

## READING AUTHENTIC STORIES IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE WITH SEVENTH GRADERS

The benefits of using authentic unabridged literary texts in EFL (English as a foreign language) teaching go beyond the improvement of the students' basic skills and their overall linguistic competence. At present, both language-oriented and literature-oriented teaching materials based upon literary texts are available, and are becoming more popular with EFL teachers and their students. The examples of the former are Bassnett and Grundy's *Language through Literature* (1993), published as a resource book for teachers, as well as McRae and Pantaleoni's *Chapter & Verse*, the aim of which is to "encourage students' initiative, autonomy and development by increasing their linguistic and communicative competence through classroom interaction" (1990: v). The examples of the latter are Gower and Pearson's *Reading Literature* (1986) and Collie and Porter Ladousse's *Paths into Poetry* (1991), both aimed at students from an intermediate level upwards. Using literature with younger learners, however, especially in Croatia, has mostly been connected with using authentic picture books such as Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (1970) in class.

The introduction of literary texts in EFL teaching to pre-intermediate students aged 11 to 15 involves problems of two kinds. On one hand, the students still possess limited linguistic competence; on the other hand, it is presumed that their literary interests are usually above the level of the available texts of an appropriate linguistic level.

In the present study the results of the first part of a larger-scale investigation are presented and analysed. An attempt was made to establish whether seventh graders, that is, 13 or 14-year-old students, learning English in regular Croatian schools are capable of reading authentic literary texts on their own, provided the texts are carefully chosen and methodologically prepared. The first section of the investigation tested the individual reading of and response to a shorter text, a modern fable. The research also included a survey on the students' reading habits both in Croatian and English and their competence, readiness, and response to individually reading a novel-length children's book, the results of which will be published separately. The final stage was optional and consisted of lending children various books of their own choice to read at their own pace. The investigation took place in Zagreb in May 2000.

## Method

### Subjects

The sample consisted of 111 seventh-grade students at two urban primary schools; most of them were aged 13 (there were eighteen aged 14, four aged 12 and one aged 15). There were 62 boys and 49 girls. Their overall academic achievement varied from low to excellent, just like their English language marks at school, so that, in this respect, the sample is representative of the Croatian primary school population. Most of the children had been attending English classes from their first grade, as they were part of the Zagreb project introducing the learning of English at an early age in the formal school environment (Vilke & Vrhovac, 1993; Vilke & Vrhovac, 1995). Other children in the sample had started learning English early as well, either at school or in addition to their regular syllabus. There were only 12 students who had started as fourth graders or later.<sup>9</sup>

### Materials

The story chosen for the investigation was A. Lobel's "The Camel Dances" from his book of new *Fables* (1980). A camel wants to become a ballet dancer. She works hard under the hot sun and then, when ready, she announces a recital. The audience openly disapproves of the camel's dancing. The camel continues dancing for herself, and it gives her "many years of pleasure."

The story meets several criteria that make it appropriate for the purposes of the research. It is rather short; it consists of only 177 words, that is, of 22 sentences of an average length of 8.05 words (189 words and 23 sentences including the title and the moral). The syntax is also simple and the text is repetitive in places (both words and structures are repeated). As a result, the text is not difficult from the linguistic point of view. However, the vocabulary and the author's expression are not restricted by the need to facilitate understanding of the text. It is obviously aimed at native speakers. For example, there are almost 20 vocabulary items that may pose difficulty, such as *to have one's heart set on something*, *arabesque*, *blistered*, *fatigue*, etc. Therefore, the readers in our sample needed to apply reading strategies such as making inferences about the vocabulary and relying upon overall understanding of the text. Finally, the text is intriguing in its content and the story is concluded in an unexpected way, which

<sup>9</sup> This fact shows the difficulty the researchers encounter in finding a relevant control group in Zagreb to test the success of the project itself; on one hand, the children who do not start learning English by the fourth grade seem to be mostly those whose academic achievement seems to be on the poor side, on the other hand, it would be almost impossible to find an urban class of students who would be homogenous in this respect.

prompts the reader's reaction: the camel is not crushed by the difficult situation, but has enough self-assertiveness to overcome it.

**The feedback form**, the questionnaire, comprised 12 questions which were divided into three groups. The first six items were aimed at testing the students' understanding of the fable, four questions were aimed at the students' personal responses to the story, and two questions were evaluative: the subjects needed to assess their own understanding of the story and then to grade the story on a scale from 1 (not good at all) to 5 (excellent). The latter questions offered scales to choose from, and the former two groups required verbal answers. Four of the six questions from the first group included *yes/no* answers as well, but both solutions were acceptable. The subjects were asked to explain their choices in writing, and in one case they were even asked to provide two pieces of verbal feedback in addition to their *yes/no* choice. It is the verbal explanation that counted as relevant or irrelevant and was thus the signal of the students' understanding of the story. Individual opinion was required throughout the feedback form.

The language of the form was Croatian. The reasons for employing the subjects' mother tongue were to minimise the students' stress, to make it easier for them to express themselves and to reduce their reluctance to provide verbal answers due to anxiety caused by the possibility of error. Besides, it was not their EFL writing skills, but their understanding of and response to a literary text that were tested.

### Procedure

The subjects were given the fable to read once at their own pace. The individual reading time was measured and noted, and then they were given the feedback sheets to fill in. They were allowed to ask the researchers questions. They were repeatedly reassured that any answer of theirs would be invaluable to the researchers, who were interested in their opinion. The atmosphere was friendly and highly cooperative. After the task had been completed, individual data was collected by means of a questionnaire.

### Results

**Time.** As can be seen from Table 1, a great majority of the subjects (almost 70%; i.e., 37.84% + 31.53%) finished reading the fable in one or two minutes. Only about 8% needed over four minutes, but none five. However, the initial reading was smooth and none of the subjects reported any problems. Interestingly, in comparison, about 8% of the subjects taking part in this research reported in a separate questionnaire that they did not like to read at all, and about 15% of them did not find compulsory reading at school interesting in the least (Narančić Kovač, 2000: 106f).

*Table 1. Time needed to read the story*

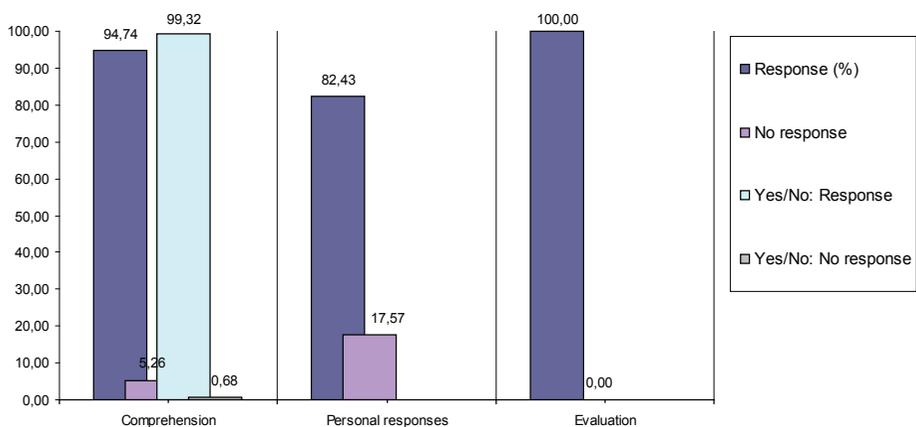
Time: minutes	Students	%
1	42	37.84
2	35	31.53
3	25	22.52
4	9	8.11
5 and >5	0	0.00
<b>Sum</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>100.00</b>

The subjects' readiness to provide expanded verbal responses in writing can be seen from the totals given in **Table 2** and in the chart in **Fig. 1**. The response rate is particularly high for the first six questions, as only three responses were missing among the *yes/no* choices, and as only 35 verbal responses in explanation of the students' opinion were missing, which is only 5.26% of the total possible answers to those questions. The remaining 78 missing responses were among those to the second set of questions aimed at a personal reaction to the story, which is 17.57% of the total possible answers in this category.

*Table 2. Students' responses*

	No. of responses provided	No. of questions without response	Total possible responses
Yes/No questions	441 99.32%	3 0.68%	444
<b>Comprehension (Questions 1-6)</b>	631 94.74%	35 5.26%	666
<b>Personal responses (Questions 7-10)</b>	366 82.43%	78 17.57%	444
<b>Evaluation (Questions 11-12)</b>	222 100.00%	0	222
<b>Total completed responses</b>	<b>1219 91.52%</b>	<b>113 8.48%</b>	<b>1332</b>

It can be seen that the number of unanswered questions is very small indeed, which shows the subjects' enthusiasm for the task. It seems they reacted with interest both to the reading materials and to the methodological approach in which they were not evaluated, but where they had an opportunity to express their own opinions. Even more, they seemed to have been particularly ready to evaluate their own understanding of the story and the story itself. There were no responses missing in that category.

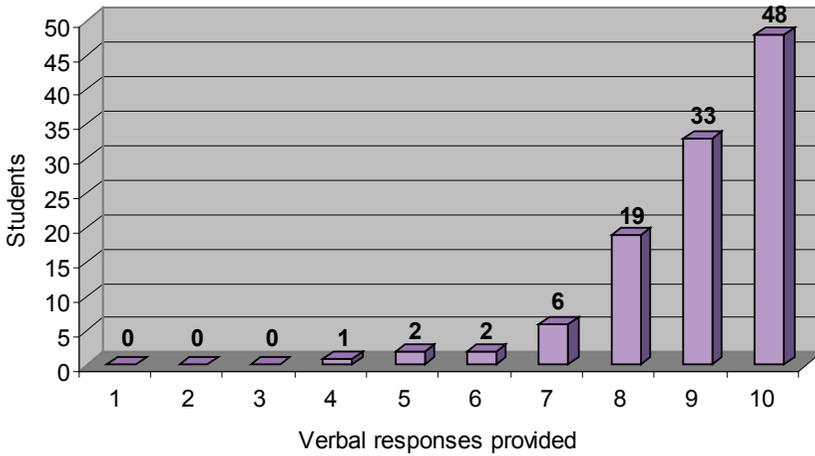


*Fig. 1. Students' responses*

Besides, as can be seen from **Table 3** and **Fig. 2**, as many as 100 subjects, or more than 90%, provided at least 8 verbal responses.

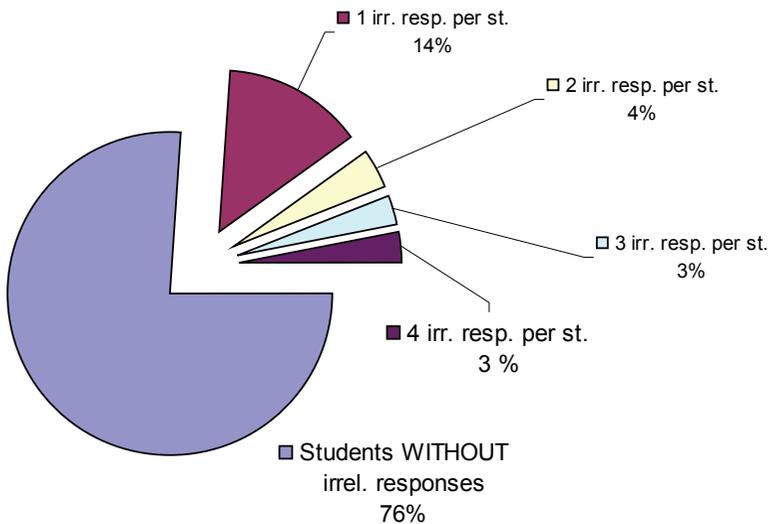
*Table 3. Distribution of responses*

Resp. per stud.	Responses provided	Relevant responses	Irrelevant responses
Value	f (subjects)	f (subjects)	f (subjects)
0	0	0	85
1	0	0	16
2	0	0	4
3	0	0	3
4	1	3	3
5	2	3	0
6	2	8	0
7	6	7	0
8	19	24	0
9	33	24	0
10	48	42	0



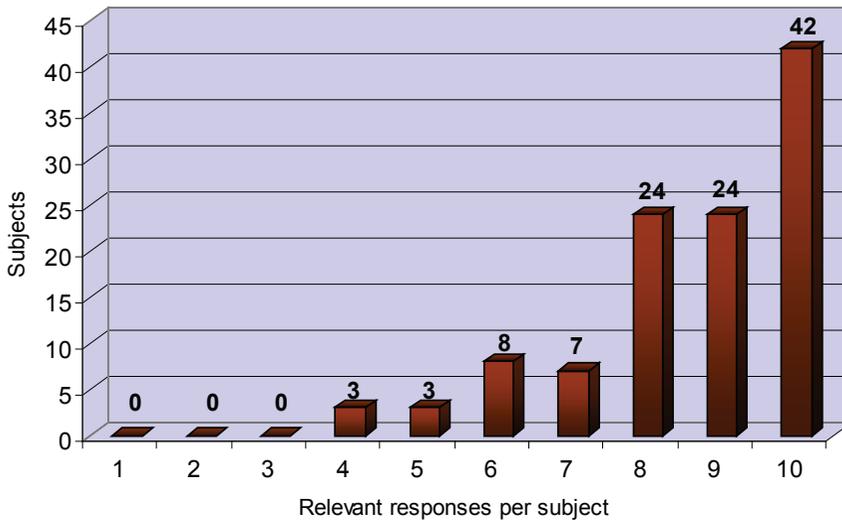
*Fig. 2. Distribution of verbal responses*

In addition to that, they seemed to have been exceptionally successful in providing relevant answers: as can be seen in Fig. 3, as many as 85 subjects (76.58%) provided only relevant responses (no irrelevant responses), which demonstrates their high level of understanding of the story and/or meaningful personal response to it. There were 16 (14.41%) students whose responses included only one irrelevant one, and only 10 students (9.01%) who had between two and four irrelevant responses. None had more.



*Fig. 3. Distribution of irrelevant responses*

The distribution of relevant responses (Fig. 4) also shows the general success in understanding the story, because as many as 90 students in all provided 8 or more relevant answers, and almost half of those the maximum of 10 relevant answers.



*Fig. 4. Distribution of relevant responses*

The distribution of the responses to individual questions covering reading comprehension and personal responses is shown in Table 4. High percentages of relevant answers persist throughout.

Questions	Resp	%		No R.	%		YES	%		NO	%		V. Resp	%		Relev	%		Irrel.	%		No YR.	%		
1	Did the camel ever learn to dance well?	111	100	0	0.00	41	36.94	70	63.06																
	Why do you think so?												110	99.10	105	95.45	5	4.55	1	0.90					
2	Was the camel happy?	111	100	0	0.00	86	77.48**	27	24.32																
	Why do you think so?												110	99.10	106	96.36	4	3.64	1	0.90					
3	The camel's best decision was...												98	88.29	94	95.92	4	4.08	13	11.71	3				
4	Do you agree with the way...? - If not: what should they have said or done?	108	97.30	3	2.70	39	36.11	69	63.89				73**	65.77	71	97.26	2	2.74	1***	1.45					
	Why do you think so?												98	88.29	91	92.86	7	7.69	13	11.71					
5	Did the camel really care about the opinion of others?	111	100	0	0	18	16.22	93	83.78																
	Why do you think so?												107	96.40	104	97.20	3	2.88	4	3.60					
6	Why did the camel announce the recital at all?												108	97.30	107	99.07	1	0.93	3	2.70					
7	What dancing it to camel ... is to me.												95	85.59	92	96.84	3	3.26	16	14.41					
8	This camel is similar to me in that ...												99	89.19	94	94.95	5	5.32	12	10.81					
9	This camel is different from me in that ...												95	85.59	84	88.42	11	13.10	16	14.41					
10	... reminds me of this camel because ...												77	69.37	73	94.81	4	5.48	34	30.63					

Table 4. Distribution of the responses by question

\* Two students decided both yes and no counted.

\*\* Six students provided an explanation to their yes choice.

\*\*\* One response was missing among 69 no choices; i.e. when the subjects were expected to provide an explanation.

The distribution of 'yes' vs. 'no' answers to the four questions that offered a choice is also given. It can be seen that the students' answers were usually divided into two unequal groups, but they, as a rule, managed to convincingly support their individual choices in either case, demonstrating thus their excellent understanding of the text.

It can also be seen that providing personal responses posed a slightly more difficult problem than providing the answers referring to the story itself.

**Verbal responses to comprehension questions.** Examples of the subjects' verbal expansions of their choices demonstrate the versatile interpretative potential their individual readings offer.

Thus, in response to the **first question**, *Did the camel ever learn to dance well*, the most frequent argument for *yes* was along the lines of 'she worked so hard, she must have learned eventually after having practised for so long' kind, and for *no*, 'after all, she is a camel and they really are clumsy'. Both explanations were marked as relevant because they revealed an understanding of the problem the main character faced in the story. Other interesting explanations of the choice in the answer to the first question include "Yes. She knew how to dance, but other camels were jealous"; "When everybody said she could not learn how to dance, she did learn because she wanted to prove to them that she could do it"; "Because she really wanted to learn"; "Because she thought so"; "Because everybody is born with the gift of dancing. One only has to express it and then to keep and cherish it"; or "No. Nobody liked her dancing"; "Nobody taught her how to dance"; "She was ridiculous"; "Because she is an animal"; "She spent so much time practising, and in that hot sun" (The implication of the latter explanation being that she would have learned earlier if she had been any good); "Because she had nobody to support her. She had nobody to motivate her for dancing." It is easy to see that the students' opinions offered interesting and elaborate topics for class discussion in which ideas would bounce off each other and different personal and moral issues would surface for every reader. It is similar with the other responses, as well.

The **second question**, *Was the camel happy*, demanded decisions based upon understanding one of the most important aspects of the story. 'Yes' was most frequently supported by the fact that the camel liked dancing. 'No', on the other hand, was frequently explained by the fact that others rudely told her that she did not know how to dance and that the audience did not like her dancing. Interesting answers included "Both: first, she was unhappy because of the reaction of the audience, then she was happy because she enjoyed dancing for her own pleasure"; "Yes. Because she learned how to dance"; "Because she danced for herself even though she did not know how to dance"; "She enjoyed what she did"; "Because she continued dancing for herself"; "Because she worked so hard"; "Because she was brave"; "Because she knew how to

dance”; “Because she achieved what she wanted completely on her own”; “She was successful in what she wanted and she persisted in it”; “She was happy while she was learning how to dance”; “Because she had confidence in herself. One must have confidence in oneself, she practised, practised... “ or “No. Because she failed”; “Because she never learned how to dance”; “Because they constantly criticised her”; “Because others laughed at her and teased her”; “Because other camels did not accept her as a dancer, so she had to dance alone”.

To decide about the camel’s **best decision** was closest to a kind of information-finding task. Most of the subjects opted for the camel’s decision to continue doing what she liked best in spite of everybody. However, other convincing choices could be found, such as “to learn to dance”, “not to bother with other people’s opinions”. A rare irrelevant answer was “not to dance”.

The students split on the **fourth** question, *Do you agree with the way in which the audience told the camel their opinion*, as well. The minority, 39 students, thought of variants of ‘honesty is the best policy’ and answered *yes*, but the majority, 63 students, thought the critics could have been more polite and kind, or that they should have supported the camel in her endeavours, and answered *no*. Three students failed to answer this question, but those who did respond gave various suggestions as to what the others should have said or done. Examples are: They should have “consoled her”, “encouraged her to practise more”, “told her that the ballet is difficult”, “told her how nice it was that she had tried to dance ballet”, “applauded”, but also that they should have written “a letter, because it is worse when somebody tells you something to your face than through a letter or by phone” and that they should have told her “how she was mistaken and how to correct that, because real friends always help each other”. Further examples of the students’ attitudes supporting ‘I do not agree with their ways’ are that “the audience were rude and impolite, they did not show any respect for the camel’s hard work”; that “ridiculing someone (the camel in this case) may lead to hurting that person’s feelings”; that “the camel might have become angry”; that if they had encouraged her, “the camel would have been happier, not so sad”; that “you never tell things like that to somebody’s face”; that “they should not have disgraced her”; that “when someone is told that he or she is the same as everybody else, that person does not feel good”; that the camel “deserved” kinder words; that “we must not offend people”; that “it made the camel embarrassed and unhappy”; that “they are insensitive”; that “other camels were envious”; that “it is not the camel’s fault that she is all clumsy”. Interesting examples in support of the ‘I agree’ attitude are “If they had told her that she knew how to dance, she would have become conceited”; “They would only have deluded her otherwise”; “It only stimulated her to practise more”; “Everybody has the right to express his/her opinion”; “They only spared her more disgrace”.

Next, 92 students thought the camel did not really **care about the opinion of others**, because she continued dancing in spite of everything, or because she danced for herself. Nevertheless, 18 students thought she did care, at least a bit; otherwise she would not have prepared the recital at all and would not have asked all those people to watch her.

Finally, in response to the **sixth** question, most students agreed that the camel announced the recital because she wanted to demonstrate her newly gained skills to others. Other interesting answers included “Because she wanted to show the others that she was special and different from other ordinary camels”; “Because she wanted to become famous”; “Because she wanted to find out what others thought about it” and “She wanted to entertain others”.

Interestingly, several responses marked as irrelevant were those reduced to “I do not know.” We find them significant, though, because such a response shows the subjects’ wish to write down something at least, and to express themselves.

**Personal response** to the story was stimulated by four unfinished sentences in which the students were invited to compare themselves and other people they know with the camel.

For instance, in item **seven**, they were invited to recognise some of their own activities as something they enjoyed and were ready to pursue just as the camel pursued dancing. At the same time, their favourite activity was recognised as something valuable and worth the trouble because it mattered to them, just as dancing did to our camel. In addition to that, the uniqueness of dancing to the camel was emphasised in their impression, so that some students pointed out what they considered to be of greatest value to them. The answers hence ranged from “sport”, “football”, “basketball”, “roller-skating”, “drawing”, “art”, “chess”, “computer games”, etc., through “Chinese and the glagolitic alphabet”, “learning”, “piano lessons”, “mathematics”, and “ballet”, even “school”, to “my diary”, “my cat”, “my friends”, “Mum and Dad”, “my family”. The students presented an amazing scope of interests, activities and beloved people they valued most in their lives. About 85% of the subjects completed this sentence, almost 97% of whom did so relevantly.

Those who recognised the **similarities** between themselves and the camel noted features such as determined, persistent, stubborn, hard-working, proud, as well as that she, “like me ...does not give up”; “wants to become famous and have (a lot of) money”; “likes to do things she enjoys”; “does not care about what others think”; “wants to show others something and hear their opinion, because I like it when others frankly tell me the truth even when it is not nice”. A very good parallel is given in “I, too, think that what I do on my computer is good, but it is (in fact) very poor”.

**The self-evaluation** reveals the subjects did not find the story difficult to understand; as can be seen in **Table 5**, the average value was 4. The story itself was evaluated

with an average mark of 3.94, reflecting the students’ overall liking of the fable. The main objection to the story by those subjects who gave it a lower mark, which some of them explained to the examiners, was that its contents and genre seemed to be ‘for smaller children’.

Table 5. Evaluation

	Very poor 1	Poor 2	Good 3	Very good 4	Excel- lent 5	3/4	4/5	Average
	f	f	f	f	f	f	f	
Assess your understanding of the story.	2	6	27	35	41	-	-	4
What is your mark for the story?	3	6	19	46	31	1	5	3.94

**Discussion**

The results show that the subjects understood the story very well without using reference books and relying only on their own judgment. When they provided an explanation for their choices, it was generally relevant so that there were very few irrelevant entries. Besides, the response rate was particularly high. As many as 607 out of the 631 given responses were relevant, which makes 91.14% of the total possible answers for the whole sample. In addition to that, as many as one third of our sample (42 students) scored the maximum of 10 relevant verbal responses.

It could be presumed that the story was not difficult enough for the tested population. Still, unabridged original texts are very rarely used for individual reading at school due to the fact that educators and students themselves do not think the students’ linguistic competence would be sufficient. Our results prove them wrong. The text used in this research is unabridged and not adapted. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is possible to find such authentic texts that could be easily mastered by the general population of seventh-graders learning EFL.

On the other hand, it might be suggested that the comprehension questions were too easy. However, although they were easy to answer, it can be argued that they tested the understanding of the story at a deeper level than conventional comprehension questions do. They were designed in an unconventional way, and that might have in-

fluenced the results: the subjects were not under stress due to the possibility of error, they did not feel tested, but were kindly asked for their **opinion**. As what they thought was what mattered, any of their answers would be correct. However, in trying to explain their choices, they had to think more about the implications of the story. As a result, their understanding of the story was revealed clearly to the researchers despite the fact that it was only a secondary product of their endeavour. The students' self-confidence was thus supported and that, in turn, may have expanded their enthusiasm for completing the task.

Besides, the questions drew the students' attention to specific literary problems tackled by the story. They were not self-explanatory, and the answers had to be wrought out. For example, the first question, "Did the camel ever learn to dance well?" could not be answered conclusively using the information from the story. As a result, 36.94% of the subjects said *yes*, and 63.06 said *no*.

In providing the explanation, the readers really needed to get involved and to think about it.

The examples of the children's answers show, therefore, that the questions were not too easy to answer; yet they facilitated understanding of the story by directing the readers towards the relevant problems implied in the fable. As a result, understanding of the story was tested not only at the linguistic level, but also at the literary level. At both levels, the subjects demonstrated an excellent understanding of an authentic story in a foreign language.

However, the personal response questions definitely posed more difficulty to the students than the former set. This could already be seen in the tasks of comparing oneself with the camel (favourite things and activities, similarities, differences), as about 17 to 27 students failed to provide relevant responses to those tasks. It was especially so when they tried to compare somebody else with the camel, as over a third (38) of the subjects had problems with that. The responses required a relatively high level of self-evaluation and sincerity, which is not always easy for anyone, let alone pre-adolescents. On the other hand, some of them might simply not have remembered anyone appropriate, or the answers might have seemed too personal. Some of those students would probably need some help and guidance from the teacher.

Nevertheless, these questions triggered individual responses in the large majority of students, which helped them establish a relationship between the ideas underlying the story and their own, individual experiences. Their answers further confirmed their understanding of the story, but they also demonstrated the subjects' potential to communicate with a literary text in a foreign language at a personal level, and to see it as relevant to their own experiences.

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that short stories can be used as part of regular EFL teaching, and that it is highly probable that students will be able to understand an authentic story written for children in a foreign language provided it is not of particular linguistic or stylistic complexity. Of course, the level of difficulty would need to be considered in individual cases, but there definitely are stories available which could meet the needs and be supported by the linguistic competence of an average seventh grader. Short questions or topics for discussion similar to those used in this research could prompt feedback from students and motivate them to exchange their experiences and opinions in connection with their reading with other students. Thus, they would benefit from their individual reading even more, at multiple levels that include their linguistic and literary competence as well as their intellectual and communicative skills.

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## APPENDIX

### UPITNIK NAKON ČITANJA PRIČE Arnolda Lobela THE CAMEL DANCES

Ime i prezime: .....

Vrijeme: ..... min

Datum: .....

Molimo Te, odgovori na pitanja ili dopuni rečenice.

Trebamo Tvoje mišljenje!

1. Je li deva ikada naučila dobro plesati balet?

da  ne

Zašto tako misliš?

.....  
.....  
.....

2. Je li deva bila sretna?

jest  nije

Zašto tako misliš?

.....  
.....  
.....

3. Najbolja je devina odluka bila.....

.....  
.....

4. Publika je devi iskreno rekla što misli.

Je li se to, po Tvome mišljenju, trebalo reći drugačije ili baš ovako?

baš ovako  drugačije

Kako? .....

Zašto tako misliš?

.....

5. Je li devi bilo važno tuđe mišljenje?

da  ne

Zašto tako misliš?

.....  
.....  
.....

6. Zašto je deva uopće priredila nastup?

.....  
.....  
.....

7. Kao što deva ima ples, ja imam .....

8. Ova mi je deva slična po tome što .....  
jer .....

9. Od ove se deve razlikujem po tome što.....  
.....jer .....

10. .... (Tko?) me podsjeća na devu iz ove priče jer .....

11. Koliko si razumjela/razumio priču?

nimalo  ponešto  prilično  skoro sve  potpuno

12. Na kraju, koju je ocjenu (od 1 do 5) zavrijedila ova priča?



Zahvaljujemo Ti na suradnji!