

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE '80S ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS PUBLISHED FOR THE ROMANIAN MIDDLE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Daniela-Florina FERCEA

Abstract: *This study 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 in the 80's, concerning the Romanian Middle School system.*

Keywords: *children's literature, Romanian middle schools*

INTRODUCTION

This study 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 in the 80's, concerning the Romanian Middle School system.

When choosing and analysing books to be applied in the classroom activities, middle school EFL teachers use well-established criteria, trying to convey successfully concepts as *moral* and *values* into their literary teaching approach. The general questions are whether the values and attitudes projected in the story are acceptable and if the story can help children to understand their meaning, thus becoming aware of their importance. Anyway, a book chosen for use in class should present a set of moral values, one that is socially acceptable and conform with current norms and ideals.

TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR AND VOCABULARY USING LITERATURE

Before teachers introduce new materials like children's literature, they should consider the appropriate material for their students in order to make them interested in reading. It becomes a challenge for teacher in choosing effective and appropriate material because it is a source of authentic text and when it is used in the context of the learning of an additional language, ambiguity should generally be avoided.

I am confident that the right materials encourage children to read, help children to discover the values and functions of written language, permit children to use written language for a wide range of purposes, make use of the children's native language, when possible, support the children's acquisition of English.

Teachers also need to consider how to select, exploit, analyse and adapt children's literature. First, it may not always be appropriate to use an authentic, unabridged text. Therefore, it may be necessary to simplify the text taking into consideration the linguistic and the cultural issues. The language simplification aspects include lexis (vocabulary), which could be accompanied by a glossary of expressions that are vital to the meaning of the text; structural, where tenses could be changed, or complex modal verb forms simplified to suit learner comprehension.

Second, literary texts often have a multiplicity of interpretations. There is no clear message, and the meaningfulness achievement happens or comes into being during the transaction between the young reader and his/her text. Teachers can point out to students those individual interpretations of a text by different readers are influenced by their cultural and life experiences. They can ask students to provide their own interpretations of different parts of the text and use their various suggestions to enhance critical reading and thinking skills.

I should also suggest a number of strategies that can be used to assist students to appreciate how texts are perceived and interpreted through an individual reader's life experience, where my role will be to guide them through the storyline, at times, listing its main points as to simplify the narrative line since it is sometimes difficult to retain the meaning or style.

When adapting the text to the linguistic level of the students, so that students can follow, teachers take into consideration the qualitative attribute as a major decision factor and the didactic usefulness of his selection of children's literature excerpts.

So, what makes a *good* children's literature? Identifying quality in children's books is controversial and it is quite understandable why the multitude of attempts to do so are driven by adult values, often assuming without any specific rationale that childhood is similar to adulthood.

In terms of content, children respond differently in some fundamental ways from how adults generally respond. This is clear, for example, in the way in which children appreciate the illustrations of a book and what makes them laugh. It is also clear that children often have an insatiable taste for the ridiculous and the absurd, exposing a peculiar sense of humour, that is different or annoying from the grown-ups' perspective.

Stewig (1980, 13-15), whilst arguing that the most important factor in evaluating children's literature is the responses of children themselves, notes that evaluation need not only be external (based on children's responses) but can also be internal (based on a set of pre-established criteria). So far as internal evaluation of children's storybooks is concerned, the scholar refers to characterization, dialogue, setting, plot, conflict, resolution, theme, and style, without any mention of illustration or of language.

Good books can do so much for children. At their best, they expand horizons and instil in children a sense of the wonderful complexity of life. No other leisure available to children is so indulging on empathy and human sympathies. No other activity can accomplish a child's education with the possibilities of civilisation, furnishing the wholesome upliftment of the human spirit.

Many teachers, librarians and recently parents follow the lists of award-winning books, considering this criterion relevant and compulsory when it comes to expressing judgements on samples of children's literature. However, in spite of the fact that award-winning children's books may be interesting and challenging in some contexts, I hardly imagine that award winning books always accord with children's stated reading preferences.

In addition to evaluative criteria mentioned above, I would add the evaluation of illustrations and the coherence of the language. Children need visual aids that can enrich the meaning of a literary text, giving them hints on various interpretations through symbols, colours, signs, etc. Language must be appropriated to readers' age and needs, regardless of the literary merit obtained through official distinctions, awards that are adult-driven enterprises in the end.

As can be observed, there is no clear-cut distinction between *good* or *bad* children's literature, the only notable reference remains the resonance between the teachers' selective *path* and the children's compatibility

to the actual written format.

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 pression 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 and post 1989, focusing on middle school education, sixth grade level more precisely. Our two course-book 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 80's English textbooks, the case of Romanian middle schools.

REFERENCES

- Baruah, Nayanmoni. 2013. "Children literature: its role and importance in present context" in *Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities* 3 (9).
- Bland, Janice. 2013. "Introduction to children's literature in second language education". London: Bloomsbury, pp. 1-11.
- Creangă, Ion. 2019. "Recollection from childhood". Tiberian Press.
- Dixon, John. 1967. "Growth through English". London: Penguin.
- Dodgson, Charles Lutwidge. 2015. "Alice's adventures in Wonderland". London: Pan MacMillan.
- Dorobăț, Dumitru. (coord.). 2000. "Limba engleză. Manual clasa a VI-a". Iași: Institutul European.
- Fârnoagă, Georgiana; Ionici, Anca. 1982. "Limba engleză. Manual pentru clasa a VI-a". București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, R.A.
- Langer, Judith. 1995. "Envisioning literature: Literary understanding and literature instruction". New York: Teachers' College Press, Columbia University.
- Langer, Judith. 1997. "Literacy acquisition through literature" in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 40 (8), pp. 606-614.
- Lazar, Gillian. 2010. "Literature and language teaching. A guide for teachers and trainers". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McDowell, Myles. 1973. "Fiction for children and adults: some essential differences". *Children's literature in education* 4 (1).
- Norton, Donna. 1991. "Through the Eyes of a Child - An Introduction to Children's Literature" (3rd ed.). New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.
- Perrault, Charles. 2013. "Cinderella". Express Publishing.
- Peter, Thomas. 2018. "Approaches to Learning and Teaching Literature in English". Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pyle, Howard. 1986. "The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood". Signet Classics.
- Sandford, Sir Francis, editor. 1889. "Reports on Elementary Schools 1852-1882 by Matthew Arnold". London: MacMillan and Company.
- Scott, Walter. 2003. "Robin Hood". Bucharest: Iri S.R.L.
- Sloan, Glenna Davis. 1980. "Developing literacy through literature" in *The Reading Teacher* 34 (2). International Literacy Association, pp. 132-136
- Stewig, John Warren. 1980. "Children and Literature". Chicago: Rand.

- Stewig, John Warren; Nordberg, Beverly. 1995. "Exploring language arts in the elementary classroom". California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Trelease, Jim. 2013. "The read-aloud handbook". New York: Viking Penguin.
- Twain, Mark. 2003. "The adventures of Huckleberry Finn". London: Penguin Classics.
- Wilde, Oscar. 2018. "The Happy Prince and other stories". London: Thames & Hudson

Notes on the author:

Daniela-Florina FERCEA (GUGEA) is a PhD. Student in English literature at West University of Timisoara and has published numerous articles on the topic of teaching English to children and teenagers. She writes poetry, her latest volume is *Lacrimi de mai*, ed. Marineasa, Timisoara, 2006. She teaches English to children at Scoala Gimnaziala Zavoi, Caras-Severin, Romania daniela.gugea@yahoo.com