Children's Literature in English Language Teaching (ELT): Enhancing Language Skills and Learner Engagement

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***Abstract*—This paper investigates the pedagogical efficacy of utilizing authentic children's literature (CHL) within English Language Teaching (ELT) frameworks, moving beyond traditional, structurally dry graded readers. Drawing upon sociocultural theory and input hypotheses, we examine how children's literature simultaneously cultivates core macro-linguistic skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and elevates affective learner engagement. Through a comprehensive review of recent literature, this study details how narrative elements, predictable linguistic structures, and multimodal cues (e.g., in picture books) facilitate subconscious vocabulary acquisition and grammatical internalization. Furthermore, the paper demonstrates that children's literature serves as a potent vehicle for critical thinking and intercultural communicative competence (ICC). Finally, we address systemic challenges to implementation such as congested curricula and lacking teacher training and provide targeted pedagogical recommendations for the contemporary global EFL/ESL classroom.**

***Index Terms*—Children's Literature, ELT, Language Acquisition, Learner Engagement, Intercultural Awareness, Pedagogical Frameworks.**

I. INTRODUCTION

For decades, formal foreign language teaching heavily prioritized mechanical drill-and-practice methods and sanitized, structurally controlled texts known as "graded readers." While graded readers provide predictable lexical environments, they often lack the emotional depth, stylistic nuance, and cultural authenticity required to foster genuine student investment. In recent years, a paradigm shift in English Language Teaching (ELT) has sparked a renewed appreciation for authentic children's literature (CHL) as an elite vehicle for both primary and advanced language acquisition (Nagy-Kolozsvári & Gordon Győri, 2022).

By its very nature, children's literature presents language in a holistic, context-rich environment. Rather than presenting vocabulary items in isolation, stories stitch language into cohesive narratives driven by relatable characters, high-stakes problems, and emotional arcs. This fusion of authentic input satisfies Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis ($i+1$) while lowering the Affective Filter by shifting student focus away from the anxiety of formal learning and into the immersive world of the story (Asmini, 2022). This paper aims to synthesize current pedagogical frameworks regarding the use of CHL in ELT, exploring how it enhances the four macro-language skills, serves as a catalyst for cognitive and critical development, and acts as an agent of deep learner engagement.

II. CHAPTER DISCUSSION

2.1 Enhancing the Four Macro Skills and Lexical Acquisition

The integration of children's literature offers an organic baseline for merging reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Literary texts serve as an excellent model for how language functions in context rather than in isolation (Leal, 2015).

Vocabulary and Reading Authentic children's literature exposes learners to a wide range of words, including rich, expressive vocabulary omitted from standardized curricula. Studies show that the replication of naturalistic child reading behaviors combined with the contextual cues of storytelling allows foreign language learners to acquire large working mental lexicons efficiently (Cheetham, 2019). Picture books, in

particular, scaffold reading comprehension by providing immediate pictorial keys that map directly to novel nouns and descriptive adjectives (Asmini, 2022).

Listening and Speaking: Story read-a louds and interactive storytelling facilitate phonetic awareness and acoustic familiarity. When teachers guide interactive discussions around open-ended narrative dilemmas, students transition from passive consumers to active producers of spoken English.

Integrated Writing: Literature acts as a natural springboard for creative composition. Instructional tasks such as rewriting grammar patterns (e.g., converting past-tense narratives to future tenses), composing alternative character endings, or conducting character analyses bridge the gap between reading reception and written expression (Leal, 2015; Sterioti, 2024).

2.2 Promoting Cognitive Development and the 4Cs of CLIL

Children's literature is no longer viewed merely as an engine for simple entertainment; it is an active cognitive catalyst. Research establishes a direct line between narrative processing and the development of 21st-century critical thinking skills (Aisyah & Mustofa, 2023). By assessing a character's motives, evaluating conflicts, and predicting plot directions, young learners move past factual recall into higher-order analysis and synthesis.

Furthermore, children's literature maps precisely onto Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) frameworks, specifically supporting the **4Cs**:

Content Exploring cross-curricular subjects like history, geography, and moral ethics through thematic storytelling. Communication Producing context-driven language during peer debates, narrative retellings, and text negotiations. Cognition Cultivating critical thinking, inferencing, and reasoning through problem-centered plots (Aisyah & Mustofa, 2023).

Culture Fostering cross-cultural awareness and international communicative competence (Graham et al., 2021).

2.3 Enhancing Learner Engagement and Affective Outcomes

One of the most persistent hurdles in ELT is overcoming student passivity, anxiety, and disinterest. Children's literature addresses this through psychological and emotional alignment. When a learner becomes emotionally invested in a text, their subconscious cognitive defenses dissolve (Asmini, 2022). This narrative immersion shifts the paradigm from *learning a language* to *experiencing a story*. The predictable patterns, rhyming structures, and short chapters native to CHL generate rapid milestones of achievement, boosting learner confidence and self-efficacy (Leal, 2015). Furthermore, literature provides safe spaces for identity exploration, allowing students to map their personal life experiences onto fictional paradigms, establishing deep personal connections to the target language (Lee, 2011).

2.4 Addressing Constraints and Implementation Pitfalls

Despite its undeniable strengths, systemic roadblocks frequently limit the use of CHL in global ELT environments.

Key Barriers to Implementation:

- Congested Curricula: Fast-paced, exam-driven school systems leave little administrative breathing room for non-textbook materials (Nagy-Kolozsvári & Gordon Győri, 2022).
- Linguistic Strain: Unmodified literature can present a wide scattering of rare words and complex syntax, which may initially overwhelm low-proficiency learners if unmediated (Cheetham, 2019).
- Deficiencies in Teacher Training: Many pre-service and in-service training programs do not equip teachers with concrete methodologies for selecting or exploiting authentic texts (Nagy-Kolozsvári & Gordon Győri, 2022).
- To maximize outcomes, practitioners must avoid texts with stark gender or cultural biases, and instead select stories that provide both a "mirror" to the student's identity and a "window" into international spaces (Ibrahim, 2021; Lee, 2011).

III. CONCLUSION

The integration of authentic children's literature within ELT contexts represents a vital departure from sterile, grammar-heavy pedagogy towards holistic, emotionally resonant, and communicative language learning. By presenting language within dynamic narrative structures, children's literature accelerates

vocabulary acquisition, unifies the instruction of the four macro-skills, and fosters advanced critical thinking alongside deep cultural literacy. Most importantly, it tackles the affective component of learning, converting language acquisition from an academic chore into an intrinsically motivating experience.

To bridge the gap between theory and practice, institutional change is required. Educational authorities must ease curricular constraints to allow for literature-based modules, and teacher training programs must actively train educators in narrative scaffolding strategies. When chosen thoughtfully and deployed purposefully, children's literature does not just teach a language it unlocks the world.

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