

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ROMANIAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: Our purpose in this study is to highlight children's literature as an available resource to both teachers and students that will aid them in studying various aspects of a foreign language, in this case English.

The study that I intend to conduct argues for integrating children's literature and literary theory-based discussions within the English classes in Romanian schools in order to enhance knowledge, creativity, motivation to learn, open-mindedness and understanding of other cultures and civilizations. Children's literature can be regarded as a study in and of itself, enforcing students to discover language that can be used in real life.

Firstly, I examine the functions of literature in the classroom, drawing attention towards a special category – children's literature. The latter will be examined taking into account definitions, general features, illustrative components and selective criteria.

Secondly, I draw a brief comparison between a selected pair of English textbooks prior and post 1989, in order to detect differences and similarities of a certain teaching approach, mainly based on learning about language through children's literature. In all, the emphasis falls most heavily on knowing and understanding the Romanian educational system under communist rule, the case of middle schools.

To be consistent with the purpose of the study, I concentrate on how different literature excerpts are being integrated in these textbooks as a method of enhancing appreciation and understanding of language beyond concern for proper usage.

Throughout the study, literary concepts are illustrated as a way of animating students' imagination and expand their knowledge, thus making possible linguistic progress and a continuous improvement on the English language.

Keywords: *children's literature; English classes; foreign language; textbooks; prior 1989*

Introduction

The present article provides a conceptual background and discusses selected theoretical data about the role of using children's literature with children and adolescents in foreign language classes and the effects of using

children's literature as far as language development is concerned. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach of teaching English based on children's literature texts would offer the students a proper education not only in the field of foreign languages but also in their long-life learning process.

The study that I intend to conduct argues for integrating children's literature and literary theory-based discussions within the English classes in order to enhance knowledge, creativity, motivation to learn, open-mindedness and understanding of other cultures and civilizations. Moreover, it focuses on how children's literature can be used to work on listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, thus becoming a way of promoting enjoyment in learning through interdisciplinarity.

The present-day knowledge society urges teachers to take an interdisciplinary approach to teaching a foreign language. Placing more emphasis on the students' study of a foreign language through an interdisciplinary approach of certain literary concepts, such as intertextuality or the creative recontextualization of the past generates motivation to make linguistic progress and a continuous brush up on the foreign language.

As the age at which young learners are introduced to English in elementary schools in Romania has decreased, there has been an increased focus on the teaching of English to young learners. My personal belief is that there is no better method with respect to this than the use of literature and its universal language (section 1.2).

Undoubtedly, there has been an increased interest in the potential of children's literature to contribute to language teaching. The present study also presents data which support the theory that including children's literature in children's and teenagers 'second/foreign language classroom not only enables them to appreciate and enjoy literature but also enhances the development of language skills by stimulating them to reach a more advanced level of English (section 1.3).

Moreover, most of Romanian teachers believe that children's literature in English has an important role to play in the language classroom, a belief that is reinforced by the fact that many private language schools in Romania make extensive use of literary texts in introducing young learners to English which was clearly not the case before 1989 (section 1.4).

Furthermore, although Romanian teachers often make claims about the value of children's literature in the language classroom, they appear very rarely to explain what they mean by children's literature and their attempts to provide empirical evidence for the claims that they make fail each time they get confronted with the reality of the national syllabus.

It is therefore important to consider the recommendations of educators in relation to the use of children's literature in the teaching of English in the context of a more broadly-based consideration of writing about children's literature in order to select the appropriate didactic materials (section 1.5).

According to John Dixon (1967, 81), "the *body of knowledge* in a syllabus or curriculum guide represents our hopes of what pupils will discover and build as discussion arises from day to day, not a package to be handed over". The need for a child-centred approach to teaching and learning English as a foreign language to young learners is more than essential, building a strong case for the importance of activities such as creative writing, talk and improvised drama. For this reason, his pedagogical perspective remained a constant educational resource in the context of a society that is constantly in flux, highly digitalised, with a decreasing readership.

Throughout this chapter, I underline different opinions that are held on a number of issues that lie at the heart of the English teaching, but I also aim at introducing my personal view which emphasises the relationship between language and learning in the individual child, and the role of literature in developing children's imaginative and aesthetic lives.

Literature in the classroom

First of all, literature is art! Art can be defined as communication between an artist and the audience. When an author writes, he creates all kinds of stories through words as a way of communication with the readers. An exquisite piece of art or a fine book have the same influence on the human perception: pleasing the eyes, delighting the soul, challenging the mind.

Literature is seen not only as an entertaining activity of spending the free time but also as an art of language (Zhen 2012, 35). As an art of language, teachers can use this as a powerful source in teaching English and the meaning of the language itself. Nonetheless, literature offers many opportunities for the students in developing their skills, vocabulary and linguistic competence as the whole process in English language acquisition.

Classic literature has been a part of our lives for many generations, and despite that it never seems to grow old. A practical explanation for this tendency lies in the numerous advantages of literature teaching: enjoyable to read, different styles of writing, vocabulary expansion, developing reading skills, personal development, arising cultural awareness.

As Penny Ur (1996, 201) underlines “literature also encourages empathetic, critical and creative thinking and contributes to world knowledge”. On the other side, the same scholar admits the existence of several disadvantages: a language too difficult for foreign language learners to read, some texts may be long and time-consuming to teach, the target-language culture on which the literature is based is alien to learners and may be difficult for them to relate to, learners’ enjoyment and appreciation of literature can be spoiled in the process, students with another field of specialization may find literature irrelevant to their needs.

In what follows, I examine the functions of literature in the classroom and its implications for the teacher. According to John Warren Stewig (1995, 387), “literature in the classroom has three distinct functions: to provide a literary experience, to impart information, and to provide a vehicle for developing language-related skills of memory, sequence, description, expression, comprehension, interpretation, analysis, synthesis and evaluation”.

The literary experience is the very heart of literature. Literature is the most valuable content for engaging young children with feelings concerning the past, present and future. This experience nurtures a desire to see, hear and understand the ideas of others. Only through a systematic knowledge of books can the teacher contribute effectively to children’s impressions of literature.

Jim Trelease (2013, 1) considers that “as lumber is the primary support for building a house, words are the primary structure for learning. There are really only two efficient ways to get words into a person’s brain: either by seeing them or by hearing them. Since it will be years before an infant uses his or her eyes for actual reading, the best source for vocabulary and brain building becomes the ear. What we send into that ear becomes the foundation for the child’s *brain house*”. His book provides specific suggestions about ways to share more than 300 great read-aloud books and why teachers must expose children to literary experiences, i.e., the absence of the necessary reading skills.

The impact of reading aloud on the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing is overwhelming, considering some of the key competences for lifelong learning: literacy, multilingual, personal, social and learning to learn. This listening enjoyment also motivates children to acquire reading skills once they see what literature has in store for them.

It is equally important for teachers in all grades to provide group literary experiences so that all students can enjoy the vicarious experiences written especially with their age group’s interests in mind. Glenna Davis

Sloan (1980, 132) claims in one of her articles that “Although literacy may be a right, unfortunately it can’t be bestowed like a gift. Like it or not, the level we attain is largely a measure of our own efforts” and that “Literacy is a state of becoming, not a point to be reached”. Literary texts can conduct to this *state* if they are properly inferred in classroom activities by teachers who are totally dedicated to their mission and understand students’ needs and expectations.

Taking into account Trelease’s and Sloan’s statements, my point of view is quite similar to theirs because time should be allocated each day in every classroom to providing literary experiences for pupils. It is a win-win situation for every participant in education, inducing an active behaviour, not a passive one.

In fact, the literary experience has as sole objective the enjoyment of a book. Words and ideas put together in the right combination bring characters to life, exciting readers to explore the deeper insights of their worlds, past, present and future.

The question that I intended to answer all along in this section is: “Why should teachers use children’s literature in the English classes? There are numerous answers and I review some of the theoreticians who have provided pertinent points of view.

For example, Judith Langer (1995, 5) states that “literature plays a critical role in our life, often without our notice and it helps us to explore both ourselves and others, to define and redefine who we are, who we might become, and how the world might be... In its best sense, literature is intellectually provocative as well as humanizing, allowing to use various angles of vision to examine thoughts, beliefs, and actions”. She continues by adding that stories provide us with something more significant than dry drill-teaching – they provide us with the meaning of our world and the world around us.

When students read literature, they not only learn new vocabulary or grammatical structures, but they also learn how to raise questions, recognize problems and search for causes and solutions, reflect on ideas, and make connections. As far as I am concerned, using children’s literature can stir motivation in second language acquisition and make all the difference during English classes. The other benefits mentioned by Langer simply add further value to this essential achievement.

Langer (1997, 613) also describes the traditional second language classroom in which literature is absent. In such classroom, learners do not have a chance to practice language through personal and meaningful engagement and are often limited to studying language in texts through low-

level literal questions. Learners “are often given short passages and fill in exercises meant to develop their English skills before being provided with context that permits them to use those skills in interesting and meaningful ways.”

The purpose of reading is to encourage positive lifetime, independent reading, apart from the focus on specific reading skills. One aspect should not exclude the other, but it will be wisely to consider it a wholesome experience, quite elevating for both teachers and students.

The information experience implies the difference between information books and fictional works, the author’s intention and the teacher’s way of selecting the right material, apart from the enjoyment criterion. Information experiences are needed whenever information has to be transmitted or is sought by individual children.

While the literary experience is the relationship between a child and a book, the information experience is often a relationship among the teacher, the child and a book. Teachers read or assign these books for specific purposes.

When the child looks for information for the sheer sake of seeking, the reading experience is on the fine line between being an information and a literary experience.

The language experience uses literature to develop specific language skills or knowledge about language. A teacher might read an accumulative story like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, written by Mark Twain, and then ask children to recreate the exact sequence, or assess retention by asking children to recall different parts of the story. After reading *The Happy Prince* by Oscar Wilde to a class, the teacher could ask children to recall all the errands that the kind-hearted prince gave to the swallow as to help the poor. The story could serve as a basis for an extended discussion of children’s related personal experiences.

The implications for the teacher are somehow confusing. The major problem is that teachers have not seen these aspects as three separate and distinct functions of literature and have not understood the purposes of each. A teacher may intend to provide a daily literature experience for children, but frequently, because of zeal for instruction, such an experience becomes an information experience or a language experience.

Unfortunately, too many teachers see their role as providing children with an experience in which the gain can be immediately measured. The literary experience is impressionable. It is measured years later by assessing the reading attitude and involvement that resulted from regular exposure to the best literature available.

The information experience is foundational, providing information that, when added to other information, builds a firm foundation for further learning. The language experience continues to focus on the skills of listening, expressing, thinking, and sequencing in such a way that they become overlearned and therefore help facilitate the intake and analysis of many experiences.

Children's literature: definitions

It is not a simple matter to define literature. Since literature is not the most utilitarian field, its importance is revealed by those interested in educating themselves and each has a different point of view, more or less subjective.

Clearly, working with abstract concepts as 'literature' and 'childhood' makes it even harder to find a satisfying definition, but the vaster list of attempts had put the topic in the spotlight, emphasizing its relevant significance for a struggling society with a culture on the verge of extinction.

Some writers maintain that children's literature differs from adult literature and that the word *literature* when used in the context of children's literature cannot necessarily be related in any straightforward way to the word *literature* as used in other contexts (Peter 2018, 82). Langer (1995, 58) even indicates questions as "part of the literary experience" when she describes the effects of literary ambiguity and openness on the reader: "the literary experience involves the raising of questions; questions are necessary and normal when a person is exploring horizons of possibilities".

Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown (2002, 2) define children's literature as "good quality tradebooks written especially for children from birth to adolescence, covering topics of relevance and interest to children through prose and poetry, fiction and nonfiction".

McDowell (1973, 17) states that "children's literature is applicable to books written for, and read by, that group referred to as children by any particular society".

On one hand, Bottigheimer (1998, 190) argues that "children's literature is an important system of its own". On the other hand, Hillman (1999, 3) claims that "to be included in the category of children's literature, writing must be of good quality, excluding from the category of children's literature, writing that is stodgy, too predictable or too illogical".

For a considerable number of scholars, children's literature is narrative, an important characteristic of which is the provision of access to

understanding through empathy with the lives and experiences of others (Hollindale, 1997; Saxby, 1997). Saxby (1997, 14) claims that “the raw material of literature is experience, life itself”, while Hollindale (1997, 62) considers that “the experiences recorded can be nonfictional but might, for example, be based on the author’s memory of his or her childhood”.

For Huck et al. (1997, 5), children’s literature is “the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language”. I must agree with their remarks because this type of literature is focused on the lives and experiences of children, encouraging the development of empathy through vicarious experience. Young people broaden their world view by engaging themselves in some sort of imaginary journey, seizing new experiences. When they proceed to the reading of a literary text, new stories unfold in front of them and they can identify with the characters, choosing between right and wrong. All this excitement induced by words and phrases recreate somehow the process of coming of age, a young person's transition from being a child to being an adult.

Ghosn (1997, 15) confines children’s literature to fiction, defining it as “fiction written for children to read for pleasure”, rather than for didactic purposes and explicitly excluding any type of material based around controlled vocabulary and sentence structures. I consider that, in excluding such material, many very popular books that have been written for children are being effectively excluded which would be a total loss. Furthermore, it is unclear what is the author’s intention by the use of the word *didactic* in this context. The word *didactic* can be applied to any material that is intended to convey information and instruction, not taking into account the presence or lack of entertainment.

These extremely vague criteria of definition leave much room for speculation and continuous debate. Personally, I consider that each scholar has inferred an essential piece of the big *puzzle*, but as Bland (2013, 3) puts it “children’s literature seems to be good preparation for reading literary texts as adults”, makes it all more understandable and connected to the realities of the educational agenda.

Children’s literature concept goes beyond the theoretical background, reaching the practical aspect; something plausible that can be measured and evaluated in terms of school progress or failure when it comes to the learning of English as a foreign language or even for the first language studies.

This type of literature prepares the road for extensive reading for future adults, creating a healthy habit of lecture and word enjoyment. Recent studies have shown that only those students exposed to literary material

from an early educational stage have developed a predilection for reading literature, enriching their vocabulary and using properly the grammar structures.

Therefore, writing for children is a rich and strong source of information and it deals with the cultural phenomenon, bringing its own contribution to society by improving the literacy competence.

Moreover, the long road from *childhood* to *adulthood* can be gently surpassed if teachers and parents, working alongside for the wellbeing of the child, creatively infer excerpts of children's literature on and off school domain: reading aloud bedtime stories, acting out a literary scene, role-playing games, constant exposure to authentic material during English classes, compositions, a thematic set of drawings in the format of a wordless book, keeping a reflexive journal, writing poems and the list can go on.

Furthermore, I would like to present the current situation in Romania concerning the topic in discussion. A very scarce selection of literary texts is used in coursebooks in the English language teaching context, the case of Romanian middle schools. In my teaching career, I addressed this problem in many different ways I took the floor on the subject in a teacher education course, arguing that literary texts can be used, not only at the elementary school level in this context but also in English language teaching (ELT) classes at any school level.

In the past few decades, the use of literary texts in ELT has become very much the order of the day in countries where English is the first language which is quite understandable and adequate for the entire educational process.

However, in Romania, only recently researchers have begun to tackle with this area of research. As a result, the use of literature in English language teaching has not been systematically adopted. So far, no consistent theoretical background for reading instruction has been agreed upon, nor there is common usage of terminology and definitions of reading subskills. This lack of coherency means that there are almost no formal courses or further teacher development in the use of literary texts in ELT.

In addition, the Romanian pedagogues declined to make a clear distinction between classic and children's literature, considering that anything written is literature. I find this extensive definition which covers all aspects of life obviously insufficient in order to render the complexity of this liberal art.

In Romania, children's literature began to expand with the memories of Ion Creangă, *Recollections from Childhood*, a very much appraised book even in the communist era, prior 1989. Abroad, the entire process of

recognition of children's literature as a distinctive field was undertaken a few years earlier, in 1865, when Charles Dodgson wrote a novel especially for children with the title *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*. Both writers designed children's literature in order to make children enjoy in reading a text because it related with their ages and life, their fears and dreams, their need for having fun.

Regardless of the multitude of theories, children's literature empowers a tremendous potential for children and students to enlarge their cultural awareness from the story and make them appreciate their own cultural heritage in a world that one can easily lose the sense of identity and enjoyment of simple pleasures in life.

All in all, the term children's *literature* is applicable to books written for the intended audience inferred in its entitling, namely children.

Children's literature: general features

In the academic environment, the word *genre* is used to refer to socially constructed categories that describe written and oral texts such as, for example, novels, short stories, poems, lectures, and academic articles.

Over the past decades, the demand for trade books has increased considerably, thus drawing attention to literary works addressed to children and young adults. Researchers began to deeply analyse the theories that led to an assertive outcome. Therefore, children's literature can broadly be classified into two genres (Baruah 2013, 20). They are traditional and modern children's literature.

Original or translated, they are divided at their turn into many subgenres. Traditional children's literature contains folktales, folksongs, riddles, folklore, etc. This genre can be further divided down into myths, fables, legends, fairy tales, tales of tricksters, folksongs, lullabies, etc. Modern children's literature includes fiction (fantasy, realistic fiction, science-fiction, historical fiction etc.), non-fiction, biography and autobiography, travelogue, poetry and verse, picture story book, comic strip, etc.

Many notable scholars (Lazar, 2010; McDowell, 1973; Norton, 1991) define children's literature as narrative fiction whose primary purpose is entertainment. This, however, restricts children's literature to one particular text-type (story) and one particular genre (narrative).

On the contrary, Lazar (2010, 14) argues that "the study of literature makes literature itself the content or subject of a language course, while the use of literature as a resource draws on literature as one source among many

different kinds of texts for promoting interesting language activities. Clearly, if it is the study of literature which is our aim then developing the *literary competence* of our students is crucial”.

Choosing a culturally suitable text may be quite complicated because there is a list of cultural aspects that should be taken into account when using literary texts with students. According to Burns and Siegel (2018, 143), the texts can be divided into two general groups, considering the linguistic aspects (proverbs, idioms and metaphors) and socio-cultural aspects (objects, social structures, customs and traditions, beliefs, values and superstitions, taboos and humour).

This paper focuses on both traditional and modern children’s literature subgenres, but it has a particular attachment to fairy tales and novels.

Fairy tale is a simple story which is set in the past without knowing the author and most often involves magical things or animals who can behave like human. Here are some examples of the most popular fairy tales throughout the ages: *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the seven dwarfs*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Puss in boots*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rapunzel*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, etc.

According to Norton (1991), fairy tales has its own characteristics. First, a fairy tale is opened with the by now universal line *once upon a time*, being finished in the same note, using another famous phrase *and they all lived happily ever* after. Involving the conflict and action of good and evil in the plot of the story, applying a straightforward style and universal themes, fairy tales will create a meaningful time of reading literature for the students.

Other characteristics which make fairy tales to be easily recognizable are the following: supernatural adversaries (e.g. ogre, troll and giant) and helpers (e.g. fairies, fairy godmother, and jinny), magical objects (e.g. magical lamp or magical clock), power (e.g. granted wishes or humans with extraordinary power), and transformations (e.g. prince to beast or bird to human), the pattern of three (e.g. Three little pigs) and seven (e.g. Seven dwarfs), talking animals (e.g. Puss in boots).

Asides the supernatural motifs, fairy tales are consistently moral stories, trying to educate readers of all ages, grasping the right and wrong of human behaviour in order to convey the entire narration into one overwhelming lecture.

When it comes to novels, the general opinion is strongly divided. Some teachers find the novel far too complex to use in the English language teaching due to its high level of language, intricate style and themes, round

characters, conflictual plot, difficult grammar. Others argue for its necessity in the ELT classes so as to improve general knowledge of classic literature and to instil a progressive attitude towards study.

According to the principle *Less is more, but more is better*, Gareis et al. (2009) advocate for using novels in EFL classroom for the purpose of improving students' motivation in reading, developing their knowledge about cultures and civilizations. Since novel is one of the genres most renown in literature, novels can also become some excellent sources of plenty of comprehensible input.

It is a well-known fact that there is a strong correlation between the amount of reading individuals do and the size of their vocabulary. During novel reading, students become familiar with various linguistic forms, communicative functions and meanings that are intended for native speakers.

The role of children's literature can be analysed from a linguistic point of view, literary texts containing the means to improve all language skills, develop grammar, enhance pronunciation and extend vocabulary, but also from the instructional point of view because they are motivating, encouraging students to exercise imagination and fantasy. Skills of sharing, predicting and anticipating are being constantly promoted, young learners go through emotional responses, reactions and interpretations, all in the pursuit of cross-curricular links.

Also important is the cultural aspect of literary texts, through their connection with the cultural, historical, social and language traditions of a particular nation or group. Literary texts can thus extend knowledge of various cultures and civilizations, helping readers to better appreciate literary texts from other cultures. Uncovering and understanding cultural meanings or ideas in literary texts can be very challenging and motivating at the same time, stirring cultural awareness. Readers may be encouraged to learn more by reading about cultural issues that were not familiar to them and discover the global message of literature.

According to Winch et al. (2004, 339), children's literature can play an important role in cognitive and linguistic development, nurturing the speaking and listening skills and giving them purpose and direction. They continue to add more significance to the topic by regarding the entire notion as a non-threatening way for children to encounter a considerable variety of perspectives on philosophical issues, worldviews, social ideas, and cultural practices. My personal belief related to this is that if any of these fundamental pedagogic elements are to be realized, teachers need to understand the structural and linguistic characteristics of different genres and text-types in taking the right decisions about their use of ELT materials.

Introducing children's literature in the ELT classes is more than beneficial for both teachers and students, aside parents, communities, economic and civil society structures. In a world where individuals are able to communicate efficiently and effectively, to develop a critical thinking and to take pleasure in all that is aesthetic, the common welfare is not that unreachable, thus becoming a desirable goal.

In a rationale that is reminiscent of the canonical approach to adult literature, often, children's literature is referred to as some sort of metaphorical writing, with a poetical touch, involving a significant truth expressed through memorable language.

In EFL classrooms, exploiting the astounding array of language structures in children's books can help students with the mechanics of English. For example, some books implement a call-and-response format that encourages students' choral responses. Others use a variety of past tenses, offering opportunities for lessons that compare and contrast grammatical structures. Language structures and vocabulary can be effectively supplemented with the right picture storybook.

Although the global spread of English has led to countless implications for the ELT classroom, more or less controversial, developments in corpus linguistics seem less problematic for language teachers, at least at first sight. There is no easy task in grasping the amount of children's literature, choosing whether to teach *genuine* or *artificial* language content in class, deciding if the corpus based language description is suitable for all students, answering to all their linguistic needs and expectations.

The *authenticity* and *real* language data regarding children's books are two aspects that support pedagogical effectiveness and appropriateness, surrounding the ELT textbooks and materials, thus entailing many implications for the teachers and their response to the norms of EFL and ESL teaching.

The extent to which classroom texts should be *authentic*, since they were originally written for non-teaching purposes, and how the tasks should replicate the *authentic communication* outside the classroom has been an everlasting dilemma, especially since, in the last years, one could observe an overcrowding tendency of children's publications on the book market.

Authentic texts and tasks draw upon more realistic models of language use and leave learners better prepared for life outside the classroom. Corpora studies show that the actual language of children's literature is quite similar to the language features recorded in standard grammars of English, and that there is no preference for the use of a naturally occurring spoken language which may include some unusual linguistic features.

Therefore, in terms of English language behaviour, the literary texts designed for children manage to capture a language that cannot be invented with that much ease since its simple format, wrapped in a charming lining of word associations and picturesque descriptions, conveys a great philosophical power, irresistible to any type of readership. I always wondered why the *Cinderella* story caught the interest of so many generations, turning into one inexhaustible source of inspiration and some claim to its popularity can be trusted to the presentation of an idealistic language model. Voices of the characters convince and appeal to readers. The plot entices them to turn the pages nonstop from beginning to end.

In fact, on a broadly assumption, deep cut words, which convey almost into slipping catchy phrases, containing expressive verbs that belong to an indefinite past, present and future, create and recreate the unrealistic atmosphere of childish stories and this aspect seems very appealing. The narrative of a good children's book flows with a steady rhythm that makes it an excellent read-aloud.

Once more, it is essential for a learner of English to learn from actual examples, examples that can be trusted because of their resemblance to real life instances of communication, taking into consideration the difficulty of inventing realistic examples from teachers' behalf and the considerable level of facilitation of the learning process for ELT classrooms when it comes to the use of *real* language through literary excerpts.

Using children's literature in English language teaching in Romanian Middle Schools

This section investigates the role of motivation in second language acquisition and discusses the benefits of using children's literature with children and adolescent learners. We will also draw a brief comparison between a selected range of English textbooks prior and post 1989, in order to spot out differences and similarities of a certain teaching approach, mainly based on learning about language through children's literature.

English education in Romania has largely depended on the teaching of literature. It has been regarded as a reminiscent pattern of how the mother tongue has been taught and studied during the communist regime and a clear consequence of Romanian people's preference for folk tales, myths and legends.

The relationship between literature and English language teaching has been rather difficult throughout all these years. In many situations, while English language teaching adopted a structural approach, literature was

taught as a separate subject. Nevertheless, current approaches have endeavoured to re-examine the value of literature and have begun to upgrade it once again. These approaches assert the value of literature teaching from several aspects, primarily, literature as an agent for language development and improvement.

Literature is a verbal art that leads readers to appreciate the beauty of language. Taking that into account, we will try to analyse how children's literature was used and displayed in the pages of the English coursebooks before and after 1989.

In communism, literature was steadily used in Romanian language teaching as a separate subject to broaden students' horizons by giving them a knowledge of the classics of literature, to improve cultural awareness, to stimulate students' creative and literary imagination and to develop their appreciation of literature. But what about English teaching?

We would try to give a proper answer by presenting the format of a sixth-grade English textbook, representative for the discussed period, published in 1982 by the state Didactical and Pedagogical Publishing House Bucharest. At first sight, the table of contents is divided into several revision parts: Revision A, Revision B, Revision One, Revision Two, Revision Three, Final Revision A, Final Revision B.

Each major revision section includes an indefinite number of lessons, a total of fourteen, approaching a variety of themes like: *Romania, My village, On the family plot, Travelling in Town and in the Country, The four seasons, Back from the holidays, Lunch, At the Bookshop, The parts of the body, Going shopping, My town, The eight of March, At the theatre, A visit to a factory.*

As one can observe, the topics are far away from literary texts, firmly organised under clear tasks that can help pupils to practice the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – in addition to exemplifying grammatical structures and presenting new vocabulary. For instance: *Repeat the words after your teacher. Then read them.; Listen to your teacher. Say one or two.; Look at the pictures and read.; Make sentences about these animals.;* etc, strongly connect with a skill-based instruction.

However, each lesson is built as to raise cultural awareness, especially British culture and civilisation. In this outlook, lesson number five called *The four seasons* includes at the very end a brief informative text *The weather in Britain* and the previous lesson has a final mention about *the London traffic*, in respect to means of transport, for a further vocabulary practice.

The actual coursebook contains in its last pages a theoretical guide: list of irregular verbs, an English – Romanian vocabulary with a particular entry – Lesson vocabulary that adds up all the new words from every lesson.

All things considered, we can notice that the guideline of an English textbook prior to 1989 is rather dried out of any literary context, with a peculiar focus on grammar and vocabulary. The only lively parts of the didactic material are the cultural spots, some short poems, one or two songs like the American chant *Clementine*, a few word games.

Throughout its table of contents, the only literary reference we could identify was an excerpt from *Robin Hood* by Walter Scott, placed in the Final Revision B under the subtitle School and Extra-School Activities. The only reasonable explanation for this inadequacy is the fact that the pedagogical approach of the period was rather narrow-minded and obstructed any form of creativity and imagination.

That being the case, literature was regarded as an after-school activity, somehow unnecessary and just in case the students would want to fill their spare time with a reading task. Teaching English through children's literature, in the case of Romanian middle schools, during the communist regime, was more of a challenge and a phantasmagoric notion which was almost imperceptible in the expansion of the school curriculum, not to mention its scarce appearance inside the covers of coursebooks.

Our analysis goes further with the presentation of another sixth-grade English textbook, published in 2000 by the European Institute Publishing House Iasi. In terms of comparison, this post 1989 edition enjoyed the outburst of a free book market, the so-called liberalisation process, available for all activity domains. The actual coursebook reveals a variety of colourful pages, crammed with suggestive pictures and symbols, some sort of kitch exposure, a design so much desired in all those communist years of plain, grey pages.

Although the book in question is a mixture of illustrations and teaching methods with no organised style and clear requirements like prior 1989 model, the table of contents is most appealing. Divided into units this time, more exactly seven, each unit is being presented by a group of four lessons, with the revision part replaced by a Look back 1 and 2 section.

The English-Romanian vocabulary and the list of irregular verbs are still in use, but the novelty is the Tape scripts part, a handy material for the listening exercises performed with the help of a cassette.

One particular chapter drew our attention, entitled *Readers make leaders*, from Unit 2, some sort of far-fetched literary guide presented aimlessly in the pages of four lessons: *A book for everyone*, *Mysteries*, *Book reviews*, *Round up*.

Even if the material is not well organised, the focus on literature has increased considerably in the post 1989 period, due, in part, to the democratic values and the adoption of the Western educational system.

Having the right to liberty of movement and freedom to choose, the Romanian scholars wanted to supply the middle school teaching with too much of everything in a small amount of time.

Far and foremost, the Unit 2 subject matter explores all types of literature: fairy tales (*The Sleeping Beauty*), adventure story (*Treasure Island*), thriller/mystery/detective story (*The 39 Steps*), science fiction (*The Planet of the Apes*), novel (*David Copperfield*), but there is a clear preference for children's literature. Its characters are widely used in the grammar and vocabulary exercises as to convey the requests into a more lenient experience, as can be seen in the following examples: *Snow White wants you to describe her physical appearance* or *Puss in Boots needs your help at answering the questions*.

Nevertheless, each lesson comes with a theoretical part, *Grammar Pill* or *Data Bank* and a practical one which is a succession of various exercises, a brief reinforcement of the previous knowledge, *Do you remember?* entertaining activities called *Time for fun!*, pretty much a little bit of everything as we already mentioned above.

This random jumble material is somehow focused on the needs of a sixth grade pupil because the entire concept is colourful and joyful to browse and to practice the main pillars of a conventional English lesson: new vocabulary and grammar structures. It seems that there is no pressure on learners as to undergo any type of memorization, retaining word for word entire topics, learning by heart long poems and songs as it was practised in the past, the well-known traditional teaching.

Conclusions

In short, literary texts offer a rich source of linguistic input and can help learners to practice the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – in addition to exemplifying grammatical structures and presenting new vocabulary. Teachers that use literature in the classroom provide opportunities for multi-social classroom experiences and appeal to learners with different learning styles, providing qualitative instruction in a concentrated and didactically wholesome form.

With this in mind, we aimed to reveal to a lesser extent the general features of children's literature in terms of definition, illustrative behaviour, qualitative trait and principles of selection, all in the name of a sustainable literature-based instruction. In this section, the focus of the study was diligently directed to the overall perspective that children's literature can be regarded as a special form of literary text written for children to make them

interested in reading especially in English as foreign language because it provides simple words and colourful picture.

The research continued its analyse by underlining the status of children's literature in the English textbooks prior 1989, focusing on middle school education, sixth grade level more precisely. Our two coursebook examples – 1982 and 2000 editions – denote the enormous gap between two historical periods with different political regimes: communism and democracy.

In terms of comparison, the first didactical material seemed to be devoid of any lively written inserts, not to mention its dull and ashen format which give us the feeling of crossing through a waterless desert. The only literary mention we could find was an excerpt from *Robin Hood* and it was dismissed as an extracurricular activity.

At the opposite pole, the later version was considerably crammed with too much unselected information that it almost appeared to be like a land flowing with milk and honey, but it did have an entire unit concerning literary texts, especially fairy tales excerpts were firmly applied to this new method of teaching.

The only connection we could find between the two textbooks was the evident direction towards a children's literature exposure even if it was made to a greater or lesser extent and rather clumsy depicted in the teaching process.

On a final note, literature, particularly, children's literature has endured a long way to its worthy recognition as an indispensable instrument in the acquisition of a foreign language, in this case English, no matter the educational stage, despite the limitation of our study to the Romanian middle school system.

Contrary to the past, literature is beginning to be viewed as an appropriate mechanism for language learning and development since the attention is now on authentic language and authentic situations. This concise study has succeeded, therefore, to portray the importance of children's literature in general, through its contribution to students' literacy achievement, but also in particular, by affirming its position in the publishing headers of the English textbooks prior and post 1989, the case of Romanian middle schools.

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