

Ivana Cindrić,
Ivana Milković
University of Zagreb, Croatia

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Storytime in English Language Teaching – Teachers’ Practices, Attitudes, and Challenges

ABSTRACT

The research paper explores how primary school English language teachers in Croatia (N=110) use authentic literature in teaching. The survey examined the teachers’ attitudes, the frequency of use, criteria for text selection, and teaching methods. Additionally, teachers assessed their competences and readiness for using authentic children’s literature. The study found that teachers predominantly choose texts available in coursebooks, on average once a month. They present stories by combining reading aloud and storytelling, with only a few engaging in storytelling alone. Stories are mainly used for teaching vocabulary, but teachers also use them for activities such as dramatizations or discussions. Generally, the teachers reported feeling competent in using stories for teaching English language skills. However, the research revealed some areas that require more attention and support, especially regarding story selection, techniques for implementing stories, and time management. Some aspects of using authentic stories in teaching could be improved by being addressed in pre- and in-service teacher training.

Keywords: authentic children’s literature, primary school, story, teaching English as a foreign language

Pripovedovanje zgodb pri pouku angleščine – raba v razredu, stališča in izzivi učiteljev

IZVLEČEK

Prispevek raziskuje, kako osnovnošolski učitelji angleščine na Hrvaškem (N=110) v pouk vključujejo avtentično književnost. Raziskava obravnava odnos učiteljev, pogostost uporabe, merila za izbiro besedil in metode poučevanja. Poleg tega učitelji ocenijo svoje kompetence in pripravljenost na uporabo avtentične otroške literature pri pouku. Raziskava pokaže, da učitelji pretežno izbirajo besedila, ki so na voljo v učbenikih, in sicer v povprečju enkrat na mesec. Večina učiteljev predstavlja zgodbe tako, da glasno branje združuje s pripovedovanjem, redki zgodbe le pripovedujejo. Zgodbe večinoma uporabljajo za poučevanje besedišča, občasno pa tudi za dejavnosti, kot sta dramatizacija ali diskusija. Učitelji se počutijo kompetentne pri uporabi zgodb za poučevanje angleščine, toda raziskava razkrije tudi področja, ki zahtevajo več pozornosti in podpore učiteljem, zlasti glede izbire zgodb, tehnik vključevanja zgodb v pouk in upravljanja s časom. Nekatere vidike uporabe avtentičnih zgodb bi lahko izboljšali tako, da bi jih obravnavali v okviru dodiplomskega pedagoškega študija in stalnega strokovnega spopolnjevanja učiteljev.

Gljučne besede: avtentična otroška literatura, osnovna šola, zgodba, poučevanje angleščine kot tujega jezika



1 Introduction

The advantages of using authentic stories in English language teaching (ELT) go beyond enhancing students' language skills. Using authentic stories in ELT enables cross-curricular learning, develops students' awareness of multiculturalism and tolerance, promotes empathy, kindles imagination and creativity. What is more, literary texts also require interpretation skills and develop learners' cultural awareness (Lovrović and Kolega 2021).

All the aspects mentioned above were recognized and considered by curriculum developers in Croatia in 2003, when foreign language was introduced as an obligatory subject in the 1st grade of primary education. In Croatian primary school language programs, stories are “a significant part of the syllabus... (since they) are extremely useful in developing both children's communicative and linguistic competence” (Štokić and Mihaljević Djigunović 2003, 41).

Subsequently, this approach has persevered amidst numerous educational reforms. The present-day Croatian curriculum does not place any explicit emphasis on authentic texts but nurtures the idea that primary school children should get in contact with different literary texts written in English from their first year of learning the language. The outcomes connected to using literary texts in class are incorporated into the domain of intercultural communicative competence and implicitly presume that the texts should also be authentic. For example, one of the learning outcomes in the first grade of primary school is that children should be able to “compare literary texts in English with those from their own culture (e.g., illustrated stories, simple poems, comics and similar)” (*Kurikulum nastavnog predmeta engleski jezik za osnovne škole i gimnazije* 2019), which would not be attainable if the texts were not authentic and did not contain culture specific elements of the (Anglophone) source culture.¹

Teachers, on the other hand, have freedom to decide what materials and methods they will use to achieve curriculum goals. They decide on the textbooks and on the additional sources and materials to be used and introduced in their lessons. Consequently, teachers also design activities and allot time that they are going to devote to working on literary texts. Although numerous research has been carried out with respect to foreign language learning and teaching in the Croatian context (e.g., Gačić and Šamo 2014; Mihaljević Djigunović and Medved Krajinović 2015; Andraga and Narančić Kovač 2019; Vrhovac et al. 2019), studies focused on materials teachers use in their lessons are scarce and are mostly focused on providing practical advice regarding the use of different materials (e.g., Rijavec 2015). Considering the well-known benefits of using authentic literature (Brewster, Ellis, and Girard 2002; Ghosn 2013a; Narančić Kovač 2019), the aim of the present study is to explore the practice of using authentic children's stories by primary school English language teachers in Croatia and their attitudes towards such practice.

The paper is structured as follows: literature review, methodology, study findings and conclusion.

¹ Authentic literary texts are explicitly mentioned in the Croatian curriculum at higher levels of education from the 1st grade of high school (*Kurikulum...* 2019).

2 Literature Review

From the historical perspective, teaching English as a foreign language (ELT) is marked by various teaching approaches characterized by different methods, including the grammar-translation method, direct method, audio-lingual and audiovisual methods, communicative, and cognitive approaches, to arrive at the contemporary and widely accepted intercultural approach which places intercultural communicative competence at the centre of the teaching process (Andraka 2020). Literature, especially authentic children's literature, has been present in primary ELT methodologies for over four decades (Ghosn 2013b). However, different teaching methods approached the incorporation of literature in education differently. For example, during the 1970s, with the prevailing communicative approach to learning foreign languages, Allwright (1979) emphasized that communication should be the aim of language teaching with the development of communicative skills as the priority. Since linguistic competence is only a part of the communicative competence, "communication practice can be expected to develop linguistic skills" (1979, 170). In order to provide foreign language learners with the same kind of communicative function as their own language, Widdowson (1978) suggested reading authentic passages or extracts as "genuine instances of language use" (1978, 80), while he was primarily concerned with the authenticity and genuineness of the reader's appropriate response. Furthermore, since literature is representational and not referential (McRae 1994), it creates contexts which can be understood and interpreted "by a particularly intensive exploitation of the language medium" (Widdowson 1990, 178). It was concluded that "literature makes an irreplaceable contribution to the development of communicative competence" (McRae and Boardman 1984, 1).

In the context of the contemporary intercultural approach to teaching English as a foreign language, Kramsch (1993) points out that "literary prose or poetry appeals to the students' emotions, grabs their interest, remains in their memory and makes them partake in the memory of another speech community" (1993, 131), allowing them to acquire not only cultural knowledge, but also develop critical thinking (Cantizano 2020). Andraka (2020) points out that the language of authentic literary texts is not modified for classroom use and prepares students for understanding of future, unknown, texts that students are going to get in contact with outside of the classroom. Furthermore, even if the text is without explicit cultural information "the fact that it is a product of a specific culture makes it cultural content" (Andraka 2020, 40).

Over the years, the list of benefits for including literature in teaching English as a foreign language has expanded to include linguistic, psychological (affective), cognitive, cultural and social reasons (Brewster, Ellis, and Girard 2002, 186; see also Narančić Kovač 1999 and 2019a; Ghosn, 2013a), bringing forth the distinction between using authentic and adapted literary texts. The most important characteristic of authentic literature is that the language is not selected, adapted or graded, and as such authentic literature offers "a rich source of authentic input" (Brewster, Ellis, and Girard 2002, 188)². Although primarily aimed at child readers whose mother tongue is English, authentic literature can be selected to suit young English foreign language learners.

² For more benefits of using authentic children's literature in teaching English as foreign language see McRae (2008) and Bland (2013).

While authentic literature offers numerous advantages in the teaching of English as a foreign language, adapted texts are at the other end of the spectrum. Adapted and sometimes abridged texts are common in the foreign language learning context, especially for young learners. They are adapted or constructed to fit the presumed learners' needs and linguistic levels. Sometimes renowned publishers develop reading schemes and graded readers specifically for foreign language learners, in order to facilitate the acquisition of reading skills and provide reading materials that are not too difficult. Most of these materials, regardless of the publisher (e.g., Cambridge Storybooks published by Cambridge University Press, or picture books for FL learning published by Školska knjiga, Croatia) eliminate forms that are presumed too challenging for young learners, such as past tenses, idioms, phrasal verbs and so on. However, research has shown that even the youngest school children can read and understand appropriate literary texts in English as a foreign language. Moreover, young learners do not decode verb forms but derive the grammatical time from the story context, which makes changing grammatical forms to present tenses in stories for foreign language learners absurd and completely unnecessary (Narančić Kovač and Lauš 2011).

In the Croatian context, adapted texts are primarily found in textbooks. If carefully adapted, they can still contribute to learners' cultural knowledge (Petrović 1988), as well as other linguistic and communicative teaching goals, but the authentic communication experience is lost. Moreover, Rijavec (2015, 119) criticizes textbooks and texts in the textbooks as follows: "The artificially constructed texts not only disregard learners' interests, but also underestimate their intellectual capacities and their knowledge of the world. They present a simplified version of what adults consider a child's world should be."

Bland (2019, 90) highlights that a focus on children's literature in language teacher education also leads to freedom from coursebook-driven ELT and one-size fits all materials. In addition, Clarke and Clarke (1990, 36) maintain that "it is in TESOL textbooks published in the west for the world market that we find a major instrument for cultural transmission and a source of concern for the effect which stereotyped images may have". Relying on a textbook alone – even with young learners – must limit children's imaginative scope, while "recent research into the nature of the human brain pleads an evolutionary advantage to our capacity for narrative" (Hunte and Golembiewski 2014, 73). Stories elicit an engaged response, and empathizing with characters in compelling stories is important for the ability to take pleasure in literature (Krashen and Bland 2014, 8).

Because the coursebook is not necessarily the best option for young learner classes, many teachers spend time preparing instructional materials such as posters, vocabulary cards, and manipulatives (Enever 2011), or teach English with self-made materials only. The latter is the case in Slovenia, where textbooks are discouraged and rarely used in the first three years of EFL teaching (Dagarin Fojkar and Rozmanič 2021).

Since Croatia was "among the pioneers in introducing a foreign language as an obligatory subject in its primary schools" (Gačić and Šamo 2014, 5), there has been substantial research in the theory and practice of teaching English as a foreign language in the Croatian context. For example, literature in ELT had been investigated by Narančić Kovač (1999; 2019a), Lauš and Narančić Kovač (2008), Stanišić and Milković (2022), and others, although to date there

is no research on teachers' attitudes and practices when using narratives in EFL teaching in this context.

3 Methodology

3.1 Aim

The aim of the present study was to establish the extent and the manner in which Croatian primary school English language teachers use narratives (authentic and adapted) in English language lessons. In particular, the study aimed to explore the following: frequency of use; criteria for selecting authentic literary texts; how teachers incorporate narratives or stories; readiness to use authentic stories; teachers' estimates of their competences to use authentic stories in the classroom, and teachers' attitudes towards using authentic stories.

3.2 Instrument

In order to achieve the research objective, a questionnaire originally developed by Dagarin Fojkar and Rozmanič (2021) was applied. The questionnaire was modified to suit the specific target population, which consisted of primary school English language teachers in Croatia and aimed to collect data on several key factors. Divided into three main sections, the questionnaire included inquiries about general participant information (such as age, gender, grade-level taught, place of work, and educational background), experience in using stories (including frequency, selection criteria, teaching methods, additional activities, sources for finding stories) and teachers' perceived competences, challenges, and attitudes towards the use of stories. The questionnaire was administered online in May 2022. Support from the Croatian Teacher Training Agency was enlisted to ensure participation from teachers across the country.

3.3 Sample of Participants

The sample of participants for this study consisted of primary school English language teachers from various schools across the country. EFL teachers in the Croatian primary school context are either primary education and English language teachers or English language specialists. Generally, primary education and English language teachers teach mostly in lower grades of primary school (1–4), although their qualification enables them to teach English throughout primary school (grades 1–8). English language specialists can teach throughout primary school and secondary (high) school.

Participation in the research was voluntary, and the survey itself was conducted online using Google Forms. This approach enabled the participation of teachers in 15 out of the 21 Croatian counties. A total of 110 responses were collected from primary school English language teachers, with 104 female participants and six male participants. Among the respondents, the largest age group was between 36 and 50 years old, comprising 76 teachers (69.1%). There were 20 participants (18.2%) in the 22–35 age bracket, and 14 participants (12.7%) in the 51–65 age bracket. According to the participants' responses, almost 25% teach in all grades of primary school (grades 1–8), which indicates a relatively small school population and the need for teachers to be skilled in teaching EFL to both younger (lower

primary) and older (higher primary) children. This is further supported by the fact that only 22% of respondents teach only in higher grades (grades 5–8) and 10% teach only in lower grades of primary school (grades 1–4).

4 Study Findings and Discussion

Based on the responses provided by the participants, nearly half the teachers (49; 45%) include stories (narratives) into their teaching once or twice per month (Table 1). On the other hand, a significant portion of teachers (44; 40%) report using stories less than once a month and there were few teachers (3; 2%) who rarely use stories. On a more positive note, 14 teachers (13%) implement stories in their lessons once per week. This is an important finding, since English is taught only twice a week in the lower grades (grades 1–4). In the higher grades (grades 5–8), where English lessons are scheduled for three hours per week, introducing a narrative once a week represents a well-balanced and diverse teaching approach.

TABLE 1. Frequency of using stories (narratives) in ELT lessons.

| | N | % |
|--------------------------|----|-----|
| Once per week | 14 | 13% |
| Once or twice per month | 49 | 45% |
| Less than once per month | 44 | 40% |
| Rarely/sometimes | 3 | 2% |

Regarding the types of stories teachers use in their lessons (Table 2), more than half the participants (64; 58.2%) state using stories provided by textbooks. These stories can be either authentic or adapted; however, as noted by Skela (2014, 131), in most cases they are adapted and not very frequent. A recent investigation of the presence of authentic literary texts in textbooks for 4th graders in Croatia conducted by Milković, Cindrić, and Cvitanović (2023), revealed that most texts in the analysed textbooks are actually adapted texts. These adapted texts involve simplifying or modifying the language to align with the presumed level of knowledge of foreign learners, or alternatively, condensing the storyline.

TABLE 2. Types of stories used by primary EFL teachers.

| | N | % |
|-----------------------------------|----|-------|
| Stories from textbooks | 64 | 58.2% |
| Authentic short stories | 14 | 12.7% |
| Authentic chapter books | 3 | 2.7% |
| Authentic picture books | 13 | 11.8% |
| Adapted stories and picture books | 12 | 11% |
| Other: | 4 | 3.6% |

In the current sample, teachers also reported using authentic short stories (14; 12.7%), authentic picturebooks³ (13; 11.8%), and adapted stories and picturebooks (12; 11%). Only

³ The term “picturebook” written as a compound noun is used to emphasize the interconnectedness of visual and textual discourse in the artefact (Lewis 2001, xiv; Mourão 2016, 26).

a few teachers reported using chapter books (3; 2,7%) and other types of stories (4; 3.6%) which would include stories with videos or combinations of story types. These results indicate teachers' high reliance on stories provided by the textbooks. In fact, they show that reliance on textbooks continues to be very high in Croatia as the longitudinal study (2006–2010) known as the ELLiE study (Enever 2011) listed Croatia as first among four countries where coursebooks were widely used. This is not surprising if we take into consideration that textbooks are available to both the teacher and students, as opposed to picturebooks and other authentic stories which teachers and students might find challenging to obtain. Also, in terms of the limited time designated for English lessons in school, which is two or three hours per week – and the curriculum demands which have to be met within this – textbooks seem to be a logical solution as they cater to the curriculum. What is more, for teachers, stories in textbooks can be timesavers as the texts are already adapted and accompanying materials and follow-up activities are provided (Dagarin Fojkar, Skela, and Kovač 2013).

On the other hand, high reliance on stories from textbooks is not always the best option for language learners. For instance, Cameron (2001, 162) criticizes the texts in EFL coursebooks that are called “stories” when they do not adhere to the archetypal story template:

Most often they lack a plot; instead of setting up a problem and working towards its resolution, the characters just move through a sequence of activities. According to the author, teachers should be very careful and not assume that such non-stories will capture children's imagination in the same way that stories can do.

Non-stories do not play to the children's strengths, for children have a desire “to find and construct coherence and meaning” (Cameron 2001, 159). According to Narančić Kovač (2019a, 350) adapted texts can be a good starting point for creating dramatizations, but their simplification leads to a certain impoverishment of the literary work characterized by unnatural language and a simulation of the authentic language. Authentic picturebooks, as opposed to adapted or abridged stories presented in textbooks, provide affordances for authentic L2 use, as Mourão (2015, 202) states, through the interpretation of the book's pictures, words and design as these elements come together to produce a visual-verbal narrative that sometimes FL teachers take for granted as being led by the words. Finally, “storybooks can be used to provide extra language practice by supplementing and complementing a coursebook” (Brewster, Ellis, and Girard 2002, 192), but also as a source of enjoyment and relaxation (Narančić Kovač 1999, 264).

The exploration of authentic literary works for children naturally prompted our investigation into the availability and sources of such materials for teachers. Specifically, we aimed to identify where teachers typically find stories (narratives) for their students. As indicated in Table 3, most teachers (46; 42%) report relying on textbooks for stories, which aligns with the finding that over half the teachers utilize the stories provided by textbooks. A significant proportion of teachers (30; 27%) source stories from the internet. Notably, a portion of teachers (15; 14%) have taken the initiative to create their own personal collection of stories (picture books) for children. A few teachers mention their school library as a source for finding authentic stories and picture books, while a small number of teachers indicate using a combination of the above sources (11; 10%). Surprisingly, none of the 110 participants

in the sample mention the public library as a resource for accessing stories and authentic literature. Only a very small number of teachers (3; 2%) selected the option “all of the above”, suggesting that although they use textbooks, they also reach out for other reading materials that perhaps better suit their students’ needs, which is recommended.

These results indicate that the teachers in this sample rarely use school libraries to access authentic materials, although according to the Standards for School Libraries (Ministry of Science and Education, 2023) school libraries should also provide materials in the foreign language. Even more surprising is the finding that the option of checking with public libraries is not pursued by the participants at all. There are two possible reasons for such behaviour. Firstly, it is possible that teachers are unaware of the resources available in school and local libraries. Secondly, it is also possible that the materials available in these libraries do not meet teachers’ needs. In such a context where literary resources are not easily accessible, teachers may naturally gravitate towards relying on textbooks.

TABLE 3. Sources of stories.

| | N | % |
|---|----|-----|
| Textbook | 46 | 42% |
| Private collection/purchase | 15 | 14% |
| Internet | 30 | 27% |
| School library | 5 | 5% |
| Public library | 0 | 0% |
| All of the above | 3 | 2% |
| Other (textbook, private library, online, borrowing from friends, etc.) | 11 | 10% |

Considering that teachers mostly use narratives offered by the textbook, it is not surprising that the main criterion for selecting a story (Table 4) is the topic to be covered (content). One participant’s comment sums up this finding: “I don’t select stories, I use what the textbook offers.”

Other criteria that teachers find relevant when selecting a story for their English language lessons are language (authentic language with a lot of repetition), a clear sequence of events, text length and a combination of the above. Although some teachers shy away from using authentic reading materials for fear that the language might be too demanding for their learners (Brewster, Ellis, and Girard 2002, 188), there is an abundance of children’s literature written for L1 speakers that is simple enough language-wise and appropriate for classroom use (Narančić Kovač 2019a). Moreover, the selection of literature, as seen by Hall (2016, 464), “is not only a lesson-by-lesson or task-by task issue ... it is also a concern for wider syllabus design”. These wider aims go beyond vocabulary building, genre and register learning or better reading skills alone but are part of a wider educational aspirations for ethical citizenship and (inter-)cultural awareness (Hall 2016, 464).

TABLE 4. Criteria for selecting stories.

| | N | % |
|--|----|-----|
| Topic (content) | 59 | 54% |
| Language (authentic and repetitive language) | 28 | 25% |
| Text length | 6 | 5% |
| Clear sequence of events | 9 | 8% |
| All of the above | 6 | 5% |
| Other | 2 | 2% |

The following sets of questions concerned the actual use of authentic stories or how teachers approach stories in their lessons, their classroom arrangement during story-time, the activities used while engaging in story-time. Regarding teachers' preferences for reading or telling stories (Table 5), the results show that more than half the teachers in the sample both read and tell stories. This is a positive finding considering storytelling is a challenging activity in the sense that it is "the teacher who decides the form of each retelling, shapes the story to the audience, encourages responses and perhaps introduces new elements without disturbing the template-like building blocks of storytelling" (Bland 2015, 186). A relatively small number of teachers either read or tell stories. Some teachers also seek other ways of presenting stories to students, such as digital tools, audio recordings, listening and watching native speakers, and so on. The use of such tools can also be linked to textbooks. In a study conducted in 2013 on a sample of 50 Slovene teachers of English in the 3rd and 4th grades, the majority of participants favoured reading over storytelling (Dagarin Fojkar, Skela, and Kovač 2013, 24). The authors attributed this to the demands of storytelling in terms of preparing a storytelling performance (i.e., the techniques, knowledge and performing skills required for successful storytelling). Although there is a clear distinction between reading and telling stories, "reading and listening to stories provides one of the richest sources of language and creative thought input for children" (Vale and Feunteun 1995, 40). Both reading and telling stories are welcome in the EFL classroom and depend mostly on the teaching style and storytelling skills of the teacher (Ellis and Brewster 2014, 25).

TABLE 5. Storytelling vs. story reading.

| | N | % |
|--------------|----|-----|
| Reading | 18 | 16% |
| Storytelling | 10 | 9% |
| Both | 71 | 65% |
| Other | 11 | 10% |

In terms of classroom arrangement (Table 6), it is evident that the highest proportion of participants (53; 48%) do not change the classroom setup for storytime activities. In other words, their teaching is traditional, frontal teaching. On a more positive note, a smaller but significant number of participants (46; 41%) ask students to create a circle and semi-circle when storytime activities take place. Some teachers reported using both arrangements depending on the story, activity, students' age, and classroom.

We relate the high percentage of teachers who do not change the classroom setup during storytime to the high frequency of textbook use. If the story is in the student's textbook, there is no need to move away from behind the desk. Students simply flip the page and listen either to the teacher or a recording. However, when the teacher reads a picture book or book, or tells a story, moving the students so they can see and hear better seems the more logical step to take. Bland (2015, 186) notes that making a semicircle around the teacher provides comfortable whole-group togetherness without the paraphernalia of desks, pencil cases and school bags to distract from a trance-like immersion in a well-told story. What is more, "having pupils seated on the floor, in the form of a semi-circle, further contributes to the pleasant atmosphere in the classroom" (Dagarin Fojkar, Skela, and Kovač 2013, 26).

TABLE 6. Classroom arrangement during storytime.

| | N | % |
|--|----|-----|
| Frontal classroom arrangement | 53 | 48% |
| Reading circle or semi-circle | 46 | 41% |
| Both | 3 | 3% |
| Depends (on the story, activities, age, classroom) | 4 | 4% |
| Group work | 2 | 2% |
| Other (reading diary, sitting on cushions) | 2 | 2% |

While reading or telling stories, teachers frequently prepare additional activities for students (Table 7). Some of the activities are dramatizations, vocabulary enrichment, discussions, etc. In this research we have established that the most frequent activities teachers use while reading or telling stories are activities relating to vocabulary use (41; 37%) and dramatizations (28; 25%). Several teachers reported using discussion activities and activities relating to the integration of content from other areas. Such activities are expected in a language-oriented classroom, and they do not exclude cultural⁴ or other elements such as critical thinking.⁵ According to Hall (2016, 464), "the best tasks and activities will exploit to the full the specific features of the text", i.e., literary texts offer valuable uses of language, and this is where their greatest affordances for language learners lie.

TABLE 7. Activities during and after storytime.

| | N | % |
|------------------------------|----|-----|
| Learning vocabulary | 41 | 37% |
| Dramatization | 28 | 25% |
| Discussion | 19 | 18% |
| Cross-curricular integration | 13 | 12% |
| Other | 9 | 8% |

⁴ Kramsch (1993, 177) states that "teaching language is teaching culture". Thus, learning a foreign language always includes cultural elements, even if it is only at a basic level.

⁵ Fisher (1990, 53) insists that "stories can provide a rich stimulus for divergent thinking" and that "all stories to some extent require thinking about and recreating in the listener's or reader's mind".

With respect to using reading and telling techniques and additional support (Table 8), teachers mostly report using body and facial expressions, changes in voice, pictures, and illustrations. It is evident that although some teachers use artefacts and puppets, the majority do not. According to Bland (2015, 190-2), “creative teacher talk” is an important teacher skill for teaching English to young learners, for oral storytelling, picturebook readalouds and classroom discourse generally. Creative teacher talk is interactive, highly repetitive and with chant-like routines and expressive prosodic features, including carefully modulated pitch, tempo, volume, and rhythm to attract attention and underline meanings. Depending on the topic, the teacher may make use of dramatic pauses and exuberant intonation. In addition, creative teacher talk is accompanied by the scaffolding of gestures and facial expressions, elaboration, a slower speech rate, additional contextual cues and realia as well as comprehension checks.

TABLE 8. Techniques and additional support used during storytime.

| | Yes | No |
|----------------------------|------------------------|----|
| | Frequency of responses | |
| Pictures and illustrations | 104 | 6 |
| Body and facial expression | 108 | 2 |
| Changes in voice | 106 | 4 |
| Artifacts | 36 | 74 |
| Puppets | 42 | 68 |
| Other | 17 | 93 |

The next item explored under the heading experience in using stories was the time teachers devote to preparing lessons that revolve around storytime. According to the results (Table 9), more than half the participants state using approximately the same amount of time for preparing story-based lessons (62; 56%) as for regular, textbook-based lessons. On the other hand, 46 participants (42%) state that more time is necessary for preparing story-based lessons compared to preparing usual textbook-based lessons. The planning of a lesson that includes storytime (either reading a story or storytelling) is somewhat different from planning usual lessons following the textbook. Such planning necessitates time for finding and selecting an appropriate story, and for activities that accompany pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. The fact that more than half of the participants spend the same amount of time planning storytime lessons and usual lessons can be linked to the finding that most participants use stories provided by the textbook. It is likely and common practice that the related teaching manual offers a ready-made teaching plan for instructors, resulting in minimal differences in the time required for planning such lessons compared to planning a typical lesson.

TABLE 9. Time spent planning a story-based lesson.

| | N | % |
|-----------------------------|----|-----|
| More than usual | 46 | 42% |
| Less than usual | 2 | 2% |
| Approximately the same time | 62 | 56% |

The third section of the questionnaire comprised a self-assessment of competences for using authentic stories in the classroom, an open-ended question regarding the challenges teachers come across while utilizing storytime in their lessons, and an exploration of teachers' attitudes regarding the use of authentic stories in the classroom. The results are presented in the order stated.

The teachers self-assessed their competence to use stories on a five-point Likert scale (1– no competence, 2 – low competence, 3 – average competence, 4 – moderate competence, 5 – high competence). According to the results (Figure 1), a significant number of teachers (39%) assessed themselves as highly competent to use stories in the classroom, while most (44%) felt moderately competent. It is important to note that some teachers (18; 16%) estimated their competence to use stories in their lessons as average.

Interestingly, Ellis and Brewster (2014, 6) report that teachers lacked confidence in using stories and storytelling in research conducted in the early 1990s. However, things have changed a lot in the years since due to the publication of handbooks, research papers,⁶ and the incorporation of relevant courses in teacher education syllabi.⁷ Even if teachers are not familiar with a literature-based approach or using literature in the FL classroom, there is a plethora of resources available which can serve to enhance their teaching skills in using literature. However, it would be desirable to equip students, as prospective teachers of foreign languages, with as many skills as possible, including skills in using literature in language teaching, or at least to inform them of the possibilities they can use in the future.

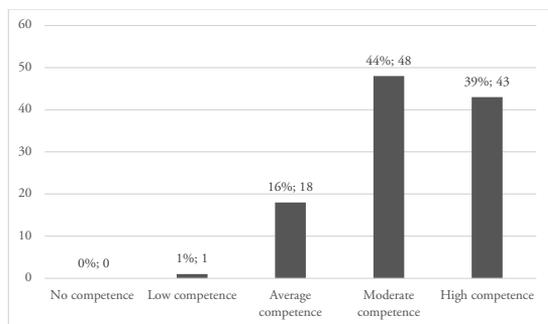


FIGURE 1. Teachers' self-assessment of their competence to use stories in their lessons.

The following set of results (Table 10) indicates the challenges that teachers reported with respect to using storytime in their lessons.⁸ According to the participants, the largest obstacle to using storytime in their lessons is the lack of time, and almost all the participants (100) marked this as a challenge that they face. It is possible that the number of hours allocated for

⁶ Several relevant titles can be found in this paper.

⁷ For example, in the Croatian context, there are several relevant courses integrated into syllabi at the University of Zagreb Faculty of Teacher Education (e. g. Literature in Teaching English, Creative Teaching Activities, etc.), some from the very beginning of the program for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language, since 1993 (Narančić Kovač 2019b).

⁸ Teachers could choose more than one item.

English language lessons per week (two in the lower grades and three in the higher grades) presents a challenge to teachers with respect to meeting the curriculum outcomes. However, awareness of possibilities in terms of different and diverse methods and materials in language teaching can help meet the demands of the curriculum without the anxiety and stress both teachers and students seem to be experiencing in their drive for success. For example, in their studies Tomlinson (2015, 283–84) and Mason (2013, 27) established that story-listening is as effective as or even more effective than traditional methods. Furthermore, stories are far more pleasant and engaging than traditional instruction, and students can gain other aspects of language as well as knowledge through stories (Mason 2013, 28).

Additionally, the connection between the participants' heavy reliance on stories in textbooks and their lack of time for using other authentic stories cannot be overlooked. We presume this is a result of a practical matter that puts textbooks at the centre of teaching – specifically, following textbooks to the letter and presenting the material in the order suggested by the books themselves. Using textbooks is not negative *per se*, but Rijavec (2015, 119) warns against putting them at the centre of teaching:

First of all, we should free ourselves from the tyranny of the course book by challenging our general attitude towards it. We should stop treating it as the Bible and feeling guilty in case we do not fulfill its purposes completely.

The second most frequently mentioned challenge for teachers is lack of materials (58). According to the results, teachers infrequently source materials from school libraries, possibly indicating that school libraries either do not provide sufficient or adequate teaching material, and therefore the pressure to provide quality storybooks is complicated by the related financial burden. Some teachers collect materials and books for their own personal library, which is certainly commendable, but should not be the only way to provide literary texts for classroom use. A notable number of teachers (31) report students' lack of interest in stories as being a challenge. Teachers report that some students refuse to participate and show resistance to such activities. According to the results of this research, we assume that a part of the reason for such behaviour might rest in the fact that textbook texts are not as emotionally engaging as authentic literary texts. However, the teachers' explanation for such student reactions is the existence of large gaps in previously acquired knowledge and skills in English. They also relate this to the students' poor work habits, the ease with which they become distracted, as well as lack of focus and consistency. Teachers state that some students require more supervision and support inside and outside of school. This often leads to a growing achievement gap between them and those who can follow the program, as well as growing insecurity and frustration, which over time results in the development of the aforementioned resistance. This is a vicious cycle and teachers cannot make much difference due to the lack of institutional support and lack of interest from higher authorities.

Finally, teachers' attitudes regarding the use of stories in their lessons were examined (Table 11). The participants were provided with a total of 24 positive and negative statements regarding the benefits of storytime for which they were asked to state their degree of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1– Entirely disagree, 2 – Mostly disagree, 3 – Can't decide, 4 – Mostly agree, 5 – Entirely agree). The statements were categorized into four groups including

TABLE 10. Challenges participants come across when using stories in EFL lessons.

| | Yes | No |
|---|------------------------|-----|
| | Frequency of responses | |
| Lack of materials | 58 | 52 |
| Insufficient competence | 11 | 99 |
| Lack of time | 100 | 10 |
| Unfamiliar method | 4 | 106 |
| Students' lack of interest in such activities | 31 | 79 |
| Other | 6 | 104 |

teachers' attitudes towards: 1– Students' interests, concentration, creativity and imagination; 2 – Teaching vocabulary, language, grammar and communicative competence through literature; 3 – Authentic literature and cultural aspects; 4 – General teaching aspects. For this part of the research, the most frequent value in the data set, i.e., Mode, was calculated.

TABLE 11. Teachers' attitudes regarding different aspects of using stories.

| Categories | Statement | Mode |
|--|---|------|
| 1 Teachers' attitudes towards students' interests, concentration, creativity and imagination | 1 Reading stories in ELT raises students' interest in the language. | 4 |
| | 2 Reading stories in ELT helps students to concentrate. | 4 |
| | 6 Using stories in ELT promotes students' creativity and imagination. | 5 |
| | 23 Authentic children's literature is not conducive to creative work with students. | 1 |
| 2 Teachers' attitudes towards teaching vocabulary, language, grammar and communicative competence through literature | 3 Authentic stories are a good source for vocabulary and language learning. | 5 |
| | 7 By using authentic English children's literature students are exposed to natural, authentic language. | 5 |
| | 9 Reading stories in ELT serves only as a foundation for teaching grammar. | 1 |
| | 10 Authentic children's literature in ELT prepares children for the acquisition of more complex language structures. | 5 |
| | 13 Reading authentic children's literature in the English language can serve as material for checking vocabulary comprehension. | 5 |
| | 14 Authentic children's literature is important for developing students' communicative competence. | 4 |
| | 16 Authentic children's literature which is available to me does not contain vocabulary relevant for students. | 2 |
| | 17 Authentic children's literature which is available to me does not contain contemporary language. | 2 |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| | 18 The obstacle I come across is that the text is loaded with grammatical structures students have not yet learned. | 3 |
| | 24 Authentic children's literature contains atypical language which students cannot use for communicative purposes. | 2 |
| 3 Teachers' attitudes towards authentic literature and culture | 8 Using stories in ELT promotes students' development of positive attitudes towards language and literature. | 5 |
| | 11 Through literature, students can learn a lot about the culture of English-speaking areas. | 5 |
| | 12 Reading authentic children's literature can improve students' awareness of cultural differences and mutual understanding between cultures. | 5 |
| | 15 My students can't understand authentic children's literature due to cultural differences. | 2 |
| 4 Teachers' attitudes towards some general aspects in teaching | 4 Using stories in ELT can be a starting point for engaging students in cross-curricular activities. | 5 |
| | 5 When using stories in ELT the learning environment is more relaxed. | 5 |
| | 19 Using authentic children's literature in ELT requires extra time and effort to prepare the materials adequately. | 4 |
| | 20 Regular ELT sessions in schools do not offer the time for using authentic children's literature. | 4 |
| | 21 Authentic children's literature in the English language can only be used for leisure time activities. | 1 |
| | 22 I avoid authentic children's literature as I find that it is impossible to use in ELT. | 1 |

The participants mostly agreed (Mode 4) that their students' interests in the language and their concentration are better when using stories, while they entirely agree (Mode 5) that using stories promotes students' creativity and imagination.

In the second group of statements, *Teachers' attitudes towards teaching vocabulary, language, grammar and communicative competence through literature*, the participants entirely agreed (Mode 5) that authentic stories are an important source of vocabulary, grammar, and language learning in general as well as of exposure to authentic, natural language and more complex grammar structures. The respondents mostly agree (Mode 4) that authentic children's literature is important for developing communicative competence. Consistent with the results on the positive statements in this group of questions, the negative statements were marked "disagree", which means that teachers are aware that authentic children's literature should not be used only for language aspects such as teaching grammar.

Regarding the third group of statements, *Teachers' attitudes towards authentic literature and cultural aspects*, the respondents entirely agreed (Mode 5) with all three positive statements about using stories to promote the development of students' positive attitudes towards

English language, literature and culture. The respondents do not consider cultural differences in authentic literary texts to pose a challenge to reading comprehension.

With respect to statements about general teaching aspects, the participants showed an awareness of the benefits and teaching opportunities that literature can offer in the FL classroom. They perceive literature as an opportunity to create a more relaxed learning environment and a window to cross-curricular teaching. They also mostly agree (Mode 4) that extra time and effort to prepare adequate materials is necessary when using authentic children's literature in ELT, and that regular ELT sessions do not offer the time for using authentic children's literature. They entirely disagreed (Mode 1) with the statement that they avoid authentic children's literature because it is impossible to use it in ELT, which leaves us hopeful that teachers consider they can overcome obstacles for using stories.

5 Conclusion

According to the research results, we can establish that English language teachers in Croatian primary schools use storytime on average once a month. When they engage in storytime, most teachers rely on the stories provided by textbooks. They combine reading stories aloud with storytelling and accompany this activity with pictures and illustrations, facial expressions, body language and changes in voice. Puppets and realia are used by less than half of the participants. For most teachers, stories are used to enhance or enrich vocabulary, for dramatization purposes or for discussions. They are aware that literature should not be used exclusively for language purposes and that using stories in the EFL classroom offers many benefits for students, as well as opportunities for the teacher.

The participants in the sample assess their competence in using stories in their lessons as moderate to high. However, some teachers' responses, particularly those indicating average competence, suggest that additional guidance may be necessary. This matter should be addressed more comprehensively in both pre-service and in-service teacher education, as short-term training or workshops have limited effects (Butler 2019, 34). Furthermore, the participants demonstrate positive attitudes towards using stories in the foreign language classroom, acknowledging their benefits. According to the teachers, insufficient time for reading and engaging in storytelling presents a challenge. Additionally, they mention that lack of adequate resources limits the use of authentic literature, often leading teachers to rely solely on textbooks and the accompanying (ready-made) materials.

Based on these conclusions we can identify issues that need to be attended to for stories to be effectively integrated into foreign language instruction, especially when teaching young language learners. Teachers' perception of lack of time is closely linked to the use of textbooks. As other research has shown, there is a correlation between textbook use and the use of authentic materials and texts. When teachers do not rely on textbooks, they resort to other materials including authentic literature. Apart from relying on textbooks, the pressure of time constraints can also be attributed to teachers' limited awareness that teaching and learning goals can be achieved through diverse methods, including storytelling. Given this perspective, pre-service and in-service teacher training programs should consistently address this awareness gap.

The reported lack of resources is a burning problem for teachers which needs to be addressed, and there is thus a need for more research that would focus on the amount and quality of resources available in the form of English language books in school and local libraries. Considering Croatia has been at the forefront of introducing foreign languages to young learners as early as grade 1 (formally since 2003), the lack of resources in the English language in school libraries is quite disheartening. Nowadays, being a member country of the European Union gives schools the opportunity to carry out various projects. In that respect, care should be taken to ensure that school libraries are equipped not only with resources in the students' mother tongue, but also in English.

Students' declining interest in stories can be attributed to their confinement within textbooks. We propose that this can be addressed by introducing real, authentic books and picturebooks. The younger the students, the more receptive they are to developing a genuine affection for books, rather than stories in textbooks. Encouraging students to move away from their desks and creating a special place and time for reading is a starting point. Another possible explanation for the falls in students' interest in stories may be attributed to the teachers' varied abilities to effectively incorporate authentic literary texts into their lessons, potentially due to a lack of competence in this area. However, for a comprehensive understanding of the study's results, it seems important to examine the correlations between teachers' initial training, perceived competence in story-based teaching and teachers' practices.

Finally, teachers' positive opinions regarding storytime and their awareness of the benefits of stories provide a solid foundation for devising strategies to motivate and inspire them to pursue this approach.

In summary, this study sheds light on EFL teachers' incorporation of stories in their lessons, offering valuable insights into current teaching practices. However, there are still opportunities for future research, particularly in conducting a thorough exploration of distinctions between teachers' initial training, grade level, and conducting a detailed examination of resource availability in school and local libraries. These research directions should contribute to a more thorough understanding of story-based teaching practices in FL contexts.

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