

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE READABILITY OF AUTHENTIC ENGLISH CHAPTER BOOKS FOR CROATIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores chapter books, explaining their nature and providing information on their usefulness and possible uses in the context of teaching English as a foreign language. It outlines their properties, layout and subject matter. The goal of the exploratory study was to investigate whether young Croatian pupils could read English chapter books written for native speakers and whether illustrations helped them to comprehend the narrative. Furthermore, it aimed to examine pupils' response to the format of chapter books. The study about the suitability of chapter books was conducted among pupils in the third, fourth and fifth grade in two Croatian schools, and its results show that young learners of English as a foreign language can grasp the essence of a story and can reflect on what they read, identify points of difficulty and the strategies applied. The findings suggest that carefully chosen chapter books can be valuable authentic materials in aiding language acquisition, fostering discussions, and engaging higher-order thinking skills in young EFL learners in Croatia.

KEYWORDS:

chapter books, reading, literacy,
English as a foreign language (EFL)

Authors' note

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INTRODUCTION

In the attempt to develop English literacy among pupils learning English as a foreign language (EFL), one comes across the issue of whether to expose pupils to English literature in its ‘pure’ form or resort to simplified or adapted literature. Consequently, there will be pros and cons relating to the adaptation of stories, songs and chants for EFL learners, that is, adapted versions may or may not be good for EFL learners. Janice Bland (2013) claims that:

To lead students on to higher-order thinking skills and critical cultural readings, who then take on the role of the expert in diverse ways and read against the grain of global English texts in ethical ways, I maintain that literary education must commence in the first years of EFL learning. (p. 223)

It is assumed that beginner EFL learners could have problems with understanding an original story or text, and therefore such works tend to be adapted and simplified. Narančić Kovač finds that original literature is adapted according to structural differences, vocabulary, cultural and literary aspects, yet changes do not seem to be necessary, and “It is not always clear [...] why one structure is considered more complicated [for young learners] than another” (2007: 62). Authors of simplified versions of original stories usually avoid the use of the past tense and other tenses in favor of the present tense. The rationale is that young children should not be exposed to new grammatical structures at such a young age. Additionally, non-finite forms like *-ing* are also rarely used, and adapted texts primarily use finite forms. *Shall* and *will* are turned into *can*, *if* into *when*, and *wh*-questions and passive forms are avoided. However, past tenses and ‘difficult’ vocabulary would not affect young learners’ general understanding of the story (Narančić Kovač, 2007: 63). Research has shown that young language learners understand the story they are reading equally well in its original form and in its adapted form because they rely on the context, illustrations and their previous knowledge and experiences rather than on grammatical structures (Coulthard, 2003; Kokkola, 2002; Lauš & Narančić Kovač, 2008; Narančić Kovač & Lauš, 2008). Also, they “rely on the acquired story scheme for understanding the narrative text” (Narančić Kovač & Milković, 2011: 226). Furthermore, exposing young learners to past verb forms as early as possible during EFL instruction is beneficial as it “doesn’t in any way hinder the process of EFL learning in young

primary children, as long as they are not taught explicitly” (Narančić Kovač & Milković, 2015: 146). Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002: 189) also claim that children will be concentrating on the meaning of the story, not on why and how the simple past is used. Young learners do not use grammar correctly because they typically lack morpho-syntactic competence (Medved Krajnović, 2001: 51), but that does not mean they do not understand the message.

Still, it is not clear whether adapted versions of stories improve learners’ literacy better than authentic books or just limit their exposure to original stories. This leads to the view that if a text is adapted, children may lose valuable information about the culture the text is coming from. Young readers focus their attention on understanding the story plot, leaving us to question whether books need to be adapted. The picturebook is an example of authentic material which has been widely accepted and implemented in ELT practice for several decades; “a journey that began with the communicative language teaching approach in the 1970s” (Mourão & Bland, 2016: ii). The significance and value of authentic picturebooks for young language learners have been validated in a multitude of studies, such as those conducted by Bland (2013; 2015), Lado (2012), Mourão (2015a; 2015b), Narančić Kovač and Lauš (2008), and Stanišić and Milković (2022), among others.

Regarding format, in English speaking educational contexts the progression for children between grades 2 and 4 typically involves transitioning from the predictable plots and layouts of picturebooks to chapter books or middle-grade fiction in the United States (Bland, 2018). These and other chapter books are characterized by rich illustrations within short chapters, featuring protagonists in the 8-12 age range. Despite this shift from picturebooks to chapter books in English speaking educational contexts, there is minimal acknowledgment of the use of chapter books in EFL teaching, prompting us to inquire about the appropriateness of chapter books as instructional material in ELT settings. Therefore, this paper presents an exploratory study that seeks to investigate whether young EFL learners can effectively engage with longer, unadapted texts in natural English, using chapter books as a representative example.

CHAPTER BOOKS

The term “chapter book”, as defined by Agnew (2001), refers to „real books for children who have mastered basic reading skills but still require simple, illustrated texts with a more intricate story than what is found in reading scheme books“ (139). Chapter books address the perceived gap between easy readers, reading schemes and middle school novels, aiming to enhance readers’ literacy and love for literature. Reading chapter books also prepares children for independent and strategic reading.

In terms of format, chapter books are stories intentionally divided into chapters, recognizing the short concentration span of children at this age (6-11). They serve as points where readers take a break before reading on. Chapter books are shorter than novels and longer than typical picturebooks. They are typically around 10 chapters long, with larger font sizes. Chapter books are also illustrated books; however, the images, although often abundant, are not essential for understanding the story, distinguishing them from larger picturebooks (Bland, 2018). The illustrations are usually black-and-white drawings whose purpose is to reinforce the text and encourage further reading.

In terms of vocabulary and structure, chapter books are designed for children between the ages of 6 and 11. These books typically feature characters, often animals or humans (children), grappling with relatable issues and thereby conveying humor and familiar every-day situations. The plot is usually simple and linear, spanning the length of 45 to 100 pages. The themes explored in chapter books are rooted in contemporary realism, encompassing humor, mysteries, sports and survival stories, adventure, tales involving animals, narratives about growing up, addressing challenges, and portraying life in a diverse world.

Some well-known examples of chapter books include *Flat Stanley* by Jeff Brown, illustrated by Toni Ungerer in the first series (1964), which gained widespread popularity leading to a multiple series. *Arthur* by Marc Brown is a chapter book series which revolves around mystery and sports. Beyond print, the *Arthur* franchise extends to apps, e-books and television shows, reaching audiences in over 80 countries and receiving acknowledgements such as the New York Times Bestseller list, Emmys and The George Foster Peabody Award for Excellence in Broadcasting. *The Magic Tree House* by Mary Pope Osborne, illustrated by Salvatore Murdocca, is another chapter book series, first published in 1992 and sold in 134 million copies. The series combines literature, history and science in

fanciful stories like *Dinosaurs Before Dark* or *Abe Lincoln at Last*. A companion series, the *Magic Tree House Fact Trackers*, is a nonfiction version of these stories. *Magic Tree House Books - Beginning Chapter Book Readers* revolves around the adventures of Jack and Annie, for readers ages 6–9 who are just starting to read chapter books. *Magic Tree House Merlin Mission Books 1-27* are written for more advanced readers. *The Boxcar Children* series by Gertrude Chandler Warner, *Freckle Juice* by Judy Blume, *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney and the *Amelia Bedelia* series by Peggy Parish are other examples of richly illustrated chapter books with protagonists in the 8-12 age range.

AUTHENTICITY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CROATIAN CURRICULUM FOR THE SUBJECT ENGLISH LANGUAGE

To ensure literary competence, the Croatian curriculum for the subject English language approaches literature from the domain of *Intercultural communicative competence*. By attaining learning outcomes within this domain, a learner is, among other things, ready for the reception of literature in the English language and is generally familiar with its most important forms. Intercultural curiosity is encouraged and promoted along with the reception of literary text and intercultural meetings where knowledge is acquired. For example, one of the learning outcomes in the third 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).

With respect to materials and methods, teachers have the autonomy to choose the materials and methods to attain curricular objectives. They decide on textbooks and additional sources and materials, including authentic ones, to be used and introduced in their lessons. According to a survey conducted in 2022 in Croatia among 110 primary school English language teachers, story-time is practiced on average once a month, and most teachers rely on the stories provided by textbooks (Cindrić & Milković, 2023). Therefore, authentic English literary works are not commonly used in Croatian schools and chapter books are not an exception. On the other hand, the accessibility of chapter books for leisure reading outside of school is increasing in popularity, particularly due to well-received titles such as the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series.

In the context of EFL teaching in Croatia in the 1990s, researchers predominantly utilized picturebooks and various literary forms such as rhymes and stories (Narančić Kovač, 2016).¹ It became clear that picturebooks and children's literature in general were desirable and advantageous in teaching English in primary education (Narančić Kovač, 1999; Narančić Kovač & Likar, 2001/2015). On the other hand, there is an absence of recorded research to date regarding the integration of chapter books as an authentic English literary form among Croatian primary school English Language Learners (ELLs). This gap forms the basis for the exploratory study presented in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

Exploratory research, according to Swedberg (2020: 17), consists of an attempt to discover something new and interesting by working one's way through research. It is frequently the first study conducted, offering results within a previously unexplored field. The purpose of this exploratory study was to establish whether Croatian EFL learners have sufficient linguistic proficiency to be able to read continuous text, i.e., chapter books that are primarily aimed at native English speakers. During the testing procedure, pupils were given authentic, unabridged versions of chapter books from English-speaking contexts. The selected chapter books were chosen with respect to students' age and language proficiency. Also, the protagonists in these selected books address issues that resonate with children of that age, fostering a greater connection and making the assigned reading more engaging and relatable.

¹ For more information on the mentioned research, we offer references:
Nikpalj, V. (1993/2015). Elements of drama in teaching English to young learners. In J. Mihaljević Djigunović (Ed.), *Children and English as a Foreign Language*. (83-95). Zagreb: FF press.
Štokić, L. (1993/2015). Music and verses in teaching English to young learners. In J. Mihaljević Djigunović (Ed.), *Children and English as a Foreign Language*. (78-82). Zagreb: FF press.
Tomašević-Dančević, M. (1995/2015). Environmental education and creativity in teaching English. In J. Mihaljević Djigunović (Ed.), *Children and English as a Foreign Language*. (108-118). Zagreb: FF press.

Research questions

The research aimed to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Can young EFL learners independently engage in reading authentic chapter books?
2. Do EFL learners rely on illustrations while reading, and do illustrations enhance the general understanding of chapter books?
3. How do learners respond to chapter books?

Participants

The sample of participants consisted of nine pupils attending three different grade levels – three 3rd graders, three 4th graders and three 5th graders in two small-town Croatian primary schools. In total, there were five boys and four girls, aged 8/9, 9/10 and 10/11 respectively. All of the pupils started learning English in the first grade, and two pupils attended extracurricular English lessons. Three students from each grade were chosen by their teachers. The criteria for selecting students were the teachers' evaluations of the students' ability to read a text written in English targeted at their language level and the willingness of the selected students to participate. Prior to their involvement in the research, consent was obtained from the parents of the children, approving their participation. Additionally, the children themselves willingly agreed to take part in the study. The study was conducted within the participants' respective schools, ensuring a familiar environment.

Instrument

Three different chapter books were selected for the study. *Ghost Dog* by Eleanor Allen for the third-graders (49 pages; 24 illustrations; 10 single-page illustrations; 23 lines of text per page; 140 words per page when the page is covered with text), *Arthur Accused* by Mark Brown for the fourth-graders (58 pages; 10 single-page illustrations; 23 lines of text per page; about 130 words per page) and *Mixed-Up Max* by Dick King-Smith for the fifth-graders (57 pages; 26 illustrations; 4 single-page illustrations; 23 lines of text per page; 160 words per page). When choosing these three chapter books, the researchers had in mind the criteria for selecting story-

books proposed by Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002: 190-191): level (vocabulary and structures), literary devices, content/subject matter, illustrations, educational potential motivation, global issues. The selected chapter books met several criteria suitable for the participants and the study with respect to the students' age and language proficiency. The chapter book designated for older students is characterized by increased length, slightly more complex vocabulary and syntax and a reduced number of illustrations. Furthermore, the characters in the narratives tackle topics that deeply resonate with children of the corresponding age, fostering a stronger connection and making the assigned reading more captivating and relatable. Additionally, the illustrations vividly portray characters, settings and events within the stories. Native English speakers (within the same age range as the students in our sample) were the primary audience for these chapter books. Consequently, the vocabulary and expressions used by the authors were not constrained or adapted to simplify comprehension. The researchers were fully aware that there would be items causing difficulty, such as *pavement*, *jostle*, *cramped flat*, etc. In response, the students were encouraged to ask for clarification of unfamiliar words if they could not infer meaning from context or illustrations.

After reading, the participants were asked to reply, in their mother tongue (Croatian), to two sets of questions. The first set of questions (identical for all three groups) consisted of eight questions (see Table 1 in the Results section). The intention was to record learners' opinions about a particular chapter book and their perception of the level of difficulty, reliance on illustrations, content and their potential interest in reading similar books.

The second set of questions (as presented in Table 2, Table 3, Table 4) centered around specific plot details of each narrative and sought learners' individual opinions on the story, along with their overall experiences, including their interpretations of the narratives. The participants' answers were recorded on a mobile phone and later transcribed on paper.

Procedure

The reading sessions took place after the students' regular lessons and an extended break in available rooms in schools. After presenting the purpose of the research and obtaining parental consent, instructions on how to read were given to the pupils. Their task was to read the selected book, taking a break, if needed, at chapter breaks. The pupils were encouraged to ask questions at any time during

the reading (meaning of words, clarification). They could also write down the meaning of unfamiliar words on paper and refer to the list as they continued reading. Reading time was measured to the minute. Upon finishing the task, the participants were individually interviewed in order to obtain unobstructed answers.

RESULTS

As mentioned, the pupils from all three grades were asked to reply to a set of general questions identical for all pupils (Table 1 below). The exploratory study was conducted as an interview, the participants' answers being recorded and transcribed once all the participants completed their tasks. The second set of questions related to particular chapter books, which were different with respect to grade level. The results are presented according to grade level, starting with Grade 3.

TABLE 1 Answers to general questions by grade level

	Grade 3			Grade 4			Grade 5		
	3B1	3B2	3G	4B1	4B2	4G	5G1	5G2	5B
Can you retell the story?	partial	partial	full	full	weak	full	full	full	partial
Was the book difficult to read?	easy	diff.	med	med	med	med	med	med	med
Did the illustrations help you to understand the story (how)?	partial	yes	partial	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Was the story too long or just right?	right	right	right	right	right	right	right	right	right
Did you skip parts while reading?	yes	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	some
Would you leave something out of this story?	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no	no
Would you like to read this story again? Why?	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	no	yes
Would you like to read a similar book in English?	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes
Reading time (min.)	40	37	20	50	34	34	65	67	69
Average reading time (min.)	32,33			39,33			67		

The answers given by the Grade 3 participants to general questions about the chapter book they had read are presented in Table 1 above. The sample of participants in this grade comprised three pupils, two boys and one girl. They are coded

in the following way: 3 (for grade level), B (boy) 1 (first boy), 3B2 (second boy) and 3G (girl). While reading, the pupils asked for clarification of the meaning of certain words: e.g., *lawnmower*, *cramped*, *pester*, *barking*, *supposing*, *notice*. We also noticed they had some problems with finding where they had left off after chapter breaks.

The pupils' answers to these questions indicate an overall grasp of the story as one participant was able to retell the story in full (3G), while the other two offered partial recounts. The illustrations aided one student (3B2) in understanding certain story elements, whereas the others reported noticing the illustrations, but did not consider them crucial for following the story plot. All three students agreed that the book's length was appropriate, although one (3B1) admitted to skipping some sections while reading. Despite the difficulty in reading and some skipping of text, none of the students expressed a desire to change or omit parts of the story. Two participants said that they would want to reread the story as they found it interesting, while one student (3B2) said that he wouldn't reread this book as he found it a bit boring. All of the pupils stated that they would like to read a similar book in English. The average reading time of this chapter book was 32.33 minutes.

The students' answers to the second, specific group of questions (Table 2) relating to the book *Ghost Dog*, are presented below.

TABLE 2 Questions about "Ghost Dog" by Eleanor Allen (Grade 3)

1.	Were Kim's parents right for not allowing her to have a dog? Why do you think so?
2.	Have you ever been in a similar situation?
3.	Do you think that the dog was actually a ghost? How is that possible?
4.	What kinds of dogs was Kim permitted to have?
5.	Would you tell your parents that you saw a ghost dog? Why yes or no?
6.	Why did they finally let Kim have a dog?
7.	Why did Kim's parents want to buy her a bike?
8.	Did Rex like Bobby?
9.	Could others, except Kim, hear the ghost dog?

Participant 3B1 took 40 minutes to read the book and gave a partial recount of the story. While retelling, it was clear that there were some misunderstandings (mentioning that the entire family invited the ghost dog, that in the end there were two dogs, and that dad wanted a carpet). Pupil 3B1 felt that the parents were wrong for not allowing Kim to have a dog, and that if she had one, then the lawn-

mower would not have been stolen. In terms of details, this pupil remembered one (Kim being allowed to have a stuffed dog), but could not remember why Kim was finally allowed to have a dog. Participant 3B1 also understood that the parents wanted to buy Kim a bike so that she could get to school faster (without thinking that they wanted to distract her from her wish). Pupil 3B1 admitted skipping parts of the story, but not because he found it difficult or boring, but because he wanted to finish reading at the same time as his peers. He could relate to the story as he mentioned being in similar situations as Kim, wanting things, but having parents tell him that he did not need them.

Participant 3B2 took 37 minutes to read the book and retold the plot in two sentences – the beginning and the end of the book. The book seemed difficult, but he would not reread it because he found it boring. Still, pupil 3B2 said that he would like to read similar books because books in English are interesting. In terms of difficulty, pupil 3B2 mentioned that the illustrations helped understand the plot better. Regarding details, pupil 3B2 claimed that the parents were wrong about not letting Kim have a dog. He did not provide an answer to whether the ghost dog was actually a ghost, just mentioned that it was invisible. Pupil 3B2 remembered that Kim was allowed to have a dog that was Japanese – actually a china dog, indicating that he remembered that the dog was not real, but could relate that to the meaning of ‘china dog’. Pupil 3B1 understood well that parents wanted to buy Kim a bike so that she could get to school, which is what the book says; however, their intention was to make her forget about her wish. Lack of understanding was also obvious when pupil 3B2 explained that Kim did not actually get a real dog, but that it was invisible. Pupil 3B2 could not relate to the story as he said that he always got what he wanted.

Participant 3G took the shortest time to read (20 min). This participant gave a detailed recount of the story. In terms of details, pupil 3G answered that the parents had valid reasons for not allowing Kim to have a dog as it could make the house dirty and destroy flowers. Still, she thought that the parents should have allowed for the dog. Her explanation for the imaginary dog was that Kim loved dogs so much that she imagined one. She knew that Kim was permitted to have a stuffed dog, posters and books about dogs. Participant 3G also knew that Kim was finally allowed to have a dog because, in addition to wanting one, the family needed someone to guard the house, dad needed someone to go for walks with, and mom needed a friend while alone. The pupil recognized that buying Kim a bike was a distractor from her wish to have a dog. In terms of relating to the story,

she described a situation when she wanted a hamster and her parents got her a goldfish instead.

The answers given by the Grade 4 students to the first set of questions are shown in Table 1. From their answers, we can see that two students (4B1 and 4G) were able to give a recount of the story, while one student gave a weak recount (4B2). All three students said that the book was of medium difficulty. Because of that, they all wanted to reread the book. Participant 4G said that there were some unfamiliar words, but that she could infer meaning from context, participant 4B1 understood most of the words, and participant 4B2 said that some words were difficult so he had to read them several times. All three participants replied that the illustrations were helpful for understanding the story, participant 4G saying that she looked at the illustrations when she could not understand something; participant 4B1 could recognize and name the characters from the illustrations, while participant 4B2 recognized but could not name the characters from the illustrations. The chapter book seemed to be of appropriate length and the pupils did not skip any parts. They would not leave anything out. All three pupils in Grade 4 expressed a desire to read another similar book in English again, extending their answers by saying that they enjoy reading detective stories. The average reading time for the 4th graders was 39.33 minutes.

Below are the summaries of the participants' answers to the specific set of questions (Table 3) relating to this chapter book.

TABLE 3 Questions about "Arthur Accused" by Mark Brown (Grade 4)

1.	Do you think Buster was a good friend to Arthur? Why?
2.	Would you do something similar for your friend?
3.	Why was Arthur collecting money? Which animal would you buy?
4.	Have you or your friend ever been falsely accused?
5.	What would you do in the same situation?
6.	Where did Arthur and Buster go after school?
7.	What is Mrs MacGrady's job?
8.	How did Mrs MacGrady put coins instead of flour in the cookies?
9.	Could that really happen?
10.	Was Arthur sorry for being punished? What was he mostly sad about?

Participant 4B1 needed the most time to read the story, but his comprehension of the story was quite good as he was able to give a detailed recount of the story.

He found the book to be of medium difficulty, but was able to infer meaning of words with the help of illustrations. The pupil found this book interesting and would read it again as he liked reading detective stories. He would also like to read other books in English. His comprehension of the chapter book was evident as he related this story to another situation.

Participant 4B2 attempted to retell the story, but gave a rather vague recount. His recollection of details and characters was poor (could not remember what animal they were collecting money for, where Arthur and Buster went after school, what Mrs MacGrady's job was, how she did not notice the coin, where Arthur was not allowed to go with his classmates). Participant 4B2 understood the story in the sense that he knew it was a detective story, that Arthur was in trouble, and that Buster, the detective, wanted to help him. He could relate to the story from his own experience as he had also been falsely accused at one point. This pupil showed interest in reading detective stories, and said that he would like to read this story again as he did not understand some words during the first reading. His reading time was relatively short, indicating that he was rushing to complete the task.

Participant 4G1 gave thorough answers and remembered all the details she was asked about the story. She knew that Buster was a good friend and that he wanted to help Arthur. This participant showed good understanding and memory, remembering that the money was to be collected for a Dalmatian dog for the fire-fighters (mentioning that she remembered that from the text and the illustrations). Good recollection of detail and accuracy was shown in answering questions about the place and Mrs MacGrady's job. She also remembered Mrs MacGrady's lack of concentration while cooking, and Arthur's sadness when not being allowed to go to the school picnic. This participant could relate to Arthur's experience as she had been falsely accused and would try to defend herself by providing evidence.

As for the pupils in Grade 5 (Table 1, column 3), two pupils gave a full recount of the story, while one pupil (5B) gave a partial recount. They found it appropriate in length and of medium difficulty or somewhat difficult to read. The pupils relied on the illustrations to help them clarify what was happening in the story and infer the meaning of unknown words. Pupils 5G1 and 5G2 did not skip any part of the book nor would they leave anything out. Two of the three pupils would read this book again because they liked it, while pupil 5G2 said that the struggle with unfamiliar words was a bit too confusing and tiresome. Nevertheless, all of the pupils expressed a desire to read similar books in English as they found them interesting and they seem to like such books. The pupils also mentioned that reading such

books is an opportunity to learn new words.

Below are the summaries of the pupils' answers to the questions (Table 4) relating to the chapter book for Grade 5.

TABLE 4 Questions about *Mixed-Up Max* by Dick King-Smith (Grade 5)

1.	Do you think Max is wise or thoughtless? Why?
2.	What did Max want to do?
3.	Did you ever want to do something like Max?
4.	How many sisters did Max have?
5.	How many attempts did Max have before finally crossing the road?
6.	Why did the hedgehogs want to cross the road?
7.	Why did the house owner leave food for hedgehogs? Are they useful?
8.	Who are Ma and Pa?

Pupil 5G1 considered Max wise as he figured out how humans cross the road. Max attempted to cross the road without being hurt (which according to pupil 5G1 was his intention). In terms of detail, pupil 5G1 remembered that Max had three sisters and that Max succeeded in crossing the road in the third attempt. The pupil thought that hedgehogs were useful, but did not remember why the owner left food for the hedgehog.

Pupil 5G2 found Max to be wise, but also thoughtless and inconsiderate. She understood that Max's intention of crossing the road was to brag about his achievement. That idea permeated into the question regarding the hedgehog's insistence on crossing the road – she said that they wanted to show off and show how strong they are. In terms of detail, this pupil gave an incorrect answer when being asked about the number of Max's sisters (six), and that he was able to cross the road after the second attempt. She said that the house owner wanted to communicate with the hedgehogs and observe them. She thought hedgehogs are useful for digging holes in the garden, but that they can do a lot of damage in back yards.

Pupil 5B replied that Max was thoughtless in his attempt to cross the road, doing it without asking permission. His understanding was that Max simply wanted to learn how to cross the road. He also understood that Max wanted to enter the garden across the street, but did not relate that to the food in that garden (park). Pupil 5B could not decide whether hedgehogs were useful or not. In terms of detail, he remembered Max having three sisters, but could not recall after which attempt Max succeeded in crossing the road (his guess was seven). This pupil

wanted to read the book again as he found it interesting. He also expressed interest in reading similar books in English. The illustrations helped him in understanding words (he didn't understand all the words). Pupil 5B1 admitted skipping some parts, particularly those that did not interest him. All three pupils knew who Ma and Pa referred to.

The fifth graders took the longest to read their book, but it was also the longest of the three. All pupils grasped the gist of the story. Their reading was, at times, hindered by unknown words, but all pupils mention relying on illustrations to clarify meaning.

DISCUSSION

The conducted research yielded answers that could potentially motivate EFL teachers to incorporate chapter books into their teaching. The results show that all of the nine pupils chosen for this study were willing to read their chapter books and made efforts to complete the assigned task. In that respect, the pupils showed that they can engage in independently reading authentic chapter books, which have been carefully selected with respect to pupils' age, language level, length and content. Here we note that for this exploratory study, the participant selection process relied on the teachers' assessment of the pupils' reading ability and willingness participate in the study. Future research should include a more diverse range of reading proficiencies and attitudes to allow generalizations to be made.

The students also provided feedback on their reading, following a single, independent reading session. Therefore, their comprehension of the selected chapter books, which ranged across the grade levels from partial to full, shows that the pupils managed to acquire the gist of the stories they had read by using strategies such as asking about the meaning of words and asking for clarification, inferring from and relying on illustrations to overcome difficulties related to vocabulary. This aligns with Bland's (2013) position that when reading or listening to stories, children should be allowed to guess meanings and make informed predictions about what the writer/storyteller will say next. Furthermore, based on the participants' reflections on the learning experience, it's worth noting that seven of the nine students expressed a desire to reread the chapter books – generally, to get a better understanding of the story or because it was interesting. While acknowledging the potential influence of socially desirable response behavior in the students' feed-

back, the findings still reveal valuable insights that call for consideration. These insights reflect the students' desire to reread the chapter books for a clearer understanding of the story, as well as their willingness to explore other books. To pursue that in practice, incorporating a structured approach, such as guided and planned reading (pre-while-post reading), might be an effective strategy in the context of story-based teaching.

In this exploratory study, in addition to reading for gist, the participants from all three grade levels were able to recall most details from the stories they had read. A component of the *whole language approach*, as explained by Pressley (2002: 15), is immersing readers in authentic literature. This approach often depends on illustrations, images or semantic cues from the context to extract meaning. The objective is to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the overall content, although not necessarily delving into a detailed comprehension of every aspect in the text (37). With respect to detail, an interesting observation in the analysis of the pupils' answers captured our attention: across the grades, girls actually needed less time for reading and paid more attention to details. We also know that the two girls in Grade 5 took extracurricular English lessons, possibly making them more proficient in the language. Still, this finding cannot be taken as a generalization, but rather as a characteristic of this particular study.

At times partial recounts of the plot given by the pupils should be seen as a window of opportunity for the teacher to take action and help pupils overcome difficulties or issues relating to comprehension (*scaffolding* would be an appropriate teaching strategy). The pupils' general understanding of such stories is an indicator that the carefully selected chapter books did not pose difficulties for these particular pupils to read independently, but here we urge caution. In particular, we refer to the diversity of pupils in terms of their reading ability, attitudes and reading experience. Potential difficulties could arise from possible misunderstandings of the plot, inability to comprehend the story, lack of reading strategies, anxieties or, as was the case in this study, rushing to keep up with peers. In that case, appropriate guidance by the teacher is necessary for a successful experience of reading authentic materials, e.g., through guided reading, stopping for understanding, pacing, focusing and characterizing developments. Also, the teacher can initiate a good strategy for becoming acquainted with authentic texts by reading chapter books aloud. According to Cappellini (2005), many teachers do not read chapter books aloud to beginner learners in primary grades since "perhaps they think that children will not be able to handle it" (106). Furthermore, the author cautions that children

should not be deprived of the idea of reading a story and discussing the characters and the plot over several lessons because of their language level.

The answer to our second research question is an affirmative one, that is, the participants in the study reported that illustrations helped them in following the story plot. Their feedback revealed that they relied on illustrations to reinforce meaning or to offer clues and clarify meaning. According to Bland (2015b), “the illustrations simplify the understanding of the verbal text both for L1 and L2 readers, and this is the case for example in picture books, illustrated chapter books” (25). Therefore, the presence of illustrations may have played a role, as unfamiliar or unknown words did not discourage learners from continuing to read nor did they distort the overall meaning. This finding is in line with Gunning’s observation that „creating images serves three functions: fostering understanding, retaining information and monitoring for meaning“ (2005: 301). Although illustrations might have helped the pupils to visualize characters and actions and to clarify some uncertainties in terms of understanding, relying solely on illustrations can be tricky, given their potential richness in details (Lauš & Narančić Kovač, 2008). Therefore, interpretation should be approached with caution.

Finally, the results of this research show that the pupils found chapter books interesting, with regards to the respective topics covered by the chapter books. The pupils readily responded to interview questions that tapped into their personal experiences, opinions and judgments. This observation emphasizes the idea that students are more engaged when the topics are pertinent to their lives and connected to their contexts. For instance, all three Grade 3 pupils were able to relate their reading to personal experiences, demonstrating that the topic resonated with them and was relatable in their lives.

The pupils also expressed a desire to read similar books in English because they find these books appealing and interesting content-wise. The pupils in Grade 5 all agreed that they would like to read other books similar to this one. In this group of pupils, their marked interest to read at the same pace was observed. This caused some skipping of parts of the book and clearly indicated that pupils have to be guided by teachers; that is, the time aspect should simply be a point of reference with younger pupils. Nevertheless, the pupils’ interest in reading more books of this kind is an indicator that chapter books are a welcome reading for our pupils. Similarly, a study conducted among primary school EFL learners in Germany (Kolb, 2013) showed that by having them read on their own could not be said to increase competence in reading, but a considerable rise in reading motivation and

confidence in reading was certainly observed. If there is a match in text difficulty, characters, topic, age and students' needs, then a learner could successfully read such books with the teacher's help. Reading an authentic text, a chapter book, may in that case boost learners' confidence in learning the language, inducing them to consequently experience learning as meaningful and applicable.

CONCLUSION

It is our conclusion that integrating chapter books into EFL lessons is possible; however, it requires careful consideration with respect to students' age, language proficiency and interests. These books should strike a balance between readability and content challenge, ensuring that students derive both enjoyment and satisfaction from the experience. Mere inclusion in the roster of authentic literary materials for language learning would be inadequate as chapter books offer linguistic richness (rhyme, alliteration, metaphor, the sound system, phonetic awareness), cultural depth (making connections with their own lives, with text, with others) and illustrative value. In essence, chapter books represent potentially valuable authentic material for helping pupils in the process of acquiring the English language, stimulating discussions and activating higher-order thinking skills.

Furthermore, we would like to stress that our study marks only the beginning of a journey to unveil and understand the potential use of authentic English chapter books in teaching English as a foreign language at the primary school level. While the study provides valuable results on readability and students' reception, it is important to recognize its limitations. The participant selection process based on teachers' assessments and the reliance on feedback from a single, independent reading session may impact the generalizability of our findings. These limitations and the exploratory nature of the study indicate the issues that future research is likely to explore further. This includes investigating effective teaching strategies for integrating chapter books into EFL lessons by taking into account diverse learning styles and proficiency levels, exploring the impact of the illustrative value of chapter books on students' understanding and appreciation of the content in terms of developing visual literacy skills. Additionally, future studies should examine specific linguistic aspects that contribute to the development of language proficiency through the use of chapter books.

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ČITANJE AUTENTIČNIH PRIPOVIJESTI U POGLAVLJIMA (*CHAPTER BOOKS*) U NASTAVI ENGLESKOGA KAO STRANOGA JEZIKA – EKSPLOLATIVNO ISTRAŽIVANJE

SAŽETAK

Rad analizira književni oblik pripovijesti u poglavljima (engl. *chapter books*), istražujući njihovu suštinu i pružajući informacije o njihovoj korisnosti i mogućnostima primjene u nastavi engleskog jezika kao stranog jezika. Detaljno se opisuju karakteristike, struktura i tematika ovih knjiga. Cilj eksplorativne studije bio je ispitati mogu li učenici u dobi od 9 do 11 godina, čiji je materinski jezik hrvatski, samostalno čitati ovaj format knjige napisan za istu dobnu skupinu izvornih govornika te utvrditi može li ilustracija olakšati razumijevanje priče. Također se istraživala recepcija ovoga formata knjige. Rezultati provedenog istraživanja na malom uzorku učenika trećeg, četvrtog i petog razreda u dvije hrvatske škole ukazuju na to da učenici mogu samostalno pročitati priču i razumjeti srž priče. Također mogu analizirati vlastiti pristup čitanju, prepoznati izazove te primjenjivati strategije čitanja. Rezultati sugeriraju da pažljivo odabrane knjige ovog formata mogu biti vrijedan autentičan materijal za poticanje jezičnog razvoja, poticanje rasprava i poticanje razvoja kritičkog razmišljanja kod učenika spomenute dobi.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

čitanje, engleski jezik, pismenost, pripovijest u poglavljima