

## THE BENEFITS OF USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN TEACHING EFL IN A WAR-TORN COUNTRY

**Enikő NAGY-KOLOZSVÁRI**

*Senior Lecturer,*

*Postgraduate Student at the Department of Philology*

*Ferenc Rakoczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian College of Higher Education*

*5 Kossuth sq., Berehove*

*ORCID: 0000-0003-1844-8674*

*nagy-kolozsvari.eniko@kmf.org.ua*

**János GYŐRI**

*Professor, Doctor of Philosophy,*

*Institute for Intercultural Psychology and Education*

*Eotvos Lorand University*

*23-27 Kazinczy str., Budapest*

*ORCID: 0000-0002-3894-7959*

*gyori.janos@ppk.elte.hu*

The global importance of learning foreign languages, especially English, highlights the necessity for motivating tools in language education. Creative teaching strategies, as suggested by Bahous [1], can enhance learners' attitudes towards language acquisition. One effective tool is children's literature (CHL), known for fostering creativity, emotional intelligence, and a love of learning, making it an engaging resource for language acquisition and cultural understanding.

This article investigates the impact of children's literature in EFL education in Ukraine, where conflict has disrupted traditional education. It argues that children's literature can offer psychological relief, foster empathy, and provide a sense of normalcy and hope for children. The study explores parents' views on using CHL to enhance their children's language skills and emotional well-being during wartime.

The literature review highlights the broad definition of children's literature, encompassing various genres and forms. Research indicates that children's literature supports language learning and promotes moral reasoning, emotional intelligence, and empathy [3; 6]. Additionally, children's literature can be therapeutic, aiding children in processing difficult emotions, as supported by bibliotherapy practices [7; 13].

The research, conducted in Transcarpathia, Ukraine, involved a questionnaire survey with parents about their reading habits and the presence of English storybooks at home. Findings reveal that while many parents value reading, numerous obstacles prevent them from reading English literature with their children, such as limited proficiency and accessibility issues.

The study concludes that reading foreign language books with children during wartime offers benefits including cognitive development, emotional support, and improved language skills. It provides a comforting escape from conflict, fostering resilience and hope. Integrating children's literature in EFL education, especially in challenging contexts, supports the holistic development of young learners.

*Key words: bibliotherapy, children's literature, EFL, parents, Transcarpathia.*

## **ПЕРЕВАГИ ВИКОРИСТАННЯ ДИТЯЧОЇ ЛІТЕРАТУРИ У ВИКЛАДАННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЯК ІНОЗЕМНОЇ УКРАЇНИ, ЯКА ЗНАХОДИТЬСЯ У СТАНІ ВІЙНИ**

**Еніке НАДЬ-КОЛОЖВАРИ**

*старший викладач,*

*аспірантка кафедри філології*

*Закарпатського угорського інституту імені Ференца Ракоці ІІ*

*площа Кошута, 6, Берегово*

*ORCID: 0000-0003-1844-8674*

*nagy-kolozsvari.eniko@kmf.org.ua*

**Янош ДЬОРИ**

*професор, доктор філософії*

*Інституту міжкультурної психології та освіти*

*Університету імені Лоранда Етвеша*

*вул. Казінці, 23-27, Будапешт*

*ORCID: 0000-0002-3894-7959*

*gyori.janos@ppk.elte.hu*

Глобальна важливість вивчення іноземних мов, особливо англійської, підкреслює необхідність мотиваційних інструментів у мовній освіті. Креативні стратегії викладання, як пропонує Bahous [2], можуть покращити ставлення учнів до вивчення мови. Одним з ефективних інструментів є дитяча література (ДЛ), відома тим, що вона сприяє розвитку креативності, емоційного інтелекту та любові до навчання, що робить її цікавим ресурсом для вивчення мови та розуміння культури.

У статті досліджується вплив дитячої літератури на викладання англійської мови як іноземної в Україні, де конфлікт підірвав традиційну систему освіти. У ній стверджується, що дитяча література може запропонувати психологічне полегшення, сприяти емпатії, а також дати дітям відчуття безпеки та надії. Автори вивчають погляди батьків на використання дитячої літератури для покращення мовних навичок та емоційного благополуччя їхніх дітей під час воєнного стану.

Аналіз літературних видань підкреслює широке визначення дитячої літератури, що охоплює різні жанри та форми. Дослідження показують, що дитяча

література підтримує вивчення мови та сприяє розвитку морального мислення, емоційного інтелекту й емпатії [3; 6]. Крім того, дитяча література може бути терапевтичною, допомагаючи дітям переживати складні емоції, що підтверджується практиками бібліотерапії [7; 13].

Дослідження, проведене в Закарпатті (Україна), включало анкетування батьків щодо їхніх читацьких звичок та наявності вдома англomовних книжок з оповіданнями. Результати показують, що, хоч багато батьків цінують читання, численні перешкоди заважають їм читати англomовну літературу зі своїми дітьми. Серед таких перешкод – недостатній рівень володіння мовою та проблеми з доступністю літературних джерел.

У дослідженні зроблено висновок, що читання іношomовних книжок з дітьми під час війни має такі переваги, як когнітивний розвиток, емоційна підтримка та покращення мовних навичок. Це заспокоює, дає змогу відволіктися від конфлікту, виховує стійкість і надію. Інтеграція дитячої літератури у викладання англійської мови як іноземної, особливо у складних умовах, сприяє цілісному розвитку школярів.

***Ключові слова:** англійська мова як іноземна, батьки, бібліотерапія, дитяча література, Закарпаття.*

**Introduction.** Nowadays, there is no doubt that learning foreign languages, especially English, is essential and has become an international trend that needs to be handled by non-English speaking nations. Another trend in foreign language teaching is to start learning languages as early as possible. And these two important factors play a major role in the need for us, as teachers, to find the tools to motivate language learners. Bahous [2] found that language learners learn to adopt more positive attitudes about language acquisition when teachers employ creative strategies that are customized for the demands and personalities of their learners. One possible solution can be the use of children's literature (CHL) in teaching English a foreign language (EFL).

Children's literature, stories, and the art of storytelling have long been cherished throughout the world [3; 4; 6; 10; 15]. Children's literature is an important part of childhood development because it can foster creativity, emotional intelligence, and a love of learning. Stories often hold a strange and magical quality that can interest and engage learners in a way that few other materials and methods have. In teaching EFL, children's literature can be used as a tool to enhance language learning. It can help students to develop their language skills in a fun and engaging way. Additionally, children's literature can provide insights into the culture and values of English-speaking countries, which can help students to develop cultural awareness and communication skills.

Based on the aforementioned facts, researchers and educators should help those involved in education who are experiencing difficulties in their daily lives. That is why, the aim of the present article is to show a solution and a way out in order to improve children's foreign language skills and maintain their mental and emotional well-being in a time of conflict. In the given article, the authors would like to show the importance

and benefits of using children's literature in EFL education in Ukraine, where unfortunately there is still a war going on. As the authors have been dealing with the use of CHL in teaching EFL for a long time, we are convinced that in a war-torn country, children need stories, tales even more than usual, for several reasons. (1) Firstly, CHL can offer an escape from the harsh realities of the war, they can help to forget about the dangers and hardships children have to face daily. (2) Secondly, CHL can help develop empathy while reading about characters who face similar challenges which can foster a sense of compassion. In countries of war, education can often be disrupted or sometimes inaccessible. Providing children with books to read can promote literacy and encourage bonding and connection with parents or caregivers. (3) CHL can encourage imagination, which is very important in Ukraine as children's opportunities for play and self-expression is often limited because of the regular air raid alerts when they have to spend hours in bomb shelters. (4) Finally, CHL can offer hope to young learners because they can get inspiration from tales of bravery, resiliency, and tenacity to overcome their own obstacles and discover hope for the future.

**Literature review.** Given the vast amount of literature available on the subject, it is not easy to define children's literature. In our study, we use Bland's definition of children's literature as a term used to describe "all literature for children and adolescents, including oral literature, such as fairy tales and nursery rhymes, graphic narratives and young adult literature, reflecting the eclectic interests of children" [3, p. 1]. As such, we focus on English language literary texts that were not published for teaching purposes or any educational context primarily aimed for children [11].

Literature plays an important role in mother tongue education and children are naturally fond of rhymes, short stories, picturebooks and fairy tales. As several researchers highlighted, the use of CHL in teaching EFL, enhances language learning [3; 4; 6] but besides, as Ghosn pointed out, it can also develop moral reasoning skills, emotional intelligence and empathy, as well as help children work through difficult issues. Tomlinson [14] and Ghosn [6] argue that language teaching materials ought to be humanizing, taking into account learners' 'experience of life, their interests and enthusiasms, their views, attitudes and feelings and, above all, their capacity to make meaningful connections in the minds [14, p. 162]. Children's psychological health may also be improved by the power of literature to help them deal with issues, problems, and concerns.

Traditionally books mean the oldest and richest source of information and knowledge. They aid in our development and support the growth of our capacity for imagination and creativity. According to Gumber [7], books and literature can also be used therapeutically, also known in the literature as bibliotherapy. Gumber [7, p. 896] argues that 'bibliotherapy as creative arts modality of therapy is not just something that can be used only in the clinical settings but also in what we loosely characterize as a general and daily place of work like a classroom and school.' Given the current situation in Ukraine, authentic children's literature can also be used therapeutically in foreign language teaching. Another researcher, Rubin [13] defines three types of bibliotherapy: clinical, institutional and developmental. The first two types are usually conducted in

an institutional setting with the help of a psychiatrist while the latter means using books in schools, libraries or any other community setting, not just to maintain health but to nurture emotions and promote mental health in the individuals. Children's literature with meaningful topics can promote some aspects of the human condition, such as happiness, sadness, friendship, exclusion, courage, fear, etc.

Lowe [8] highlights in her study that recently an increasing number of children suffer from an absent parent because of military deployment. This is unfortunately also the case in Ukraine. As a result, teachers have to deal with emotionally distressed children and must help them develop coping skills [1]. Fassler [5] has already proved that children may experience some reduction in classroom performance while a parent is on active military duty. Children may experience obstacles while studying because of worry regarding their parents' health and well-being. These emotions can cause visible symptoms in the classroom such as behavioural and concentration problems, laziness, lack of motivation. According to Maslow [9], an individual's basic needs are physiological (food and clothing), safety (personal safety), love and belonging needs, esteem and self-actualization. Physiological and safety needs must be attained to lay the foundation for future educational opportunities. This means that if children are worried about their own physical well-being and that of their loved ones, they are less able to pay attention to learning and classroom activities. But as Ghosn [6] emphasizes literature can help children work through problems, difficult issues and concerns, thus potentially supporting their emotional wellbeing.

**Research design and methods.** As it was mentioned earlier, the authors have been dealing with the use of children's literature for a long time. The present research is part of a larger research project. We have previously investigated English teachers' attitudes towards the use of authentic children's literature [11] and English teacher candidates' own experiences of their language learning in relation to authentic children's literature [12]. In the current phase of the research, we intended to investigate parents' views on the use of children's literature in teaching foreign languages.

Based on the previously mentioned, the given article tries to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Is it possible for parents in Ukraine to read literature in their free time during war-time?
2. Do families have their own authentic English storybooks in their homes?
3. Do parents read English-language stories with their children to develop their children's language skills and emotional well-being?

Our research involved a questionnaire for parents of children aged 6-14 years to gain a better understanding of children's and parents' reading habits in English in a time of war. Providing children with books to read can promote foreign language literacy and encourage bonding and connection with parents or caregivers. CHL can encourage imagination, which is very important in Ukraine as children's opportunities for play and self-expression is often limited now. To gather data an online questionnaire was designed which consists of three parts. The first part of the questionnaire asks

information about the parents' age, education, reading habits, etc. The second part of the instrument looks at the language learning habits of parents' children while the third part contains Likert scales concerning the parents' views on foreign languages in general and specifically in their children's schools. In the given article, we would like to present some preliminary results of the questionnaire on this topic.

**Participants.** The data collection was carried out in Transcarpathia, the most western region of Ukraine, during spring 2023. Altogether 277 parents took part in the survey, 247 (90%) female and 27 (10%) male respondents. The completion of the questionnaire was completely voluntary and anonymous. Most of the parents (39%) are between 36-40 years. The age distribution of respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Age of respondents								
Age	26–30	31–35	36–40	41–45	46–50	51–55	56–60	60+
No. of participants	18	67	109	54	23	4	1	1

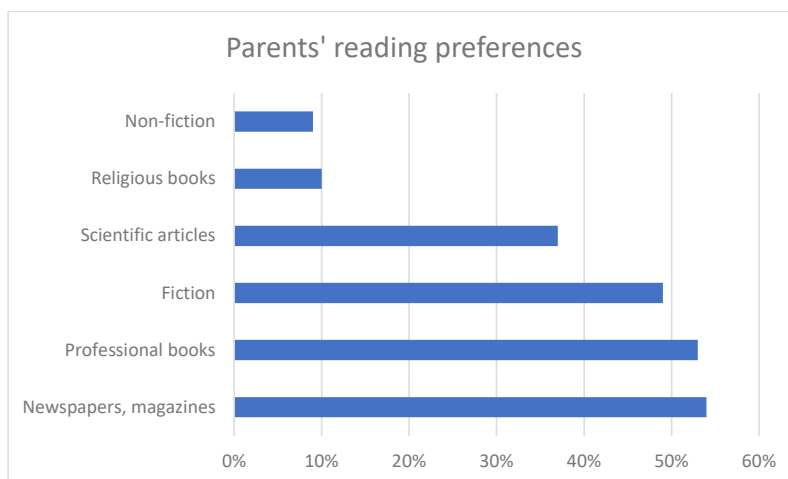
**Results and discussion.** As mentioned earlier, in this paper we present only a small portion of the results of the questionnaire survey, with a special focus on the parents' role in reading foreign language literature together with their children.

We considered it important to assess whether, in the current situation in Ukraine, parents have the opportunity to read for pleasure in their free time and, if they do, how much time they can devote to it. According to the results, 51 parents (18%) do not have any time to read for pleasure at all. 111 participants (40%) replied that they spend 1–2 hours with reading weekly. 61 people (22%) spend 3–4 hours a week reading while 24 respondents (9%) can find 5-6 hours to practice this activity. 29 respondents (11%) read 7 or more hours a week.

We also wanted to find out what genres parents prefer when reading books. More than one option was possible when answering this question. Diagram 1 shows the parents' reading preferences. The results show that parents prefer newspapers and magazines (54%) while almost the same number of them read texts connected to their profession (53%). Reading fiction is only slightly behind the previous two answers, which means that parents are busy but still try to find time and opportunities to read fiction (49%). Around 10% of the respondents read the Bible or some other religious books, and 9% of them read non-fiction (not connected to the parents' profession) regularly.

In our work, we tried to find out whether parents read foreign language stories to their children and we also asked whether they had original English storybooks in their homes that were not written for educational purposes that could be used to create a shared reading experience. According to the responses received, 58% of parents did not have such storybooks in their homes, while 37% of parents said that they did. 5% of the respondents were not aware if they have such books at home or not.

To answer the third research question, we asked parents if they read stories in English with their children. 90% of the respondents said that they do not read English



**Diagram 1. Parents' reading preference**

books together with their children, while 10% of the participants read authentic English literature regularly. The results show that only a minority of families use this approach to improve their children's English language learning and shared reading experience.

There could be several reasons why parents may not read more foreign language children's literature with their children. First of all, it can be because of foreign language fluency. Limited knowledge of the foreign language can make it challenging to read and explain the content of the reading material to their children effectively. Secondly, the availability of foreign language authentic children's books may cause obstacles, especially in Transcarpathia because of the limited access to diverse language resources. It is also possible that parents are more comfortable with stories from their own culture, their own mother tongue. Furthermore, if parents are busy, they might prioritize reading books in a language they are more proficient in, as it can be quicker and easier to read and comprehend. It is also possible that some parents worry that introducing a foreign language could confuse their children or delay their mother tongue language development. And lastly it is also possible that some parents may not be aware of the benefits of exposing their children to foreign language authentic literature or the resources available to them.

**Summary.** Reading foreign language books together with children, especially in a time of war, holds several important benefits.

Exposure to foreign language books introduces children to different cultures, traditions, and perspectives. This helps them develop empathy and understanding for people from diverse backgrounds, fostering a sense of global citizenship and tolerance during challenging times like war.

Furthermore, learning a new language through reading stimulates cognitive development in children. It enhances their linguistic abilities, problem-solving skills, and critical thinking, which can be crucial for adapting to changing circumstances in times of conflict.

It is also important to mention that reading together provides a safe and nurturing environment for children, where they can bond with their parents and find comfort amidst the uncertainties of war. Stories can also offer valuable lessons on resilience, bravery, and hope, helping children cope with difficult emotions. The shared experience of exploring new languages and stories fosters a sense of togetherness, support, and security, which can be especially important during times of adversity.

Reading together serves as a positive distraction from the stress and anxieties caused by war. It offers a temporary escape into imaginary worlds, relieving tension and providing a healthy way to cope with the challenges children have to face day-by-day.

Besides the emotional factors, language learning proficiency can also be developed. Immersing children in foreign language books aids in language acquisition. During times of war, when access to formal education may be disrupted sometimes, this exposure can maintain and enhance language skills, which are essential for communication and future opportunities.

Knowledge of foreign languages can open doors to future opportunities, both personally and professionally. In a post-war world, being bilingual or multilingual can be an asset for connecting with others, pursuing education, and finding employment.

By encouraging cross-cultural interactions and language learning, parents contribute to building bridges of peace and understanding, ultimately working towards a more harmonious world despite the conflicts of war.

In summary, reading foreign language books together with children during times of war not only nurtures their cognitive and emotional growth but also fosters a sense of unity, cultural awareness, and hope for a better future. It empowers children to navigate challenges with resilience and compassion while laying the foundation for a more interconnected and peaceful world.

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