

Research Article

A Critical Look at Using Children's Literature in English Language Education

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Article Info

Received: 28 December 2024

Accepted: 09 March 2025

Keywords: Children's literature, English language teaching, distance education, lifelong learning

 10.18009/jcer.1608855

Publication Language: English

Abstract

The current study aimed to investigate whether an involvement in the use of children's literature in foreign language education course resulted in an increase in graduate students' attitudes, awareness, and knowledge of children's literature when teaching English. The study included six graduate students attending a Master's Program in English Language Teaching in Türkiye. This exploratory case study followed a qualitative case study method including focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews held through online sessions. The results indicated an increase in students' appreciation, acceptance, and awareness of using children's literature in English language classrooms. Participants, overwhelmingly, held a positive attitude towards using children's literature in teaching English supporting the view that the use of children's literature was beneficial in teaching grammar and language skills. Besides, it provided improvement in language learners' imagination and critical thinking, interpreting, and guessing skills. It was found that children's literature could also be used as an instrument for improving students' cultural enrichment.



To cite this article: Kuluşaklı, E. (2025). A critical look at using children's literature in English language education. *Journal of Computer and Education Research*, 13 (25), 517-539. <https://doi.org/10.18009/jcer.1608855>

Introduction

Literature and foreign language learning are closely related to each other. Literature has a prominent role in foreign language education (Krsteva & Kukubajska, 2014). Collie and Slater (1990) list four reasons for using literature in classrooms by language teachers as personal involvement, language and cultural enrichment, and authentic material while Maley (1989) mentions ambiguity, suggestive power and economy, interest, variety, personal relevance, non-triviality, and universality of literature (as cited in Hismanoglu, 2005). Abdel Haliem (2017) acknowledges the benefits of using literature in English classrooms as it provides help for learners to improve their personal growth, language, and cultural enrichment. Learners can develop their writing, speaking, and reading skills along with their analytical skills and critical thinking with the integration of literature in general English

classes. Lazar (1993) classifies three approaches to using literature with language learners such as literature for personal enrichment, literature as content, and language-based approaches. In the literature as content approach, the text or the content rather than the language is the main concern (Özışık, 2023) including the genre of the text, the biography of the author, the historical and political background of a literary work, and characteristics and the history of literary movements. The language-based approach is closely related to the integration of literature and language to develop learners' proficiency and knowledge of English. It "emphasizes the awareness of the language of literature which is a basic stage for learners" and "facilitates the students' responses and experience with literature" (Van, 2009 as cited in Febriani, et al., 2018, p. 41). One of the goals of teaching literature to EFL learners is to develop the mastery of the language, English proficiency, and language skills of learners (Lazar, 1993; Collie & Slatter, 1990). Concerning the literature for personal enrichment approach, literature is presented as a helpful instrument for encouraging learners to employ their ideas, feelings, and experiences. Discussion and interaction are supported by classroom activities to increase personal involvement and interest (Özışık, 2023).

Some considerations should be taken into account when integrating literature into language classes. According to Al Khaiyali (2014), picture books should be short, authentic, motivating, easy-to-read, and well-illustrated to be appropriate materials to improve reading comprehension and teach explicit comprehension strategies. Can and Tezcan (2021) claim that teachers should take students' linguistic ability, culture, knowledge, and needs into consideration for better implementation of literature in foreign language classes. Students feel motivated and engaged if literary texts get students' attention and are related to culture. The age and proficiency levels of students are also of great importance for selecting suitable texts for language classes. Teachers need to use literary texts by authors from different backgrounds and various pieces of literature with non-native speakers of English as they make it possible to avoid the view of English in real life and literature and comprehend how English is globally used. For learners of all ages, use of children's literature may be a beneficial and effective method of teaching English (Chen, 2012).

Researchers focused on students' attitudes toward the implementation of literature in foreign language learning. Specifically, Zeybek (2018) investigated pre-service EFL teachers' opinions about the implementation of various genres of literature in teaching English. The study displayed that participants had difficulties and negative feelings with use of novels in

their classes. However, they found using literary texts in language classes beneficial on behalf of both teachers and students. For students, empathy development, cultural awareness, increased interest in literature, cognitive development, and a ground for vocabulary learning were some benefits. For teachers, less teacher workload, presentations of the target language and culture, and motivation were some of the advantages of using literature. Similarly, Aydın and Sarıçoban (2022) examined learners' attitudes toward integrating literary texts in foreign language learning and the place of literature in EFL classrooms. The study results indicated the necessity for using literary texts in the curriculum of foreign language teaching concerning critical thinking, reading, communication, and social skills. It was also revealed that literature had a significant impact on participants' cultural awareness providing learners to enhance their respect for other cultures, their knowledge of different cultures, and intercultural sensitivity. Özışık (2023) investigated English Language Teaching students' opinions about three approaches used for teaching English along with their challenges and benefits. The findings displayed personal enrichment was the most preferred approach as it motivated students to interact and participate. However, literature as content was the least preferred approach due to the linguistic difficulty of literary texts and cultural unfamiliarity.

Hancock (2000) describes children's literature as "literature that appeals to the interests, needs, and reading preferences of children and captivates children as its major audience" (as cited in García, 2007, p.7). Use of children's literature is presented as an alternative way to motivate foreign language learning and a source of language input (Shuquair & Dashti, 2019). As stated by Krashen (1982), "the rationale for using children's literature for English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction is that it provides comprehensible input through content and style" (as cited in Chen, 2012, p. 88). Children's literature can assist students in increasing their emotional skills and language skills such as writing and reading (Suljić, 2020). Similarly, literature for youth provides the investigation of cultural and linguistic elements and leads learners to improve their communication and critical thinking skills and critical thinking (Benabbes & AbdulHaleem Abu Taleb, 2024). Moreover, in foreign language teacher training, children's literature can provide help as children's literature may contribute to language teachers equipped with methods and abilities that they can use to develop learners' reading skills in their classrooms (Suljić, 2020).

It is acknowledged that children's literature should be studied by teachers as it is embedded in the cultural world of the children (Lütge & Bland, 2014). Bishop (1992) mentions the diversification of children's books and the importance of multicultural literature in "a multicultural education curriculum" adding that "the choice of books to be read and discussed in the nation's schools is of paramount importance" (as cited in Möller, 2016, p. 64). Bishop (1997) considers that infusing culturally diverse literature into the curriculum serves as a window or a mirror. Children can find their interactions, feelings, and characteristics confirmed and echoed in a character and see another's life. Therefore, children's opinions can be expanded by these kinds of literary experiences by introducing new experiences and ideas (as cited in Adam & Harper, 2016).

Studies indicated the benefits of using children's literature in the context of foreign language education. Shuquair and Dashti (2019) examined teachers' opinions about the effectiveness and use of children's literature in their language classes. The study indicated that children's literature was often used by the majority of teachers while teaching English to support students' language skills and their learning experience. The findings showed that participants had various opinions about the place of literature but most of them agreed on the significance and logic of using literature in the language teaching curriculum and program. Besides, teachers knew a lot about different genres of children's literature and the techniques of using children's books in their courses. They used children's literature to teach grammar, improve reading skills and speaking proficiency, and contextualize vocabulary. Belsky (2024) explored whether using children's literature with adolescents influenced students' foreign language development, including writing, reading, speaking, and listening. The findings displayed that integrating children's literature in foreign language learning supported participants' personal growth, the improvement of language skills, enjoyment, and appreciation of literature.

Children's literature serves as authentic literary texts used in language classrooms by language teachers as an alternative way to widen learners' cognitive development, cultural awareness, and emotional and language skills (Suljić, 2020; Uslu & Aslan, 2023; Zeybek, 2018). Nevertheless, the literature review provides little information about graduate students' perspectives on using children's literature to teach English and mostly concentrates on the benefits of using children's literature in foreign language teaching. Besides, to the researcher's knowledge, there have not been any studies considering increasing participants'

appreciation and interest in using children's literature while teaching English. Therefore, the researcher of the current study conducted this research with the aim of, first, introducing children's literature in foreign language teaching, and secondly, acquainting participants with selecting and evaluating materials for using children's books and approaches to using literature with the language learner. The purpose of the research was to explore the graduate students' preferences and attitudes after they were introduced to elements of children's literature, material selection and evaluation, classroom activities, lesson plan samples, and use of various types of children's literature in teaching English during twelve-weeks. Accordingly, the value of this study can be seen from three stands. Firstly, it provides the basis for assessing graduate students' attitudes toward children's literature. Secondly, this study addresses the issue of how the use of children's literature in an English language education course can be effective considering participants' attitudes, knowledge, and awareness. Thirdly, it focuses on the idea of whether a graduate-level education course on use of children's literature can provide help for students to increase their attitudes toward using children's literature in teaching English. With this aim, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. Does involvement in the use of children's literature in foreign language education course result in an increase in graduate students' awareness and knowledge of children's literature in teaching English?
2. What are graduate students' attitudes towards using children's literature in English language education?

Method

Research Design

This study used a qualitative method design to gather data concurrently and explore the experiences from participants' points of view. Two main data collection methods, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions were utilized to investigate the research objectives. The main motivation behind using data from multiple sources was to achieve triangulation. Furthermore, ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process.

Research Context

The study was done in a three-credit elective course, namely, Use of Children's Literature in Foreign Language Education for twelve weeks in the spring term of the 2023-2024 academic year. Six weeks of the course were given through distance education and the data collection tools were also administered online during distance education. The course content included the analysis of different definitions of literature and children's literature, the features of literature, the use of literature in foreign language classes, the aim, and the importance of children's literature. It also covered the genres of children's literature, approaches to using literature in language classes, selecting and evaluating materials for using children's literature, and using various types of children's literature in language classes for teaching a language such as short stories, poetry, nursery rhymes, etc. At the end of the course, participants were required to make presentations based on teaching a specific language property by using a genre of children's literature they want to concentrate on (an independent model lesson for their students). The researcher of this study was also the instructor of the course in which the current study took place. She had her PhD in the department of English Language and Literature and she has been teaching English for twenty-four years.

Study Population

The focus of the research was on six graduate students who were also working as English teachers and attending a Master's Program in English Language Teaching at the Institute of Educational Sciences in a state university. They took the three-hour elective course, Use of Children's Literature in Foreign Language Education. They were all studying in the phase of taking Master's courses. As for their academic backgrounds, they all held bachelor's degrees in the English language teaching department. The participants were also English teachers working at various workplaces. In detail, three participants had been giving private online and face-to-face English courses for a year. Two participants had been teaching English for six years at different grades in secondary and high schools. One participant had been teaching at a private high school for two years.

Data Collection and Tools

The study used concurrent qualitative data collection instruments to address the research questions outlined in the introduction section and get deep insights into participants' knowledge, awareness, and attitudes toward use of children's literature in

English language teaching. The data instruments included focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, which were held online.

Online Focus Group Discussions

Online focus group discussions were administered as qualitative data collection instruments to achieve answers, stimulate discussions among the students, and analyze participants' attitudes (Prasad & Garcia, 2017 as cited in Tümen-Akyıldız, 2020). The discussion sections were held during four weeks of the course which was given through distance education. They were conducted in English as participants were proficient in English. In this light, they were held on the subject of each week's course for four weeks of the twelve-week course. Three sessions were done online following weeks four, six, and eight in which the lectures were given on the related topic. For three weeks, lectures on different aspects of children's literature were first given through distance education, participants were assigned to do the tasks, and then the online sessions were held on each week's subject and lasted forty-five minutes. Table 1 demonstrated the descriptives of the online sessions.

In the first online session, the lecture was given on the internal structure of children's books such as message, theme, language and expression, characters and subject, and external structures of children's books such as layout, dimension, paper, cover, letter character and size, and illustration. Then, the focus group discussion was held on the essential elements of children's books. Participants were asked to answer the question: What is the most important element for you when using a work of children's literature in your class? Could you please explain?

In the second online session, the lecture was given on selecting and evaluating materials for using children's books in English classes in terms of reader-task considerations, qualitative measures, and quantitative measures since selecting suitable children's literature for EFL classes was an important step before the class (Ye, 2022). The quantitative measures referred to a quantitative text difficulty such as word frequency, sentence length, and readability formula. The qualitative measures encompassed theme and knowledge demands, language conventionality and clarity, structure, and level of meaning. Reader-task considerations contained the tasks students were asked to perform, abilities, interests, and needs of the students. Participants were asked to answer the question: How could you evaluate the children's literature according to reader-task considerations, qualitative

measures, and quantitative measures? Then, the focus group discussion was held on how they selected and evaluated the books for using children's literature in teaching English.

In the third online session, the lecture was given on the approaches, namely, literature for personal enrichment, literature as content, and language-based to using literature with the language learner. Participants were asked to respond to the question: Which approaches would you prefer to use while teaching English? Why? The focus group discussion was held on the approaches to use children's literature in language classrooms, and participants gave their opinions about which approaches they would prefer to use while teaching English.

Table 1. Descriptives of online sessions

Online sessions	Topic	Duration	Weeks
Session one	The essential elements of children's books: internal and external structures of children's books	45 min.	Week 1
Session two	Selecting and evaluating materials for using children's books in English classes: Quantitative measures, qualitative measures, and reader-task considerations	45 min.	Week 2
Session three	The approaches to using literature with the language learner: Language-based approach, literature as content, and literature for personal enrichment	45 min.	Week 3

Semi-Structured Interview

The research was conducted through online semi-structured interviews with all participants from the focused study side to obtain the track changes. This data measurement aimed to facilitate a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings and broaden the perspective of the research questions. Gathering participants' opinions could provide insights into their preferences and experiences concerning the use of children's literature in educational interactions and understand the probable reasons behind them by using open-ended questions. While collecting the data, each question was prepared to support the emergence of different aspects of the target subject.

In the preparation phase of the questions, a detailed literature was reviewed, a draft was developed, and presented to two academicians working in the English Language Teaching department for a long time in a state university for evaluation and content validity.

In this vein, questions like “What did you generally know about children’s literature before taking this course?” and “What do you think of using children’s literature in foreign language classes?” were asked. If participants’ answers were positive, follow-up questions were asked for further clarification such as “Could you please explain briefly?” The interview process was administered to validate participants’ preferences and experiences towards using children’s literature when teaching English. The interviews were conducted online in English with each student at the end of the study. Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted approximately half an hour long.

Data Analysis

Multiple sources of data were used to align different perspectives and lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions in the study. A convergence of information gathered from the sources was used to explore the different features of the research questions. For the qualitative data gathered through online focus group discussions, and semi-structured interviews, transcriptions were examined to identify emerging themes related to participants’ views, preferences, and experiences with children’s literature in teaching English by using content analysis and inductive coding. Inductive coding was used as the themes emerged from the data. In detail, the interviews were first transcribed into text using Microsoft Word by the researcher, then coded and analyzed using thematic analysis and inductive coding in order “to locate, recognize, and interpret themes” (Ugwu & Eze, 2023, p. 30). Before the codes were determined, the transcripts were read and notes were taken to evaluate. Themes were created considering the research questions. Detailed information about data collection, data analysis, and interpreting processes was given for internal validity. For external validity, the findings collected from the data were evaluated with the results of the previous research mentioned in the literature review section, and similarities and differences were presented accordingly. Interview quotes were incorporated directly into the discussion and result sections to increase the internal reliability, comprehensibility, and clarity of the analysis. When giving participants’ statements in citations, participants were numbered T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, and T6.

Finding

This part summarized the findings taken from the online discussions and semi-structured interviews conducted with the research participants.

Research question 1: Does involvement in the use of children's literature in foreign language education course result in an increase in graduate students' awareness and knowledge of children's literature in teaching English?

Online focus group discussions were carried out to give a response to the first research question of the study: Does involvement in the use of children's literature in foreign language education course result in an increase in graduate students' awareness and knowledge of children's literature in teaching English? Findings were categorized under the subjects of essential elements of children's literature, selecting and evaluating materials, and approaches to using literature with the language learner with its themes and sub-themes.

Online focus group discussion one: Essential element of children's literature

The first focus group discussion was done on the internal and external structures of children's books. Participants were asked to explain what the most important element for them was when using a work of children's literature in their classes. From the thematic coding analysis, three sub-themes were determined, which could be broadly categorized under two themes namely Language and Expression, and Theme.

Language and expression, and theme

Most participants agreed on the idea that language and expression used in children's literature were the most essential elements with the sub-theme of appropriateness for students' proficiency and punctuation:

"I think language and expression are the most important elements in children's literature. Language should be appropriate for children's levels to understand the work easily." (T1, T2, T3)

"When there are mistakes in books, children may imitate these mistakes easily and use them while learning English. The language and punctuation should be correct in children's books." (T4)

Some participants explained the importance of theme in literary works with the sub-theme of culture:

"The event or the theme of the story is important to me. By using the term, theme, I mean that literature should be easy to comprehend and pick up. The topic or the event should be culturally related to the children's experiences, especially at their early ages." (T3)

Online focus group discussion two: Selecting and evaluating materials

The second focus group discussion was held on selecting and evaluating materials for using children's literature in English classes in terms of quantitative measures, qualitative measures, and reader-task considerations. From the thematic coding analysis, five sub-themes were identified, which could be broadly categorized under five themes namely Cover, Grammar, Student's interest, Vocabulary, and Content.

Cover

Participants gave their opinions about how to select and evaluate materials for using children's literature in teaching English. Specifically, all participants explained the importance of cover with the sub-theme of interesting and noticeable cover as given in the following extracts:

"Learners may easily predict what is going to happen by looking at the cover of the book. The cover should give clues about the storyline and of course, it should be interesting and noticeable." (T2)

Grammar

Grammar was one of the themes mostly mentioned about by four participants with the sub-theme of the simplicity of grammar use as follows:

"I prefer to use less complex books in my classes. I mean simplicity in terms of grammar. I can evaluate the book by quick scanning to understand the complexity of the language. I focus on the difficulty of the language". (T5)

Vocabulary

Vocabulary use in children's books was another theme stated by two participants with the sub-theme of simplicity in understanding the words as follows:

"If vocabulary is not suitable and there are some difficult words the students cannot understand them easily." (T1)

Content

Two participants also expressed that the content of the books was appropriate for language learners to comprehend with the sub-theme of familiarity as shown in the extract below:

"The familiar content of the book is an advantage for my students if they know much about the content of that book". (T4)

The contrary to the opinion given above, one participant stated that familiarity with the content of the book was not an advantage for language learners since content should attract language learners' attention as shown in the following:

"In terms of the content, for example, some books have a common story. If my students already know the story and its storyline, I think they will not try to understand it. For this reason, I would prefer to use a book which is new to them. Now, I am teaching at a high school so I would consider if the content is enjoyable for my students as I take my students' interest into account". (T2)

Online focus group discussion three: Approaches to using literature with the language learner

The third focus group discussion was administered on the approaches to using literature with the language learner. The participants gave their opinions about which approaches they would prefer to use while teaching English after giving lectures on three types of approaches: language-based approach, literature as content, and literature for personal enrichment. From the thematic coding analysis, seven sub-themes were determined, which could be broadly categorized under Language-Based Approach for Grammar and Vocabulary Teaching, Personal Enrichment for Pleasure and Personal Experiences, and Literature as Content.

Language-based approach for grammar and vocabulary teaching

All participants preferred using the language-based approach to teach parts of grammar and vocabulary since they had to follow the curriculum and this approach allowed them to use grammar activities and authentic materials as indicated below:

"When it comes to using literature while teaching English, I prefer using literary works to get help with the curriculum. In other words, the language-based approach can fit well into my classes. For instance, when I teach past continuous tense to my students, I can use some short stories that include sample usages of this tense. The short stories, as authentic materials, will present my students with language samples." (T5)

"A language-based approach seems to be the most useful approach for my teaching environment. Literary texts can be used as a resource to increase students' proficiency. It may provide stimulating language activities." (T3)

One participant gave some examples of using literary texts such as a poem or a novel to teach adjectives through using reading strategy (guessing) for improving students' linguistic abilities as illustrated in the following:

"Giving students some poems and possible titles to choose from them is a good idea and appropriate for my students. They may also try to fill in missing adjectives in a short text from a novel, in this way; they can both understand the given text and use their linguistic abilities". (T2)

However, one participant also acknowledged that focusing too much on linguistic terms can have a deteriorating effect on literary aspects of the lesson:

"One problem here would be that the focus may be too much on the linguistic terms, so the literary side of the text may be overlooked." (T1)

Literature for personal enrichment for pleasure and personal experiences

Two participants also explained that they would prefer to use literature for personal enrichment unless they had a time limit to complete the curriculum:

"However, if I had time or I didn't have to finish the curriculum on time, I definitely would use literature for personal enrichment. I think literature should make sense to the students and they can make a relationship between the work and their own experiences. We should think over the main idea, or the characters, make some discussions about the plots, and make some comments on the poems, etc." (T4)

"Each student is very special and has a unique perspective. They can contribute to the class by adding important things from their inner world. When they do this, they will get pleasure. But, unfortunately, I don't have enough time to apply this approach in my classroom." (T2)

One participant considered that literature for personal enrichment approach was more suitable for learners with a less proficient language level as indicated below:

"For students with weaker English proficiency levels or those who are not particularly interested in literature, I think literature for personal enrichment approach could be the most suitable choice in this scenario. This activity can allow students to connect with poems on a personal level and link them with their personal and past experiences. This will help them to focus on emotions, wishes, and advice, which can be less intimidating for learners with limited language skills." (T3)

Literature as content

Five participants thought that literature as a content approach was not applicable in their language classrooms. They had to follow the curriculum so that it could be boring, time-consuming, and more convenient for proficient students. One participant would prefer to use literature as content if they do not have to catch up with the curriculum:

"I would love to use literature as content and choose a poem to work with. I would give information about the poet and background that led to the birth of this poem. Unfortunately, this kind of activity and approach may be used only once or twice in my classroom. It would be something I would enjoy" (T2)

On the other hand, two participants explained the disadvantages of applying this approach as it could be boring and time-consuming on behalf of learners:

"...but I am not sure if all of the students would like it, it may get boring for some of them if it is done frequently. Also, it would be too time-consuming to do regularly since there is also a curriculum to follow. It may be a bit difficult for most students as well. Still, I may do it if I have some time left from the curriculum." (T4)

Two participants considered that using literature as content approach was more appropriate for learners with a high proficiency level in English as displayed in the following:

"For the students who are proficient in English and are interested in engaging with literary texts and exploring sophisticated language concepts, I think activities from literature as content approach would be ideal and appropriate for them. Such tasks require a strong command of grammar, vocabulary, and literary analysis skills suitable for these students' capabilities at this proficiency level." (T3)

One participant stated that choosing the most appropriate approach depended on learners' interests and preferences as indicated in the following comment:

"However, till now, I have used the language-based approach more with my students through stories, the most. But now, I think it is better and healthier for the students and the class to have a mixed approach between these three. Now and then, a different approach should be applied to have all the class engage and see their preferences." (T6)

Research question 2: What are graduate students' attitudes toward using children's literature in English language education?

Semi-structured interviews

The thematic coding analysis of the data obtained from the responses given to the following question in the semi-structured interviews was presented in this section: What did you generally know about children's literature before the course and what has changed after the course? Two themes were identified and grouped namely Literature for Children as a Facilitator for Language Acquisition and as a Reflection of Reader's Experiences as presented in the following part.

Children's literature as a facilitator for language acquisition and children's literature as a reflection of reader's experiences

Children's literature as a facilitator for language acquisition, collectively accounted for most of all the coding occurrences, making it the most predominant theme for six participants with the sub-themes of the powerful instrument, improvement of students' critical thinking, imagination, and creativity:

"The course has completely changed my perspective on children's literature. It has taught me that it is a powerful tool that can greatly improve second language acquisition and enrich the lives of young readers. I realized how literature can nurture young minds and inspire a lifelong love of reading and learning." (T5)

"Children need more fun, color, and imagination for learning English, and works of literature can meet their needs. They are more willing to participate and learn, which is the expectation of language teachers." (T3)

"Before taking the course, I didn't use or integrate literature into my English classes so much as an English teacher. This ignorance stemmed from a limited view of language teaching as solely focused on grammar drills and vocabulary memorization, neglecting the importance of context and authentic language use. I have missed the opportunities to engage students' imagination, creativity, and critical thinking skills through literature-based activities." (T1)

Children's literature as a reflection of reader's experiences was the second mostly mentioned theme among all the coding occurrences with the sub-themes of culture and representation of various points of view:

"My understanding of the importance of diversity and representation of the culture in children's literature has increased after the course. Children's novels reflect the vast fabric of human experiences and identities by including different characters, ethnicities, and viewpoints." (T3)

"Before the courses, escaping from using literature not only limited my pedagogical repertoire but also deprived my students of rich learning experiences that foster language proficiency, cultural competence, and personal growth. Fortunately, I took the courses about how to use children's literature or why literature should be used in language teaching processes, then, my perspective has changed." (T2)

"Personal relevance is related to reader's lives, events and opinions forming reader's experience" (T5)

The thematic analysis of the data obtained from the responses to the following question in the semi-structured interviews was presented in this section: What do you think of using children's literature in foreign language classes? Is it necessary? Nine themes were identified and grouped namely Culture, Entertainment, Authentic Material, Improving Language Skills, Helper for Language Learning, Empathy, Value Teaching, Flexibility, and Lifelong Learning.

Culture, entertaining, help to improving language learning, empathy, flexibility, and authentic material

Culture was the mostly mentioned theme among all the coding occurrences with the sub-themes of respect, intercultural competency, and cultural awareness by four participants:

"The relationship between children's literature and foreign language teaching has multiple benefits for language learners. Learning a new language can be an overwhelming experience, especially for beginners. However, mastering a new language can offer a gateway to various cultures and new ways of thinking." (T1)

"Also, these books show what life is like in different places and they teach about different cultures and traditions. This helps our students understand and respect others who are different from them. Furthermore, exposure to diverse characters and settings in literature can promote intercultural competence among foreign language learners." (T3)

"Through reading children's books, language learners can also learn about the customs, values, and culture of the language they are learning. This encourages intercultural competency and raises cultural awareness." (T2)

Four participants also noted the use of children's literature in language teaching as it allowed learners to learn a language entertainingly:

"In my opinion, children's literature helps our students to learn a language in a fun way. Many works like stories, poems, and pictures designed for children make learning fun. So, I think it's necessary to use children's literature in foreign language classes. It makes learning more fun and exciting, and it helps students become better at the language." (T6)

"Children's literature draws readers in and inspires them to interact with the target language. Language learning is entertaining and memorable due to the captivating narrative, likable characters, and vibrant illustrations." (T3)

"After taking the course, I have understood that using children's literature in foreign language classes is very important. Literary works are like magic tools that help students learn a new language while having fun. They have interesting stories, awesome pictures, and challenging or some new words that make learning more fun and colorful." (T1)

Four participants also valued children's literature as a powerful strategy and tool to enhance language learning, language skills, and love of reading:

"Fortunately, children's literature can provide a powerful tool for foreign language teaching."

"Integrating children's literature into foreign language classes is a powerful strategy that can enhance language learning if we apply it properly by incorporating age-appropriate stories, poems, and picture books into lessons." (T3)

"When students read children's books in a foreign language, they get better at speaking, listening, and understanding the language. It's like going on a fun adventure while learning new words and grammar rules." (T5)

"For language learners, reading children's literature can foster a lifelong love of reading. It fosters a love of learning that lasts a lifetime and supports language development outside of the classroom." (T6)

Two participants indicated a preference for children's literature in language teaching as it provided empathy for learners:

"They also make the students think about how others feel. Learning a new language with children's books is exciting. It helps people be curious, creative, and love reading. This helps our students learn better and become better citizens of the world." (T1)

"Students interact with complex concepts and personalities, which encourages perspective-taking, empathy, and critical thinking." (T5)

Three participants mentioned the use of children's literature as authentic material:

"Reading children's books gives students real language in a real setting. Language learners can improve their language learning by reading stories intended for native speakers of the target language. This exposes them to natural language patterns, vocabulary, and idioms." (T3)

"Children's literature provides authentic language contexts that are relatable and enjoyable for young learners and this helps students to develop their vocabulary, grammar, and language skills in a natural and immersive way." (T1)

"Moreover, they teach new words and how to use them correctly, because most of these works authentically present language samples." (T4)

One participant drew attention to the flexibility of children's literature in terms of use for different learning contexts, ages, and skill levels:

"Children's literature is flexible and can be used in various learning environments, age groups, and skill levels. Teachers can choose texts based on the interests and needs of their students, which makes it an adaptable tool for language instruction." (T3)

Discussion and Conclusion

The first research question was asked to seek a response to whether an involvement in the use of children's literature in foreign language education course resulted in graduate students' awareness and knowledge of children's literature in teaching English. With this aim, online discussions throughout the course were carried out and the emerging themes were recorded accordingly. The first online session mainly focused on the internal and external structures of children's books, and participants gave their opinions about the most prominent criteria for choosing a children's book in their classes. The results taken from the first online focus group discussion indicated that language and expression, and theme were significant features for using a literary work in language classrooms. As these were essential elements of children's books, this finding displayed that participants had knowledge of the children's literature course, which was one of the main objectives of this study. Besides, the

participants emphasised the age appropriateness of the books for learners. While choosing the literary texts to be used, students' language level, cultural background, interests, motivation, needs, and language difficulty should be considered in language classes (Hismanoglu, 2005).

The second online focus group discussion, which included material selection and evaluation for using children's literature in teaching English in terms of reader-task considerations and quantitative and qualitative measures aimed to provide participants with knowledge about the selection of proper works of children's literature to use in their classes. Text or material selection is an important factor for "linguistic development, personal enrichment and cultural appreciation" (Tasneen, 2010, p. 5) and based on learners' language proficiency, culture, interests and needs (Tasneen, 2010). The results revealed that grammar, vocabulary, content, students' interest, and cover were among the important criteria for choosing suitable children's books for students. It was promoted by the study (Al Khaiyali, 2014) displaying that children's books should be easy to read and well-illustrated for increasing reading comprehension. Besides, it was stated that learners' motivation was increased if the materials used in classes caught their attention (Can & Tezcan, 2021). Therefore, the literary texts should be interesting, suitable and available (Lazar, 1993). However, familiarity with the book was seen as a negative aspect of using classical or well-known children's books in teaching English showing a different perspective.

The third online focus group discussion was based on the approaches to using literature with the language learner. Concerning the approaches to using literature with the language learner, the findings displayed that all participants preferred the language-based approach that could be used in language classrooms efficiently in teaching English through children's literature. As previously stated, the awareness of the language of literature was the main phase for learners in the language-based approach (Van, 2009 as cited in Febriani, et al., 2018) and teaching literature to EFL learners aimed to improve their language skills, proficiency in English and the mastery of the language (Collie & Slatter, 1990; Lazar, 1993). This finding also supported the idea that participants as language teachers were exposed to the principles such as choosing, adapting, and designing suitable activities with the help of this approach which was utilized to combine language skills and literature (Dhillon & Mogan, 2014). English teachers benefit from children's literature to support learners' learning experiences (Shuquair & Dashti, 2019). Regarding personal enrichment approach, half of the participants preferred literature for personal enrichment as they thought it allowed learners

an opportunity to present their real-life experiences. However, as participants stated they couldn't apply this approach effectively because of the time restriction although they were willing to do so. This result was not consistent with the study's findings indicating that personal enrichment was the most preferred approach by students since it provided help for learners to enhance their motivation, participation, and interaction (Özışık, 2023). Regarding literature as content, it was the least preferred approach since participants stated it was not applicable due to the time limitation as they had to follow the curriculum. This finding was supported by the earlier research (Özışık, 2023) indicating that students preferred literature as content approach the least compared to the other two approaches as literature was an important teaching material, however, "cultural unfamiliarity and the linguistic level of the literary text" (Tasneen, 2010 as cited in Özışık, 2023, p. 8) may be a problem for language students. It was acknowledged children's books used in classes should be short (Al Khaiyali, 2014). Participants generally could teach grammatical parts of English such as tenses and adjectives with the help of this approach. They used it to benefit from literary genres like short stories, novels, and poems to stimulate linguistic parts of language as indicated in the previous studies claiming that children's literature affected students' linguistic development (Karagül, 2020) and teachers needed to take students' linguistic ability into account (Can & Tezcan, 2021).

The second research question elicited to seek a response to what graduate students' attitudes towards using children's literature in English language education were. The results of the semi-structured interviews revealed that participants thought of children's literature as a powerful tool and a way of facilitating language learning in terms of improving students' imagination, creativity, and critical thinking as studies revealed that children's literature should help students enhance their critical thinking skills (Benabbes & AbdulHaleem-Abu Taleb, 2024; Suljić, 2020). The findings also indicated that participants accounted for children's literature as a reflection of the reader's experiences concerning culture and representation of various points of views. This result showed that participants were aware of using literature as an instrument for improving students' cultural enrichment, which was emphasized in earlier studies (Abdel Haliem, 2017; Collie & Slater, 1990). Learners can see another's life and their reflections on a character (Adam & Harper, 2016). As suggested by the previous research, teachers should study children's literature as it appeals to the cultural world of the learners (Lütge & Bland, 2014).

Furthermore, the results showed that personal relevance was among the prominent issues together with cultural aspects of the literary books. Maley (1989) acknowledged that personal relevance was related to opinions, sensations, things, and events the readers experienced and connected them to their own lives (as cited in Hismanoglu, 2005). In detail, learning one's own culture was important for participants and children's literature could serve young learners as a vehicle to convey their cultural elements. The results demonstrated that the use of children's literature in language classrooms was beneficial in terms of entertainment, authentic material, improving language skills, helper for language learning, empathy, value teaching, flexibility, and lifelong learning. Participants preferred using children's literature as an authentic material (Collie & Slater, 1990) to be a sample of real language usage for learners of English, improvement of language skills, and a tool for value teaching (Suljić, 2020). However, not all children's texts in the market present authentic language use.

The results made it clear that participants were highly aware of using children's literature, which influenced children's social, cognitive, and spiritual development (Karagül, 2020) in teaching English as supported by one of the participants stating that she understood that using literature was significant in teaching a language after taking the course. Students could entertainingly learn a language with the help of children's literature (T1). The findings indicated that children's literature was of great importance for helping children gain reading habits. One participant declared that the course had completely changed her perspective on children's literature. She had realized how literature could nurture young minds and inspire a lifelong love of reading and learning (T5). The results also showed that participants had a high level of acceptance of children's literature. The reason behind this may be related to the fact that this course was an elective course which participants selected voluntarily and were willing to participate so they thought it as a useful tool to teach English. Moreover, they did not find children's books boring as stated by the participant saying that children's literature drew readers in and inspired them to interact with the target language. Language learning was entertaining and memorable due to the captivating narrative, likable characters, and vibrant illustrations (T3). Besides, the results revealed students' appreciation of children's literature. In detail, at the beginning of the course, participants were not certain that the use of children's literature in language classrooms would be beneficial since they were teaching a language so literature was not the focus of their classes. After the implementation of the

course, the findings displayed that this appreciation developed as participants were allowed to be involved in the literary texts used during the courses. They learned how to use creative activities in teaching a language by using sample literary works such as short stories and poetry so that they had the opportunity to “discover how the language of the text works and the intended message” (Dhillon & Mogan, 2014, p. 63). One participant stated that she as an English teacher did not use or integrate literature in her English classes much before taking the course. This stemmed from a limited view of language teaching as she had only focused on grammar drills and vocabulary memorization, neglecting the importance of context and authentic language use (T1). It was claimed that implementing children’s literature in language learning promoted learners’ appreciation of literature (Belsky, 2024). Increased knowledge of children’s literature led to participants’ acceptance of using children’s literature in language classes. One of the purposes of the study was to increase participants’ awareness and knowledge and change their attitudes toward children’s literature positively.

To conclude, the current study revealed that the use of children’s literature in a foreign language education course increased participants’ appreciation, acceptance, and awareness of using children’s literature in English language classrooms positively. It also displayed that participants, who were the teachers of English at the same time, had different views about the importance of children’s literature in English language education. Participants overwhelmingly supported the view that the children’s literature course in an English language teaching classroom was beneficial in grammar teaching and language skills. They were aware of the benefits of using children’s literature while teaching English and held a positive attitude towards using it to teach English. The course positively affected their opinions as they had the opportunity to know about different genres of children’s literature they could utilize in their classes especially the kinds of short stories and poetry. Children’s literature helped them not only to teach language skills such as reading but also to improve students’ imagination, critical thinking, interpreting, and guessing. However, they could use it in a restrictive way as they had to follow the curriculum. Furthermore, they would use children’s literature as an instrument to teach linguistic elements and to support students’ learning experiences (Shuquair & Dashti, 2019) after completing the course. It becomes clear that the use of children’s literature can provide background information necessary for comprehension to learn, and increase students’ interest in learning English. It is displayed that this research is beneficial in highlighting to foreign language educators who lack the

necessary pedagogical experience, confidence, and knowledge allowing them to enrich their teaching with children's literature. To overcome this, English teachers can be provided with research-based evidence that enlarges their beliefs and knowledge of planning English lessons using children's literature. This study may also encourage EFL teachers to use different genres of children's literature to teach vocabulary, grammar, and reading. It is also hoped that students will improve their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in an enjoyable and meaningful way. It is recommended that children's literature be included in courses of English language teaching to develop learning and reading competencies of language learners that can improve students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Moreover, the locality of the study suggests the pedagogical practices of teacher training in Türkiye. Children's literature can be considered in the training of English language teaching and the pedagogical approach can be revised in the training of future English language teachers based on the results and findings of the study.

The study has some limitations. Firstly, the study included only six participants, all of whom were non-random, graduate students in a Master's Program from the same educational institution, and had similar academic backgrounds. This limited generalizability and reduced the diversity of perspectives as the transferability of the results to a broader context may be limited, and this lack of diversity might limit the variability in responses and insights of participants. Secondly, the researcher of the study was also the course instructor, which introduces potential bias as participants may have felt pressured to provide positive responses potentially influencing the findings. It would be better to conduct such research by using classroom observations and assessments of actual teaching practices could be administered. Observing some English courses where teachers used children's literature could be useful. Thirdly, the data were analyzed according to participants' opinions about using children's literature as a means of teaching English and the emerging themes could be useful in future studies including literature and English language teaching in the context of higher education. It would have been beneficial to collect additional data from multiple perspectives such as teacher reflection or teacher feedback with the teacher of the observed class and student's reflection. Finally, this research would undoubtedly be more effective if it was implemented through a longitudinal study, particularly to inform educators and teachers of English about the long-term effects of using children's literature on undergraduate students from the first year to the fourth year.

Ethical Committee Permission Information

Name of the board that carries out ethical assessment: Inonu University Scientific Research Ethics Committee for Social and Human Sciences

The date and number of the ethical assessment decision: 02.05.2024/33

Author Contribution Statement

Emine KULUŞAKLI: *Conceptualization, literature review, methodology, data analysis, writing, and editing.*

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