

# Great assets: Hungarian children's books in teaching English to young learners

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The publication of more and more translations of Hungarian children's books into English in the past two decades calls for the reconsideration of what children's literature can be used for the English language classroom. This paper examines two Hungarian children's books, Veronika Marék's *The Ugly Little Girl* and Dóra Igaz's *Pali elkésik / Pali is Late*. By exploring the teaching opportunities these books offer in the context of storytelling in TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners), this paper argues that Hungarian children's books in English can be used just as well as any authentic (i.e., British-American) books in language teaching. Moreover, the Hungarian culture expressed in the language and content of these books can make primary pupils more motivated and prouder of the Hungarian literary contribution to the international scene.

Keywords: Hungarian children's literature, lower primary pupils, EFL, intercultural competence, identity

#### Introduction

It is a commonplace, yet true statement that we construe the world around us through stories. Although literary texts have always been part of education, storytelling as an educational tool in second language teaching only started to be recognised from the 1980s. Together with a growing interest in early language acquisition, this relatively late realisation has since undergone a spectacularly rapid process of professional development. Today there is no need to defend the argument of using authentic (i.e., English by origin) stories and picture books in language teaching, especially in TEYL (Teaching English to Young Learners).

What does need reconsideration, however, is the concept of 'authentic literature' in the language classroom. As a result of the changed status of English as a lingua franca and the effects of globalisation on the book market, a great number of Hungarian children's books have been published in English over the last two decades. It is important to recognise the teaching potential in these books. Therefore, after a brief literature review related to the broader context, storytelling in ELT (English Language Teaching), this paper aims to re-evaluate the term 'authentic' literature and examine the methodological possibilities found in integrating Hungarian picture books into the English teaching syllabus.



# Storytelling as an educational tool: a historical and methodological perspective

The use of stories in ELT is an 'old yet new' methodological device in language teaching. When searching for reasons, we must look to the scientific and educational trends shaping ELT professional discourse in the second half of the twentieth century. The growing popularity of the holistic approaches of alternative pedagogies and Piaget's and Vygotsky's constructivist theory contributed to a more learner-centred language teaching methodology. The communicative approach (Littlewood, 1981), which became popular over the 1970s and early 1980s, and the theory of the natural approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) paved the way for content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and bilingual education (Krashen, 1989), methods that became widely recognised by the end of the 1990s. In addition, another paradigm shift known as the narrative turn<sup>1</sup> occurred in the humanities and social sciences from the 1970s to early 1980s. Beginning in the early 1980s, these theories all pointed towards a renewed interest in storytelling as a device of language teaching. By the mid-nineties, several resource books (notably, Ellis & Brewster, 1992; Wright, 1995; Zaro & Salaberri, 1995) discussed the methodological considerations of storytelling while simultaneously providing a wide range of activity and lesson plan ideas.

Morgan and Rinvolucri (1983) were among the first to advocate the use of the ancient oral tradition of storytelling in the second language classroom by using an outline (i.e., 'story skeleton') that could help learners acquire a second language virtually unconsciously and naturally because stories connect them to their common human experience and thus engage the whole person (p. 1). Similarly, Zaro and Salaberri (1995) highlight the connection between storytelling and Krashen and Terrell's natural approach theory. Working with stories is inherently communicative and thereby forms a great starting point for successful language learning (p. 3). Listening to a good story means acquiring the language naturally rather than learning it formally (p. 4).

Ellis and Brewster (1992) emphasise that stories are motivating because children identify with the characters and the plot, a process that connects the imaginary to their own real world (p. 186). Comprised of rich language, stories build vocabulary and grammar structures naturally and nearly imperceptibly, thereby preparing children for more formal and conscious language learning in the future. They can acquire learning strategies such as tolerating a lack of understanding, guessing meaning and comprehending keywords and elements of the plot based upon context and illustrations. Storytelling can provide a springboard for follow-up activities that involve many other subject areas, from maths through drama to music. This creates cross-curricular links between English and other subjects (p. 187). Stories also improve children's social and language skills through communication and sharing experiences with the storyteller (the teacher) and one another. In short, storytelling not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For a good overview, see Barbara Czarniawska's book, *Narratives in Social Science Research*, SAGE publications, 2004.

only improves their listening and speaking, but also their cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills (pp. 190–191).

The English teacher and professional storyteller, Andrew Wright (1995), offers many practical tips on how to choose a story, perform it, and the advantages and disadvantages of telling versus reading a text (pp. 13–24). He also suggests means for organising teaching material in the form of a story bag (picture cards, puppets, etc. for a certain tale), a story pack (activities for before, while, and after reading) and setting up a reading corner in your classroom (p. 26).

Twenty-first century publications also discuss aspects like visual literacy, intercultural competence, diversity, modes of reading, empowerment, and creativity (Bland, 2013) as well as inclusion, differentiation, and information technology (Ellis & Brewster, 2014). While the first book edited by Janice Bland is recommended for those interested in recent research in the field, the latter one, Tell it Again – The Storytelling Handbook for Primary English Language Teachers by Ellis and Brewster (2014), is a definitive guide for practising teachers who wish to include stories in their classroom work.

Fortunately, some excellent Hungarian research also promotes and furthers the above findings. Judit Kovács (2009) was the first to address the topic of using literature in early language teaching for a Hungarian readership in A gyermek és az idegen nyelv ['The Child and Foreign Language'] (pp. 139–153). This volume was followed by publications including both theoretical and practical approaches to early language acquisition in the Hungarian context (Márkus & Trentinné Benkő, 2014; Márkus et al., 2017). Éva Trentinné Benkő has done much for the dissemination of practical teaching materials. Together with Judit Kovács (both teachers in the primary teacher training programme at ELTE, Budapest), they have authored two important publications in English: a book on the theory and practice of CLIL in Hungary (Trentinné Benkő & Kovács, 2014) and a textbook for pre-service teachers on the theory and methodology of using children's literature in TEYL (Kovács & Trentinné Benkő, 2017).

This overview aimed to demonstrate how educational thinking has evolved regarding the use of children's literature, especially stories, in the last four decades. All the aforementioned volumes discussed the use of authentic, mainly British-American, works. However, a growing number of Hungarian children's books available in English has become present in both domestic and international book markets. Taking into account why and in what forms these works have appeared is the first step to investigating how they can be used in TEYL.

## Hungarian children's books in English

Arguably, the rich resource of British and American stories (including readers, authentic and bilingual books alike) available in Hungary since the early 1990s has been a great aid for English language learners in Hungary.<sup>2</sup> This plethora has recently been complemented by the wide range of Hungarian children's books translated into English under the aegis of two Hungarian publishers, Móra and Pagony. It is worth comparing their selection from an ELT point of view.

A well-established publisher and pioneer in the publication of Hungarian children's books in English, Móra Publishing House offers books in English by classic authors like Éva Janikovszky, Veronika Marék, and Ervin Lázár. These authors all belong to the canon of Hungarian children's literature and have ensured generations of children the pleasure of reading. Perhaps this was the reason why Móra decided to reach out to international audiences as their primary targets³ to promote these classics in English. For the same reasons, however, these books can be motivating for Hungarian children learning English because they firstly represent high quality stories written in an excellent style. Secondly, it is likely that children will know them from home.

Another prominent publisher of children's books, Pagony Publishers, started out as the first bookshop dedicated to children's books in 2001.<sup>4</sup> Today, it represents several contemporary children's authors, such as Judit Berg, Erika Bartos, Adrienn Vadadi, Erzsi Kertész and Dóra Igaz, just to name a few. It has lately launched *I can read!/Most angolul olvasok!*, a bilingual reader series as part of their Hungarian graded reader series, *Most én olvasok!*. The aim of the publishing house has been to bring contemporary children's authors closer to young readers. The bilingual readers come with professional pedagogical support in the form of carefully selected headwords and vocabulary activities. As Judit Kovács, the professional consultant of the series, explained, it was their express objective to prepare the after-reading activities with a holistic approach in order to reflect children's learning needs in early language acquisition. The task-based activities reinforce children's thinking skills while enabling the acquisition of complex vocabulary and grammar structures (Hagyni kell..., 2020).

Móra's classic stories and Pagony's bilingual series represent two main directions in the foreign publication of Hungarian children's books, an aim that makes them worthy of further investigation regarding the methodological potentials of using Hungarian children's books. To give examples, I will refer to two works in particular: Veronika Marék's *The Ugly Little Girl* (transl. Andrew C. Rouse, ill. Veronika Marék, Móra Publishing House, 2013)<sup>6</sup> and Dóra Igaz's *Pali elkésik – Pali is Late* (transl. Anna Bentley, ill. Ildi Horváth, Pagony, 2020).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The merits of Libra and Oxford bookshops in this area cannot be overestimated.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> 'It is very important for us to show foreign language speakers how colourful Hungarian literature is and give Hungarian families living outside of Hungary the opportunity to get to know these wonderful works in Hungarian.' https://mora.hu/content/2020/9/NewsItemFile/hungarian\_literature\_in\_english\_for\_children\_2020.pdf

<sup>4</sup> https://kiado.pagony.hu/foreign-rights

 $<sup>^5</sup>$ https://www.pagony.hu/sorozatok/most-angolul-olvasok-i-can-read $\,-$  I am grateful to Judit Kovács for calling my attention to this series.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> First edition: A csúnya kislány, Móra Könyvkiadó, 1965.

Marék's *The Ugly Little Girl* opens on a Soviet-style housing estate, a typical type of housing prevalent in Hungary since the 1960s, when the original work was published. The characters, a group of children, live in the same tower block of flats. The children are preparing for a fancy-dress party where the Ugly Little Girl, who does not even have a proper name, wants to be a fairy. The other children laugh at her because she is so scruffy and ugly that they cannot imagine her as a beautiful fairy. In her sorrow, the girl runs to the forest where she undergoes a magical metamorphosis with the help of some hedgehogs. When she returns, she eventually takes part in the party as a fairy, to the joy and surprise of her friends. Marék uses the children's community as a frame from which the main character escapes and then returns to. This story can serve as a good starting point for the discussion of topics including low selfesteem, the role of peer-esteem in identity formation, and the transforming power of love, benevolence, trust, and compassion. Exploring topics such as these will conceivably promote greater self-confidence, especially necessary during the period of settling into a new classroom community.

Igaz's Pali is Late is the story of hectic urban life within which children and adults alike suffer from a constant lack of time. The plotline is organised against the backdrop of the children going to school and often being late. The scenes alternate between home and school with the experience of city congestion in between. The antagonist is a strict form teacher who appears in the story as a menacing timekeeper who stands at the school gate every morning and tells off the late-comers. The twist in the story comes when the children notice one day that even the form teacher can be late. When she arrives at last, she kindly admits, 'Oh dear! I'm the one who's late today!' This admission is a relief to all the children. Igaz's good-humoured and empathetic story helps children improve their skills in accepting a different perspective, handling the mishaps of everyday life, and learning about tolerance and generosity.

I believe that it is their *Hungarianness* that distinguishes these publications from other authentic (i.e., British-American) materials. Therefore, in my analysis, I will focus on the cultural implications of their language and content. TEYL experts agree that early language teaching should target the whole person, thereby using language acquisition as an opportunity to shape children's personalities, identities, and their knowledge of the world. The latter is particularly relevant given that language is the most important vehicle of transmitting culture and values.

# An intercultural approach to appreciating our national culture in a global context

To understand how Hungarian books in English can teach children about their own culture, we must examine the educational conditions that provide a framework for this. Primary school is the place where children become better acquainted with the characteristics of their own national culture. The Hungarian Literature and Linguistics curriculum framework of the 2020 Lower Primary Core Curriculum puts a special emphasis on this issue. In particular,

the content area entitled "My place in the world" features learning outcomes that include the development of children's national identity and respect for cultural values (OH, 2020b, pp. 40-41). The recommendations here place emphasis on knowledge about Hungarian culture.

Children's knowledge of other cultures, which can be English culture in our case, is foregrounded in the Living Foreign Language curriculum framework for fourth graders. This emphasises the importance of openness to other nations and foreign worlds that can improve pupils' positive attitudes towards cultural differences as well as their tolerance and intercultural awareness (OH, 2020a, p. 2).

I believe the competencies presented in the Hungarian and the English language curriculum frameworks are two sides of the same coin. John Donne's famous adage from 1624 is perhaps more valid today than ever: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main" (Donne, 1624, p. 108). We cannot fully understand a culture unless we see it in relation to other cultures. The practicing English teacher, Judit Szepesi (2014), points out that children are excited to learn about English culture because they feel they can contribute a lot to it based on their own previous experiences (Donne, 1624, p. 259). We can assume that the same is true for children reading a Hungarian story in English.

A story set in Hungary includes a range of cultural ideas both contentwise and language-wise that appear differently when pupils read or hear the story in English. Encountering their own culture in the language of another culture creates a critical distance that helps them notice and evaluate the characteristics of Hungarian life. At the same time, it may give pupils a reassuring sense of familiarity. In Marék's *The Ugly Little Girl*, the tower block of flats located on a Soviet-type housing estate, the home of the children in the story, conveys this sense of familiarity. In Igaz's *Pali is Late*, the atmosphere of the streets (*the green man at the zebra crossing* or *the tram*) and the school with the strict, although somewhat negatively stereotyped, character of the form teacher (with her grey clothes and untidy grey hair in Ildi Horváth's illustration) accomplishes the same.

If we look at the linguistic differences, comparing the Hungarian and English versions of the text can help children discover the creative meaning transfer in literary translation and understand the idiomaticness of language. Discussing why the characters are called differently in English (*Big-belly Pete* for *Pocak Peti* or *puss-cat*, *Miaow* for *Mióka cica* in Marék's book) can teach pupils about how the two languages work.

It is also worth discussing how a translator works. Andrew C. Rouse (the translator of *The Ugly Little Girl*) has proved several times<sup>7</sup> how sensitively and precisely he grasps Hungarian humour. He follows Marék's language and style as closely as possible. Anna Bentley is an emerging translator who has also proved her talent before.<sup>8</sup> Her rendering of *Pali is Late* diverges a bit more from the original text (e.g., "*Felkelni!*" is more impersonal and therefore stricter

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Rouse translated all Éva Janikovszky's books.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Bentley translated Arnica the Duck Princess by Ervin Lázár.

in style than the playful "Wakey, wakey!") but this kind of a decision is precisely in line with the editorial team's specific intention to produce authentic English texts. Whether on a lexical or structural level, the language differences can help children realise the impossibility of word-for-word translation. By teaching English to children through these Hungarian books, we can furthermore encourage them to be proud of Hungarian literature's contribution to the global literary scene.

At this point, it is noteworthy to say a few words about the changed status of the English language over the last few decades, a circumstance that is closely related to the phenomenon of globalisation. What the British linguist, David Crystal, could only predict in 1997 (as cited in Wandel, 2003, p. 72) has become a reality by now: in our global and digital era, English has become a lingua franca that is greatly detached from British-American culture. Today, more than two thirds of those speaking English speak it as a second language.9 Reinhold Wandel (2003) claimed that this must have consequences in ELT, too. He suggests that the development of intercultural awareness should become a part of ELT (Wandel, 2003, p. 73). Although his suggestion focused on postcolonial cultures, I believe it could be extended to the inclusion of other cultures and their cultural products on their own merits. Any nation's literature that is available in good ('authentic') translation can be used in ELT. The translator's proficiency is the only criterion.

### Methodological opportunities

Hungarian children's books in English translation can be used in the same ways as any other English books. However, as I have argued before, using these books with Hungarian children can also have some additional methodological benefits. One of these is raising awareness of the characteristics of our own culture. Ideally, pupils should have a good command of English to discuss cultural issues but, in lieu of this, cross-curricular collaboration is a good solution. In accordance with the traditions of bilingual education, the class teacher can work together with the English teacher on the same book in the Hungarian Literature and the English Language classes. Alternatively, if the lower primary class teacher can also teach English, he or she can use the methodology of CLIL.

Krashen (1989) suggests that the first language background information to a literary work could enhance the comprehension of English input (p. 50). Before reading the story in English, the teacher can explore children's background knowledge related to the story. This can later support the reading experience. Depending on children's level of English, this can be done in English or Hungarian. Pupils could be introduced to the author, plot, characters, style, and different themes of the story. If the pupils are already familiar with the author and the book in Hungarian, all the better. One of the great advantages

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> English is spoken by approximately 16% of the world, out of which 11% speak it as a foreign language. https://www.statista.com/statistics/266808/the-most-spoken-languages-worldwide/; https://www.statista.com/chart/12868/the-worlds-most-spoken-languages/

of using Hungarian books is that the extant background knowledge can make language learning easier.

Reading or listening to the story in English can happen in different ways. The teacher can use traditional storytelling techniques, or the pupils can do extensive or intensive reading depending on language level and teaching objectives (see more on this in Bland, 2013; Ellis & Brewster, 2014; Price, 2017). A monolingual book has the advantage that pupils can focus on one text at the same time. This is closer to an authentic reading experience in which the student needs to rely on context for better understanding. Monolingual reading also suggests that understanding every single sentence is not the point. If children get a good grasp of the basic storyline, they will enjoy it. What Ellis and Brewster (2014) say about children's reception of authentic (i.e., British-American) children's literature in TEYL is also true for Marék's story: 'Children have the ability to grasp meaning even if they do not understand all the words; clues from intonation, mime, gestures, the context and visual support help them to decode the meaning of what they have heard' (p. 14).

A bilingual edition, on the other hand, has the advantage of understanding more of the text. This can particularly be useful when reading the story alone (the publisher's primary intention with the series was to encourage independent reading in English), or when working on the story together in the classroom. Reading the story simultaneously in English and Hungarian, switching between the two pages of the opening, can save time in looking up new words in a dictionary. Although the translation, as I mentioned earlier, is a literary one and not word for word, this convenience can be of great help.

The repetitive narrative style also aids comprehension. In Marék's story, for example, the emblematic objects of cleanliness appear at the beginning of the story (see *Figure 1*) and return one by one in the forest scene when the hedgehogs help the little girl get washed. The children's ideas for their costumes in the fancy-dress party also appear twice: firstly in the beginning, when they all make a drawing of what they want to be, and secondly when they all come together for the party. So, on a lexical level, children can learn words like *soap*, *wash-basin*, *towel*, *toothpaste*, *glass*, *toothbrush*, *flower*, *pussy-cat*, *ball*, *mushroom*, and *butterfly*. In Igaz's story, 'being late' serves as a repetitive element. Pali's family and friends are often late for work or school. Pupils can learn the phrases *Sorry*, *I'm late* and *on time*.

After having read the story, different types of follow-up activities can deepen children's comprehension by improving their language skills. In the case of Igaz's *Pali is Late*, these activities could be the ones found at the back of the book. These playful matching, reordering, true-or-false and gap-fill exercises revise phrases and sentences from the story. With some adult help, children can easily attain a sense of achievement. The exercises also make use of the illustrations, elements that play an important role in early language acquisition because they complement the narrative information non-verbally and thereby facilitate language comprehension. At the same time, the teacher must be careful not to fall back on the pre-set exercises too often otherwise children will lose interest. Creative activities like dramatisation or arts and crafts can be effective because they combine verbal/linguistic intelligence

with bodily/kinesthetic and spatial/visual intelligences in accordance with the holistic approach of early language acquisition.

#### Conclusion

In this paper, I argued that Hungarian children's books in English translation have a place in TEYL for several reasons. In our globalised world, the English language has got somewhat detached from its original British-American culture, and works as a lingua franca connecting people all over the world. Although more than twice as many non-native people speak English compared to native speakers, Hungarian still has a lot to do in terms of making primary pupils understand the significance of speaking English. Using stories is a very good way to enhance children's motivation since they can relate these tales to their own experiences. This is particularly true when we use stories from our Hungarian literary culture. In the last two decades, several Hungarian children's books (both classic and contemporary titles alike) have appeared on the Hungarian book market in monolingual and bilingual editions. These books can be used just as well in the English language classroom as any other English storybook, with the added values of teaching children about cultural and intercultural issues related to content and language. Children can get a sense of pleasure from the fact that the situations, places, and characters are familiar to them. I also suggested that reading Hungarian books in English could also broaden pupils' horizons regarding and appreciating their own culture in a global context. Among numerous others, Veronika Marék's and Dóra Igaz's books are suitable for the purposes of language learning for the merits of their narrative style and the supportive dialogue between picture and text. I hope that this paper will inspire further research in this field, thereby encouraging more and more primary teachers of English to experiment with Hungarian children's books in their classrooms.

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