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## POSITIVE ASPECTS OF USING LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* The purpose of this paper is to look at some of the issues and ways in which literature can be used in the classroom. A sample of 70 young learners (age 7 to 11) and 30 teachers were interviewed for this purpose. The survey contained open-ended questions and Likert's scale. The mix-method research was conducted in four primary schools in Jagodina, two primary schools in Ćuprija and one primary school in Paraćin. The obtained research data show that examined teachers use folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems very often in teaching English to young learners. The most used materials are the ones downloaded from the internet (the named reason was the lack of time to prepare their own materials), followed by the course book activities and then audio and video material. According to the teachers' view, the reasons why they usually use literature for children in TEYL are to motivate students to learn the target language, enrich the students' vocabulary and to enhance the overall English knowledge. Examined students noted that they like best rhymes and songs and that they like activities in which they dance along with the music. Also, they added that they prefer video material, cartoons and drawing and painting activities related to a certain literal text.

*Key words:* English language, young learners, literature for children, positive/negative aspects.

### INTRODUCTION

Literature was not that much used in the English as a foreign language classroom before 1980s. Since the 1980s this area has attracted more interest among EFL teachers. In order to answer the question what literature is referred to in the paper, we could turn to the Macmillan English Dictionary definition: "stories, poems, and plays, especially those that are considered to have value as art and not

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just entertainment” (Macmillan Publishers Ltd. 2003).

One of the explanations of literature says that literary texts are those that reflect different aspects of life, especially a social life. According to Mounfold (1993), literature represents cultural documents which offer a deeper understanding of a country or countries. Other researchers say that there is no expected quality to a literary text that makes a literary text, rather it is the interpretation that the reader gives to the text (Eagleton 2003). Therefore, this definition brings us back to the above definition in the sense that literature is only literature if it is considered as art.

According to Lang (2009), literature, reading and telling stories for children has an enormous value for children, parents and teachers. It is a very important part in child’s language, emotional, cognitive, personal and social development both in mother tongue acquisition and FLA. It motivates and teaches at the same time. It enhances different kinds of development, it transfers knowledge, values and trusts, and it supports and increases imagination and creativity.

Children love stories. We do not have to use some special way to motivate them to listen because they are always eager to listen to stories, know how stories work, want to understand what is happening and can enjoy hearing stories in English when they start English lessons (Slatterly, Willis 2001). Children enjoy listening to stories in their mother tongue and are familiar with narrative conventions. For example, as soon as they hear the formula “once upon a time...” they can make predictions about what to expect next. For this reason, storybooks can provide an ideal introduction to the foreign language as they present language in a repetitive and memorable context.

Definitions of children’s literature vary from one culture to another. In most western cultures, children’s literature is published in books containing prints and pictures. In other cultures focus is more on oral children’s literature such as songs, lullabies and folktales. Bainbridge and Gellner (2009) believe that children’s literature should include stories, information books, song books and poetry, all designed to appeal to children’s interests. There is the rich variety of genres of children’s literature: classical fairy tales and folktales, fables, contemporary retellings of fairy tales and fables, animal stories, rhyming stories, comics, everyday life or fantasy. For the purpose of this paper, further text will refer to stories, fairy tales, fables and poems (ibid.)

## WHY USE STORIES, FABLES, FAIRY TALES AND POEMS IN EFL CLASSROOM?

Ertan and Karakaş (2007) state that stories help young children to develop some specific concentration skills and some aspects of emotional intelligence,

such as empathy and relating to other people. Stories also provide a foundation for a wide range of activities which could be used in EFL classroom to develop English language, critical thinking skills, positive attitudes towards other cultures, or understanding of content from other related areas of the curriculum. As children increasingly develop their interest and ability to understand, repeat, act out and/or make their own stories in English, this also has a positive effect on their motivation, self-assurance and self-esteem.

Shin and Crandall (2014: 211) found that there are four reasons that make using literature in the classroom beneficial: it is an authentic form of communication; it introduces new cultures to children; it teaches young learners in an entertaining way; it helps develop critical thinking skills. They also state that "in many cultures, storytelling is also a tradition used to communicate culture from one generation to the next" (ibid.). Using literature in teaching English to young learners is advantageous because it develops the young learner's creative, communicative, emotional, cognitive and social skills. This could be explained by the idea that was pointed out by Lütge and Bland (2012). They say that readers read better, know more about literature, history, science, cultural differences, they gain better results in reading, writing, expand vocabulary, and improve spelling (ibid.). In this line, we may turn to Minardi (1994) and her studies that proved that the literature review indicated some advantages to using children's literature such as: enabling the development of language, increasing reading achievement and improving reading skills and strategies, enhancing writing skills and styles, encouraging higher-level thinking skills and abilities, enhancing the integration of the four language skills, motivating children to read and encouraging learner active participation in the class as well as involvement.

Shin and Crandall (2014: 213) state that "literature should be highly predictable, be familiar to the home culture, have a high percentage of known vocabulary, include repetitive and predictable patterns, it should provide opportunities to apply drama and Total Physical Response (TPR), use of visuals and realia to make input comprehensible". For this reason, teachers should choose a story having in mind the following aspects: take a story that will engage the children within the first few lines (note that children often accept and like a story in the foreign language they might feel was childish in their own language), select a story that is interesting to you as well, pick one you feel is appropriate for the children, choose a story that the children will understand well enough to enjoy, use a story which offers the children a rich experience of language, select a story which does not have long descriptive passages, pick one which is right for the occasion and in its relation with other content you are teaching to children, last but not least, choose a story which you feel you can tell well (Wright 2009: 11-12).

According to Clandfield (2017), there are many good reasons for using literature in the classroom. Here are a few: 1) Literature is authentic material. It is

good to expose learners to this source of unmodified language in the classroom because the skills they acquire in dealing with difficult or unknown language can be used outside the class; 2) Literature encourages interaction. Literary texts are often rich and possess multiple layers of meaning, and can be effectively extracted for discussions and sharing feelings or opinions; 3) Literature expands language awareness. Asking learners to examine sophisticated or nonstandard examples of language (which can occur in literary texts) make them more aware of the norms of language use (Widdowson 1975, quoted by Lazar 1993); 4) Literature educates the whole person. By examining values in literary texts, teachers encourage learners to develop attitudes towards them. These values and attitudes relate to the world outside the classroom; 5) Literature is motivating. Literature holds high status in many cultures and countries.

For this reason, students can feel a real sense of achievement at understanding a piece of highly respected literature. Also, literature is often more interesting than the texts found in course books.

## RESEARCH METHOD

A sample of 70 young learners (age 7 to 11) and 30 teachers were interviewed according to the questions given in the survey specially designed for this purpose. The survey contained open-ended questions and Likert's scale. The mix-method research was conducted in four primary schools in Jagodina, two primary schools in Čuprija and one primary school in Paraćin. The research with young learners was conducted in January 2017 while teachers completed questionnaires later, in February the same year. Before this research, piloting was conducted with ten young learners and three English teachers. After the piloting was done, it was evident that the questionnaire was valid and relevant for this research. The interview was designed to stimulate student's awareness of the various literature texts that could be used in learning English as a foreign language. Furthermore, the aim of interview questions was also to encourage students to think what kind of instruction they prefer when their teachers use poems, stories, fables and fairy tales in the language class. The teachers' questionnaires were anonymous and teachers were asked to complete it and to return it at their convenience.

Specifically, these were the research questions the author wanted to answer: 1) What are the possible ways of using literature for children in teaching English to young learners (TEYL)?; 2) What are the positive/negative aspects of using literature for children in TEYL – teachers' attitudes?; 3) What are the positive/negative aspects of using literature for children in TEYL – students' attitudes?

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers were asked to explain the positive aspects of using folk and/or author's story by answering the questions from a survey. Their answers are presented in the Table 1.

| Statement/Question  | Teachers answers (N=30)  |   |   |   |
|---|--|---|---|---|
| 1. How often do you use folk and/or author's stories, fairytales, fables and poems in TEYL within one month?                            | very often<br>11 (36.66%)  | often<br>8 (26.68%)                                       | rarely<br>5 (16.66%)                              | very rarely<br>6 (20%)                    |
| 2. I mostly use the following literature types  | rhymes<br>12 (40%)   | stories<br>9 (30%)  | fairy tales<br>5 (16.66%)                         | Fables and other types<br>4 (13.33%)      |
| 3. I mostly use the following material for teaching folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems to YL                   | already prepared activities taken from the internet              | activities from a course book                             | video and audio material                          | I create activities for my classes        |
| 4. When I prepare a class on which I use some of the literature types I use the following sources                                       | course book and teacher recommendations from it                  | internet resources  | methodological literature                         | I consult my colleagues                   |
| 5. The most significant reason to use mentioned types of literature in TEYL in my opinion is  | to motivate students to learn the target language<br>14 (46.66%) | to improve the overall knowledge of English<br>8 (26.68%) | enrich students' vocabulary of English<br>6 (20%) | practice all language skills<br>2 (6.66%) |
| 6. How would you describe students' motivation to learn English when using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems? | very motivated<br>12 (40%)                                       | usually motivated<br>8 (26.68%)                           | somewhat motivated<br>6 (20%)                     | not specially motivated<br>4 (13.33%)     |
| 7. In which grades do you usually use mentioned literature types?   | 4th grade  | 1st grade   | 2nd grade   | 3rd grade                                 |

Table 1. Ways of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems.

As we can notice from the Table 1, most questioned teachers (36.66%, N=11 out of 30) said that they use stories, fables, fairy tales and rhymes very often in TEYL, 26.68% of teachers (N=8) use these types often, while 5 teachers (16.66%) said that they use literature for children rarely or very rarely (20%). If we look

at the rank of the most used types of literature it goes on like this: mostly used are rhymes  $N=12$  (40%), then stories  $N=9$  (30%), followed by fairy tales  $N=5$  (16.66%), followed by fables and other types  $N=4$  (13.33%). This could be explained by the fact that in the first two grades teachers use activities with simple language, usually listening exercises with rhymes, simple stories with music in order to teach or revise vocabulary. Only later, according to teachers' belief, grammar exercises are priority.

Teachers stated that the most used material for the purpose of learning/teaching the target language is already prepared material such as the activities taken from the internet, activities from a course book, video and audio material and, lastly, prepared material by the teacher himself/herself. In line with the previously said teachers added that they mostly use the following sources: course book and teacher recommendations from it, internet resources, methodological literature, or they consult their colleagues and share the material. One of the reasons for this situation is the lack of time and motivation to prepare material on their own. Teachers explained this by saying that nobody rewards them for their additional effort in teaching so this was the reason why they usually choose the most accessible and easily reached materials.

Further, according to this survey, teachers believe that the most significant reason to use mentioned types of literature in TEYL in their opinion are these: to motivate students to learn the target language  $N=14$  (46.66%), to improve the overall knowledge of English  $N=8$  (26.68%), to enrich students' vocabulary of English  $N=6$  (20%) or to practice all language skills  $N=2$  (6.66%). In terms of motivation, teachers  $N=12$  (40%) think that students are very motivated to learn English when poems, songs, rhymes, stories or fables are used in the classroom, 8 teachers believe that students are usually motivated, 6 that they are somewhat motivated while only 4 teachers (13,33%) say that students are not specially motivated in this case. Therefore, we may say that teachers are aware that students are very motivated to learn English and to improve overall language skills, but they still admit that the lack of time for adequate preparation is the main reason why 20% of teachers use these literature types very rarely.

As stated in the Table 1, questioned teachers use these mentioned literature types mostly in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, then in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and very rarely in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Teachers explained this by saying that in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade students know the language very well and they can understand poems, stories, fairy tales and fables and they are also able to retell them as well. In the 1<sup>st</sup> grade students cannot read or write English, that is why listening activities are very much in demand, therefore rhymes and simple stories are often used. Colouring activities during listening tasks are very usual and these are practiced often according to teachers' answers. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, focus is on grammar content which is usually practiced and revised, so there is not much space for literature types.

Although there appears to be a general agreement that children's literature, particularly narrative, can contribute to children's social, cognitive and linguistic development, such writing as it is on the use of children's literature in the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language generally has little to say in specific terms about the problems that can be associated with using literature designed for first language speakers, or about the relationship between specific aspects of the selection and use of children's literature and issues related to the language curriculum. It is interesting to consider, at this point, some positive and negative aspects of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems in English as a foreign language classroom in the Serbian teaching context. Questioned teachers gave their answers and shed light to the most significant positive/negative aspects in this field. Teachers' answers are given in the Table 2.

| <b>Rank positive aspects of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems from the most valuable one towards less important ones – teachers' opinion.</b> |
|---|
| 1. Encouraging and motivating students to learn English language  |
| 2. Improving students' reading abilities and understanding of a text written in English   |
| 3. Integration of all language skills   |
| 4. Using the foreign language in a real life context, using authentically written texts   |
| 5. Learning cultural elements of English speaking countries   |

**Table 2.** Positive aspects of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems according to the teachers' opinion.

According to the rank in the Table 2, we may notice that teachers think that the most valuable aspect of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables, rhymes and poems in Serbian foreign language classroom is "encouraging and motivating students to learn English language" followed by "improving students' reading abilities and understanding of a text written in English". Teachers explained this by saying that famous stories and poems motivate and help learners come to grips with difficult grammatical forms. Learners are more motivated to listen and practice grammar if the text is familiar or if it is about their favourite character. Then, teachers outlined as the third important aspect – integration of all language skills. Practicing all language skills is a lot easier when the teacher has appropriate materials and when the language is used in the context. The next one goes along with the previous aspect and it is "using the foreign language in a real life context, using authentically written texts". In teachers' view, "learning cultural elements of English speaking countries" is also one of the positive aspects in TEYL. However, this should be taken on a cautionary note because there is a problem which includes what to select and why and when and how to use what is selected.

Some questions were raised in terms of negative aspects of using literature for children in English language instruction. Teachers' answers are accessible in the Table 3.

| <b>Rank negative aspects of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems from the most negative one towards those that are less harmful in TEYL - teachers' opinion.</b> |
|---|
| 1. Weaker learners of English tend not to participate in the discussion in the class and are rarely active in language tasks N=4 (13.33%)   |
| 2. Some texts might be too hard for understanding for most learners N=2 (6.66%)   |
| 3. Teachers need more time and energy to prepare such classes N=1 (3.33%)   |
| 4. There are no negative aspects N=23 (76.66%)  |

**Table 3.** Negative aspects of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems according to the teachers' opinion.

On the basis of the teachers' statements given in the questionnaire and presented in the previous table, we may point out that 13.33% of teachers believe that the most negative aspect is that "weaker learners of English tend not to participate in the discussion in the class and are rarely active in language tasks". The next one was "some texts might be too hard for understanding for most learners" N=2 (6.66%). According to this, we may conclude that teachers are mostly worried about weaker learners and their active learning in the class. Only one teacher (N=13.33%) pointed out to the negative aspect of class preparation „(teachers need more time and energy to prepare such classes)" and surprisingly, 23 out of 30 teachers (76.66%) believe that there are no negative aspects in using stories, fairy tales, fables and poems in English language classroom. It is clear that the teachers are fond of using literature texts but they also admit that there is not enough time to adapt and prepare appropriate material and lessons. In other words, well prepared lesson plans may help both teachers and learners to use the best of children's literature and to make the class successful. We may refer here to McDowell (1973: 17) who notes that whether a particular text can be given a value "depends upon the circumstances of use".

„Students' attitudes were elicited in the interview and their answers were categorised in two groups" 1) positive aspects and 2) negative aspects of learning English by using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems in the class. The purpose of this was to compare teachers' and students' answers. The most valuable positive aspects in students' opinion are presented in the Table 4.

| <b>What are the reasons you like using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems in English language lesson?</b> |
|--|
| 1. I like when we sing songs and dance along (all grades) N=31 (44.28%)  |
| 2. I like when we watch a cartoon or a video of a fairy tale or a story (3rd and 2nd grade) N=16 (22.85)                           |
| 3. It is easier to remember English words (4th grade) N=9 (12.85)  |
| 4. The class is more interesting than when we learn grammar (4th and 2nd grade) N=7 (10%)  |
| 5. I like when we paint or draw after the reading of a fairy tale or a story (1st and 2nd grade) N=7 (10%)                         |

**Table 4.** Positive aspects of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems according to the students' opinion.

From the Table 4 we can deduce that students from all four grades (N=31, 44.28%) mostly like songs and TPR activities. The use of kinaesthetic intelligence and memory is particularly important when we are teaching young children because it is well known that learners do not learn in a conscious intellectual way. In simple terms, children do not learn by thinking, but by 'doing' things. Physical responses are very good ways to respond to language learners have understood. Physical actions bring language to life and make it easier to remember. Consequently, students (N=9, 12.85) said that, in order to remember English words easier, they like to hear them in the context and when they read or listen to a story it is more interesting than learning grammar (N=7, 10%). Painting and drawing activities are also mentioned by the students as those which have a positive aspect on learning.

The next question in the interview was intended to address issues about the negative aspects of using literature for children in learning English as a foreign language but, in this case, in learners' opinion.

| <b>What are the reasons you dislike using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems in English language lesson?</b>    |
|--|
| 1. I don't like when we only focus on unfamiliar words from the text (all grades) N=16 (22.85%)  |
| 2. I don't like when the text is not interesting, I cannot focus then on the task (4th and 3rd grade ) N=5 (7.14%)                       |
| 3. Sometimes, there are too many unfamiliar words in the text (4th grade) N=4 (5.71%)  |
| 4. There are no reasons why I do not like the use of stories, poems, fables and fairy tales in English lesson (all grades) N=45 (64.28%) |

**Table 5.** Negative aspects of using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems according to the students' opinion.

As a way forward, we may point out that students mostly dislike when focus is only on unfamiliar words from the text (N=16, 22.85%) and the other reason is when the text is not interesting, they cannot focus on the task (N=5, 7.14%). Too many unfamiliar words do not motivate students to continue reading or listening a story, poem, fable etc. (N=4, 5.71%). Yet, 45 students out of 70 (64.28%) answered this question by saying that "there are no reasons why I do not like the use of stories, poems, fables and fairy tales in English lesson". This could be explained by the fact that young learners from 7 to 11 still like playing games, singing songs, saying rhymes and introducing their own thoughts and ideas. Using storytelling in class, children develop a constructive and creative comprehension.

To sum up the results of this part, we may note that the most examined teachers (23 out of 30) and students (45 out of 70) have positive attitudes towards children's literature in the process of learning a foreign language, but they are using it in class only occasionally because of the lack of time for preparation and designing of such lessons.

According to the research results and teachers' and students' attitudes towards literature texts in English language classroom, we may point out four the most significant aspects in this process: students' increased motivation, practicing and learning all target language skills and developing intercultural and interpersonal values (Ghosn 2002).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the obtained research data show that examined teachers use folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems very often in teaching English to young learners. The most used materials are the ones downloaded from the internet (the named reason was the lack of time to prepare their own materials), followed by the course book activities and then audio and video material. According to the teachers' view, the reasons why they usually use literature for children in TEYL are to motivate students to learn the target language, enrich the students' vocabulary and to enhance the overall English knowledge. Teachers pointed out that their students are very motivated to learn English when a literature text is used in the class. Further, teachers were aware of the importance of careful selection of topics and materials with the necessary adaptation to the needs of students, their prior English language knowledge, interest, range of vocabulary, purpose of the activities and overall aim and objectives of the lesson. Examined teachers believe that English texts should contain the repetition of new and unfamiliar key words, phrases (expresses clearly) and grammatical forms that are thoroughly explained by the teacher. The text's illustrations should serve the purpose of reading comprehension and better understanding of the plot. In this

way, students come to grips with the meaning and increase their general awareness of English.

In line with the previously said, students noted that they like best rhymes and songs and they like activities in which they dance along with the music. Also, they added that they prefer video material, that is, cartoons and drawing and painting activities related to a certain literal text. On the other hand, students reported that they do not like literature texts when these contain too many unfamiliar words or when the focus of a class is only to memorise those unfamiliar words. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to highlight that 64.28% of examined students (45 out of 70) and 76.66% of examined teachers (23 out of 30) expressed their positive attitude towards using folk and/or author's stories, fairy tales, fables and poems in English as a foreign language classroom in lower grades of primary school. It goes without saying that literature for children has a great potential in TEYL when carefully prepared and planned lesson is on stand.

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## ПОЗИТИВНИ АСПЕКТИ КОРИШЋЕЊА КЊИЖЕВНОСТИ ЗА ДЕЦУ У НАСТАВИ ЕНГЛЕСКОГ ЈЕЗИКА НА МЛАЂЕМ УЗРАСТУ

*Резиме:* Подаци добијени истраживањем на испитаном узорку од 70 ученика и 30 наставника из основних школа у Јагодини, Ђуприји и Параћину показују следеће: интернет је значајан извор наставних материјала које наставници користе у настави енглеског језика као страног; наставници су исказали свест о важности одабира тема и материјала уз неопходно усклађивање са потребама ученика, њиховим предзнањем језика, интересовањем, опсегом вокабулара, циљем и задацима часа; према мишљењу наставника, текстови треба да садрже учестала понављања кључних речи, фраза (које су јасно исказане) и граматичких облика уз адекватна објашњења; квалитетне и занимљиве илустрације треба да буду у функцији разумевања садржаја текста на енглеском језику и мотивисања ученика да активно учествују у раду. Ученици су истакли да највише воле да уче енглески језик кроз песме и покрет, а да не воле када се на часу само уче непознате речи или када их је у тексту превише; затим, ученици позитивно оцењују употребу видео материјала и илустровања одређеног садржаја као активности на часу енглеског језика.

*Кључне речи:* енглески језик, ученици млађег школског узраста, књижевност за децу, позитивни/негативни аспекти.