

The position of authentic literature in primary ELT in Croatia

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Abstract

This study explores Croatian primary teachers' use of authentic literature in English language teaching (ELT). It examines teachers' perceptions and practices, including differences based on teachers' initial education and age. The findings reveal that teachers, regardless of initial education and age, use stories in their classes, typically once or twice a month. The main source of authentic literary texts for these teachers is the coursebook. There were no significant differences observed in terms of frequency and type of text used based on teachers' age. Overall, teachers have positive attitudes towards using authentic literature, although they express concerns about the increased teacher engagement required for preparation and delivery, as well as the time constraints of English lessons.

Keywords: authentic literature; ELT; practices; perceptions; primary school.

1. Introduction

Authentic texts such as poems, songs, movies, newspaper articles, menus, web pages, and similar (Simonsen, 2019) are not specifically designed for FL instruction and are believed to represent the target language accurately and reliably (Zyzik & Polio, 2017). Using authentic materials in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) has been recognised as relevant due to their potential to enhance language learning outcomes and foster meaningful engagement among students. In fact, according to McRae and Boardman (1984: 1) "literature makes an irreplaceable contribution to the development of communicative competence."

Exposure to real-life language use implies natural speech patterns, cultural and contextual nuances which lead to benefits in the linguistic, psychological (affective), cognitive, cultural and social aspects (Ellis et al., 2002: 186; see also Narančić Kovač, 1999 and 2019; Ghosn, 2013). Authentic stories, in particular, offer a rich and dynamic resource for language instruction, allowing students to connect with authentic narratives that reflect diverse perspectives and experiences (Ellis, 1997). By incorporating authentic stories into

language lessons, teachers can create immersive learning environments that stimulate students' curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking skills (Tomlinson, 2012). Critiques of commercial international and national materials for language learning thus suggest an important role for literature. This approach criticizes the limitations of commercial EFL materials. Unlike traditional textbooks, which often focus on formulaic content and avoid engaging topics, literature tackles relatable "big issues" such as love, death, and relationships, making it inherently more engaging and relevant for students (Maley & Kiss, 2018).

Furthermore, the educational value of literature is seen in its ability to bridge the gap between the inner and outer world, broadening perspectives and offering windows into different cultures (North & Piccardo, 2019: 149). *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2001) emphasizes the importance of literary reading in developing creative language use, essential for both speaking and writing skills. It suggests various activities such as singing, storytelling, and interacting with various texts (Council of Europe, 2001: 56). However, the *CEFR* initially lacked specific descriptors for working with literature, leading to its sidelining in many classrooms (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019). The 2018 *CEFR* Companion Volume addressed this by introducing new scales relevant to creative text and literature, including reading for leisure, expressing personal responses, and analyzing and critiquing literature (Council of Europe, 2018).

While both research and official frameworks acknowledge the power of literature in language learning (North & Piccardo, 2019; Council of Europe, 2001), research on how effectively teachers translate this knowledge into classroom practice is relevant. This research aims to investigate the use of authentic stories by Croatian EFL teachers at the primary school level, focusing on their perceptions, practices, and experiences. While the advantages of incorporating authentic literature into EFL classrooms are undeniable, effectively implementing this approach requires well-trained teachers. Therefore, the following section will explore the existing research on foreign language teacher education and teachers' attitudes towards using literature in their teaching practices.

2. Literature review

2.1. Teacher education in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)

According to Hélot and Bonacina-Pugh (2023), for the past thirty years the European Commission has been strongly supporting early language learning. This is based on research suggesting that early exposure to foreign languages (FL) leads to both more efficient language learning and improved

mother tongue competence. According to the document Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, learning FLs also contributes to developing crucial lifelong learning skills, including literacy, multilingual competence, cultural awareness, and personal and social development (European Union, 2019). The rise of early language learning policies in Europe and “soft” policy measures facilitated an increase in the number of young learners studying FLs (Enever, 2012). On the other hand, research has indicated inconsistencies in teacher training practices across Europe (Enever, 2014; Rich, 2018; Rixon, 2017; Zein & Garton, 2019).

Dörnyei (2018) emphasizes the teacher as a pivotal factor in early language learning success. However, the path to becoming a qualified teacher of English to young learners is a dynamic one. The task of initial teacher education programs is to equip future educators with a broad understanding of language education and its role in shaping young learners’ identities, critical thinking skills, and global citizenship (Enever, 2011a; Pinho, 2019). Furthermore, effective teaching of English to young learners requires not only strong language fluency but also age-appropriate teaching methods and the ability to scaffold language for young learners (Copland & Garton, 2014; Ellis & Knagg, 2013; Rixon, 2018). There is a consensus among FL teacher education experts that initial FL teacher education should be comprised of the following four components: practical knowledge of the FL, knowledge of the theory of FL teaching, knowledge of the teaching conditions, and practical knowledge of language teaching methods (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2008). Vilke (1999, 2019) recognizes important characteristics of teachers of young language learners (YLL) beyond having linguistic knowledge (pronunciation in particular). According to Vilke, the teacher is the leader of all games in which they themselves should participate; they should love their work (calling); show an understanding for and of children and their problems regardless of how grave or minor they seem to be; the teacher should have patience for children’s potential misbehavior; the teacher should be creative and encourage creativity, remain faithful to their personality and teaching style. Most importantly, seven-year-old children do not show an inclination toward their classmates, but toward their teacher; for this reason, the teacher plays an important role in the development of the attitude toward the foreign language, as young learners get emotionally attached to their teacher (Vilke, 1995). In addition, teachers of YLL should possess specific knowledge required to successfully teach foreign languages to young learners which includes children’s cognitive and psycholinguistic development, as well as glottodidactic principles of planning and teaching, which enables teachers to organize and carry out a lesson suitable for young learners (Radišić et al., 2007).

Although various policies advocate for developing young learners' linguistic skills (Enever, 2018), critics argue that these policies often oversimplify the complexities of TEYL (Emery, 2012; Rich, 2018; Rixon, 2017). It is suggested that policymakers need to acknowledge the crucial role of teachers in early language learning and the importance of providing quality training that addresses the specific needs of young learners and the challenges of effective language instruction (Muñoz & Spada, 2019).

Further along, high-quality language input in the classroom is a prerequisite for successful TEYL. According to Muñoz and Spada (2019: 246), the teacher is also a major source of language input. Bland (2019) notes that an important goal of young learner teacher education must be to help teachers master fluent language skills, as well as skills to cunningly scaffold YLLs by using pattern-rich teacher talk that is modeled on child-directed speech, supporting children as seekers of meaningful patterns.

A highly recommended resource of high-quality input is children's literature offering engaging content and opportunities for language development (Bland, 2018; Ellis, 2018; Mourão, 2016; Narančić Kovač, 2016). Children's literature used in the FL classrooms includes both authentic and adapted literature. While adapted literature usually undergoes a number of changes in length, story structure and language to better fit learners' needs, authentic literature is written in the mother tongue of the author and is not adapted in any way to an FL learner or reader (Cindrić et al., 2024).

However, as indicated by Bland (2019), despite the recognised benefits, integrating children's literature into teacher education programs seems to be sporadic. An example of a program in which literature is integrated into the in-service language teacher education program can be found in Croatia. Narančić Kovač (2019), one of the program founders and developers, gives two key reasons why literature is included in initial FL teacher education and has an important place in the existing program. First, literature plays an essential role in shaping an individual's personality, education, and cultural awareness. It exposes learners to fundamental humanistic values that are crucial for both academic citizenship and ethical conduct in daily life. Second, literature, along with other creative forms of human expression, offers a vast array of possibilities for teachers of any subject, including foreign languages. Narančić Kovač (2019) further argues that such a program aims to equip educators with the skills necessary to effectively utilize children's literature in their classrooms.

Additionally, many primary school teachers are skilled storytellers in their native language (Bland, 2019). However, spontaneously employing creative verbal scaffolding in an FL can be challenging. Teacher education programs often neglect to address the importance of developing these skills, mistakenly assuming basic English is sufficient for primary education. Bland

(2019) stresses that even fluent teachers require training on how to emphasize language patterns during classroom interactions in order for young learners to comprehend and retain the language effectively. Finally, teacher education programs should introduce and explore various communicative and learner-centered teaching approaches suitable for young learners such as Task-Based Learning and Teaching (TBLT) (Shintani, 2016), Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Ellison, 2019), storytelling and multiple literacies (Bland, 2019).

2.1.1. Foreign language teacher education in the Croatian context

Prior to the implementation of the Bologna Process in 2005 in Croatia, there were two main paths for educators to become qualified in TEYL. One possibility was to complete a four-year university program specifically focused on English Language and Literature and obtain a university teaching degree in the FL. Such degrees produced specialist teachers (Vičević Ivanović et al., 2019) qualifying them to teach any age group and in any type of educational institution (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2008). Around 10% of these four-year undergraduate study programs at the faculties of humanities and social sciences were devoted to acquiring the teaching competence (Mihaljević Djigunović & Mardešić, 2009: 319). The other option was to pursue a four-year generalist teacher education program with English as a subsidiary subject (Andraka, 2019). A future teacher following such a path would get a degree in primary education with an extra competence in teaching an FL (English or German) to young learners (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2008). The share of teaching competences within this program was around 35% (Mihaljević Djigunović & Mardešić, 2009: 319).

Following the implementation of the Bologna Process in 2005, Croatia's initial FL teacher training underwent changes. Since then, universities within humanities and social sciences have been offering a five-year program that integrates a two-year master's degree in teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) – specifically geared towards teaching this subject. This “teaching stream” provides a specialised path for educators focused on TEYLL. The MA TEFL Teaching English as a Foreign Language program requires entrants to have a BA in English Language and Literature.

The generalist, i.e., primary teacher education program also became a five-year university study program Primary Teacher Education with English or German. Students have been able to choose between English and German as a minor subject, equipping them with the necessary skills and competences to teach English or German to young learners at the primary level (Radišić et al., 2007). The proportion of ELT coursework within primary education and foreign language programs varies across universities offering such pro-

grams.¹ For instance, at the University of Zagreb's Faculty of Teacher Education, the English language program constitutes 30% of the primary teacher education program, amounting to at least 88 ECTS points (Cindrić et al., 2014) and teachers gain a qualification to teach English or German in primary school (grades 1-8). The ELT program equips students with a strong foundation in children's literature specifically for use in TEYL. This includes extensive exposure to a wide range of children's literary texts, in-depth exploration of the theory behind children's literature (focusing on areas such as picturebooks), and the development of skills to evaluate a book's potential for ELT and design engaging activities for young learners to learn English effectively.

In conclusion, these different teacher education pathways in Croatia provide graduates with the necessary qualifications to teach English to young learners, but the depth and focus of their competences vary. Graduates with a Master's in TEFL possess in-depth knowledge of English language acquisition principles, methodologies, and assessment techniques. This prepares them for specialised instruction and research in the field of EFL. On the other hand, graduates from the primary teacher education program with English gain a broader range of pedagogical skills. They develop a comprehensive understanding of the English language, linguistics, teaching methodologies, and children's literature. This prepares them to create engaging and culturally sensitive lessons for young learners. Additionally, they acquire the ability to independently plan, implement, and evaluate English language instruction and carry out research in the primary education context. This diversity in teacher education ensures a skilled and adaptable workforce for teaching English to young learners in Croatia. However, ensuring strong pedagogical skills is only one aspect of effective teaching. This next section explores teacher attitudes towards using literature in the TEFL classroom.

¹ For example, the Faculty of Teacher Education at the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek offers an integrated undergraduate and graduate university study of primary education with a module English language (30% of the program). A master's degree in primary education qualifies an individual to carry out and organize teaching in the first four grades of primary school. The obtained supplement presents additional specific competencies of a Master of Primary Education following the chosen modules specializing in child development, informatics, or foreign languages. For more information see: <https://www.foozos.hr/studiji/studijski-programi-i-ishodi-ucenja> The Faculty of Teacher Education at the University of Split offers an integrated undergraduate and graduate university study of primary education with a module Early Foreign Language Learning: https://www.ffst.unist.hr/_download/repository/Elaborat-UCITELJI_HRV_9-2023_WEB.pdf.

2.2. Teacher attitudes towards literature in the TEFL

Despite evidence that shows the motivational potential of stories in language learning (Ellis & Brewster, 2002; Van, 2009), some EFL teachers remain unaware of their effectiveness or are hesitant to incorporate them in their classrooms (Lugossy, 2006). Research by Lugossy (2006) reveals surprising resistance from some teachers, particularly when working with young learners. Several factors contribute to EFL teachers' reluctance to use literature in their classrooms. Some teachers, unaware of the pedagogical value of children's literature, might doubt its effectiveness in language learning (Lugossy, 2006). It is possible that they perceive themselves as experts only in language, not in literature. Additionally, a lack of confidence in their storytelling abilities can hinder their use of narratives in their teaching (Ellis & Brewster, 2002). In another study that examined teachers' attitudes, Gilroy (1995) looked at the views of teachers in a convenience sample of teachers in her institution. Gilroy's informants did use literature in the classroom, mainly as 'an added extra' (p. 8), and viewed it as a resource like any other. They did not use it regularly and did not feel the need for training in this area (Paran, 2008). Time constraints and concerns about student engagement in story-based activities are additional factors contributing to teachers' reluctance. For instance, research conducted by Calafato (2018), showed that teachers did not only report time constraints as a result of curriculum requirements but also because of the workload that comes with using children's literature when teaching EFL. One teacher claimed that there is an aversion towards using children's literature due to the time spent on text preparations (Calafato, 2018). Additionally, a study by Cindrić et al. (2024) found that finding suitable materials and dealing with time constraints were significant challenges for teachers in Slovenia and Croatia. Interestingly, the study also revealed that a larger portion of Croatian teachers (89.5%) reported a lack of student interest compared to Slovenian teachers (5.4%). This suggests that teachers lacking training in child-centered methodologies might feel hesitant to incorporate stories. Furthermore, Calafato and Paran (2019) argue that teachers who are not avid readers themselves might inadvertently discourage students from engaging with literature. These concerns often stem from teachers' own educational experiences, which may not have incorporated child-centered methodologies for teaching young learners (Calafato & Paran, 2019). Furthermore, the absence of positive role models who are passionate readers of literature can further discourage teachers from utilizing it in their classrooms (Calafato & Paran, 2019). According to Bobkina and colleagues (2021), research indicates a lack of training for language teachers in the use of literature in the language classroom and in teaching the literary aspects of texts (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Hirvela, 1989; Paran, 2008). Presumably, if teachers do not receive initial training on literature and do

not have sufficient methodological ability to fill in this gap, they will hardly be able to implement innovative practices in language-literature teaching. Furthermore, it seems that teaching experience does not affect the attitudes of teachers towards using literature (Aysu, 2023).

Nevertheless, research by Jones and Carter (2012) indicates that many teachers recognize the potential of literature in the EFL classroom. While acknowledging its benefits for language and cultural awareness, concerns included potential inaccessibility for students, time commitment for lesson planning, and language difficulty.

2.3. The place of literature in Croatian EFL educational documents

The inclusion of authentic stories in TEFL was acknowledged and emphasised by curriculum developers in Croatia since 2003, when FL was introduced as a mandatory subject from the 1st grade of primary education. Since then, English has been taught twice a week in the lower grades (1-4), while in higher grades (5-8) English lessons are scheduled for three hours per week. Within Croatian primary school foreign language programs, stories constitute a component of the syllabus, recognised for their invaluable role in fostering children's communicative and linguistic skills (Štokić & Mihaljević Djigunović, 2003: 41). The National Plan and Program for the English Language 2006/07 (MZOŠ, 2006) highlighted the importance of textbooks containing a richer lexicon than mandated, emphasizing contextual understanding over strict adherence to prescribed vocabulary limits. Moreover, it advocated the use of authentic materials which introduced grammatical structures not explicitly taught, promoting their recognition within specific contexts rather than active production. Elective topics were encouraged to be pertinent and engaging for students, fostering collaboration between students and teachers in selecting suitable topics.

In accordance with the mentioned National Plan and Program, children's literature in the first grade involved learning nursery rhymes, songs accompanied by movement, and exposure to two short picture books characterised by appealing design and minimal text repetition. By grade four, alongside rhymes and songs, lessons could incorporate tongue-twisters, rap, and jazz chants. It recommended that reading materials include picture books with a balanced ratio of text to images, short stories, and fables suitable for independent reading. By grade eight, students were encouraged to engage with original English texts appropriate to their language proficiency level. Children's literature introduced authorial poems, including those inspired by popular or rock music, as well as traditional songs within thematic contexts. Additionally, students encountered at least two short stories, one of which could be an original fable or fairy tale, or alternatively, a play or shorter

drama. It was recommended for students to read at least one longer narrative or contemporary novel for children and young adults.

In 2019, the Ministry of Science and Education in Croatia launched a comprehensive curricular reform initiative. The overarching goals of this reform aim to establish a cohesive and effective education system through structural changes and a comprehensive curriculum. Among others, these changes are designed to provide children and young individuals with more practical and relevant education tailored to their developmental stage and interests, preparing them for modern life, the job market, and further education (Summary of monitoring and evaluation findings, n.d.).

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 (ICC) 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) culture.

3. Research aim and method

This research aims to investigate the use of authentic stories in EFL classrooms at the primary school level. The main objective of this exploratory study was to gain insight into primary school English teachers' perceptions, practices, and experience with using authentic stories in their teaching. Additionally, the research will aim to reveal whether there are any differences in practices based on the participants' initial teacher education (primary language teachers vs. specialists) or the participants' age. To achieve that objective, we developed five research questions.

RQ1: To what extent do EFL teachers regard authentic stories as useful and necessary in teaching?

RQ2: How often do primary school EFL teachers use authentic stories?

RQ3: What kinds of stories do EFL teachers predominantly use in their lessons?

RQ4: Are there differences between primary language teachers and language specialists in their attitudes toward authentic teaching materials and the types of authentic teaching materials they most commonly use?

RQ5: Are there any differences in the frequency of using stories with respect to EFL teachers' age groups and teaching experience?

3.1. Instrument and procedures

The instrument used in this research was a survey (questionnaire) adapted from Dagarin Fojkar and Rozmanič (2021), which is available from an open-source web survey application (Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated at .950). Additional questions were added as the final part of the questionnaire, which was deemed necessary for obtaining the information pertinent to our research aim and questions. The questionnaire comprised open and closed questions which were grouped under three major headings. The first concerned general information on the participants (gender, age, acquired qualification, and school where the participants completed their study). The second group of questions explored participants' experience in using stories in teaching. The last part of the questionnaire comprised 24 statements on the use of stories and authentic children's literature in English lessons, to which participants gave opinions on a 1–5 Likert-type scale. These statements are based on the issues identified in the literature review and offer insights into current teaching practices and teacher attitudes toward using authentic texts in EFL. The questionnaire was anonymous, and individual responses could not lead back to an individual respondent. It was administered online, it was voluntary, and respondents could choose to stop participating in the study at any point without providing explanations. The quantitative data was sorted and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics v. 29. The obtained data comes from a random sample, and the variables are categorical (age groups, acquired titles, frequency of use, and kinds of stories) with no assumption of normality. Therefore, Pearson's Chi-Square test was used to determine the associations between variables and their statistical significance.

3.2. Participants

A total of 110 participants (N = 110), primary school English language teachers in the Republic of Croatia, made up the sample in this study. The sample was dominantly comprised of female teachers (96.4%) in the 36–50 age group (69.1%), followed by 18.2% of the participants in the 22–35 age group and 12.7% of the participants in the 51–65 age group. The responses came from participants in all 21 Croatian counties. The majority of participants were

language specialists, i.e., *mag. educ.* ($n = 74$), and the rest were primary educators and teachers of English, i.e., *mag. prim. educ.* ($n = 36$).

4. Results

This section has three distinct segments. The initial segment addresses the first research question, exploring the extent to which English teachers at the primary level perceive authentic stories as useful and necessary in teaching EFL. The next segment answers the second and third research questions dealing with the frequency of using authentic stories and the kinds of stories predominantly incorporated into English teachers' pedagogical practices. The third segment addresses the fourth and fifth research questions, looking into potential differences within participant subgroups based on their respective age groups and educational backgrounds.

4.1. EFL teachers' views of using authentic stories in teaching

A quantitative analysis of the obtained data was conducted to find objective indicators that, when put together, would facilitate answering the research questions. The Likert-type statements were almost equally divided between favourable and unfavourable regarding the use of authentic stories in ELT (13 and 11, respectively). More specifically, favourable statements represent the advantages of implementing authentic texts in primary EFL, while unfavourable statements imply teachers' hesitation to use authentic literature in EFL classes due to various constraints, including limited teaching time, curriculum requirements, personal preferences, and more. Determining the mean values for each statement reveals English teachers' general attitudes toward the usefulness and necessity of authentic stories in regular ELT classes, which answers the first research question. Table 1 presents the results of favourable statements: mean values, standard deviation, and the percentage of neutral responses.

Table 1: Mean values of favourable statements

Statement	Mean value (M)	St. dev. (SD)	Neutral responses (%)
By using authentic English children's literature students are exposed to natural, authentic language.	4.62	0.72	2.73
Authentic stories are a good source for vocabulary and language learning.	4.55	0.76	5.45
Using stories in ELT promotes students' creativity and imagination.	4.50	0.73	5.45
Through literature, students can learn a lot about the culture of English-speaking areas.	4.48	0.71	7.27
Reading authentic children's literature can improve students' awareness of cultural differences and mutual understanding between cultures.	4.44	0.76	5.45
When using stories in ELT the learning environment is more relaxed.	4.42	0.72	8.18
Using stories in ELT promotes students' development of positive attitudes towards language and literature.	4.42	0.76	8.18
Using stories in ELT can be a starting point for engaging students in cross-curricular activities.	4.36	0.73	6.36
Reading authentic children's literature in the English language can serve as material for checking vocabulary comprehension.	4.32	0.78	5.45
Authentic children's literature is important for developing students' communicative competence.	4.29	0.76	7.27
Authentic children's literature in ELT prepares children for the acquisition of more complex language structures.	4.18	0.91	11.82
Reading stories in ELT raises students' interest in the language.	4.15	0.81	15.45
Reading stories in ELT helps students to concentrate.	3.95	0.86	20
Average values	4.36	0.77	8.39

Overall, the favourable statements have a relatively high mean value ($M = 4.36$) on a 5-point scale, which reflects the overall positive perception of English teachers toward the use of authentic pieces of children's literature in English. The highest mean values ($M \geq 4.50$) were given to the statements concerning AUTHENTIC LANGUAGE and CREATIVITY: authentic English children's literature exposes students to natural, authentic language ($M = 4.62$), that stories are a good source for vocabulary and language learning ($M =$

4.55), and that they promote students' creativity and imagination ($M = 4.50$). These statements also have the lowest percentage of neutral responses, which indicates that English teachers were able to make specific judgements about them.

Next in line were the statements with the mean value between 4.49 and 4.30, and here they are listed in descending order. This group begins with **CULTURE-RELATED** statements saying that by reading authentic stories, students can learn a lot about the culture of English-speaking areas ($M = 4.48$), and they can improve their awareness of cultural differences as well as mutual understanding between cultures ($M = 4.44$). Following are statements regarding creating a more **RELAXED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT** and developing **POSITIVE ATTITUDES** toward language and literature, both with $M = 4.42$. The final two statements in this group state that using stories in ELT can be a starting point for engaging students in **CROSS-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES** ($M = 4.36$) and can also serve as material for checking **VOCABULARY COMPREHENSION** ($M = 4.32$).

The third group comprises the statements with $M < 4.30$. The statement that authentic children's literature is important for developing students' **COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE** has a mean value of 4.29. Next is the statement that authentic children's literature in ELT prepares children for the acquisition of **MORE COMPLEX LANGUAGE STRUCTURES** ($M = 4.18$). Finally, there are the two statements with the lowest mean value, and they are related to the **AFFECTIVE DOMAIN** of language learning: reading stories in ELT raises students' interest in the language ($M = 4.15$), and reading stories helps students to concentrate ($M = 3.95$). The last three statements showing the lowest mean value have the highest standard deviation, as well as the percentage of neutral answers, which means that a number of participants differed in the level of agreement, and many of them were either unable or unwilling to make more specific judgements about these statements.

In the following step, the unfavourable statements were analysed according to their mean values (Table 2). Since the average mean value of favourable statements was relatively high, which reflects the overall positive views of authentic stories in ELT, that incidence should be complemented with a relatively low average mean value of unfavourable statements.

Table 2: Mean values of unfavourable statements

Statement	Mean value (M)	St. dev. (SD)	Neutral responses (%)
Using authentic children's literature in ELT requires extra time and effort to prepare the materials adequately.	3.70	1.00	20
Regular ELT sessions in schools do not offer the time for using authentic children's literature.	3.61	1.03	20
The obstacle I come across is that the text is loaded with grammatical structures students have not yet learned.	2.89	1.00	35.45
Reading stories in ELT serves only as a foundation for teaching grammar.	2.30	1.29	20
Authentic children's literature which is available to me does not contain vocabulary relevant for students.	2.23	1.01	23.64
Authentic children's literature which is available to me does not contain contemporary language.	2.22	1.00	24.55
My students can't understand authentic children's literature due to cultural differences.	2.13	0.98	19.09
Authentic children's literature contains atypical language which students cannot use for communicative purposes.	2.08	1.01	21.82
Authentic children's literature in the English language can only serve for pastime.	1.99	0.98	17.27
Authentic children's literature is not conducive to creative work with students.	1.85	0.88	15.45
I avoid authentic children's literature as I find that it is impossible to use in ELT.	1.84	0.95	19.09
Average values	2.44	1.01	21.49

The unfavourable statements have a relatively low mean value ($M = 2.44$) on a 5-point scale, with a somewhat higher standard deviation and a discernibly higher percentage of neutral answers. In this case, as well, the statements can be divided into three groups according to their mean values: above 3, between 2 and 3, and below 2. The unfavourable statements with the highest mean values and approximately average percentage of neutral answers (20%) are related to **TEACHER ENGAGEMENT** and **MATERIAL CIRCUMSTANCES**: using authentic children's literature in ELT requires extra time and effort to prepare the materials adequately, and that regular ELT sessions in schools do not offer the time for using authentic children's literature.

The following six unfavourable statements are primarily related to LANGUAGE (vocabulary and grammar) and CULTURE: the text contains numerous grammatical structures students have not yet learned; reading stories in ELT serves only as a foundation for teaching grammar; available authentic children's literature does not contain vocabulary relevant for students; does not contain contemporary language; students cannot understand it due to cultural differences; and contains atypical language which students cannot use for communicative purposes.

The final three statements with mean values below 2 are related to the GENERAL UNSUITABILITY for primary ELT: authentic children's literature in the English language can only serve as a pastime and is not conducive to creative work with students. The unfavourable statement with the lowest mean value ($M = 1.84$) says that children's literature is avoided as it is found to be impossible to use in ELT.

The statements with the highest percentage of neutral answers were about authentic texts loaded with grammatical structures that students have not yet learned (35.45%), a lack of contemporary language in authentic stories (24.55%), as well as vocabulary relevant to students (23.64%). On the other hand, the three statements with mean values below 2 had the lowest percentage of neutral answers, along with the statement about likely cultural differences leading to difficulties in understanding authentic stories.

When the mean values of favourable (F) and unfavourable (U) statements about authentic stories in ELT are compared, it is evident that the favourable statements have a considerably higher mean value ($MF > MU$; $4.36 > 2.44$, respectively).

4.2. Kinds of stories and the frequency of their use

According to the survey results regarding the frequency of use of stories in their teaching, nearly half of the teachers (44.5%, 49 participants) reported using stories once or twice a month. Another half (40%, 44 participants) indicated using stories less frequently or less than once a month. Only a small number of the teachers (12.7%, 14 participants) stated using stories on a weekly basis, more specifically, one a week.

With respect to the type of stories used, the participants' answers show that they heavily rely on coursebooks in their teaching. In other words, almost 60% of teachers use stories that are offered in the coursebook. Other kinds of stories are distributed among authentic short stories (12.7%), authentic picturebooks and stories (12%), adapted stories and picturebooks (11%), authentic chapter books (3%) and other kinds of stories (4%). To further examine the kinds of stories English teachers use, along with the fre-

quency, a crosstabulation technique was used. Table 3 shows the frequency of using each of the six types of stories presented to the participants.

Table 3: Kinds of stories and frequency of using stories in EFL

	Kinds of stories						Total (n)
	stories from the textbook	authentic short stories	authentic picture books	authentic chapter books	adapted stories	other	
once a week	8	2	2	1	1	0	14
once or twice a month	29	6	6	2	2	4	49
less than once a month	25	6	4	0	8	1	44
rarely	2	0	0	0	1	0	3
Total (n)	64	14	12	3	12	5	110

As the table shows, stories from the textbook, which is the most common kind of stories used in primary ELT, are predominantly used once or twice a month or less than once a month.

4.3. Differences between the subgroups

To answer the fourth and fifth research questions, two subgroups were compared based on the participants' acquired title and age in relation to the frequency of using authentic stories in ELT. The Pearson Chi-Square test ($\chi^2 = 1.639$; $df = 3$) determined that the participants' education is not connected with the frequency of their use of authentic stories in ELT. A weak positive association was found between these two variables ($\phi = .124$; $\phi_c = .124$), but it is not statistically significant ($p > .05$). Table 4 provides more detailed figures about the frequency of story usage in ELT and English teachers' initial education. Both groups have their highest scores in the category "once or twice a month". Their second and third-highest scores are in the same categories as well, "less than once a month" and "once a week", respectively. The category "rarely" has no responses for *mag. prim. educ.*, and only three for *mag. educ.*, which is not substantial considering the total number of respondents in this category.

Table 4: The connection between teachers’ education and the frequency of using stories in EFL

		Frequency				Total (n)
		once a week	once or twice a month	less than once a month	rarely	
Acquired titles	<i>mag. prim. educ.</i>	4	17	15	0	36
	<i>mag. educ.</i>	10	32	29	3	74
Total (n)		14	49	44	3	110

Next, the connection between teachers’ age and the frequency of using stories in ELT was not established ($\chi^2 = 6.054$; $df = 6$). A weak positive association was found between these two variables ($\phi = .235$; $\phi_c = .166$) and it was not statistically significant ($p > .05$). More specific information about the frequency of using stories in ELT and teachers’ age groups is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: The connection between teachers’ age groups and the frequency of using stories

		Frequency				Total (n)
		once a week	once or twice a month	less than once a month	rarely	
Age groups	22-35	4	7	9	0	20
	36-50	10	36	27	3	76
	51-65	0	6	8	0	14
Total (n)		14	49	44	3	110

As can be seen in the table, the most represented age group is 36-50, and their prevailing preference is using stories “once or twice a month,” while the remaining two age groups have their highest scores in the category “less than once a month”. The two younger age groups have almost a fifth of their preferences in the category representing the highest frequency, “once a week,” while the most senior age group has no responses in that category. The youngest and the most senior age groups both have no responses in “rarely.”

Another difference was explored in the further analysis of the mean values derived from the participants’ responses to both favourable and unfavourable

vourable statements described in the first segment, which adds to answering the fourth research question inquiring about possible differences between primary English teachers and language specialists. The means of the sample averages ($\bar{X}$) for both favorable and unfavorable statements show no significant differences between the two subgroups based on initial teacher education. However, there is a slight difference in the percentage of neutral answers for both favourable and unfavourable statements (table 6). Language specialists offered more neutral responses for both groups of statements. More specifically, primary education teachers had zero neutral answers for the statement that using authentic English children’s literature exposes students to natural, authentic language, and six other statements had a very low percentage of neutral answers (< 3%).

Table 6: Differences between the subgroups based on teachers’ initial education

Primary teachers (n = 36)		Language specialists (n = 74)	
Favourable statements ($\bar{X}$)	Unfavourable statements ($\bar{X}$)	Favourable statements ($\bar{X}$)	Unfavourable statements ($\bar{X}$)
4.39	2.47	4.35	2.43
Neutral answers (%)	Neutral answers (%)	Neutral answers (%)	Neutral answers (%)
2.73	8.35	5.66	13.14

For primary education teachers, the above-average percentage of neutral responses was recorded for the following favourable statements: *authentic children’s literature in ELT prepares children for the acquisition of more complex language structures* (7.27%); *reading stories in ELT raises students’ interest in the language* (4.55%); and three statements with 3.64% – *reading authentic children’s literature in the English language can serve as material for checking vocabulary comprehension*; *reading stories in ELT helps students to concentrate*; and *authentic childrens literature is important for developing students’ communicative competence*. Their above-average neutral responses for the unfavourable statements were as follows: *the obstacle I come across is that the text is loaded with grammatical structures students have not yet learned* (12.73%); *authentic children’s literature contains atypical language which students cannot use for communicative purposes* (10%); and three statements with 9.09% of neutral responses - *using authentic children’s literature in ELT requires extra time and effort to prepare the materials adequately*; *regular ELT sessions in schools do not offer the time for using authentic children’s literature*; and *authentic children’s literature which is available to me does not contain vocabulary relevant for students*.

For language specialists, the above-average percentage of neutral responses among the favourable statements was found for *reading stories in ELT helps students to concentrate* (16.36%); *reading stories in ELT raises students' interest in the language* (10.91%); and *when using stories in ELT the learning environment is more relaxed* (7.27%). In the case of unfavourable statements, the highest percentage of neutral answers was recorded for *the obstacle I come across is that the text is loaded with grammatical structures students have not yet learned* (22.73%); *authentic children's literature which is available to me does not contain contemporary language* (16.36); and two statements with 14.55% – *authentic children's literature which is available to me does not contain vocabulary relevant for students* and *reading stories in ELT serves only as a foundation for teaching grammar*.

In the case of comparison according to teachers' age groups, no statistically significant difference was found either. The only difference that can be observed in Table 7 is a slightly higher percentage of neutral answers in the middle age subgroup for both favourable and unfavourable statements about using authentic stories in primary ELT.

Table 7: Differences between the subgroups based on teachers' age groups

22-35 (n = 20)		36-50 (n = 76)		51-65 (n = 14)	
Favourable statements ($\bar{X}$)	Unfavourable statements ($\bar{X}$)	Favourable statements ($\bar{X}$)	Unfavourable statements ($\bar{X}$)	Favourable statements ($\bar{X}$)	Unfavourable statements ($\bar{X}$)
4.30	2.64	4.39	2.37	4.29	2.57
Neutral answers (%)	Neutral answers (%)	Neutral answers (%)	Neutral answers (%)	Neutral answers (%)	Neutral answers (%)
1.61	4.21	5.60	14.79	1.19	2.48

More precisely, the highest percentage of neutral responses among favourable statements was found for *reading stories in ELT helps students to concentrate* (13.64%); *reading stories in ELT raises students' interest in the language* and *authentic children's literature in ELT prepares children for the acquisition of more complex language structures* (both 10%); and *using stories in ELT promotes students' development of positive attitudes towards language and literature* (6.36%). Then again, for unfavourable statements, the middle age subgroup responded neutrally to the following statements: *the obstacle I come across is that the text is loaded with grammatical structures students have not yet learned* (24.55%); *regular ELT sessions in schools do not offer the time for using authentic children's literature* (18.18%); *authentic children's literature contains atypical language which students cannot use for communicative purposes* and *authentic children's literature which is available to me does not contain contemporary language* (both 16.36%);

and reading stories in ELT serves only as a foundation for teaching grammar (15.45%). While subgroup differences shed light on the nuances within our sample, it is imperative to interpret these findings cautiously. Moving forward, the discussion will delve into the implications of these findings, their potential underlying mechanisms, and implications for future research.

5. Discussion

The first research question aimed to discover the extent to which EFL teachers regard authentic stories as useful and necessary in teaching. The overall favourable statements ($M = 4.36$) on a 5-point scale indicate that English teachers, in general, have a positive perception regarding the use of authentic literature in English. The teachers highly agreed with statements that authentic English children's literature exposes students to natural, authentic language, that stories are a good source for vocabulary and language learning, and that they promote students' creativity and imagination. The findings from our study resonate with previous research on the use of literary texts in language education. For instance, Bobkina et al. (2021) found that among 81 English language teachers in Madrid, there was a consensus that literary texts significantly contribute to language development by enhancing reading and writing skills, as well as expanding vocabulary. This is consistent with Akbari and Razavi's (2015) study, where 57 Iranian English teachers preferred using authentic materials to develop language skills. Similarly, Kayaoğlu et al. (2012) reported comparable findings among teachers in Turkey. These studies collectively suggest that the traditional view of literature as a tool for vocabulary acquisition, reading strategy development, and critical thinking, as outlined by Kramsch & Kramsch (2000), remains prevalent in language classrooms. Additionally, literature is highly valued for enriching students' cultural and intercultural understanding, aligning with Jones & Carter's (2012) perspective. Teachers acknowledge its role in developing communicative competence and preparing students for more complex language structures. However, our findings also highlight some areas of indecision. Specifically, teachers were uncertain about whether reading stories in ELT increases students' interest in the language and helps them concentrate. This skepticism echoes the results of Lugossy (2006), who found that while teachers initially questioned the motivational value of stories, they were ultimately surprised by their positive reception in the classroom after introducing them. These insights provide a nuanced view of the role of literature in language education and suggest areas for further investigation, particularly regarding the practical impacts of using stories to engage students and enhance their focus.

The unfavourable statements with the highest mean values and approximately average percentage of neutral answers (20%) are related to teacher engagement and material circumstances. Specifically, using authentic children's literature in ELT requires extra time and effort to prepare the materials adequately and that regular ELT sessions in schools do not offer the time for using authentic children's literature. Similar discoveries were made in previous studies (Calafato, 2018; Cindrić & Milković, 2023; Jones & Carter, 2012; Lugossy, 2006).

With respect to the frequency of use of authentic literature, which was the second research question, the results indicate that most of the teachers surveyed use narratives when teaching English generally once or twice per month. However, the high percentage of teachers (40%) who use these approaches less frequently, i.e., less than once a month cannot be overlooked. This suggests that stories, despite their recognised benefits, may not be fully exploited as a teaching resource. Furthermore, it is also possible that the number of hours allocated for English language lessons per week (2 in lower grades and 3 in higher grades) presents a challenge to teachers with respect to meeting the curriculum outcomes. For comparison, in an investigation of the frequency of use of authentic stories in Slovenia in 2013, in grades 3 and 4, the results were slightly different, i.e., 52% used stories once or twice per month, while 33% used stories less than once or twice a month (Dagarin Fojkar et al., 2013). It is important to mention that in the case of Slovene teachers, the data possibly reflect the fact that teachers not using a coursebook (in Slovenia coursebooks are not proscribed in lower primary grades) tend to use narratives more often in their teaching of English to young learners, presumably because they prepared their own materials and narratives represent an indispensable resource for language learning.

The third research question, 'What kinds of stories do EFL teachers predominantly use in their lessons?', revealed another possible connection to coursebooks. Heavy reliance of participants on coursebooks could possibly account for the results regarding the type and source of authentic text for use in the English language classroom. The results show that 60% of teachers use stories provided by the coursebooks. What is more, they show that reliance on textbooks has not diminished since the results of the longitudinal study (2006–2010) known as the ELLiE study (Enever, 2011b) listed Croatia first among four countries where coursebooks were widely used. Reliance on textbooks could be attributed to the easy availability of such teaching materials to both students and teachers. In addition, the pre-selected stories in textbooks and accompanying activities make them a convenient choice for teachers, saving them time in the lesson preparation process (Dagarin Fojkar et al., 2013). The unfavourable statements about using authentic stories in ELT discussed in the previous section reflect such assumptions, with extra

time and effort for preparation and time constraints during lessons having the highest mean values.

To answer the fourth research question, statistical analysis of the data was conducted. Statistically significant differences with respect to the participants' educational background and frequency of use of authentic stories in their teaching were not established. Both primary education teachers and language specialists have their highest scores in the category "once or twice a month", followed by a significant 40% of teachers who use stories less than once a month. Such findings can be attributed to the fact that both groups of teachers gear their teaching around coursebooks which potentially dictate the teaching content and teaching pace. That reality significantly reduces the autonomy of teachers. Also, previous research has shown that there is a correlation between coursebook use and the use of authentic materials and texts. When teachers do not rely on textbooks, they resort to other materials including authentic literature (Bland, 2019; Dagarin Fojkar et al.; 2013, Le Hunte & Golembiewski, 2014).

The last research question aimed to reveal possible differences in the frequency of using stories regarding teachers' age. Teachers' age in relation to the frequency of using stories also did not reveal statistically significant differences. The majority of participants in the research falls within the 36-50 age group, and they report using stories once or twice per month. It is interesting that participants in the oldest age group had no responses for using authentic literature on a weekly basis. It is possible that participants in the oldest age group rely more on the coursebook, which would influence and dictate the frequency of using stories. However, having in mind that teaching styles may differ greatly, it is also possible that more experienced teachers are also more confident in their teaching and feel no need to change their teaching practices. Furthermore, since the age category in our research spanned over the usual working age in Croatia, it follows that our participants completed their education at one point over a 30-year period. During that period, TEFL underwent major changes not only in the European context, but also in the Croatian context. Teacher education also underwent changes, as was acknowledged in the introductory part of this paper. Therefore, the lack of statistically significant differences in using stories in relation to teachers' age reveal two possibilities: either the initial teacher education and educational programs are not as relevant when it comes to teachers' attitudes, preferences and practices in using stories, or the gaps in the initial teacher education can be successfully filled in with in-service seminars and programs.

With respect to teachers' educational background and teachers' perceptions of using literature, it can be observed that language specialists, who make up the majority of the sample of participants, provided more neutral

(indecisive) answers to particular statements as opposed to primary education teachers. For example, all of the primary education teachers (generalist teachers) agreed that using authentic English children's literature exposes students to natural, authentic language, while language specialists showed above-average neutral responses for statements such as *when using stories in ELT the learning environment is more relaxed*. This is a possible indicator that primary education teachers are relatively confident in the use of literature and that their familiarity with the classroom environment in lower primary education and the needs of children at that level are more dominant in that respect (see Vilke, 1995). However, both groups display above-average neutral responses regarding the relevance of vocabulary contained in authentic children's literature potentially demanding grammatical structures, students' interest in the language taught with the use of such teaching materials, and their ability to concentrate in such situations.

Regarding teachers' age and perceptions of literature use in teaching, again no statistical difference was established. What was observed is the relatively high number of neutral responses from teachers in the 36-50 age group regarding opinions on the use of literature. In the case of this particular subgroup, the highest percentage of neutral responses among favourable statements indicates hesitancy or mixed feelings towards the perceived benefits of using stories in ELT, such as enhancing student concentration, raising interest in the language, and preparing children for acquiring complex language structures. Their impartial views also include concerns about the complexity of grammatical structures, time constraints within regular ELT sessions, the suitability of authentic literature for communicative purposes, and its alignment with contemporary language usage. It is possible that this age subgroup is more focused on student achievement and curriculum outcomes thus obtaining favorable results. Research in another context (Spain) indicated a positive relationship between years of teaching practice and a positive attitude towards the advantages of using literature, i.e., experienced teachers had a better perception of the advantages of literature (Bobkina et al., 2021). On the other hand, in a study by Aysu (2023), age, i.e., teaching experience, did not have an effect on English teachers' attitudes toward using literature.

6. Conclusion

The research conducted in this study reveals the perceptions and practices of primary school English language teachers in Croatia regarding the use of authentic literature in ELT. Following the research questions, we can establish that the teachers in this study recognise and acknowledge qualities of authentic stories as teaching materials, such as exposure to authentic lan-

guage, children's literature as a conduit for expanding vocabulary, fostering comprehensive language acquisition, and nurturing creativity. Other recognised qualities include engaging with the target language culture, cross-curricular activities, and affective factors such as building positive attitudes toward FL, as well as creating a relaxing language learning environment.

While not pervasive, certain drawbacks of using authentic literature in primary ELT were documented. The most prominent ones refer to the increased teacher engagement required for adequate preparation and delivery, along with the time constraints of individual English lessons within which it might be challenging to implement all aspects of a more comprehensive teaching plan entirely. Some English teachers expressed their concerns regarding the complexity of grammar and vocabulary, as well as unfamiliar cultural references, which could potentially hinder their students' comprehension. Nevertheless, these results leave us hopeful that teachers consider that they can overcome obstacles by using stories.

Furthermore, the study found no significant difference in how often teachers used stories based on their pre-service teacher education (specialist vs. primary). While both groups reported the highest frequency of using stories "once or twice a week," a significant portion (perhaps concerning) still uses them less frequently than once a month. This potentially connects to the finding that most teachers rely on textbooks as their source of authentic literature. The readily available pre-selected stories and accompanying activities in coursebooks might be viewed as a time-saving factor for teachers. Given this perspective, teacher training programs at all levels (pre-service and in-service) should actively equip educators with the skills to use authentic materials effectively. Equipping teachers with the skills to confidently navigate beyond commercially prepared resources can foster greater flexibility and responsiveness to learner needs and interests. On the other end, since the teachers rely heavily on textbooks, efforts should be geared towards creating and disseminating accessible, age-appropriate and culturally relevant authentic materials specifically designed for the Croatian context. This approach would provide educators with a wider range of engaging materials, empowering them to effectively integrate authentic literature into their pedagogical practices.

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the perceptions and practices of English language teachers in Croatia regarding the use of stories and authentic children's literature in ELT. Notably, the findings reveal a potential under-utilization of stories, despite teacher recognition of their benefits. However, limitations to this study are also recognised, such as the imbalance in participant group size. Therefore, future studies could involve using a more balanced sample and exploring additional factors influencing the use of stories in ELT classrooms. These factors might include stu-

dents' age and proficiency levels, material accessibility, classroom dynamics, resources such as class size and classroom space, and teaching time constraints. In the next steps, the components reflecting teachers' attitudes toward implementing authentic texts in primary EFL should be analysed, grouped, and compared for a better understanding. To gain deeper insights into the nature of neutral responses from teachers regarding the implementation of authentic texts, future research could incorporate focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

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Received: April 15, 2024

Accepted for publication: August 13, 2024