



Children's Literature in Traditional Arab Schools for Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This research has shown that the use of authentic children's literature is an effective and motivating *ESL* classroom strategy. However, this study investigated the use of children's stories in *EFL* elementary classrooms where the teaching methods are very traditional and the resources are limited. This study was carried out in an elementary school in an Arab town in Israel. Approximately a hundred fifth and sixth grade pupils filled in a questionnaire expressing their attitudes towards being taught through stories. Teacher trainees taught the classes, wrote reflections, filled in questionnaires and were observed by the researchers. This information has been collected and served as the data for the study. Results suggest that the use of this strategy is very positive and should be carefully considered by *EFL* teachers, *EFL* trainees and teacher educators.

Keywords: Children's stories, *EFL* teacher trainees, *EFL* pupils, Traditional classrooms

1. Introduction

Many theories have been developed by linguists, psychologists and researchers to explain the process of language acquisition. A variety of empirical and experimental studies were conducted based on certain theoretical assumptions. Researchers find similarities and differences in first and second language acquisition. However, 'the similarities outweigh the differences' (Ellis, 1985, 9). Halliday (1978) adds that many writers in the applied linguistics field have emphasized similarities between first and second language learning rather than differences. Teaching English as a first language through authentic children's literature has been used for teaching English as a first language in many English speaking countries such as New Zealand, England, Canada and the United States. Integrating authentic children's literature either wholly or partially became a reality in teaching English as a second language. *ESL* instruction through authentic children's stories highlights the importance of communicative, authentic, meaningful and purposeful texts for reading and writing (Hannabuss, 2002; Smallwood, 1992; Freeman & Freeman, 1989; Zemelman & Daniels, 1988;).

Arabic is diglossic with a colloquial spoken form and a more formal written classical Arabic. Many pupils reach school in the first grade with minimum knowledge of the classical language (Amara & Mari', 2002). Hebrew is introduced in the second grade, and English is taught mainly orally in the third grade. When English reading and writing are introduced in the fourth grade, these young pupils are grappling with three different scripts: Arabic, Hebrew and English. Furthermore, due to the peculiarities of each of these three languages, bottom up decoding very often does not result in accurate reading of the word.

Naturally, children as well as adults are drawn to stories. It is also argued that stories are "the fundamental grammar of all thought and communication" in every language (Chambers, 1985). In addition, children's literature 'presents a veritable treasure for teaching both content and language skills' (Cockman, 2004, 172). According to Shrestha (2008), children's stories are a good authentic source of language for developing their literacy skills as well as their emotional development. She concludes stating that 'stories are a wonderful vehicle in order to provide a natural linguistic environment in an unnatural one such as a classroom' (281). Seung-Yoeun & Sook Hee (2006) reports about a successful movement called 'Mother Brand English' in South Korea, where mothers expose their infants and little children to the English language and culture using English authentic stories besides other audio and videotaped materials. She claims that these young children enjoy valuable children literature and develop their English in a meaningful authentic way. According to Ghosn (2002) a syllabus that is based on authentic stories provides a motivating medium for language learning. Teachers are expected to read to their students or tell them stories every day as an important part of the curriculum.

Some studies had been conducted to examine the effectiveness of teaching through authentic children's stories in second language classrooms (Elly 1991, Freeman & Freeman 1996; Freeman & Freeman, 1992;; MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1991). For example, Elley (1991) writes about four studies comparing language development of children who learned a first language in traditional classrooms and those who participated in a book-based program in New Zealand. Results showed superior performance by participants in the book-based program in the three administered to examine its effectiveness. The participants in the book-based program outperformed their peers who learned in traditional classrooms. Moreover, Elley and Mangubhai (1983) report that in second language classrooms "pupils exposed to many stories progressed in reading and listening comprehension at twice the normal rate and confirmed the hypothesis that high interest story reading has an important role to play in second language reading" (p.53).

Similarly, MacGowan-Gilhooly (1991) reports about a literature based program for teaching ESL at the college level in New York College where students were exposed to a massive amount of reading, approximately, 70 pages a day. They were also expected to write their reflections and to answer questions about the readings. MacGowan emphasizes the positive results for pursuing such a program indicating the significant gains in language proficiency among the ESL learners. In addition, the students enthusiastically fulfilled the requirements of the course. These research studies had been conducted at the elementary level and the college level as well.

In light of the positive findings of these ESL research studies, we conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of children's stories for teaching English as a foreign language in traditional classrooms. Traditional classrooms are not usually equipped with a rich environment of print that includes fiction and nonfiction books, magazines, newspapers, signs, calendars...etc. In fact, they are "talk and chalk" classrooms which lack most of the updated equipment and technology for effective language learning.

In general, English is taught traditionally. There could be many reasons for this. One might be the lack of resources and facilities; another might be the lack of exposure to the English language and its speakers. (Amara & Mari', 2002; Abu Rass, 1991) The problem is further manifested in the shortage of well-qualified English teachers in some schools in the Arabic sector. Abu Rass (1991) adds that teaching English as a Foreign Language in these conditions places a heavy burden and pressure on Arab learners.

The student teachers in this study are in their third year of studies in The Academic Institute for Teaching and Teacher Education which is part of Beit Berl College, a teacher education college in Israel. It has a four year program for training students to become qualified English teachers from grade four through nine. At the end of the fourth year, the students get their Bachelors of Education degree. The curriculum consists of four main areas: proficiency [oral and written], literature, linguistics and pedagogy. These students practice their teaching in local Arab schools, and they are encouraged to employ innovative ideas for teaching English as a foreign language by integrating children's literature and authentic stories in particular. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to examine the appropriateness of integrating authentic children's literature in foreign language classrooms in terms of students' attitudes and interaction in Arab elementary schools in Israel. English is taught in these schools as a fourth language. To examine the effectiveness of this way of teaching in terms of student teachers' as well as the pupils' attitudes in this particular situation, the following four research questions have been asked.

- 1) Could the idea of teaching through stories be applicable to traditional Arab classrooms for English as a foreign language?
- 2) How does teaching through stories affect the attitudes of the trainees?
- 3) How does teaching through stories affect the attitudes of the pupils at school?
- 4) What are the obstacles of applying this strategy in these classrooms?

2. Methodology

2.1 Subjects

The subjects of the research are third year student teachers in the English Department in the Academic Arab Institute for Teacher Training at Beit Berl College. In the second year, a course of teaching English through children's stories is offered. This is in conjunction with the first domain of the new national curriculum for teaching English in Israel which is 'Appreciation of literature and culture'. In this course, students are exposed to a variety of children's books and their relevance to English language classrooms. As part of evaluation, the second year students usually prepare lesson plans for teaching English through stories and present them orally in class. In the third year, they are expected to put their preparation into practice in their practical work in the schools twice a week. One day is spent in the elementary schools and the other in junior high schools. The trainees were expected to teach through authentic stories in the elementary level.

During the time of the study, they were taking the Didactic Seminar, a three-hour course that links theoretical and practical issues in teaching English as a foreign language. The practical work in carried out at two levels: elementary

and junior high to put theory into practice. The course of Children's Literature is designed specifically for teaching EFL through stories in the elementary schools. Also serving as subjects were two groups of fifth and sixth graders who learned in an elementary school in adjacent town to the college, which is a middle-sized town in the central part of Israel and located 13 miles north east of Tel Aviv.

The elementary school has eighteen classes, from first through sixth, with three classes for each grade level. This helped us gather information about the effect that teaching through stories had on the pupils. The total number of the pupils is one hundred and eight. The forty nine fifth graders were taught through stories almost every week by two student teachers who were expected to do so as part of their practical work requirements. The two trainees' instruction to the fifty nine sixth graders included stories only occasionally.

The student teachers were placed to practice teaching in an elementary school in an adjacent Arab town to the Academic College Beit Berl. They were required to integrate authentic English children's stories in their instruction and to observe each other actual teaching in the classrooms. They were supervised by their pedagogical adviser who taught them the theoretical course and was one of the two researchers. The lesson plans were discussed with her in advance.

2.2 Research instrument

Qualitative methods were employed in this research to provide a genuine picture of the use of stories for teaching English as a foreign language in traditional Arab classrooms. Qualitative data collection involved class observations, informal talks with the trainees and the master teachers, trainees' observation notes as well as ours and the students' general reflections. These general reflections were part of the two practical work portfolios, which were submitted twice a year. In addition, quantitative data collection included two questionnaires which were administered at the end of the school year. The first questionnaire included closed questions about the trainees' attitudes, objectives, and understanding towards EFL instruction through children's stories. One open question asked the trainees to write about their experience of teaching the elementary level through children's literature. In addition, they were expected to express their opinions about its success or failure and the reason behind it.

The second questionnaire was administered to the pupils in the 5th and 6th grades in the elementary school, where the student teachers practiced their teaching. It included 19 closed questions and two open ones. The closed questions asked about their attitudes in general towards the English lesson, their interest and participation, learning through stories, the amount of exposure to English language through cartoons, and reading stories in general. The two open questions focused specifically on the lessons of the trainee and the methods used in her instruction.

Videotaping took place in three lessons throughout the school year to examine the effectiveness of teaching EFL through stories in terms of pupils' motivation, participation and discipline. Student teachers were observed in the four elementary schools where they practiced teaching. However, the focus was on two student teachers who were practicing their teaching in the elementary school in a nearby town to the college. They were observed by the pedagogical adviser, one of the researchers, eight times. The other researcher observed them four times.

The answers of the closes questions in the questionnaire of the pupils were coded and analyzed statistically [N=112]. Since the number of the trainees who answered the questions in the questionnaire is fourteen (out of eighteen); no statistical analysis has done. The answers of the eight questions were counted by hand.

For data analysis, the answers of the two open questions in the questionnaires of the pupils were categorized. Five categories were decided for each question. The categories which were created were as follows: For the question: "I like the lesson of the students teacher because..." the categories were: [mentions] stories, [mentions] activities and methods, [mentions] inter-personal reasons, [mentions] clarity of teaching and content. Similarly, the answers of the second question, which sought their opinion about the method, fell into five categories: [mentions] visual aids and materials, [gives a judgment, i.e. good] evaluative, [mentions] inter-personal reasons, [mentions] reading and writing and [the catch-all category] other.

The trainees were asked: "How do you find the experience of teaching English through authentic children's books?" "Is it successful? Please explain your answer". The answers were divided into four categories: motivation; enjoyment and fun; attention and language learning. The general reflections had similar categories. In addition, the students' and our observation notes were categorized accordingly. The videotape was edited to demonstrate the same categories.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Student teachers' and pupils' attitudes

Searching for the answers of the four specific questions was the basis for our data analysis. In order to organize the analysis, we looked at the questionnaire results, our and the students' class observation notes, the two copies of the students' general reflections, the answers of the open questions, the class materials and the videotapes.

Generally speaking, the trainees as well as the pupils expressed very positive opinions about teaching EFL through authentic children's stories.

Table 1 was meant generally to evaluate their attitude at the end of the school year. The questionnaires had some general questions (A & B), some questions specific to teaching literature in the classroom (C, D, & H) and some questions on the reading habits and beliefs of the trainees (E,F,& G).

Insert table 1 here.

In general, the trainees were positive about their elementary school teaching experience. The answers to questions C & D gave an accurate picture of the potential and the problems of using authentic literature in such traditional classrooms. In both cases the answer “sometimes” suggests that although the student teachers recognized that this is an excellent method of teaching, they realize that it cannot be the entire program. The difficulties stem from the fact that that teaching through literature is not part of the core curriculum and the physical setting in Arab schools is an obstacle by itself. The trainees have to purchase the books by themselves as “The Very Hungry Caterpillar” and the schools do not have collections of books.

In the trainees’ first reflection which was included in the first portfolio, they were expected to reflect on their practical work in general. No specific question was asked. Nine out of the eighteen students mentioned that they enjoyed teaching through stories and the pupils had fun as well.

The master teachers had repeatedly expressed their appreciation of trainees’ use of authentic stories to teach EFL at the elementary level. Some of them even asked to copy the stories and the activities. The pupils at school greatly appreciated the use of stories, the abundance of visual aids; they loved listening to songs and stories and participating in the wide range of activities. For example, a considerable number of the fifth grade pupils, who were taught through stories almost once a week, mentioned that they like the trainees’ lessons because of the stories. The answers of the two open questions also show that the pupils appreciated the trainees’ methods and activities, especially among the sixth graders. In the closed question questionnaire (Table 2), the pupils were asked about their general attitudes about English lessons (A & B), their participation in the English lesson (G-H), the experience of learning through stories (H-N), their outside class exposure to English (O & P) and their literacy habits in general (Q-S). The table represents the combined results of two 5th grade classes which were taught with stories and two 6th grade classes which were not taught using this method.

It can be seen that more than 70% of the participants expressed positive attitudes toward the English lessons and their participation in those lessons. Reading literature in the classroom represents a departure from their usual textbook activities. Such a lesson demands that the children listen to a story and participate in activities that are very different from traditional “chalk and talk” lessons. Nevertheless, more than 60% of the pupils indicated that they liked the English lesson when the teacher reads a story (combined *Very often* & *often* responses). It should be noted that over 75% like when the teacher reads from the textbook (combined *Very often* & *often* responses)

Approximately 65% do understand the story when the teacher reads. These pupils in general do not hear English outside the classroom and having a story read to them even in L1 (question R & S) is not a common activity. However, the interest and motivation that the story creates makes up for the deficit in language.

To answer the four research questions, we looked at the statistical results of the questionnaires, the open questions, the general reflections of the trainees, observation notes and the videotapes. All sources of data indicate that children’s literature could be part of the Arab classrooms instruction of EFL. The answers of the three questions which asked about the pupils’ liking and understanding to stories and coloring as an activity show very positive results.

The trainees also wrote positively in their reflections about teaching English through stories. The following three citations are one reflection and two answers of the open question. In fact, they reflect the very positive experience the trainees had in their instruction through stories in the elementary level.

Teaching through stories was another lovely experience. Pupils enjoyed hearing a story and all their attention was focused at me. I felt that they learn better and that they were motivated. The subject matter was meaningful and they remembered the material for a long time.

It is of course a successful method. I like it and I enjoy it. I think that students benefit a lot from it since they like it. When I enter the class, the students gather around me asking me to read them a story. It is a very good method to control the class since students become very quiet while reading.

I think such method can be sometimes very beneficial and effective. This due to the real atmosphere it creates and establishes. I mean in this way children may learn spontaneously without being aware they’re doing so.

Although most of the answers show the positive attitude of the trainees towards teaching through children’s literature, one student was not particularly excited about it. She attributed her neutral attitude to the story itself which could be motivating or not. The following is her answer for the open question.

I think it depends on the story and the class. It sometimes works and the children learn things the teacher explains, and sometimes they don’t.

In contrast, one student was not positive at all in all of her answers and reflections. She mentioned repeatedly that it was a very hard experience since the stories are appropriate to native speakers and not to non-native ones. In addition, teaching through stories is very demanding in terms of preparation of materials and activities.

The videotapes also show that the students as well as their teacher enjoyed the lesson. The enjoyment was manifested in their full attention to the teacher, their attempt of guessing what comes after and their eagerness to participate in the activities. Besides the above mentioned areas, the videotapes overlap with the content of some of the reflections which stated very positive comments about teaching through authentic stories in terms of language use. The pupils used English to answer the teacher's questions.

Regarding the fourth question, our research didn't find any major obstacles in the application of these strategies in the classroom. The previously mentioned comment by the one of the trainees about the extra preparation involved in using this method is certainly a factor; however, we feel that the positive benefits are worth the efforts.

A variety of print to include not only stories, but also poetry, songs, rhymes, riddles, jokes and other authentic texts is a must. In addition, better results would be achieved if in-service teachers attend special training workshops and courses for integrating authentic literature in their instruction of EFL. Moreover, parents should be involved in this change since most of them should have finished high school at least and are aware of the importance of English for the success of their children. For example, they could also attend special workshops that illustrate the significance and the importance of teaching EFL through children's literature especially at the elementary level. The training session should focus on the criteria for choosing a book, the way it should be read to their kids and how to discuss its content. Such training sessions are very important because only 11.6% of the pupils mentioned that their parents always read them books. (L1). Similarly, 7.1% mentioned that they have this parental experience only sometimes (See Table 2). 16.1% of the pupils answered positively to the question which asked them if they read a story before they go to bed and 9.8% stated that they do so sometimes.

The results of this study have shown that authentic children's stories are motivating sources of EFL materials. Most of the studies had been carried out in the use of authentic stories were conducted in 2nd language classrooms schools in which the language instruction was English or in second language classrooms in English speaking countries. This study indicates that authentic stories can be an outstanding strategy in EFL class rooms as well. Therefore, they should be considered seriously for being part of the school curriculum in EFL classrooms. A great deal of communicative activities to include all language skills could be prepared to facilitate language learning through reading holistic authentic stories.

4. Conclusion

The above analysis indicates that authentic children's stories could be very motivating, enjoyable and a very effective source for foreign language learning. It also indicates the applicability of integrating authentic stories in the EFL instruction in traditional Arab classrooms. Using such stories will be just a pleasant diversion unless serious steps are taken first. Well-stocked libraries for every day reading are needed.

The results of this study show that using children's stories in EFL classrooms could be a very motivating and encouraging tool for achieving a positive attitude among the learners as well as their instructors. In addition, it could be used as a stimulus for increasing the learners' participation in EFL classroom language learning activities.

There is no doubt that there is still a great deal to be learned about use of children's literature in the EFL classrooms. This study was flawed in that although the two groups of the fifth and sixth graders didn't have equal instruction of English through stories, the data from the questionnaires were analyzed collectively. The analysis would have been more useful if the results had been compared rather than collated.

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Table 1. Third year students' questionnaire N= 14

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Not at all
A. I like teaching English to elementary school children	10	4	-	-
B. I prepare myself well for my lessons.	11	3	-	-
C. I teach through authentic children's literature	3	9	2	-
D. I am very excited about implementing the ideas that I learned in the "Whole Language" Course	3	9	2	-
E. I like reading literature in general.	9	5	-	-
F. I enjoy reading children's literature to my siblings, nephews and nieces	4	6	-	-
G. I don't think that reading is useful.	1	-	2	11
H. I don't believe that teaching through literature is beneficial for teaching EFL.	2	2	3	7

Table 2. Pupils' Questionnaire N=112

	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
a. I like the English lesson	55.4	25.0	14.3	5.4
b. I take part in the English lesson	41.4	30.4	25.0	3.6
c. I raise my hand when I am sure that my answer is correct	59.8	14.3	20.5	1.8
d. I try to answer the teacher's questions	49.1	32.2	15.2	2.7
e. I prepare for the English lesson	64.3	24.1	7.1	-
f. I usually do my homework for the English lesson.	68.8	14.3	13.4	.9
g. I ask my mom/brother to help me.	8.9	8.0	46.4	35.7
h. I feel a difficulty in the English lesson	8.0	8.0	47.3	32.1
i. I like the lesson when the teacher reads us a story	35.7	28.6	25.9	8.0
j. I like the lesson when the teacher reads from the textbook	44.6	32.1	16.1	15.4
k. I like the lesson when the teacher doesn't teach us from the book.	7.1	15.2	40.2	34.8
l. I understand the story that the student teacher reads.	39.3	26.8	24.1	6.3
m. I feel it is hard to understand the story	8.0	10.7	38.4	40.2
n. I like to color in the booklet that the student teacher gives.	44.6	13.4	26.8	13.4
o. I watch cartoons in English	42.00	20.5	25.9	11.6
p. I like to play computer games in English	28.6	27.7	30.4	12.5
q. I like reading stories in general	50.0	19.6	22.3	4.5
r. My parents read me stories before I go to bed.	11.6	7.1	25.0	56.3
s. I read stories before I go to bed.	16.1	9.8	32.1	41.1