

Demystifying Children's Literature

by

Zahedah bt Abdul Hafiz

International Languages Teacher Training Institute
Kuala Lumpur

ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the notion of using children's literature to assist language learning. It will review some definitions of children's literature and discuss views on the link between reading children's literature and acquiring language. It will also discuss how the books that children read in childhood help mould their views, influence their way of life and can be a pivot to encourage children to become willing readers. It will argue for the use of children's literature as a resource in language teaching. In doing so it will propose that language learning can be made fun and enjoyable with the use of children's literature. It will also put forward the notion that the use of children's literature as a resource in language teaching and learning can assist in helping to demystify literature and children's literature thus encouraging its use in ESL classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a voice in the discussion to demystify children's literature and literature for use in the ESL classroom. It will review some definitions of literature and children's literature, recognizing the extensive nature of what literature stands for in the world. It will discuss genres that encompass children's literature, and discuss the link between reading and responding to children's literature and language learning. It will argue for the use of children's literature as a resource for language teaching and learning as a great deal of research points to the benefits of its use in language learning. This paper will put forward the notion that children's literature be used in the ESL classroom as a resource to encourage reading and assist language learning.

Definitions of Children's Literature

Literature is vast and about life. Literature is a miracle. With words on a page, a writer can take his readers to a place that never was, let them find out about people who never lived, and help them share adventures that never happened and in spite of this artifice, create and write something truer than life itself. Much has been written about it and from many viewpoints. In essence, literature can be and is a valuable part of language and life experience. When composing a work of art in words a writer creates an experience of

life. It has many definitions and vast interpretations, and can be viewed from a variety of aspects; Arnold (1853) defined it as ‘the best of what has been thought and written’. Eagleton (1995) proposes that literature transforms and intensifies ordinary language and that it is not pseudo-religion or, psychology or sociology, but it is a particular organization of language which among other things lends itself to the acquisition of language and this is particularly important to second language learners. Jauss (1992) argues that literature actually has the ability to inform readers of language structure when looked at as grammatical interpretation. In short, it seeks to save the literal or reconstruct the past meaning in order that it can be translated into a form understandable in the present. This link between literature and language is a valuable one that needs to be tapped in the ESL classroom.

Children’s literature has all the genres and forms of literature, and is a branch of literature however it is a term that is not easily defined. Though children’s literature defies definition it needs to be defined, Hunt (1996) says that it will have to be defined ‘according to our purposes, by features, by cultural norms and according to the uses of texts by individuals’. Hanson (1998) proposes that it be defined as ‘the material created for and widely read, viewed and heard by children, that has an imaginative element’. Munde (1997) similarly proposes that the term children’s literature applies ‘to those works which have both literary value and appeal to children’. In other words the purpose of such texts is to encourage children to read and this is clearly stated by Lesnik (1998) when he claims that children’s literature is, by definition ‘underpinned by purpose’. It is specially concerned with the aim of encouraging children to read. He says it is something in particular, because its purpose is supposed to connect it with the reading audience, namely children, with whose needs it declares itself to be overtly and purposefully concerned with children. It could be books that are good for children especially in terms of emotional and moral values. He goes on to say that because children’s literature is in itself good for children, and something that affects the child better or more than ‘non-literature,’ it then can contribute to overall reading and language development.

With such arguments children’s literature can be easily seen to be for a particular audience. It is especially suitable for children and it entails all the qualities of form and content, as well as genres of literature. The specific qualities found in it can be utilized as a vehicle to encourage reading and assist language learning especially more so for second language learners.

Genres in Children’s Literature

Children’s literature encompasses most of the genres as in adult literature; it contains stories, rhymes, poems and plays, which can be further divided into animal, religious, adventure, school and family stories, fairy tales, folktales, illustrated texts and picture books, science and historical fiction, poetry, playground rhymes, nursery rhymes and oral tradition as well as comics and dime novels.

It can also be said that children’s literature is a collection of books and book-based media that are read to and by children and the collection of such texts is enormous. It spans the

range from alphabet books and nursery rhyme collections for the very young to novels and informational books for adolescents. In other words stories read or read to, rhymes role-played or sung, drama acted or mimed can all be considered to be part of children's literature. All these genres in children's literature play an integral part in assisting children's language acquisition and development. The power of stories, rhymes and plays whether read or told can form a major part of a child's earliest recollections. According to Martin and Leather (1994) an experience of the power of stories and rhyme and personally responding to them helps children learn about language as well as how texts work. Meek (1982) concurs and says that 'an early introduction to stories and rhyme is the significant starting point for children taking on the heritage of literature in the folklore of childhood'. When parents and teachers concoct stories in various settings and either read or tell stories most children will learn about story openings and endings, story characters, and the kinds of things that happen to the characters and they will also learn that stories are told in the past tense. Martin and Leather (1994) also go on to add that other than stories, rhymes are another genre in children's literature that can help children learn about language. When children, chant, sing, and learn rhymes by heart (playground, nursery rhymes) they develop their sensitivity to language in ways that are important for their future reading development. This can be said to be so because the use of rhyme and alliteration leads to the development of phonological awareness, which in turn can help children in the development of their reading skills.

Why Children's Literature?

The twentieth century has seen the development of literature specifically for children, catering to their wants and needs. Development in this area is continuing as educational theories evolve and specific requirements of individual learners are identified. In the nineteenth century, works of literary merit, although not specifically aimed at children, were made available but only to children of middle and upper classes. These days books in general have become more accessible, with greater number of purchasing points lower costs and greater emphasis in responding to consumer demands. Most families can now afford books for children and schools have more books in libraries and reading corners than past years.

Why children's literature? Why read books? The rationale for encouraging using and reading children's literature is clear. It can assist children in a number of ways not only in assisting language acquisition and language learning but also in numerous other areas of a child's overall development. Current research on critical thinking and cognitive development demonstrates the link between language and thinking ability. According to Smith (1991) where exposure of different genres is concerned the analysis of different types of literature can promote cognitive development because it can give learners an opportunity to apply similar skills and strategies, such as identifying themes discussed in one genre to other genres for example from short stories/poetry to reports and descriptive writing. Zhang and Alex (1995) state that in teacher-centred language classrooms, where teacher discourse and worksheets dominate, the development of oral language is not as progressive as that where (children's) literature dominates in the teaching and learning of language. In support of this view are Senechal et al (1996) who found that language skills

and emergent literacy were enhanced when storybooks were frequently used in teaching and learning of language. Similarly, Otto (1993) found that the use of storybooks in language teaching demonstrated a higher level of emergent reading among children.

An exposure to a wide range of children's literature can increase children's skills in critical thinking by providing a broad knowledge base in scenarios (Smith, 1991). When children have been exposed to a wide range of children's literature, they can draw on background experiences accumulated from their reading experiences to compose a text, whether in concrete or abstract form. Therefore, the use of children's literature offers the potential for higher-level thinking. Through the use of children's literature children learn to read personally, actively and deeply (Sweet, 1993).

In investigating the application of children's literature and its value from a meta-cognitive perspective Staniford (1984) in his study identified common features of comprehension deficiencies. And it was concluded that contributing to this lack of comprehension features was the lack of appropriate schemata. This deficit of schemata can be addressed by the application and use of children's literature with its vast storehouse of genres. Children's literature encompasses a number of genres, when learners are exposed to a number of genres there is evidence that the major intellectual function that each literary genre provides can be a source of valuable schemata and experiences which they can in turn bring to the text in attempting to comprehend texts.

Children's literature has also successfully been used to address children experiencing learning difficulties. When exposed to children's literature children who had been classified as being unable to read responded positively to literature (Sulzby et al, 1993). On the other hand talented and gifted children may not have their needs met without adequate access to children's literature, this view has been put forward by Collins and Aiex (1995) who noted that a differentiated reading program rich with children's literature is appropriate for such learners.

Researchers and practitioners have also documented the importance of children's literature for developing language and literacy skills and content knowledge (Rudman, 1993 and Smallwood, 1996). This is because high quality children's literature contains universal themes, accepted values, stunning illustrations and is captivating, consequently carefully chosen books can offer educational benefits to language learners.

One other reason why children's literature should be utilised is because through using multicultural children's literature we can cultivate cultural understanding. The value of good multicultural children's literature can reflect many aspects of a culture, its values, beliefs, ways of life, and patterns of thinking. Quality multicultural children's literature can transcend time, space and language and help readers to learn about an individual or a group of people in their own cultural settings. Subsequently, the exposure to multicultural children's literature can help children appreciate the idiosyncrasies of other ethnic groups as well as help eliminate cultural ethnocentrism. When children read stories from their own cultures as well as other cultures they have opportunities to see how others go

through experiences similar or unlike their experiences in other words they can learn about groups of people whose stories take place in varied historical and physical settings.

Children's Literature and Language Learning

Our culture should no longer view literature or children's literature simply as a means for escape and adventure. We should recognize that there is value in reading novels, short stories, poems, plays and rhymes whether for enjoyment or for purposes of academia. Where the primary school ESL classes are concerned children's literature should be an important part of the classroom language program. It should be used as a resource in the teaching and learning of language. As teachers we should address the issue and demystify children's literature by using it in our teaching and making it accessible and available for our learners. We have to strive to make reading it as part of their lifestyle. As teachers we have should be able to assist our learners to realize that through the use of children's literature they will be able to satisfy all kinds of emotional and intellectual needs. There is a type of literature for every need, so to say.

Language teachers can select from a variety of genres in children's literature. For instance folktales can provide quite a clear and fairly uncomplicated example of a type of children's literature. Language teachers through the use of a simple genre like the folktale in their teaching, can actually help learners understand that there are different types of children's literature. They can go on and explain or show that the various types can be defined by characteristics noted. In this way learners can generally begin to distinguish folktales, fairy tales, short realistic fiction, fantasy fiction and also non fiction which can range from personal essays to descriptions and so on. One way of doing this is by reading several sample folktales and by analyzing their characteristics in group discussions, even very young children can arrive at a reasonable list of characteristics of the folktale :

- involves real people or a typical situation
- uses unusual occurrences or humour to resolve an issue
- uses common spoken language, and
- makes a point about life.

Language teachers can either read or tell a story. Stories in children's literature can be subdivided into numerous kinds, for example fairy tales, animal, school or adventure stories. Whitehead (1999) states that a story is 'a number of happenings real or imaginary, which have been organised so as to be told or shared in some form'. In stories there is an organising system called narrative and this provides a kind of backbone to the story. Those who wish to use storytelling, can begin by choosing a simple story with only a few characters and a fairly uncomplicated plot. The story as far as possible should have action, where the plot should be easily understandable and at the level of the learners. The events of the story should have a definite climax that then leads to a conclusion that the learners find satisfactory. According to Ramey (1986) folk and fairy tales are the easiest kinds of stories for beginning storytellers/teachers to communicate with their young learners. Teachers need to select their stories or texts with the age and language level of their learners in mind. The instructional potential of using storytelling in the

language classroom is vast. Effective story telling in the language classroom can be used to encourage exploration and experimentation with language (Schwartz, 1987). One implicit goal in storytelling is constructing meaning through use of language. One strategy teachers can use as a language development focus is retelling stories. When stories are told and retold they develop a patina with each new telling. According to Wason-Ellam (1986) children's participation in storytelling can provide not only novelty to stimulate their curiosity but also enough familiarity to allow children to perceive relationships and to experience success in using language.

According to Wray and Medwell (1991) stories can teach children both about people and 'things'. They contend that most of the information or schemata that we have are accumulated over the years from stories rather than from factual statements. They also say that stories have the ability to 'stimulate the readers imagination' because they allow the children's minds to create pictures of people, places and events in the stories, and these mental images help to encourage creative thinking. They also contend that stories 'encourage readers to engage in predictive thinking' that is when the child is either reading or listening to a story, throughout the story the child is building up sets of impressions of what has gone before and predicting the events which may proceed.

There is a strong link between reading stories and acquiring language. This is because stories provide a wealth of experience and information and this helps children decipher texts to access meaning and understanding. Herriot (1970) in discussing about the learning of language claims that 'some features of children's experience are of vital importance to the learning of the structure of language'. According to Chambers (1991) 'it is a fact of our psychological make-up that we are unable to read anything without experiencing some sort of response'. He describes two such responses, the first relating to the pleasure and enjoyment that reading a book brings when readers feel that they either want to re-read the book or to read others by the same author. The second response draws on the enjoyment of the book in the sense that readers are unable to stop talking about it and want others to experience it too. This kind of book talk according to Chambers takes two forms, one being the social activity of informal gossip when children are able to chat together (discuss) about a book they have read and the second, which is developed from this informality. Such response is thought to cause readers to think more carefully and deeply about what they have read, developing their ability to question, report, compare and discriminate between texts they have read. What is of utmost importance is that reading must take place and children read, not because they have to but because they want to.

Among practitioners it has been clear for a long time that children who read early are almost invariably children whose lives are full of books and activities involving reading and writing. Wells (1985) argues that stories have a vital role in learning because the activity of learning or discovery is one where we make things become meaningful, in other words we construct stories in the mind and share our interpretation of events and ideas with others. Stories express information, ranging from the myths that try to explain the basic beliefs of the culture to the anecdotes that illustrate our own stories of our day-to-day activities and selves. Stories allow us to become spectators instead of participants

who are totally concerned with getting things done and in doing this reflection, comment and other meta- cognitive activities become possible for us. Essentially stories allow us to profit from other people's experience, as well as, reflection on our own. When teachers use stories it means that they will use words to create a world as well as to fit the world. The words found in stories can provide the context in which the text itself, and the knowledge that it conjures, can be understood. Thus stories require full attention to linguistic meaning, and this kind of attention and this sort of knowledge is required in the language classroom.

This paper concludes with the proposition that the use of children's literature as a resource in language teaching will reap numerous benefits. A large amount of research shows the link between reading children's literature and language learning. Children's literature with its rich storehouse of genres can pave the way for dynamics of literary response that can cut many ways. Books can take readers up out of their chairs or beds, and make them imaginatively live other lives. The first priority is to involve children in literature without having them to struggle to read it. This means teachers need to refine their skills at reading aloud, working on their storytelling and involving children in the storytelling too, and engaging children in role playing and drama. Such activities can engage children in the meaning and the beauty and the fascination of literature, without making an obstacle out of reading the words. What is of utmost importance in the ESL classroom is to encourage children's voluntary reading. We want children to become willing readers and to love reading right from the start. And if they have had more television and electronic games than nursery rhymes, play ground rhymes, fairy tales and bedtime stories, this is all the more reason to entice them with free access to colourful, fun and enjoyable story books.

References

- Chambers, A. 1991. The Reading Environment. Stroud : Thimble Press.
- Collins, N.D. & Aeix, N.K. 1995. Gifted Readers and Reading Instruction. ERIC Digest.
- Eagleton, T. 1995. Literary Theory : An Introduction. Oxford : Blackwell
- Hanson, K. 1998. ELT 402. Children' Literature for Teacher Librarians. Open Learning Institute
- Hunt, P. 1994. An Introduction to Children's Literature. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Hunt, P. 1996. Defining Children's Literature. In Egoff, S. and Stubbs, G. (et al) Only Connect Readings in Children's Literature. Oxford : Oxford University Press.
- Herriot, P. 1970. An Introduction to the Psychology of Language. London : Methuen

- Jauss, H. 1992. The Theory of Reception: A Retrospective of its Unrecognized Prehistory. Literary Theory Today. Cambridge : Polity Press.
- Lesnik-Oberstein, K. 1998. Defining Children's Literature and Childhood. In International Companion Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature. New York : Routledge.
- Martin, T. and Leather, B. 1994. Readers and Texts in the Primary Years. Buckingham : Open University Press.
- Meek, M. 1988. How Texts Teach What Readers Learn. Lockwood : The Thimble Press.
- Meek, M. 1982. Learning to Read. London : The Bodley Press.
- Munde, G. 1997. What are you laughing at? Children's Literature in Education. Vol.28, 4.
- Ramey, M. 1986. Mastering the Art of Storytelling Takes Training and Experience. Highway One, 9(4) pp 47-51.
- Rudman, M.K.(Ed.) 1993. Children's Literature : Resources for the Classroom. Norwood : Christopher-Gordon.
- Schwartz, M. 1987. Connection to Language Through Story. Language Arts. 64 (6) pp 603-610.
- Smith, C.B. 1991. The Role of Different Literary Genres. Reading Teacher. 44 (6) 440- 41.
- Wason-Ellam, L. 1986. Storytelling Extends Literary Language. Highway One. 9(2) pp 33-39.
- Wells, G. 1985. Language and Learning : An Interactional Perspective. London : Farmer Press.
- Whitehead, M. 1999. Supporting Language and Literacy Development in the Early Years. Buckingham : Open University Press.
- Wray, D. and Medwell, J. 1991. Literacy and Language in the Primary Years. London : Routledge