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## **Extensive Reading of Children's Literature in First, Second, and Foreign Language Vocabulary Acquisition**

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### **Abstract**

Extensive reading of children's literature can be seen as one of the most powerful means to acquiring a large working vocabulary for both first language learners and second language learners. However, for foreign language learners, children's literature has a less positive image. For foreign language learners the most commonly recommended reading is of graded readers. Corpus research has shown that work for children has a wide range of rare words, comparable to adult literature, and this leads to the argument that children's literature puts too great a comprehension and memory strain on foreign language learners, and is an inefficient learning tool compared to graded readers. This paper reviews existing research and examines the arguments for children's literature in language learning in terms of some features of naturalistic child reading behaviour, and the stylistic choices of writers for children. Replication of child reading behaviours in conjunction with the aid to comprehension and memory inherent in stylistic choices, combined with motivational and practical considerations, are argued to make children's literature an equal, if not superior choice as extended reading material for foreign language learners.

**Keywords:** foreign language learning; children's literature; extensive reading; vocabulary

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## Introduction

First language (L1) learners acquire an enormous amount of vocabulary at impressively high rates. Estimates of the size of the vocabulary of the average high school graduate range from about 40,000 words to over 100,000 words, with counts varying according to definitions of 'word', criteria for knowing a word, and methods of extrapolating the results of sample testing into estimation of a full mental lexicon (Nagy and Anderson 1984, p. 305). Even with a conservative count of 40,000 words, we can estimate an average rate of learning of about 3,000 words per school year (Nagy & Herman, 1987). The incredible numbers of words learned has led L1 acquisition researchers to the inevitable conclusion that this is a figure which is impossible only through direct instruction, and that very large amounts of experiential learning are also taking place.

First language learners all acquire large amounts of vocabulary, and the problem is to understand *how* this occurs and how some learn more than others. However, many foreign language learners do not acquire large amounts of vocabulary (see Laufer 2000; Schmitt 2008; Ozturk 2015) and the problem is to understand how this learning can be brought about. The situation of second language (L2) young learners living in a target language culture, and their often very successful language acquisition, shows that this impressive learning of vocabulary is not limited to first languages, thereby giving hope to the possibility of finding ways in which foreign language learners might be more successful in their vocabulary acquisition. The aim of this paper is to examine the role of reading children's literature in L1 vocabulary acquisition to see if there are parallels for the L2 young learner, and to then speculate on how these successes might also be enabled for foreign language learners.

## Reading and L1 Vocabulary Acquisition

In 1984 Nagy and Anderson carried out counts of separate word meanings in a corpus of school texts for grades three to eight and identified over 88,500 distinct meanings. This research demonstrated the value of reading as a source of lexical input, and directly led to Nagy, Herman and Anderson's (1985a; 1985b) highly influential studies of incidental learning of vocabulary. These studies showed that at grade eight (Nagy et al. 1985a), and

at grades three, five and seven (Nagy et al. 1985b), students reading grade appropriate texts (both fiction and non-fiction) of about 1,000 words in length, and with only one exposure to a new word, showed, on average, a one in twenty chance of learning that word to the high level of completing a definition task (Nagy et al., 1985a) or with a one week interval multiple choice test (Nagy et al., 1985b). This may seem a very low rate of learning, but Nagy and Herman (1987) put it into perspective by calculating that grade appropriate texts tend to have a concentration of between one and a half to three new words per hundred words of text. They continue with a mind experiment, calculating that if children read at a rate of about 200 words per minute for 25 minutes per day for 200 days per year, they would read 1,000,000 words each year. Children would therefore come across 15,000 to 30,000 new words, of which, at a rate of one in twenty, they could be expected to learn 750 to 1,500 words, approximately half the learning target for one year.

Nagy et al.'s experiments show that reading is a very useful way to expand the functional vocabulary of L1 learners, and these experiments, along with later experiments in incidental vocabulary learning, which often show higher rates of acquisition (Swanborn & de Glopper, 1999), are a powerful contributing factor to the current pedagogical view of reading as an inherently valuable behaviour for children. This is despite the fact that Nagy et al.'s experiments were designed to give a conservative estimate of learning. The experiments included a strict measure of word learning, used short texts experienced just once and over a short period of time, included little or no repetition of targeted words, had no illustrations for the texts (Nagy et al., 1985a, p. 237), and the texts included little contextual information to aid vocabulary learning (p. 245). However, the calculations presented in Nagy and Herman's mind experiment are for extended, year-long reading, and this necessarily introduces factors which should raise the predicted levels of learning, meaning that extensive reading of children's literature may be an even more powerful aid to vocabulary acquisition than previously estimated.

### **Naturalistic Reading**

Naturalistic extensive reading is very different from reading short, isolated, experimenter-selected texts. Child readers are selective of what they read. Specifically, child readers

often re-read, they follow authors, series and genres which they enjoy, and they choose texts for interest and pleasure over utilitarian learning aims (Hall & Coles, 1999). Children's literature covers an enormous range of text types, content and reading level, and child readers learn to negotiate this variety to select texts which suit their own reading preferences. These reading behaviours all contribute to greater chances of learning new vocabulary from the reading.

The strongest contributing factor of child reading behaviour to vocabulary acquisition is the degree of repetition. The chance of learning a new word on one encounter in text is calculated at one in twenty, but if the same word is encountered again, as is likely in extensive reading, then the chance of learning must be increased (see Saragi, Nation & Meister, 1978). For a rare word at a frequency of one in one million, there might not be a second exposure over a whole year of reading. However, because child reading is selective, the chances of repeated experiences of even rare words is not directly dependent upon whole corpus frequency rankings. Children, especially younger children, often re-read the same texts (Hall & Coles, 1999, pp. 9-10). This means that they are giving themselves multiple experiences of the same unknown vocabulary, no matter what its frequency ranking in a corpus. With each subsequent reading, new words stand a progressively greater chance of reaching higher levels of understanding and memory. This is not simply a function of repetition leading to learning, as in rote learning, but is also dependent upon other factors. Child language abilities change very quickly, and for a later re-reading of a text, a child might well be at a higher level of language/reading ability than for the first reading. At the same time, words which gave the reader trouble on the first reading are likely to have become psychologically marked, so that more attention is paid to those words on a later reading. The combined pressures of repeated experience, of advancing linguistic level, and of psychological marking of problematic vocabulary, are likely to result in considerably higher chances of learning a repeated word than for a first experience of a word (Nation, 2015, pp. 136-8).

Reading several works by the same author, reading series fiction, and reading genre fiction also all add to the chance of learning new lexis. Within any of these groupings of texts, there is likely to be repetition of lexis greater than for unrelated texts and the high levels of lexical repetition in linked texts have been shown to have a powerful effect on

vocabulary acquisition (Kyongho & Nation, 1989). Authors have habits and favourite ways of expressing things, series and genres have common scenes, events, characters and plottings, and these commonalities all lead to commonalities and repetition of lexis. Repetition of lexis in different texts provides new context and new co-text for those words, and thereby increases the data available to the reader, allowing them a greater chance of learning more about the meanings and usages of the word (Nation, 2015, pp. 137-8). Thus, within the work of a specific author, words which are rare in an entire corpus might have a much higher frequency and therefore be experienced more often and have a higher chance of being learned; indeed, especially with children's literature, authors may even assist readers with some new vocabulary. As an example, we could look at a section from A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*:

‘And we must all bring Provisions.’

‘Bring what?’

‘Things to eat.’

‘Oh’ said Pooh happily. ‘I thought you said Provisions.’ (p. 110)

‘And we’ve got to bring Pro-things to eat with us. In case we want to eat them.’ (p. 111)

‘Oh! Piglet,’ said Pooh excitedly, ‘we’re going on an Expotition, all of us, with things to eat. To discover something.’ (p. 112)

‘I think,’ said Christopher Robin, ‘that we ought to eat all our Provisions now, so that we shan’t have so much to carry.’

‘Eat all our what?’ said Pooh.

‘All that we’ve brought,’ said Piglet, getting to work. (p. 117)

In this section we can see that A.A. Milne has repeated ‘provisions’ three times in a space of eight pages, an incidence vastly higher than the 9.3 occurrences/million in the fiction sub-section of the British National Corpus (BNC). Milne has also focussed reader attention on aspects of the sound of the word, ‘Pro-things’, and has succinctly glossed the meaning

as 'things to eat' and later as edibles 'that we've brought' or things to carry. The chance of a reader learning the word 'provisions' from this story would be much higher than a simple cumulative three chances in twenty, and would incidentally set them up for adult usage as the most common use in the BNC is for academic writing with a frequency of 106.32 occurrences/million.

The increased learning effects of repetition in naturalistic reading are not limited to the raised incidence of simple repetition of lexis. The texts chosen for Nagy, Herman and Anderson's experiments were stylistically simple. However, many popular writers for children make extensive use of complex forms of repetition in the stylistic/rhetorical devices in their writing, and importantly, unlike in much adult-oriented writing, the devices used tend to reveal rather than obscure meaning. Take this example from Dav Pilkey's *The Adventures of Captain Underpants*:

After a hard day cracking jokes, pulling pranks, and causing mayhem at school, George and Harold liked to rush to the old tree house in George's back yard.  
(Pilkey, 1997, p. 9)

Dav Pilkey is using a three-part technique, which in classical rhetoric is called the 'tricolon'. 'Cracking' and 'pulling' may be unfamiliar to some readers in this usage, but their grammatical relationship with 'jokes' and 'pranks' make those usages especially transparent. 'Mayhem' however, is likely to cause more trouble for younger readers although the grammatical link with the relatively common 'causing' makes the general sense of the word partially accessible. However, the crucial element in aiding understanding is the position of 'causing mayhem' in the tricolon. The tricolon is an extremely common technique in English (Bland, 2013, p. 179) and most readers will be able to use the rhetorical position of 'causing mayhem' to understand that it is part of a set of behaviours, and that the set helps predict meaning. It would be a very inexperienced reader, for example, who would be surprised to find that the third part of Lear's famous 'why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life' (*King Lear* 5.2.280) was another animal, rather than for example, a tree. In the same way, the use of the tricolon in the next example makes the possibly problematic words 'backbreaking', 'grueling' and 'humiliating'

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considerably more accessible than if the words had occurred outside of any rhetorical patterning:

After four-to-six weeks of backbreaking slave labor, grueling homework assignments, and humiliating good behavior at school, a package arrived in George's mailbox from the Li'l Wiseguy Novelty Company.

It was the 3-D Hypno-Ring. (Dav Pilkey, 1997, p. 49)

The use of the tricolon not only increases the chance of vocabulary acquisition, it also gives valuable experience of a very common and powerful rhetorical/stylistic technique, one which, like new vocabulary, might be best learned in a familiar and easily visualised context. The tricolon, naturally, is not the only stylistic device used in children's literature. Stylistic choices which add to the rhythmic or musical qualities of what is often a read-aloud text are common, especially in writing for younger children, which frequently features rhyme, alliteration, high densities of simple and complex repetition (see Hoey, 1991, pp. 54-65), and both simple and complex phrasal repetition (see Cheetham, 2000, pp. 17-21), and, as with the example from *Winnie-the-Pooh*, frequently includes glossing as a stylistic choice. Repetition, then, in the naturalistic reading behaviours of re-reading, and reading series, genre and same author texts, combined with the common stylistic choices of authors, adds enormously to the accessibility of new or problematic vocabulary, and almost certainly powerfully increases the chances of incidental word learning.

Naturalistic reading has other powerful facilitators of learning. People reading works of their own choice are more likely to enjoy that reading. Emotional involvement in reading improves motivation, and also facilitates learning (Talmi, 2013). Enjoyable reading is likely to involve the reader's imagination, aiding in the creation of a mental representation of the contents of the reading. A stronger mental representation of content increases the creation of psychological context and a stronger context has also been shown to positively effect learning (Smith & Vela, 2001) as has an active interaction with target materials (Baddeley, 1997, Ch. 8), which in this case means creating a mental representation of the content.

A further difference between the experimental reading and naturalistic reading is the use of illustration. Printed reading materials for children, especially for young children, commonly include significant quantities of illustration. Even for older readers, magazines, illustrated textbooks, and most internet websites include a high density of illustration, though significantly, most adult novels do not. The differing nature of text and picture as carriers of meaning results in a greater breadth and depth of data available for a reader if their reading is accompanied by visuals of some sort. As such, reading which is accompanied by pictorial input is likely to result in more efficient learning than the mono-modal input used in Nagy et al.'s experiments, a hypothesis which is confirmed by the effects of visual gloss on vocabulary acquisition (Jones & Plass, 2002; Yanguas, 2009).

Naturalistic reading, therefore, results in much greater levels of repetition, more complex forms of repetition, stronger and more varied contextualisation, greater emotional involvement, an active interaction with the text, and because of the repetition of problem words, allows a more focussed attention on such words whenever they reoccur. All these things have been shown to have a positive effect on learning (Nation, 2015, p. 137), and all these things, therefore, should lead to higher levels of learning for extended naturalistic reading than for the restricted experimental situations of Nagy and Herman and Anderson and the conservative learning projections of 750 to 1,500 words that Nagy and Herman extrapolate from them.

### **L2 Learners**

Many L2 learners are children who have moved to a new language culture and will acquire their L2 through a mixture of active learning and immersion in the target culture. These children are often found to be high achievers, often gaining higher academic success than their monolingual schoolmates (Dustmann, Machin & Schönberg, 2010; Wilson, Burgess, & Briggs, 2011). Where academic success is limited, the shortfall can often be explained by socioeconomic measures rather than by a simple lack of language ability (Jensen & Würtz Rasmussen, 2011). The presence of migrant children in schools was traditionally seen as a negative factor, reducing success of other students, but recently is becoming perceived as a positive influence (Geay, McNally & Telhaj, 2011), and a valuable



contribution to overall school success (Burgess, 2014; Dillon, 2013, pp. 4-6). Second language learners often reach very high levels in their L2 (Dustmann et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2011; Schönberg, 2013), especially where schools work to socially integrate the L2 children (Dillon, 2013, p. 20).

This success has been attributed to differences in socio-emotional benefits, or increased cognitive resources for bilinguals (Willard & Leyendecker, 2013, p. 10; Leyendecker, Willard, Agache, Jäkel, Spiegler & Kohl, 2014, pp. 295-7), or for bilinguals who can already read in their L1, crossover of reading skills from one language to the other (Geva & Siegel, 2000). However, although advantages of bilingualism may explain later high levels of academic achievement, they do not explain how migrant children become bilingual in the first place. Certainly these children are placed in an input-rich environment, but to achieve comparably to native speaker children they would need, and often achieve, even greater rates of language acquisition than the very impressive rates which L1 learners exhibit (Dustmann et al., 2010).

Language growth is not uniform in the development of bilingualism in children. Typically, especially if the two languages use the same orthographies, bilingual children's L2 reading skills progress faster than their oral skills (Bialystok, Luk & Kwan, 2005). Initially they are behind their L1 classmates in both measures, but before long, even when their oral skills still lag behind, their reading abilities improve and can even overtake the monolinguals (Lipka & Siegel, 2007; Lesaux, Rupp & Siegel, 2007), showing that the reading improvements are not in a simple causal relationship with general language development (Geva & Zadeh, 2006). At kindergarten level, there are clear differences in reading ability between L1 and L2 learners; however, these differences seem to evaporate around fourth grade (Lipka & Siegel, 2007; Lesaux, Rupp & Siegel, 2007; Bialystok et al., 2005). This dramatic rate of learning has been explained to a certain degree through theories of transfer of orthographic decoding skills, phonological awareness, transfer of general reading skills from the first language to the second, and for a combined awareness of both languages leading to efficient language learning, especially through reading (Bialystok et al., 2005). From a pedagogical perspective, Olusola, Lavin, Thompson and Ungerleider (2011) carried out a meta-analysis of interventions for L2 learners in schools and recommend reading, especially '[c]ollaborative reading interventions, in which peers

engage in oral interaction and cooperatively negotiate meaning and a shared understanding of texts' (p. 629) as the most consistently advantageous approach.

Whatever the mechanisms of language acquisition, it is clear that L2 young learners can catch up with, and sometimes actually outpace their native speaker classmates. To do this they would need rich, easily available sources of varied language input. In short, since the impossibility of acquiring such vocabulary through direct instruction is just as true for this group of learners as for L1 learners, the lexical variety of texts for children and the learning benefits of naturalistic reading argued to assist L1 vocabulary acquisition is most likely assisting the very rapid and effective language learning L2 young learners display. Indeed, it may well be that many or most of these learners are able to acquire new vocabulary through reading even more effectively than monolingual readers. There is evidence that picturebook reading is a useful source of vocabulary for L2 young learners (Collins, 2010; Roberts, 2008) and there is reason to hypothesise that successful L2 young learners derive a large amount of their linguistic gains from extensive reading in the target language. This hypothesis is supported by the common pedagogical view that reading is beneficial to students of whatever language background and the consequent encouragement migrant children receive to read in the target language (Dillon, 2013).

### **Children's Literature as a Source of Lexis**

The first problem in understanding L1 vocabulary acquisition is the source of input. In 1988 Hayes and Ahrens reported that children's books, including both fiction and non-fiction, had a higher proportion of rare words than did children's conversation, adult conversation, children's TV, or adult prime time TV. A more recent study (Thompson & Sealey, 2007) comparing child- and adult-oriented fictional texts in the BNC shows that children's fiction carries a comparable range of tokens to adult fiction, finding 'a close similarity between the two fiction corpora, in terms of the overall frequency lists, and the proportions of different parts of speech' (p. 21). Webb and Macalister (2013) also find great similarity between the range of vocabulary in their corpus of children's literature and the Wellington Written Corpus. Nagy and Anderson (1984) examined a large range of printed school-texts used between grades three and nine, and by a conservative count,

including only base-words of lemma, and only counting words with shared morphemes if semantically distant (p. 315), still found a total of 88,500 to 100,000 word meanings in their corpus. These findings are also supported by modern corpus analysis, with Tellings, Hulsbosch, Vermeer and van den Boch (2014) finding a total 168,073 separate lemma within the 13,987,731 token BasiLex Dutch language corpus of work written for children. Tellings et al. also compare child and adult corpora findings that the frequencies and usages of specific words and the absolute sizes of the corpora differ for adult and child writing, which is consistent with Wild, Kilgarriff, and Tugwell's (2012) findings for the 30-million-token Oxford Children's Corpus. Both the Dutch data and the British data confirm that texts written for children, both fictional and non-fictional, provide readers with a very rich and varied source of lexical experience.

### **Children's Literature and Foreign Language Learning**

In contrast to first and second language pedagogy, foreign language pedagogy has not yet fully taken on a view of naturalistic reading as a valuable tool. Nagy et al.'s 1985b results show that neither age nor reading ability are significant factors in the learning levels of their subjects, and for this particular experimental setup, where a longitudinal effect was carefully avoided, the contributing effects of other kinds of language input are not likely to be especially important. Nonetheless, foreign language learners inevitably have much lower levels of target language experience than L1 or L2 learners and it may be argued that the same lexical gains for the same investment in reading time might not be achieved (Webb & Macalister, 2013). However, foreign language educators still face the same basic problem as L1 educators, that even with the more modest goals (compared to native speakers) proposed by Nation (2006) of 8-9,000 word families, or Schmitt and Schmitt (2014) of 9,000-plus word families, direct instruction is simply not a plausible strategy for teaching all the vocabulary needed to reach a good level in a foreign language, and this problem is exacerbated by the comparatively limited learning time available for foreign language learning.

The question we must now ask is, considering the importance of vocabulary in the development of foreign language skills (Stæhr 2008; Schmitt 2008), would extended

reading of children's literature be a valuable learning choice for foreign language learners? Foreign language learners cannot match the quantities of language input which L1 or L2 learners enjoy. However, foreign language learners should incur the same benefits of reading in a foreign language as developing bilinguals do. Older foreign language learners especially, should be able to reap the additional benefits of a more conscious control over their learning by engaging in direct learning/comprehension strategies, and thereby adding deliberate learning to the mostly incidental learning of extensive reading. Foreign language learners may also benefit from the crossover of reading skills.

Experiments with relatively advanced learners reading adult novels have shown that a significant amount of vocabulary learning does take place. In 1978 Saragi, Nation and Meister published a now famous experiment with native speakers of English reading Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). This novel has a large number of Russian-derived slang words previously unknown to the readers. Post-reading multiple choice tests of these words showed 'a substantial amount of vocabulary learning' (p. 78), and that the number of repetitions of a target word in the text correlated with learning at  $p \geq 0.005$ . A similar experiment was conducted by Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt (2010) using Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), an English language novel containing words from the Nigerian language, Ibo. This time the readers were Spanish learners of English. Again, the results showed 'measurable learning' for twenty-eight per cent of the words, a result which Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt describe as 'the type of incidental vocabulary gains demonstrated by studies using graded readers' (p. 40). Ultimately, Pellicer-Sánchez and Schmitt argue that authentic novels can be a valuable source of vocabulary for more advanced learners, but recommend graded readers for less advanced readers, and for all readers recommend direct instruction to support and encourage the experiential. Ironically, the presence of a wide variety of lexis in children's literature, which is seen as an argument in its favour for L1 and L2 learning, is the major argument against the use of children's literature in foreign language learning.

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### The Case for Children's Literature

We must wonder why, since children's literature is so important in L1 and L2 vocabulary acquisition, it does not have the same status in foreign language learning. At lower levels children's literature has great advantages over adult literature simply by virtue of being understandable. It seems strange that adult literature is acceptable for language learning to such a degree that it is often simplified for lower level readers with reduced lexical and stylistic variety but that children's literature, which does not need to be simplified, is not seen as an equivalent choice. Researchers studying vocabulary acquisition for foreign language learners commonly recommend graded readers as preferable to children's literature (Schmitt 2008; Webb & Macalister 2013; Nation 2015). As a rough indication of the seriousness with which children's literature is examined as a possible reading choice in foreign language learning, I ran two searches on Google Scholar. The first was 'children's literature, foreign language learning', the second, 'graded readers, foreign language learning'. For children's literature, only two hits of the first sixty actually examined this topic, but for graded readers all but two of the first sixty hits were directly connected with the viability of using graded readers in foreign language learning. Whatever the reasons for this, it seems clear that the possible role of children's literature in language learning is seriously understudied. It is also an indication of the Anglocentric focus on learning *English* as a foreign language, as rich collections of graded readers for language learning are simply not available for learning most other languages, though children's literature usually is. Indeed, the two hits for the 'children's literature' search were both case studies on learning Japanese.

The arguments against using children's literature in foreign language learning are varied, but they centre on three main points, i) that children's literature is too difficult for lower level language learners (Webb & Macalister, 2013), ii) that children's literature is generally very different from adult discourse and does not form a good model for learning, and iii) that children's literature might be inappropriate in content or form for older, more sophisticated readers (Day & Bamford, 1998). On the second point, the corpus analysis shows that children's literature is actually surprisingly similar to adult literature, that it often carries sophisticated use of language, and is not at all a deviant form of language use.

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Regarding the third point, there is ample evidence that older learners, especially at university age, with a little experience and explanation, respond very well to children's literature as learning materials (Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Tomlinson & McGraw, 1997; Ho, 2000; Bloem & Padak, 1996).

The main argument against the use of children's literature in foreign language learning springs from the first point; the belief that children's literature is too difficult for lower level learners. This belief comes from the relatively high numbers of low frequency words found in children's literature and the perception that this places an unnecessarily heavy comprehension and memory load upon the learner. Children's literature does have a much wider range of vocabulary than graded readers (Webb & Macalister, 2013; Schmitt 2008), and it does include many rare and unusual words. However, this should not automatically lead to the conclusion that it is not useful for foreign language learners. The reasons for this can be found in a deeper understanding of the nature of children's literature.

Children's literature ranges from texts for the very young, usually picturebooks, through to texts for the mid-teens, usually medium-length novels with little or no illustration. The variation within children's literature is enormous and any attempt to treat it as in any way a homogenous collection of texts is bound to fail. Certainly, if very low level foreign language learners tried to read any of Roald Dahl's novels for children they would have a very hard time, and certainly, if intermediate students tried to read novels written for teenagers they too could have a very hard time. However, elementary learners working with texts for very young children would probably manage very well indeed, just as would intermediate learners trying to read Roald Dahl. Advanced learners trying to read teenage novels would also manage very well, and would probably, as do native speaker children, use them as a platform from which to move on to whatever kind of adult literature attracts them. Children's literature is incredibly varied in content, level and form, and this variability allows learners to find texts they can read at any level. As readers progress they will come across many rare words, but this is only a problem if the learning aims are relatively low and these words are never going to be of use to the language learner, or if the presence of these words seriously disrupts the reading process.

Children's literature also provides a good introduction to adult literature. Learners who move directly from graded readers to adult literature, as is often recommended in the foreign language acquisition literature (Uden, Schmitt & Schmitt, 2014; Schmitt, 2008, p. 349; Nation & Wang, 1999), are likely to encounter all sorts of unnecessary problems. They will suddenly be coming across far more unusual words than they are used to, they will be experiencing more, and more complex, stylistic devices and narrative forms than they are used to, and they will be attempting much longer and more linguistically complex works than they are used to. The consequent increase in reading difficulty may well be very demotivating. Uden, Schmitt and Schmitt (2014), studying advanced learners moving from high level graded readers into authentic adult novels, report reduced comprehension (p. 14) and that 'pleasure and ease ratings went down substantially' (p. 17). Only two of their four subjects continued to read adult novels after the experiment but they still conclude that a sequence of graded reader to authentic novel is 'pedagogically sound advice' (p. 20), at least for motivated readers.

Learners who progress to adult literature from children's literature will already have experienced many rare words and may well have a larger vocabulary than those who learn through graded readers. They will have experienced the most common stylistic and rhetorical forms of the language, but usually in a simpler, more perceptually salient form than they are likely to come across in adult literature, and they will have worked steadily up from shorter to longer and more narratively complex texts and will be used to the length of longer works for teenagers. Reading children's literature is, in short, good training for reading adult literature. It is also good training for understanding other discourse types which employ the same stylistic and rhetorical techniques they will have learned through reading children's literature.

Finally, there is a difference in the use of rare vocabulary in younger children's literature and in adult literature. Authors of children's literature use rare words, but they often use them in the knowledge that they are unusual words for their readership and use the words in ways which make the meanings at least partially clear. A writer of adult literature would not, for example, feel the need to make sure their readers understood 'provisions'. Nor might they feel the need to be clear about the meaning of a 'gibbous moon' (though many adults may not be quite sure exactly what a 'gibbous moon' is). A

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writer for children however, may feel differently, as it seems did Terry Pratchett when he wrote *The Wee Free Men*, and chose as his protagonist a young girl who enjoys unusual vocabulary:

There was a lot of mist around, but a few stars were visible overhead and there was a gibbous moon in the sky. Tiffany knew it was gibbous because she'd read in the Almanack that 'gibbous' meant what the moon looked like when it was just a bit fatter than half full, and so she made a point of paying attention to it around those times just so that she could say to herself: 'Ah, I see the moon's very gibbous tonight' (Pratchett, 2003, pp. 53-4)

Later he playfully re-creates 'gibbous' as a verb, using an apostrophe rather than an 'ed' suffix, thereby making the use marked, identifiably non-standard, but still good learning input:

The moon gibbous'd at her through the crescent-shaped hole cut in the door.  
(Pratchett, 2003, pp. 54-5)

He recycles the word one more time towards the end of the text, in a standard usage, with its collocate 'moon' and with strong and visually powerful contextualisation:

There, glistening on the oily, rich yellow surface, was a gibbous moon and, sailing in front of the moon, a witch on a broomstick. (Pratchett, 2003, p. 309)

'Gibbous' occurs only three times (less than in this single story) in the entire fiction sub-corpus of the BNC with a frequency of only 0.19 occurrences/million. It is therefore a rare word and its appearance becomes an argument against using children's literature in foreign language learning. However, in this example at least, its use is carefully controlled, it presents no comprehension problems, and the degree of attention given to the word means that it stands a good chance of being learned to a level whereby any later experience of the word is unlikely to be problematic.

Some writers of children's literature also play with language so that, for example, when Kenneth Grahame, in *The Wind in the Willows*, writes of Mole burrowing up out of his burrow, that he 'scraped and scratched and scrabbled and scooged and then he



scrooged again and scabbled and scratched and scraped' (1908, p. 2), the close lexical grouping, the repetition and the alliteration are beyond what we would normally expect from work written for adults but are not uncommon in work for children and almost certainly contribute to both understanding and memory. The words here may be a little unusual, or very unusual in the case of 'scrooged', but are nonetheless understandable as a linked set rather than as single examples.

Naturally, writers for children, like writers for adults, have a great deal of variation in the way they write and it is only possible to show specific instances of how less common words are dealt with in some works of children's literature. The fact remains though, that if corpus analysis of children's literature shows similar spreads of vocabulary to adult literature then, since children can read children's literature but have to work up to reading adult literature, these words must be used in ways which do not create terrible barriers to understanding. Writers are aware of their audience and adapt their style accordingly, as comparative analysis of work for children and adults but by the same writers has consistently shown (Shavit 1986, pp. 17-91; Anderson 1984).

### **Conclusion**

Children's literature is an excellent and valued source of language experience for L1 and L2 learners and is a major factor in the development of a large and flexible vocabulary, including extensive and varied experience of collocation, lexical patterning and usage, as well as grammatical, phonological, discoursal, conversational, stylistic and narrative patterning. The literature on the use of children's literature in foreign language learning is limited but the evidence of small-scale interventions, with both adult and child learners has generally yielded positive results (Leung, 2002; Hsiu-Chih, 2008; Hitosugi and Day, 2004; Tomlinson & McGraw, 1997; Abu Rass & Holzman, 2010; Bloem & Padak, 1996). Foreign language acquisition research is recently more accepting of the use of adult literature for advanced learners but still tends to recommend graded readers as the best option for lower level learners, mainly because of the quantity of rare vocabulary which is found in children's literature. However, stylistic features commonly found in children's literature, combined with the great range of level in children's literature, seem likely to be

sufficient to cancel out this perceived disadvantage. Extensive reading can have great benefits in language learning and there is no doubt that graded readers can be a very useful source of language input for lower to middle level language learners (Schmitt, 2008; Webb & Macalister, 2013). However, children's literature is also a viable option and in some ways superior to graded readers, especially if learners can be encouraged to replicate some of the common reading behaviours of L1 and L2 young learners. Children's literature has strong motivational benefits, being clearly authentic, being a reading experience shared with large numbers of adult and child members of the target language culture, and having sufficient breadth and variety of form, content and level to allow learners to find attractive texts which they can comfortably and realistically read, cover to cover. Children's literature also has important practical benefits. It has easily identifiable levels, with a strong correlation between level, length of text, and density of illustration, allowing foreign language learners to quickly learn to navigate the wide range of choices available to them, and unlike graded readers, is easily available in a wide variety of languages. Far from something to be cautious of, children's literature is a valid and powerful option for foreign language learners and teachers, especially in terms of material for extended reading.

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