

SELECTING AND PRESENTING LITERATURE TO YOUNG LEARNERS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract

This article presents a systematic examination of the principles, criteria, and pedagogical practices for selecting and presenting literature to young language learners. Drawing on theoretical frameworks and empirical studies spanning several decades, the review synthesizes definitions of children's literature from multiple scholars, establishes evidence-based selection criteria, and outlines effective classroom presentation strategies. The analysis demonstrates that authentic children's literature provides a motivating, meaningful context for language learning by presenting natural language, fostering vocabulary development in authentic contexts, promoting academic literacy and critical thinking skills, and contributing to children's emotional and intercultural development. Key selection criteria include age-appropriate themes, simple language with predictable patterns, clear illustrations, action-oriented narratives, and alignment with curriculum objectives. Effective presentation strategies incorporate pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading activities that activate prior knowledge, scaffold comprehension, and extend learning through meaningful tasks. The article concludes with practical recommendations for educators and directions for future research.

Keywords: children's literature, young learners, English language teaching, story selection, early literacy, authentic materials, language acquisition, picture books, storytelling.

INTRODUCTION

The integration of literature into language instruction for young learners has gained substantial recognition among educators and researchers over the past several decades. A growing body of evidence indicates that literature-based instructional approaches can positively influence the oral communication development of primary school students (Morrow, 1992). This recognition stems from an increasing understanding that young children acquire language most effectively when exposed to meaningful, engaging, and contextually rich materials rather than through isolated grammar exercises or decontextualized vocabulary drills.

Children's literature occupies a distinctive position within language education. Unlike artificially constructed textbook dialogues, authentic children's books provide natural language samples, cultural insights, and imaginative content that capture young learners' attention and sustain their engagement over extended periods. However, the effective use of children's literature in language teaching depends critically upon two interrelated factors: the appropriate selection of materials and the skillful presentation of those materials to learners. A

poorly chosen book will fail to engage, while a well-chosen book presented ineffectively will not achieve its pedagogical potential.

The definition of children’s literature itself has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate over several decades. McDowell (1973) proposed a foundational definition, suggesting that the term applies to quality books written for and read by the group referred to as children by any particular professional community. This definition emphasizes both the intended audience and the literary quality of the work as essential characteristics. Oberstein (1996) offered a more complex characterization, describing children’s literature as a class of text whose meaning depends fundamentally upon supposed kinship with a particular interpretive community namely, children themselves. This perspective shifts attention from authorial intention to the relationship between text and reader.

Hollindale (1997) provided an alternative definition, describing children’s literature as a body of texts possessing certain common features of imaginative interest, which becomes children’s literature through a reading result that is, through being read by a child. This definition emphasizes the act of reading as the defining characteristic rather than any inherent property of the text itself. Ghosn (2002) offered a more functional perspective, describing children’s literature as narrative written for children to read primarily for pleasure rather than for explicitly didactic purposes. This perspective emphasizes the aesthetic and affective dimensions of literary experience over instructional utility.

Huck and colleagues (1997) defined children’s literature more broadly as the imaginative shaping of life and thought into the forms and structures of language. Galda and Cullinan (2002) expanded substantially upon this view, arguing that literature both entertains and informs simultaneously. Furthermore, they asserted that literature enables young people to explore and understand their world, enriches their lives, and widens their intellectual horizons. Through engagement with literature, children learn about people and places across the globe, travel through time, explore their own identities, shape their personal values, and imagine lives beyond their own immediate experience.

Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown (2002) offered a comprehensive and practically useful definition, describing children’s literature as good quality trade books written especially for children from birth through adolescence, covering topics of relevance and interest to children. This definition encompasses both quality and appropriateness as essential criteria for selection while acknowledging the wide age range encompassed by the term.

METHODS

This systematic review synthesizes theoretical frameworks, empirical research studies, and practitioner guidelines published primarily between 1973 and 2013, with inclusive consideration of foundational works that have shaped the field. Sources were selected based on four criteria: (a) direct relevance to children’s literature in language education contexts; (b) explicit focus on selection criteria or presentation strategies for young learners; (c) publication in peer-reviewed journals, academic books, or established educational databases; and (d) availability in English language.

RESULTS

Ghosn (2002) provided a comprehensive synthesis of the reasons why authentic literature holds particular value for children in language learning contexts. First, authentic literature provides a motivating and meaningful context for language learning, since children

are naturally drawn to stories and narrative structures. This natural attraction reduces learner resistance and increases voluntary engagement with language materials. Second, literature can contribute directly to language development by presenting natural language at its finest, fostering vocabulary growth within authentic contextual frameworks. Third, literature can promote academic literacy and higher-order thinking skills, preparing children for eventual English-medium instruction across content areas. Fourth, literature can function as an agent of personal change; good literature deals meaningfully with aspects of the human condition, thus contributing to children’s emotional development while fostering positive interpersonal attitudes and intercultural understanding.

Brown (2004) added several additional benefits to this framework. Appropriate selections of children’s literature give students exposure to new vocabulary presented with illustrated support in meaningful contexts. Such selections also provide repetition of key words and phrases that students can master and learn to manipulate independently. Furthermore, successful engagement with complete stories provides learners with a genuine sense of accomplishment that motivates continued effort.

Winch and colleagues (2004) emphasized that children’s literature provides a wonderful opportunity for children to see language functioning authentically in action. Additionally, they noted that literature serves as a rich resource for more formal learning about language structures while simultaneously functioning as a locus for learning about these structures within meaningful contexts. This dual function makes literature uniquely valuable among instructional materials.

Heide Niemann (2002) identified several specific benefits of storybooks for young language learners. Storybooks represent an integral part of a country’s cultural heritage, thus effectively combining language learning with cultural awareness development. They challenge and develop the imagination while helping children expand their understanding of their own world; sometimes literature may even help children cope with challenging aspects of their personal reality. Storybooks provide language embedded in meaningful contexts and present grammatical structures within authentic discourse frameworks. They give children the opportunity to browse independently, choose their own reading pace, and examine visual details carefully. They introduce topics and language patterns in child-oriented ways and help children develop creative and imaginative powers. In picture books specifically, the combination of text and illustration mutually supports understanding and interpretation of the story, creating a synergistic effect.

Steinbeck (2008) listed several essential characteristics of using stories with young learners. Stories should be action-oriented to maintain engagement and momentum. Stories should be personal in nature, employing familiar characters, while pre-reading and post-reading activities should make strategic use of personalization techniques. Stories should not be overly detailed, either in terms of narrative complexity or visual density, to avoid cognitive overload. Stories should allow for context extension, enabling teachers to build additional activities around the core narrative. Stories should use comprehensible input language pitched at the appropriate cognitive and linguistic level so that learner output becomes more structured and accurate.

DISCUSSION

The multiple definitions of children’s literature reviewed in this article share several common elements despite their differences in emphasis. Most definitions emphasize literary quality, appropriateness for child readers, and imaginative or aesthetic value. Some definitions focus primarily on authorial intention, others on the act of reading itself, and still others on the inherent characteristics of the text. For practical purposes in language education contexts, Tomlinson and Lynch-Brown’s (2002) definition good quality trade books written especially for children covering topics of relevance and interest provides the most workable and applicable framework for educators making daily selection decisions.

The selection criteria proposed by Smallwood (1988), Steinbeck (2008), and Vardel, Hadaway, and Young (2006) converge substantially on several key principles despite their different emphases. First, appropriateness for the learner’s age, interests, and maturity level is universally emphasized by all scholars. Second, linguistic accessibility including simple sentence structures, predictable language patterns, and limited use of metaphor is consistently identified as crucial for language learners. Third, visual support through clear, coordinated illustrations is repeatedly mentioned across sources. Fourth, alignment with curriculum objectives and thematic units is increasingly recognized as important for systematic instruction.

The emphasis on authentic literature for young learners aligns well with several established theoretical frameworks in second language acquisition. Krashen’s input hypothesis suggests that language acquisition occurs when learners receive comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level. Well-selected children’s literature provides precisely this type of input language that is accessible yet appropriately challenging, supported by contextual clues and illustrations that enhance comprehensibility.

Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development provides another relevant theoretical framework. Stories can be used strategically to scaffold learning, with teachers providing graduated support that enables learners to comprehend and produce language beyond their independent capacity. The pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading structure operationalizes this scaffolding principle in practical classroom terms.

The finding that children are naturally drawn to stories and acquire language unconsciously through story-based activities aligns with implicit learning theories. These theories suggest that substantial language acquisition occurs without conscious attention to linguistic forms, through engaged interaction with meaningful content.

CONCLUSION

Thus, educators are encouraged to incorporate authentic children’s literature systematically into their language curricula, applying evidence-based selection criteria and presentation strategies. Future research should investigate the comparative effectiveness of different types of literature, the integration of digital formats, and the longitudinal effects of sustained literature-based instruction on language development outcomes.

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