

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## THE ROLE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN ACQUIRING LSRW SKILLS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the importance of children's literature in a young learner's curriculum thereby contributing to his acquisition of LSRW skills. With English becoming the global language the need of the hour is to acquire it and master it. Many teachers, now-a-days do not hesitate introducing new teaching methodologies in order to inculcate strong foundational concepts in the LSRW practices. A dedicated teacher may consider using children's literature for the dispensing of LSRW in her classroom as one such methodology.

The Story Based Approach is an important method in ELT. This is supplemented by the need for good illustration which helps the learner, interpret the accompanying text. A good teacher will not deny the role of Children's Literature in language acquisition. Although many critics are skeptical of the literary merit of children's books, a judicious teacher can examine the potential of a particular book and create the support material necessary and establish links to other curriculum areas.

Teachers who use children's literature often find it difficult to return to the more conventional, specifically written ELT materials which tend to remain at the mundane and utilitarian level of basic dialogues and daily activities. In order to ascertain whether children's literature has facilitated LSRW acquisition, students can be assessed on their word recognition ability, comprehension, writing- reading activities, pronunciation and communicative abilities. Using children's literature can hone the LSRW skills. Needless to say, each and every attempt at LSRW should be accompanied by approval and appraisal, of the activities the learners are involved with. Constant encouragement is also vital as this builds their motivation and self-confidence.

**Key Words:** Children's Literature, LSRW Skills, English Language Acquisition.

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This paper examines the importance of children's literature in a young learner's curriculum and its role in his or her acquisition of LSRW skills. For the purpose of this paper I have limited the age group of young learners to those between 5-10 years. I have referred to children's literature as that literature written *for* and read *by* children.

There has been a long standing need to infuse children's literature into the young learner's curriculum as it widens horizons and expands environments. With English becoming the global language, the need of the hour is to acquire it and master it. The questions that dedicated teachers who work with these young learners need to ask are:

1. How can children be taught the Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing skills?
2. How can they become literate effectively?
3. Can there be a creative curriculum to meet this purpose?

The answers to these questions will perhaps justify the need to infuse children's literature into the curriculum for the dispensing of LSRW in the classrooms.

**Objectives of ELT:** First of all the teacher should be clear about the objectives of teaching the English language to non-native children. Is it to 1)develop proficiency, 2)meet parents' demands, 3)pass the exam, 4)secure a job in India/abroad, 5)teach grammar 6)acquire authentic communicative interaction?

Most of the current school text books are designed for study rather than enjoyment and hence may fail to sustain the interest of the students. Galda and Cullinan (2002, 7) claim that literature not only informs and entertains but also enables children to explore and understand their world. They learn about people and places on the other side of the world, visit new places, meet new friends and see new worlds. They can explore their own feelings, shape their own values and imagine lives beyond the one they live.

**The Story Based Approach:** Many EFL teachers who believe in acquisition based methodology do not deny the educational value of using stories and

story-telling in English language teaching. It has linguistic, psychological, cognitive, social and cultural relevance as well. Stories can be carefully selected from a list that is of international repute. They should use the English language competently and effectively and contain, in addition, literary devices such as repetition and rhyme and onomatopoeia. They should also employ a good mix of humour and suspense and should be culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Implementing a story-based approach requires a great deal of energy, resourcefulness and creativity, in addition to excellent classroom management skills and flexibility on the part of the teacher. Good illustration to help interpret the accompanying text is also another feature. Stories that take place in western, urban and rural settings and address issues such as multicultural education in order to develop intercultural awareness; stories that develop social skills and emotional development and stories that link with other subjects in the curriculum in order to build on children's general knowledge, stories that reinforce concepts and help children learn how to learn, can be chosen.

Most of children's literature in English is written for children whose first language is English. However, post-independence, several Indian English authors are publishing books that are intended for Indian children with diversified language backgrounds. The EFL teachers who are critical of the validity of using non- Indian books could use them in addition to the popular, classic children's books.

**Defining Children's literature:** What constitutes children's literature? This is a difficult question. However contemporary definitions focus on literature that is intended for a particular readership - children. It is also understood to have a specific purpose: entertainment and information (Galda & Cullinan, 2002; Hunt, 1996).

Before the 18th century books for children were produced as school books or for religious instruction. Only during the mid 18th century, was it produced for entertainment. With the changing attitudes towards childhood and children's

development and the increased sophistication in print technology, children's literature has developed into a major industry.

**Types of Books:** Alphabet books, number books, concept books (introduces opposites, shapes, objects etc), picture books (has only pictures and no words), nursery rhyme books, picture story books etc., can be used in classrooms for teaching LSRW skills.

Illustration is another important factor in children's books because it develops visual reading competence. One can reinforce and practice language through illustrations and hence they can be exploited for language development. Children can also create a story of their own, one that is different from the accompanying text. Pictures that synchronise with the text, support children's understanding, develop their visual literacy and enhance their appetite for details.

#### **The Role of Children's Literature in Acquiring LSRW skills**

Children's literature provides models of language structure and promotes literacy development. It also provides children an opportunity to see the language in action, teaches them the structures of language and provides a locus for learning these structures in meaningful contexts. Children are able to master the structure through exposure to repeated and predictable linguistic patterns. Activities and work sheets can then be interspersed to fit into academic schedule which can complement the reading experience. Numerous practical strategies are presented for engaging students with picture books, fiction, nonfiction, and non-traditional texts.

Children's literature in early childhood provides entertainment as well as meaningful communication between the teacher and children. Through reading literature, they share pleasure, personal experience, and their historical and cultural heritage. Although many critics are skeptical of the literary merit of children's books, a judicious teacher can examine the potential of a particular book and create the support material necessary and establish

links to other curriculum areas. Teachers, who use children's literature for teaching of LSRW skills, often find it difficult to return to the more conventional, specifically written ELT materials.

Consequently, literature can help children learn about the real world in a pleasurable and fascinating way, perceive their surroundings, and understand relationships with others. Literature develops in children not only the ability to create, overcome barriers, and become imaginative, but also positive attitudes toward reading books. Additionally, it contributes to the development of a good personality.

#### **Children's Literatures in Curriculum Design:**

Literatures in translation, pivotal to international cultural exchange, have increasingly become available. Books written in Indian vernacular languages are translated to English as books written in foreign languages are translated to English, thereby providing easy access to fine literature to children all over the world. Translated texts also expose students to ideological differences between people, countries and cultures.

Children's Literature in curriculum design offers a participatory approach to education for teachers in classrooms. Anthony. D. Fredericks advocates 'the Hands-on – Minds-on' philosophy of learning where students are actively engaged in the dynamics of education - creating, manipulating, modeling, inventing, discussing, sharing and engaging. He emphasizes on the process of learning itself. He believes that learning is not the accumulation or memorization of stuff rather what we do with that stuff is intrinsically more valuable and more enjoyable and more instructive. It gives youngsters and opportunity to discover a plethora of mind expanding and concept building and real world experiences that will engage the mind excite them for many years to come (Fredericks, 2007, xviii).

For example, Enid Blyton's books that were a rage 2-3 decades ago are still popular. They teach that courage, resourcefulness, decency, and responsibility are required not only in order that children can have successful adventures, but also for

their individual, daily lives. Character building takes place as *The Famous Five* display a clear set of values, principles and positive behaviour traits.

**LSRW through Children's Literature:** A good teacher is aware of the limitations of teaching literacy. Children's literature can provide a panacea for an effective way of acquiring LSRW skills because it helps with children's natural development of language, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They should be given access to a range of books to read and respond to. The purpose of early childhood education is to develop in young children social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and physical skills. This holistic approach is encouraged through a variety of activities, developing their personality and learning during early childhood education.

Children's literature provides a range of experience and an imaginary space that enables children to develop and live their own stories. In order to do this they need to discover and learn language. They begin to connect stories in books with the stories of their lives. Therefore, children's literature can be valuable in many ways for early childhood literacy program.

**Yoo, Seung-Yoeun** (1997) argues that Piaget's theories of child development support the use of children's literature with very young children. Children between 2 and 7 years belong to the pre-operational period of development. They believe that if inanimate objects move, they are alive. Piaget found, that young children believed the moon followed them when they went for a walk at night, that dreams came in through the window while they were asleep, and that anything that moved, including machines, waves and windblown curtains, was alive. Piaget called this childhood trait as subjective logic, which makes children enjoy anthropomorphic and magic tales without questioning the logic of a story (Evans, 1973, vii).

As children grow up they learn to recognize different perspectives from their own because they change from being self-centered to other-centered. During this time, children not only read fantasy stories but also more realistic stories to develop

their relationship with others and to satisfy their curiosity about people and the world (Russell, 1994). Therefore, early childhood is the most sensitive period because they have a lot of imagination and creativity to interpret stories and relate them to their lives. This enables them to become authors of their own stories thereby promoting their language development in a pleasurable way.

**Listening:** In the present day, children appear to be suffering from a lowered attention span due to activities such as television and computer games. Lowered attention span directly affects listening skills. This skill is achieved through sustained practice. Listening is not merely the ability to follow directions or to gather information. It is the ability to listen critically, being aware of one's own thoughts, ideas and values. Children's inability to understand class material is often attributed to learning problems. However, inadequate listening skills are frequently to blame (Myers, 2001).

Children's Literature can be read aloud by the teacher in a class. A good book captures the interest of the children and makes them listen to it. Grasping the finer nuances of the story, paying undivided attention increases their concentration skills. Evidence reveals that young children develop their literacy learning within a supportive literature environment. Researchers (Cullinan, 1987; Huck, Helper, & Hickman, 1993) argue that reading children's books to young children helps them develop their literacy.

Children experience pleasure while developing their literacy through children's literature. The more they enjoy literature the more easily they become literate. As children become literate, they enjoy literature on their own by selecting their own reading based on their interests and needs, and eventually read on their own. Thus, there is a meaningful relationship between children's experiencing literature and gaining literacy naturally.

Enid Blyton's most famous creations are still among the most compelling stories for young listeners. The mystery-solving adventures of Julian,

Dick, Anne, George and Timmy the dog; friends camping under open skies, swimming in clear water, fishing, exploring and making discoveries together are all captivating. Blyton, through her characters, transports children to a time of innocence, and a fantastical place where they can play safely and roam freely, without an adult in sight.

It is important to inculcate a positive attitude among children towards books. Teachers can make their children listen to and respond to stories, poems, pictures, etc., with a goal of developing their LSRW skills. Teachers can make the act of reading into a personally meaningful exercise by allowing the readers to share their interpretations with others in the class as this instills confidence in them to speak.

As children develop their listening skill they are able to see the text as a whole rather than as isolated letters and words. They become voracious readers once they begin to appreciate the text in its entirety, thereby strengthening their literacy skills. Common values that make children's literature appealing are happy ending, the closure that comes with the victory of the hero, the good prevailing over the evil and such like.

Stephen Krashen, a renowned linguist who has contributed richly to the field of second language acquisition and an advocate of Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) believes that

"Words are not learned all at once when they are seen in context; rather, word knowledge grows in small increments. At any given time, there are words we know well, words we do not know, and words in between" (1989, 446).

As this LSRW acquisition progresses the child becomes sure of the word meaning and its usage and is able to focus, summarize and contextualize it and use it with confidence.

**Speaking:** While reading stories to children, clear and correct pronunciation is of vital importance.

Children repeat what they hear. Teachers must also encourage children to read aloud from story books, provide a free atmosphere where children can make mistakes, respond, express their own ideas and create their own stories. Children may be allowed to play-act a story they have heard or rephrase it in their own words while the teacher substitutes difficult words for the child. This helps development of vocabulary.

Consequently, children's speaking abilities will increase by as many books as they have experienced (Huck, Helper, & Hickman, 1993). Through a variety of story books, children can observe and understand different perspectives of other people, places, and time. Children perceive components of a story to extend their structure of language in their mind. The teacher needs to make this whole experience as authentic and interactive as possible. She may ask reflection questions, suggest books for further reading, and create worksheets and activities for exploiting the language in the story. Daily Oral Language (DOL) exercises maybe adopted to teach grammar. However appropriate sentences from the Children's Literature text can be used for the same purpose.

Children have a great sense of uninhibited imagination. It is important for teachers to develop in them the power of inventing something new and creative in their world. Children's literature helps learners to conceptualize the real world. They are able to glean certain elements from the story and can later use it to enhance their speaking skills. They can also internalize the sense of a story and use it during their story-telling time.

As the story-telling activities progress the child will be able to demonstrate his speaking skills with a firm understanding of what he is saying. Children should be encouraged to become active participants and also sit as an audience for others. Teachers should provide opportunities to practice speaking in front of his own class that offers a comfort zone for the child. This boosts confidence in him to speak in front of a larger and unfamiliar audience. It may start with single isolated words but may soon progress to simple yet complete

sentences and gradually progress to conversations. They slowly begin to grasp the nuances of the language and grow in confidence until they begin to speak confidently.

**Reading:** Children's Literature contributes to growth in child's reading comprehension and vocabulary. If children are to become readers and improve their reading abilities, they should read a variety of books. Also, young learners need time and space in rich literary surroundings to develop their literacy naturally. According to Charlotte Huck (1977, 54), the motivation for learning to read comes from the desire to read real books. She claims that children want to learn to read because they like to read for enjoyment, and it is an easy and effective way for children to learn to read if they get excitement and pleasure.

Children's literature offers varied perspectives about children and their worlds. Children gain awareness of the lives of others vicariously through books. *My Friend the Sea* and *Suresh and the Sea* by Sandhya Rao narrates the trauma in the aftermath of Tsunami. *Chuskit goes to School* by Sujatha Padmanabhan is about a 9 year old wheelchair bound Chuskit's desire to go to school that can be fulfilled only after her friends level the uneven path and build a bridge.

Huck (1977, 58) says that "the teacher must provide daily time for children to practice their reading skills by allowing them to read books of their own choosing and at their own pace and for their own purposes." When children begin to appreciate the plot of the stories, characters, sequence, style etc., they graduate from reading simple to complex stories and from assisted reading aloud to independent silent reading. A good teacher therefore, understands the importance of providing a variety of reading activities and greater access to books so that children can derive satisfaction and pleasure thereby stimulating more reading.

A survey was conducted by the Ilovereadin library in association with The Book Lover's Program, among school children in Chennai to assess the impact of reading children's literature on the academic performance. The result shows that those

who read more had better scores in terms of overall grades as well as in English in particular.

*A sample survey with 1 section each in class 6, 7 and 8 (total 105) was conducted asking a few lifestyle questions. With Overall grade as a benchmark, we asked how much time do children spend on various activities. With students of grade B2 as benchmark, the results are plotted here.*

**Writing:** Exposure to children's Literature introduces children to certain words, ideas, and concepts and a sense of the story. With the help of their imagination, children combine characters, plot, theme, and structure from stories and, in their own style, create new stories.

"Children's Literature provides a springboard to teach writing skills. Through literature children are able to hear and see quality writing. As you read aloud Charlotte's Webb or The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, you have probably thought to yourself, 'What incredible language!' These authors are masters of words. It seems only fitting that you would use their words to teach budding writers what excellence in writing can look and sound like. They in turn, will attempt these techniques in their own writing." (Dierking, 9)

As the exposure to literature continues, children's vocabulary also increases allowing them to articulate confidently, express freely their feelings and thoughts in their own writing. Children may feel comfortable to write when there is no stress on correct punctuation, grammar, sentence construction or spelling. However it is necessary to encourage correct language rules at all times to avoid the lapses that children are compelled to make particularly with their mobile texting and email habits.

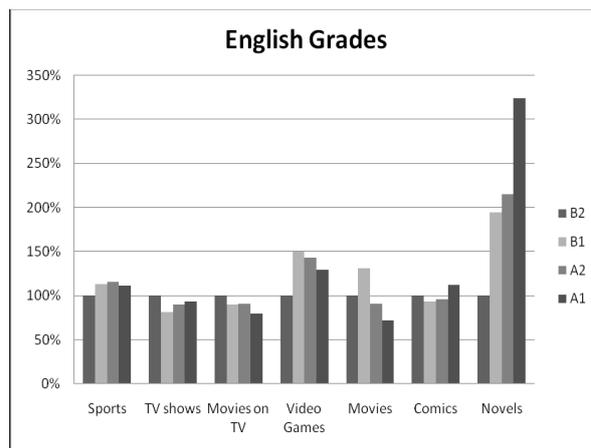
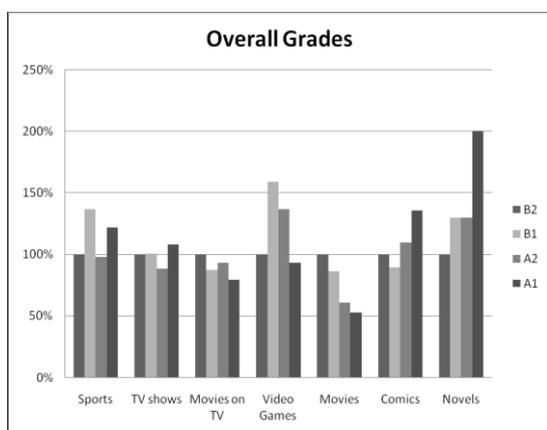
However, to sustain children's continuous interest in writing, the teacher needs to motivate them by emphasizing not on individual words, but on whole stories which retain children's personal meaning and experience. In other words, children should generate their own ideas to create their own stories.

Through the pleasure and enjoyment of books, children learn to predict what will happen in the story. Then their role changes from being readers to being writers to create their own stories by understanding elements, style, sequence and structures of a story. When the elements of stories are emphasized it helps children become creative authors.

Researchers (Applebee, 1978) use the term "story schema" as internal structure and framework to predict and construct stories with encoding and retrieval. When children become familiar with such conventional beginnings and endings of folk tales as "Once upon a time" and "They lived happily ever after", they can easily understand the basic framework and pattern of a story. In the long run, they can anticipate the pattern and structure of a story, then write their own stories in a well-focused and organized manner, following the conventions of the English language (Yoeun Yoo, 1997).

Headers	Sports	TV shows	Movies on TV	Video Games	Movies	Comics	Novels
Units	Hours per week	hours per week	Number per month	Hours per week	Number per month	Number per month	Number per month
OVERALL GRADES (actual values)							
B2 (61-70)	6.3	6.9	4.3	4.5	2.4	3.3	1.8
B1 (51-60)	8.6	7.0	3.8	7.1	2.1	2.9	2.3
A2 (81-90)	6.2	6.1	4.0	6.2	1.5	3.6	2.3
A1 (91-100)	7.7	7.5	3.4	4.2	1.3	4.4	3.6
PERCENTAGE OVER B2							
B2 (61-70)	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
B1 (51-60)	137%	101%	88%	159%	86%	90%	130%
A2 (81-90)	98%	88%	93%	137%	61%	110%	130%
A1 (91-100)	122%	108%	80%	93%	53%	136%	200%

Courtesy: Ilovereadin Library, C-Tides, IIT Madras



**CONCLUSION**

In order to ascertain whether children’s literature has facilitated LSRW acquisition, students can be assessed on their word recognition ability, comprehension, writing- reading activities, pronunciation and communicative abilities. Students’ response to such learning also can be evaluated based on their enthusiasm, interest, excitement, curiosity or boredom and fatigue. The teacher will have the satisfaction of having tried a creative approach to literacy and language teaching and appreciation for the language. Therefore, teachers should provide a good, rich literature program for children to experience joy in learning the language.

Using children’s literature can hone the LSRW skills and bring about finesse in the communication abilities of young learners. Needless to say, each and every attempt at LSRW should be accompanied by approval and appraisal of the activities the learners are involved with. Constant encouragement is vital as this builds a young learner’s motivation and self-confidence.

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