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## **Humanizing Teaching English to Young Learners with Children's Literature**

**Irma Ghosn**

### **Abstract**

High quality children's fiction can be used in the young learner classroom to advance the broader social intent of language education and humanize it, while enriching language learning. Children are naturally drawn to picturebooks, which can provide a highly motivating and engaging instructional medium in pre-primary and lower primary classes. Short, illustrated chapter books can be used with intermediate level learners. Children's literature not only enhances language learning, as proven by extensive research, but it can also nurture moral reasoning skills, emotional intelligence and empathy, as well as help children work through difficult issues. Language teaching tasks around literature can further these goals. This paper argues that quality children's literature, therefore, has a rightful place in teaching English to young learners, and no less so in the very young learner classes that are becoming increasingly common in many parts of the world.

**Keywords** – authentic children's literature, humanizing English teaching, empathy

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## Introduction

English language teaching is rapidly spreading to ever lower levels of schooling, with some countries beginning English language instruction as early as in kindergarten (see comprehensive review in Ghosn, in press). This places an increasingly important responsibility both on young learner materials developers and language teachers. As all education, language education is grounded in some social intent, and this intent is reflected in the materials produced for teaching and learning. Tomlinson (2003) argues, and I concur, that language teaching materials ought also to be humanizing, taking into account learners' 'experience of life, their interests and enthusiasms, their views, attitudes and feelings and, above all, their capacity to make meaningful connections in their minds' (p. 162). As Tomlinson points out, 'not many coursebooks encourage [learners] to do this' (ibid). If incorporated into language teaching, moral reasoning development, emotional intelligence and empathy - essential attributes of a global citizen - will add another humanizing element. This is of particular importance in the case of young language learners under 12 years old, who are still developing not only linguistically but also psycho-socially and emotionally.

Children's literature is often immediately relevant and motivating to children since it addresses topics and themes of interest to them and also takes into consideration their developmental needs. Children's books with literary and aesthetic merit, which illuminate some universal aspects of the human condition, such as friendship, happiness, sadness, exclusion, courage, and so on, enable children to make the kind of meaningful connections Tomlinson calls for. In a second language class, such books will also function as agents of socialisation through which learners can explore the values and standards of the target language culture and relate them to those in their own community. Literature enables children to make sense of their world and adolescents to expand their understanding of life and the human condition (Appleyard, 1990). Story narratives enhance children's understanding of human character and present models for their own interactions. Furthermore, story discussions provide teachers a medium through which they can cultivate children's ability to listen to others and to accept viewpoints different to their

own. Literature can help children work through problems, difficult issues and concerns, thus potentially enhancing their emotional wellbeing.

Because children are naturally drawn to stories, literature provides a motivating, meaningful context for language learning. The rich, natural language of quality children's fiction fosters vocabulary acquisition, and because literature engages children, it also stimulates oral language development. Moreover, literature often presents difficult-to-learn idiomatic expressions in a meaningful context, thus facilitating their acquisition. In addition, quality children's literature meets the above-mentioned humanizing criteria and facilitates the realization of the wider social purpose of language education. This paper will give a brief overview of research of the past thirty years on literature-based instruction. It will then focus on the use of literature in the form of picturebooks and short chapter books for the development of moral reasoning, emotional intelligence and empathy.

### **Research in Support of Literature-based Instruction**

Research of the past thirty years unequivocally points to the positive influence of children's literature on English language learning with young learners in second language contexts. Exposure to stories, whether by listening or reading, has been shown to support learners' second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition (Carger, 1993; Collins, 2005; Elley, 1989, 1997; Roberts, 2008; Roberts & Neal, 2004). Similarly, research looking at story reading has shown a positive influence on children's L2 reading comprehension and skills (Aranha, 1985; Eade, 1997; Elley, 1991, 2000; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Mangubhai & Elley, 1982; Sadowska-Martyka, 2006; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989). Investigation into children and their writing has shown that they are influenced by their language learning texts, modelling their writing after the texts they have encountered in class (Hudelson, 1989; Samway & Taylor, 1993;). In literature-based programs children's writing demonstrates more literary language features and better cohesion than writing of children in skills-based ELT programs (Ghosn, 2007; Huie & Yahya, 2003).

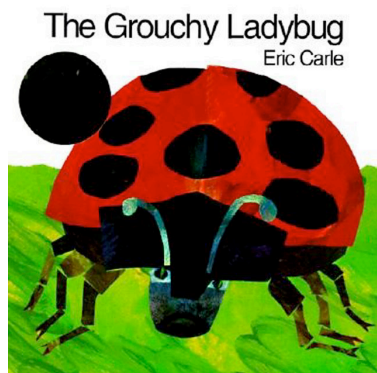
It has been suggested that language-teaching texts also influence classroom interactions. Two studies in particular have found that discourse in literature-based lessons

is more genuine and connected than discourse generated during communicative language practice (Ghosn, 2001a; 2004). Literature study is characterized by interaction and dialogue, and Urzua (1992) reports that children enjoy the interaction and sharing of ideas during literature study the most. The genuine, meaningful interactions on interesting content help explain some of the above-cited gains; negotiated interactions generated during story discussions facilitate language learning, and the developing verbal fluency resulting from the interactions contributes to reading development. Thus, using literature in the young learner class makes good sense from the language teaching perspective. Moreover, for scores of children, the texts they read in the classroom are often the only 'literature' they have access to. Including children's literature in the language curriculum would provide these children with exposure to developmentally valuable content they may not otherwise encounter.

### Literature and the Developing Child

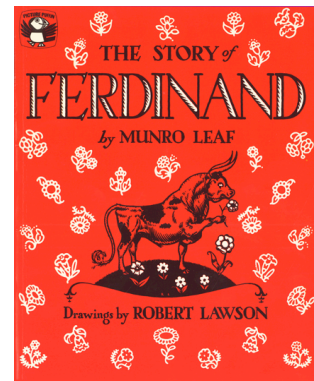
#### Themes of children's literature

Just as good adult literature, good children's literature – as it is defined here – represents an exploration of life, confirming, illuminating, or extending life experience or some aspects of the human condition (Vandergrift, 1990), hence its humanizing value. One common theme in children's literature is establishing and maintaining relationships with others. Good examples of this are Eric Carle's *The Bad-Tempered Ladybird* (*The Grouchy Ladybug* in its American edition) and Arnold Lobel's *Frog and Toad* series for the preschool and lower primary school children. Intermediate or advanced learners aged 10-



12 will enjoy short chapter books such as Patricia MacLachlan's *Sarah, Plain and Tall* and *The Hundred Dresses* by Eleanor Estes. Another frequent theme is overcoming fears, which is delightfully depicted in Dick Gackenbach's *Harry and the Terrible Whatzit* and Mercer Mayer's *There's a Nightmare in My Cupboard* (*There's a Nightmare in My Closet* in the American edition). Implicitly, both also reveal that our prejudices diminish

when we get to know 'the other.' Both books are appropriate for advanced beginners aged 6-8, introduce many past tense verbs in a clear context, and invite dramatisation by children. In *The Hundred Dresses* older children can explore discrimination and bullying, while the ability to cope with stressful situations is addressed in Judith Viorst's *Alexander* books. The latter are rich in repetitive structures and are appropriate for 10-12-year-old advanced beginners and intermediate level learners. Munro Leaf's *The Story of Ferdinand* features the theme of accepting and remaining true to oneself even against expectations of the mainstream. Suitable for advanced beginners of 8-10, it is rich with repetition of past tense verbs. Courage, perseverance, disappointment and loss are other recurring themes in children's books. Children's literature, whether fantasy or realistic fiction, presents these themes in ways immediately accessible to children.



### **Moral reasoning**

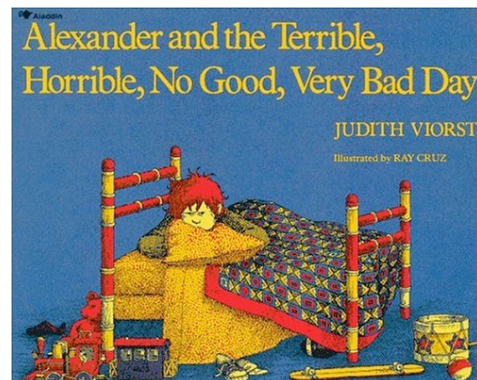
Moral judgement is essential in guiding individuals to behave ethically and to respect the rights of all living things. Both fantasy and realistic fiction can provide a context within which children can examine the characters' values and gain insight into their own values and attitudes (Goforth, 1998). Kohlberg and his colleagues (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987) found that working through complex moral dilemmas enhances moral reasoning levels of young adolescents, and Ghosn (2003) contends that children's moral reasoning can similarly develop when they work through moral dilemmas in literature. For example, *The Hundred Dresses* mentioned above is a story of a poor immigrant child, who is bullied and mocked by classmates. One of the students feels guilty, but afraid of becoming a victim of the bullying participates in 'having fun with Wanda'. Discussing her choices and what options she might have had, and why what the children did was wrong, will help children gain insight into moral choices, and what they might do in a similar situation. Similar discussions can be raised after children have read stories such as *The Hundred Penny Box*, a chapter book by Sharon Bell Mathis, and *The Summer My Father was Ten*, a picturebook by Pat Brisson. When asked to relate the story events to their own life experiences,

children's understanding of moral choices will grow. These three stories are suitable for intermediate learners as read-alouds, and as independent reading for advanced learners aged 10-12.

### **Emotional intelligence**

In his popular *Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman (1995) defines emotional intelligence (EI) as 'knowing what one's feelings are and using that knowledge to make good decisions' (p. 9). He also points out that children high in EI achieve better in school than their peers with lower EI. Given this, EI clearly plays a role also in children's second language achievement. Mayer, Caruso and Salovey (1999) have identified what they argue to be measurable areas of EI: *emotional perception*; *emotional understanding*; *emotional facilitation of thought*; and *emotional management*. Emotional perception is the ability to identify emotions, and well-chosen literature can foster this skill (Mayer et al., 1999). Bodily reactions and facial expressions are two of the many components of emotions: we may raise our voice when angry, our 'jaw drops' when we are surprised, and we may lower our head when we are sad.

Well-illustrated stories can reveal characters' emotions through both text and pictures. The popular *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* and *Alexander, Who's Not (Do You Hear Me? I Mean It!) Going to Move* by Viorst are excellent examples; Alexander's body language in the illustrations by Ray Cruz and R. B.



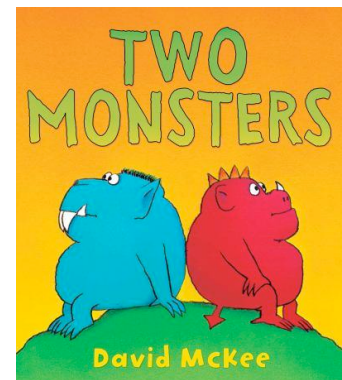
Glasser, respectively, clearly reveals his emotions while the text tells the reader what is causing them. Children can explore the characters' body language in the illustrations and look for clues to their emotions in the text. On many occasions characters' emotions are revealed by behaviour – even silence – rather than words. Explicit instruction of vocabulary on emotions and feelings will facilitate discussion if they are only implied in the narrative.

How much an individual knows about emotions has to do with emotional understanding (Mayer et al., 1999). Through literature, learners can vicariously experience

the whole spectrum of human emotions, both those they have already experienced and those they have not encountered yet. Thus, their understanding of emotions grows the more quality literature they are exposed to.

Emotional facilitation of thought is the ability to think about one's own feelings or state of mind and relate them to emotions (Mayer et al., 1999), a skill that can be nurtured during literature discussions. For example, in *I Hate English*, a picturebook by Ellen Levine, the main character, Mei-Mei refuses to speak English as she fears losing her mother tongue, Chinese, and, with it, perhaps her identity. Children can be guided to discuss how Mei-Mei's emotions of fear and confusion are related to her feelings. This story, appropriate for early intermediate learners ages 10-12, features feeling-related vocabulary as well some good repetition of past tense verbs. This story will be especially relevant for young immigrant children, who may be experiencing feelings similar to Mei-Mei.

Emotional management is the ability to choose appropriate responses to emotions (Mayer et al., 1999). Comparing how characters choose to respond to their own emotions or those of others and what consequences their responses have will facilitate development of emotional management. For example, in Kellogg's *The Island of the Skog*, aggressive response to fear almost leads to destruction.



In David McKee's *Two Monsters*, the frustrated characters resort to an aggressive response when they are unable to convince the other of their own viewpoint. Children aged 7-10 can be invited to think of alternative responses to the aggression chosen by the characters in stories.

### **Empathy**

Empathy, an aspect of emotional intelligence, has been empirically linked to tolerance. Individuals high in empathy exhibit more tolerant behaviours than those who score low in empathy scales (Sheehan, Lennon & McDevitt, 1989, Underwood & Briggs, 1980). Citing evidence from neuroscience, Goleman (1995) argues that repeated emotional experiences shape the brain circuits of the developing child. From this it follows that empathic arousal



can become a life-long skill through repeated experience. I argue that vicarious story experiences, if frequent and intense enough, might also help shape brain circuits for empathy, thus leading the reader to identify and empathise with ever-widening circles of people (Ghosn, 2001b). Discussions about stories help develop children's role-taking ability, which Hoffman (1984) identifies as the highest mode of empathic arousal. Not only can stories help children develop empathy, lack of stories in a child's life, in fact, hinders the development of empathy (Pinsent, 1997).

Children's literature is rich in empathy-arousing stories. The popularity of the Grimms' *Cinderella* and Hans Christian Andersen's classic *The Ugly Duckling* is undoubtedly the result of every child being able to identify with the main characters' situation and thus empathize with them. Contemporary versions of these fairy tales of diverse difficulty levels are available. Being exposed to the empathy-arousing experience time after time (children want to hear or read stories meaningful to them at a given time over and over again), students become more receptive to empathetic responses. John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters*, *The Rough-Face Girl* by Rafe Martin and David Shannon and Taro Yashima's award-winning *Crow Boy* are good examples of empathy-arousing stories.

### **Working through worries with the help of literature**

Bibliotherapy is advocated as a means to teach children and young adults problem solving, promote emotional intelligence and nurture positive values (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Salovey & Sluyter, 1997; Sullivan & Strang, 2002). Bibliotherapy, which is traceable to ancient Greece and originally used in helping adults overcome their problems, is defined here as 'the use of books to help people solve problems' (Aiex, 1993, p. 1). Carefully selected children's books provide educators with a tool to help children think about their worries, fears, and social and emotional concerns and work through them. These can range from inability to share and play with others to refusing healthful food, lying and stealing, or from attention getting, bullying and aggression to concerns about moving, divorce and death. Forgan (2002) suggests that through books, children can begin to articulate their problem more freely, realize that others may have encountered problems similar to their



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own, and have overcome them, discover that problems may have more than one solution, and increase their understanding of human behaviour and motivations.

Although bibliotherapy typically addresses a problem or a concern of an individual child, in the language classroom context teachers can select stories that address concerns or problems relevant to their particular students. The previously mentioned *Alexander* books invite students to discuss common concerns of children, from disappointment to fears of moving and losing one's friends. *The Tenth Good Thing about Barney* by Judith Viorst introduces the concept of death, in this case of a child's pet cat, and how to overcome the sadness of loss by remembering the positive things about the relationship. Alike Brandenburg's sensitive *The Two of Them* about the death of a child's grandfather, further illustrates how the power of positive memories can help in the grieving process.

### **Concerns about Authentic Literature**

Language teachers sometimes question the appropriateness of authentic children's literature because of the perceived linear progression of second language learning. To clarify, a distinction needs to be made between the observed order in which second language structures emerge and the exposure to structures (Ghosn, in press). Traditionally, language-learning syllabuses have been, and still are, based on the notion that learners cannot be exposed to advanced structures before they have mastered the more 'simple' ones. Hence most young learner courses limit the language to present tense for the first three years, despite the importance of narrative for young children. Young L2 learners can be exposed to richer, more advanced language, however; exposure should not imply expectation of acquisition until later. After all, parents do not control their infants' and toddlers' exposure to their first language (L1), although children are not expected to produce syntactically accurate output at age 5 or 6. I must also emphasize that I do not expect young L2 students to read the stories mentioned on their own. Rather, I would expect that a teacher reads them to the students. A teacher can read picturebooks using a dialogic, interactive approach, inviting children to point to illustrations and to make predictions, while chapter books for older children can be read aloud by the teacher, a short chapter at a time, and inviting children to make comments and predictions. Beginning learners should be able to use their L1 when necessary, with the teacher validating their

contribution and recasting it into English. This will not only enable less proficient children to participate in the discourse but also provides the teacher with valuable input as shown by Ghosn (1997).

### Language Learning Tasks from Literature

A wide range of reader-response activities exist that will promote language learning while also bringing a humanizing element to instruction. For example, after reading (or listening to the teacher read) *The Hundred Dresses*, upper primary school children can engage in a discussion about their personal experiences with bullying or exclusion and the individual's responsibility when witnessing negative behaviours. This will offer a natural context for introducing modals and conditionals: 'What should the other children do?' 'What could they do?' 'What would you do?' (Ghosn, 2003, p. 17). Although many young-learner course books refrain from presenting these structures, children can be introduced to them in a meaningful story context. I have often observed children aged 10-12 in Lebanon enthusiastically engage in discussions like this (albeit not in perfect English) after four or five years of learning English. However, children are not expected to produce these structures accurately, but begin to comprehend them and try to use them. In the following episode, Arabic-speaking 5<sup>th</sup> graders (ages 11-12), who have been learning English since kindergarten, are discussing *The Hundred Dresses*. Note how the teacher recasts students' contributions into the correct form:

- T: How does Maddie feel [about Peggy teasing Wanda]?
- S1: Miss, she feel bad.
- T: Yes, she feels bad. What could she do?
- S2: She can tell the teacher.
- T; Right, she could tell the teacher. What else?
- S3: She could tell Peggy to stop teasing Wanda.
- T: OK. She could tell Peggy to stop. If you were in Maddie's place,  
what would you do?
- S1: Miss, I, I, if I am Maddie, I will tell Peggy 'Let's be friends with Wanda.'
- T: Uhuh, so you would tell Peggy you could be friends with Wanda.
- S1: Yes, Miss.

(Unpublished observation data)

Children can be invited to generate scripts to show what Alexander's brothers in Viorst's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* could have said to make him feel better.

Many teachers are familiar with literary journal entries and letters to story characters, and both activities help develop empathy, perspective-taking ability and caring. According to Raphael, Gavalek & Daniels (1998), talking about literature reinforces the ability to change perspective, an important real life skill. After reading or listening to a story, children can take on the role of a character and write a journal entry using the first person point of view describing their emotions as that character. Here is a journal entry by a student, age 11, who has been learning English for five years (since kindergarten). It is based on *Children Who Hugged the Mountain* (Ghosn, 1999), an illustrated very short chapter book, where a group of resourceful children save a mountain from a quarry operation by resorting to a strategy they learned from an old Indian story:

Dear Diary,

Today I have a very big responsibility. Me and my friends are going on a nice trip but I will tell you what happen. A greedy man Mr. An Nzr he is going to destroy our mountain. But he will have a big surprise. I told my friends we make like the Indian peapol in the story they hug the trees. We will sleep on the ground and hug our mountin. I am going now. [Text left unchanged.]

Discussions before and after writing will promote insight into feelings and reinforce feeling-related vocabulary. When children write letters to story characters, they must think how the character was feeling by trying to understand the events from the character's perspective. They can write letters that attempt to make the character feel better by expressing empathy and support, or they can give advice that might ameliorate the situation. When children write letters from one character to another their role-taking skills are further reinforced. Expressions of caring, positive communication and letter writing conventions are activated and reinforced. The following example is from another 11-year-old (a classmate of the above student) who is writing to a character in *The Dragonfly*

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*Surprise* (Ghosn, 1999). Mallika is facing discrimination because of her colour, but wins an art contest, albeit with some questionable help by her only friend:

Dear Mallika,

Don't care about what the teacher and children talk about you, because you are black and they are white. They are like you. I want to say what nice prize you win! And your friend Heba is a nice friend and nice, brave and good friend. At last you and Heba are best friends.

Your friend B.R. [Text left unchanged.]

### **Criteria for selecting titles**

Although definitions of 'children's literature' differ, several criteria for high quality children's literature have been outlined by experts. Sutherland (1996), a children's literature pioneer, advocates books that have been written by professional children's authors and that meet 'high literary and artistic standards' (p. 6), while Goforth (1998) elaborates on this notion. Her criteria include authentic and imaginative expression of the 'thoughts, emotions, experiences, and information about the human condition' and relevance to 'the experiences, developmental levels, and literary preferences of the intended audience' (p. 3). Interestingly, Lewis (1963), the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, posits that a children's story which is enjoyed only by children is perhaps not a good children's story. His argument resonates with the view expressed by Pinsent (1997), in the context of young children's picturebooks, when she writes '(...) if the adult is going to admit the child to the full experience of the books, there is a real need for the adult to enjoy it too – time and again and again!' (p. 2). Some board books for the very young are excellent examples of this, for instance Margaret Wise Brown's much-loved *Runaway Bunny* and *Goodnight Moon*. Both titles were originally published in the 1940s and have been in print ever since. Similarly enduring are *Over in the Meadow*, a delightful counting book illustrated by Ezra Jack Keats (the rhyme originally created by Olive Wadsworth in the mid-1800s), and Mary Ann Hoberman's concept book *A House is a House for Me*. All four titles are suitable in young learner classes.

Pinsent's criterion is, in fact, quite useful when we want to select quality literature for children in the language classroom. If we examine books we plan to use in our classroom with young learners with this and the earlier cited criteria in mind, the first thing we need to do is to read the book carefully. Then, after reading the text we should ask 'Did I enjoy it?' 'What insight, if any, did I gain from it?' 'What aspect of human condition did it address?' 'Was the ending uplifting in one way or another?' (a humorous ending can be uplifting). The next step is to evaluate the literary and artistic standard of the work. 'How likely is it that this story will remain of interest and enjoyment and why?' Children's literature has developed significantly since the establishment of the Carnegie Medal in 1937 and the Caldecott Medal for picturebooks in 1938. Yet some of the best works of children's literature have endured for several decades, continuing to entertain generations of children. Examples include the aforementioned *The Hundred Dresses*, *The Story of Ferdinand*, and H. A. Rey's *Curious George* series; all have endured six decades and continue to be reprinted because of the demand. Books by Eric Carle, William Steig, Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss) and Leo Lionni are also already firmly established classics.

Next we need to consider how well a given book matches the developmental needs of the students. 'How appropriate is the story – in its theme/s and development – to the target audience?' *The Hundred Dresses*, for example, deals with peer relationships, which is a very relevant topic for children between 9 and 12, while *Curious George* addresses mischief and is more appropriate for younger children. Else Holmelund Minarik's *Little Bear* series focuses on the mother-child relationship, which is important for the kindergarten age group. The *Alexander* series deals with a variety of topics of concern to primary-school children from 7 to 10. While *The Hundred Dresses* features female characters and the *Alexander* series has a male protagonist with two brothers, the books appeal to boys and girls equally, because the topics and themes are of concern to children regardless of their gender.

Finally, there is the language of the story and its potential to offer something for a young language learner. How well turned are the phrases? How much enjoyable repetition of words and multi-word units is involved? How useful will the language of the story be for the students? Let us take the *Alexander* series as an example. The list of synonyms in title of Viorst's *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day* is the first

indicator that the book has potential as a language teaching tool. The vocabulary is repeated several times. In *Alexander, Who's Not (Do you Hear me? I Mean it!) Going to Move*, the phrase 'I am not going to move' is repeated several times, as are 'I'll never have [...] again', 'I maybe could stay...' and 'I looked at...'. Both stories meet all the criteria of quality children's literature in addition to presenting rich but repetitive and contextualized language.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of quality children's literature in the English language classroom is warranted for several reasons. First, children's literature features themes and content that are relevant to young learners and addresses their concerns, fears and aspirations and thus can provide a motivating and engaging medium for instruction. Second, quality literature has the potential to develop all four language skills. Third, good children's literature brings a humanizing element to the classroom, contributing to children's development of moral reasoning, emotional intelligence and empathy. Children's literature is a particularly suitable and developmentally appropriate medium of instruction in the young learner classroom. Fortunately, the body of English language children's literature is rich with titles that are developmentally valuable and also useful from the language teaching perspective.

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Note: Many of these titles have appeared in different editions under various imprints. Those listed here are the editions the author has consulted.

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