teach English in the future.

## Conclusions

Working on language as culture within the domain of children's/childhood discourse allowed teachers to acquire language they felt was authentic and therefore made them feel a sense of authenticity when speaking it. Books were seen as a reliable and authoritative source of language, the validity of which could not be questioned. Delving into literature helped many of the students find a voice in the FL. The workshops spurred a habit for free reading in many students, a habit that is certainly most conducive to language learning [8]. They visited libraries and ordered texts online, and many declared they would continue to expand their personal libraries. From books teachers can continue to acquire language, keep abreast of the changes in children's culture and language use, and find classroom language. Evidence argues that trainee teachers, when undertaking critical work on children's literature in the target language, can experience a sense of authenticity and self-efficacy, spurring their motivation to learn and teach, as well as their ability to interact with children in meaningful ways.

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