

# Evaluating the Benefits of Literary Texts in EFL Coursebooks Based on Littlewood's Perspectives

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## Abstract

In an attempt to conceptualize the role of literature in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses, this study analyzed the ways literary texts are approached in popular EFL coursebooks. It set out to find if these texts were used to their full potential according to Littlewood's five perspectives. The scrutinized literary texts were drawn from 44 mainstream EFL coursebooks. The findings showed that when literary texts were used, they were not necessarily used as *literary* works. Furthermore, the findings substantiated that inauthentic and poorly adapted literary texts did not lend themselves to higher levels of inquiry.

**Keywords:** literary texts, EFL, coursebooks, literature, curriculum

## 1. Overview

The important contributions that literature makes to language learning have been well-established in studies. Learners can especially benefit from reading literary texts as literature. However, publishers of coursebooks for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes are not keen on including and exploiting such texts. Modern EFL coursebooks continue to use inauthentic and poorly adapted literary texts. It is important to consider the effects of authentic and inauthentic materials on learners.

Several studies have documented the inadequacy of literary texts in EFL coursebooks. For instance, Skela (2014) examined the numbers of literary texts in various EFL textbooks that were used for over seven decades and finally concluded that the numbers in modern coursebooks were considerably lower than those in past coursebooks. Various studies confirmed that modern EFL coursebooks feature few literary texts to none. A thorough analysis of eight EFL textbooks conducted by Tomlinson et al. (2001) revealed that the inclusion of literature in them was rare. In the Turkish context, Gümüşok (2013) and Yildirim (2012) analyzed the distribution of literary texts; the former analyzed 22 EFL coursebooks and the latter analyzed six communicative EFL coursebooks, and both studies reported similar findings; that not enough literary texts were used. Furthermore, in a previous recent study conducted by the authors of the present study and relying on the same data, the authors investigated the use of literary texts in popular EFL textbooks published between 2015 and 2019 that were available in Kuwait and worldwide (Al-Saeed & Alenezi, 2020). One of the findings revealed that "... literary texts are not included in many of the coursebooks used nowadays..." and that the textbooks "... included a large percentage of inauthentic, ill-adapted works" (p. 95). Another study conducted by Al-Saeed and Alenezi (2021) focused on assessing the communicative use of these literary texts. It revealed different uses of inauthentic literary texts and authentic ones, with the latter used more for communicative purposes.

To better understand the use of literary texts in modern popular EFL coursebooks, the present study aimed to expand on the findings of previous studies of Al-Saeed and Alenezi in 2020 and 2021. This was not only important for assessing the ways of presenting literary texts in EFL coursebooks, but also for acquiring knowledge about approaches to using these tests. For this purpose, we specifically used the work of Littlewood (1986) as a basis for this research. While Littlewood's perspectives might appear to be outdated, they still have importance for and relatedness to literary texts and their practical use in coursebooks.

The five perspectives of Littlewood were an attempt to conceptualize the role of literature in EFL courses. The ways that literary texts are approached and used in the classroom often do not match the skills needed by learners and ignore the potential the text has as literature that could benefit learners. When incorporating literary texts,

teachers and curriculum designers should be aware that "... different pupils' aims require literature to serve different functions" (Littlewood, 1986, p. 177). By relating distinct levels of literature to the desired aims of learning, Littlewood's perspectives can guide teachers in selecting texts. Furthermore, these perspectives can be prioritized according to learners' phases. As Littlewood stated, "... any prospective text must be scrutinized according to all criteria relevant to the pupils' learning stage and requirements, and not adopted for study unless it passes through this scrutiny without hindrance" (p. 183). The following section briefly describes each of Littlewood's perspectives as it relates to the work presented in this study.

## 2. Littlewood's Perspectives

The main criteria for the analysis undertaken in this study were based on Littlewood's perspectives, and therefore, it is necessary to describe each of the perspectives and how they can be recognized. According to Littlewood (1986, p. 178), the language of a literary work can be divided into five types:

- 1) Language as a system of structures
- 2) Language in a specific stylistic variety
- 3) Language as the expression of superficial subject matter
- 4) Language as the symbolization of the author's vision
- 5) Language as part of literary history and/or the author's biography

Depending on the level "emphasized as dominant, they also constitute [five] ways of viewing the work" (p. 178). When the first level is emphasized, the literary work is dealt with structurally, for instance, by analyzing its grammar or vocabulary. It is used like any other text because "at the simplest level, literature is not qualitatively different from any other linguistic performance" (p. 178). One recurring argument against the use of literature in the classroom is that it does not aid linguistic study due to its variations. However, "for every device cited as peculiar to literature, examples of it can be found outside literature" (Simpson, 1997, p. 9). Further information on this topic can be found in *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

The second perspective is concerned with literature as "a vehicle for the learning of differences between language varieties" (Littlewood, 1986, p. 179). When features such as style, formality, register, and dialect are considered, "differences appear" (p. 178) between literature and other texts.

Both the first and second levels deal with aspects that "could be fulfilled equally well, or better, by readers or simplified texts," but "the more specific contribution of literature begins at the level of subject matter" (Littlewood, 1986, p. 179). When the content of a text, such as its plot or characters, is considered, then it has fulfilled the third of Littlewood's perspectives.

The fourth level is reached when the text is explored beyond a superficial knowledge of the plot "to penetrate to the author's vision or underlying theme" (Littlewood, 1986, p. 180). This is vital because "if literature is worth teaching *qua* literature, then it seems axiomatic that it is the response to literature itself which is important" (Short & Candlin, 1986, p. 90).

Finally, the fifth perspective states that the student must "step outside the work and place it in its context as part of literary history" (Littlewood, 1986, p. 180). This may be achieved by a simple review of chronological facts to "locate the work in time and place" (p. 178), or, in a more complex approach, by "relating features at different levels to the linguistic, social, or intellectual development of the foreign culture" (p. 180). Although this perspective may be irrelevant for EFL students, it is believed that the "understanding of texts is enhanced by situating them with their literary and historical contexts" (Lazar, 1993, p. 25).

## 3. Objectives

The researchers' aim was to assess how literary texts are used and what approaches are used to deal with them. To fulfill this purpose, and to frame the research according to Littlewood's five levels, the main research question of the study was: What level do learners reach as they use literary texts? The question was answered by focusing on the following objectives:

- 1) Assessing the usage of authentic and inauthentic literary texts
- 2) Assessing whether literary texts were used to their full potential as *literary* works, according to Littlewood's perspectives
- 3) Proposing a proper application, based on the analytic criteria, that would facilitate the utilization of a literary text more appropriately

#### 4. Data Sources

The data used in the study had also been used in the researchers' previous studies (see Al-Saeed & Alenezi, 2020, 2021), in which 44 mainstream EFL coursebooks (see Appendix A) were scrutinized. These coursebooks were widely used in institutes of higher education and colleges in Kuwait and other countries around the world. The findings of our previous studies revealed that in the 44 EFL coursebooks, only 25 literary texts were found, with 12 being inauthentic texts and 13 being authentic texts. For this study, the tasks used to utilize the texts were scrutinized and analyzed according to a set of evaluative criteria derived from Littlewood's perspectives. The findings were recorded in tables, compared, and charted.

#### 5. Results and Discussion

##### 5.1 Literary Texts and Littlewood's Perspectives

The researchers wanted to determine which of Littlewood's five perspectives was reached when learners read the literary texts in the selected coursebooks. Twenty-five texts were examined to yield the findings shown in Figure 1.

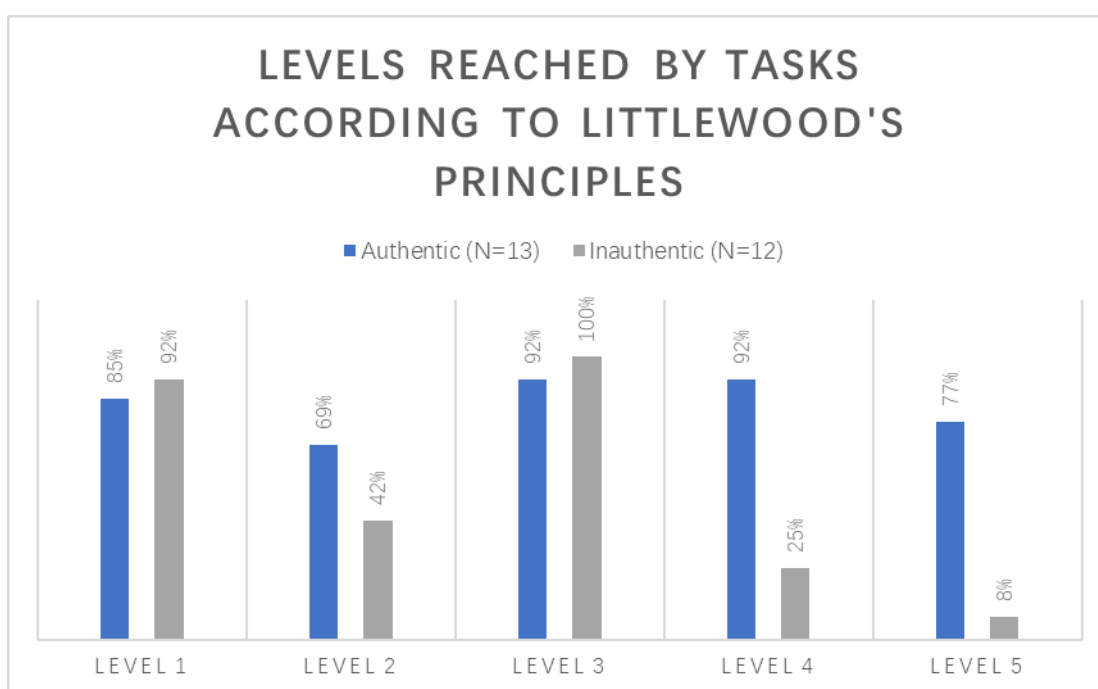


Figure 1. The percentage of tasks that reached each of Littlewood's levels

The findings confirmed that inauthentic and poorly adapted literary texts did not lend themselves to higher levels of inquiry. They generally only allowed for superficial studies and studies that were purely structural.

The findings showed that whether or not literary texts were used to their full potential, the inclusion of authentic literature for the sake of including it, without treating it as literature, was ineffective. Littlewood's perspectives made a neat distinction in showing how a text was approached. If we look at the texts in general (regardless of authenticity), it seems that, as shown in Figure 1, most were approached at the third level. This may be because the details of the plot and characters were relatively simple and could be used for learners from the beginning to advanced levels. These results were somewhat positive since this level transcends purely linguistic approaches and begins to deal with the text at the level of discourse.

It is useful now to make a distinction between the levels reached by authentic and inauthentic texts to show how different they were (see Figure 1).

Both authentic and inauthentic texts were approached at level 1 most of the time (85% for the former and 92% for the latter). This was not surprising, because it would be expected that inauthentic texts would be used for linguistic practice since they were not included for their literary merit. For authentic literature, this may be

explained by the fact that the authentic texts were approached at all of the levels almost equally (except for level 5), whereas inauthentic texts were approached in many varying ways and were usually dealt with at one or two of the levels and then abandoned. This may imply that authentic literature lends itself to being approached on different levels, whereas inauthentic literature is quickly exhausted. One coursebook that illustrated this particularly well was *Mosaic 2 Reading*, in which there was a balance in almost all of the texts. For example, the short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” by Edgar Allan Poe (Wegmann & Knezevic, 2014, p. 152) was approached on all five levels.

Level 1: Focus on the word list

Level 2: Focus on modern/archaic English

Level 3: Focus on the plot

Level 4: Focus on the authorial intention

Level 5: Focus on the biography of the author and the narrative elements of horror stories

This may be contrasted with the levels reached for inauthentic texts found in the *New Headway* series (Soars & Soars, 2006, 2009, 2013; Soars et al., 2007). They mainly reached level 3, and most approached texts on two to three levels. In another word, texts were not used to their full potential (5 levels) as they did not go beyond the third level or only approached texts on 2 to 3 out of the 5 levels. Coursebook authors may write inauthentic texts for certain purposes (e.g., to provide exercises on grammatical structure); therefore, these texts can only be approached on one level (level 1, in this case). This may be either because they lack the content for further analysis or simply because by including inauthentic literary texts, the designers have indicated that the texts have little value as literary texts. On the other hand, authentic literature, especially at advanced levels, is complex and needs to be dealt with on different levels to be understood. For instance, in “The Tell-Tale Heart,” the reader must understand what dramatic irony means to understand what the narrator is seeking to accomplish and what is implied by the theme. Furthermore, authentic literature is usually included for its own sake and approached at several levels simply because it is interesting. Also, the well-thought-out, unified presentation of good literature lends itself to levels that are intertwined. When reading “The Tell-Tale Heart,” students can be asked to concentrate on the vocabulary and then compare the English of the twenty-first century with the English of the eighteenth century, when the story was written. Questions about the plot can be followed by discussions about the story’s figurative language and the author’s overall and thematic intentions. This overlap between different aspects of a literary work makes it, as T. S. Eliot (1919, cited in Leitch et al., 2018) called it, “a living whole... an organic entity.”

Hence, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that there could be three possible combinations of how Littlewood’s perspectives may be applied in the EFL context:

1) Focus on levels 1 to 3: These three levels are the ones by which any text can be approached. Therefore, relying on them when reading literature does not add any benefit for learners beyond what they can get from reading any text. Also, it would not be an authentic application and would therefore undermine communicativeness.

2) Focus on levels 4 to 5: Although this approach is real in that it deals with literature in the same way that native speakers would deal with it, it disregards the EFL context, which is to learn a language and not the literature written in that language. This approach may be adopted once in a while for fairly advanced students when the focus is on fluency, but less advanced students require more basic approaches, in addition to levels 4 and 5. This shows that a more comprehensive approach is needed, one that includes the basic and more advanced levels.

3) Focus on levels 1 to 5: This is the most balanced approach to dealing with literature because it considers both the learning situation as well as the literary genre. Hence, it would be communicative on both counts.

The differences between the results of authentic and inauthentic texts vary considerably. The more even distribution of levels that can be approached by authentic texts shows that the third combination suggested by the above hypothesis would be the best one to use. The inauthentic texts, on the other hand, show a clear preference for 3<sup>rd</sup> level. That is what they lend themselves to in terms of tasks. Hence, it seems that the first combination of levels, levels 1 to 3, would be reached for inauthentic texts.

## 6. Conclusions

An important consideration in the teaching of literature in language learning classrooms is understanding how literature can best be used for learning. Approaching literary texts with Littlewood’s perspectives in mind can guide teachers in selecting texts that will fit in with the stage of learning of the learner. By scrutinizing literary

texts in 44 mainstream EFL coursebooks, the researchers showed that using literary texts did not necessarily mean that they would be read as *literary* works. Care should be taken to ensure that literature is used to its full potential. Littlewood's perspectives may serve as a yardstick for the depth of literariness to be reached, not the educational level, because it is possible to devise fairly simple tasks at the fifth level and more demanding ones at the first level. It is best to try to maintain a balanced approach that includes the first four levels at the least. The evaluative criteria used in this study may be used as a set of guidelines for ways in which literary texts can be appropriately utilized.

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## Appendix A

### Coursebooks that are used in the research as listed in Al-Saeed and Alenezi's (2020) study.

#### Coursebooks which included literary texts

- 1 New Headway Plus pre-intermediate  
Oxford (2006)
- 2 New Headway Plus intermediate  
Oxford (2006)

- 3 New Headway pre-intermediate  
Oxford (2007)
- 4 New Headway Plus upper intermediate  
Oxford (2009)
- 5 New Headway Plus Elementary  
Oxford (2013)
- 6 College Reading 2  
Heinle Cengage Learning 2006
- 7 Empower upper intermediate  
Cambridge university press 2015
- 8 Mosaic Reading 1  
McGraw Hill (2014)
- 9 Mosaic Reading 2  
McGraw Hill (2014)
- 10 New language leader Pre-intermediate  
Pearson (2014)

**Coursebooks which did not include literary texts**

- 1 New Headway Plus beginner  
Oxford (2013)
- 2 Unlock reading and writing skills 1  
Cambridge University Press (2014)
- 3 Unlock reading and writing skills 2  
Cambridge University Press (2014)
- 4 Unlock reading and writing skills 3  
Cambridge University Press (2014)
- 5 Unlock reading and writing skills 4  
Cambridge University Press (2014)
- 6 English Unlimited 1  
Cambridge University Press (2015)
- 7 English Unlimited 2  
Cambridge University Press (2015)
- 8 Read This! 1  
Cambridge University Press (2010)
- 9 Read This! 2  
Cambridge University Press (2010)
- 10 Read This! 3  
Alice Savage  
Cambridge University Press (2010)
- 11 Interchange Intro  
Cambridge University Press (2017)
- 12 Interchange 1  
Cambridge University Press (2017)

- 13 Interchange 2  
Cambridge University Press (2013)
- 14 Interchange 3  
Cambridge University Press (2013)
- 15 Well Read 1  
Oxford university press 2008
- 16 Well Read 2  
Oxford university press 2008
- 17 Language Leader Elementary  
Pearson Longman (2008)
- 18 Language Leader Pre-intermediate  
Pearson Longman (2008)
- 19 Language Leader Intermediate  
Pearson Longman (2008)
- 20 Interactions Access Reading and Writing  
McGraw Hill (2012)
- 21 Interactions 1 Reading  
McGraw Hill (2015)
- 22 Interactions 2 Reading  
McGraw Hill (2015)
- 23 Starting skills 1  
Garnet Education 2010
- 24 Touchstone 1  
Cambridge University Press and Obeikan 2012
- 25 Touchstone 2  
Cambridge University Press and Obeikan 2009
- 26 Touchstone 3  
Cambridge University Press and Obeikan 2012
- 27 Touchstone 4  
Cambridge University Press and Obeikan 2012
- 28 Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing Intro  
Oxford University Press (2016)
- 29 Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing 1  
Oxford University Press (2016)
- 30 Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing 2  
Oxford University Press (2016)
- 31 Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing 3  
Colin S. Ward and Margot F. Gramer  
Oxford University Press (2016)
- 32 Q: Skills for Success Reading and Writing 4  
Debra Daise and Charl Norlioff  
Oxford University Press (2016)

## 33 Pathways 1

National Geographic Learning and Heinle Cengage 2013

## 34 Headway academic skills introductory level

Oxford University Press and Oxford (2018)

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