GRADED READERS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM — THE EXAMPLE OF MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN*

Graded Readers bieten Schülerinnen und Schülern im EFL-Unterricht die Möglichkeit, sich mit literarischen Texten auseinanderzusetzen, die im Original für sie zu anspruchsvoll wären. Doch zu welchem Preis wird diese Lernmöglichkeit erkauft? Die linguistische Analyse, welche im Rahmen der Masterarbeit durchgeführt wurde, vergleicht verschiedene Graded Readers von Mary Shelleys *Frankenstein* mit dem Original und zeigt erhebliche Vereinfachungen auf lexikalischer und syntaktischer Ebene auf. Dies hat Auswirkungen auf die literarische Aussagekraft dieses faszinierenden Prosatextes. Unter anderem werden die Emotionen der Figuren in den Graded Readern weniger deutlich herausgearbeitet. Um diesen Verlust an literarischem Material auszugleichen, wurde ein Unterrichtsprojekt entwickelt, welches den Prinzipien des TBLT folgt.

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Although the usage of literature in the EFL classroom has long been advocated for because of its potential to foster both linguistic and transversal competences (cf. Claridge, 2012; Hill, 1997; Grimm et al., 2015; Richards & Smiths 2002), the in-classroom application of literature has yet to find broader appeal as it still faces many challenges. Two of these challenges concern the thematical appeal of stories and the linguistic difficulty of texts (Grimm et al., 2015). In order to overcome the latter, teachers often look to graded readers. The master's thesis presented here aims to examine two research questions regarding graded readers in the EFL classroom. Firstly, it examines in what ways graded reader versions differ from the original text in terms of their linguistic and literary material. Secondly, on the basis of these findings, it explores how the literary material which is lost during the process of adaptation can be compensated for through adequate tasks. The literary text used for this master's thesis is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* because it offers compelling storylines and characters. In addition, it deals with relatable topics such as relationships and hardships. Therefore, the pupils are likely to be interested in the story as it is thematically appealing to them (cf. Grimm et al., 2015). Secondly, Shelley's *Frankenstein* was selected because it has been turned into a variety of graded readers, which permits teachers to easily adapt the linguistic difficulty of the text to the pupils' language proficiencies. In order to examine how these versions differ from one another, a linguistic and literary analysis have been conducted, which then served as the basis for the development of classroom material.

Three key passages of Shelley's *Frankenstein* were compared to the respective passages in different graded readers. The scenes include the birth of Victor's creature, the creature's request for a companion, and the death of Elizabeth. Each of those scenes also received its respective worksheet in the classroom project. All findings of this thesis will be illustrated through the example of the

first passage. In this scene, Victor brings the creature to life for the first time. His initial excitement over witnessing the fruits of his labour is quickly replaced by horror before he flees and leaves the creature alone.

Linguistic analysis

Based on publishers' principles of grading texts as well as on claims by Dirks (2004) and Hill (2008), three hypotheses were formulated. The first one focuses on the lexical level and claims that the difficulty of words decreases along with the language level of the respective graded reader (cf. Hill, 2008). More difficult versions should therefore use more difficult words on average. As seen in Table 1, this hypothesis could only be partially verified. Although the original clearly uses the most difficult lexis whilst the easiest version provided by Starry Forest books uses the least difficult lexis (as can be seen in the percentage of A1 to C2 words used in the respective texts), Richmond Readers' and Macmillan's versions barely differ. However, across all graded reader versions different kinds of lexical adaptations could be observed. In many cases, difficult words have been either replaced or omitted (with the latter occurring more frequently). For example, in the original, Victor's initial view of the creature is described as follows: "How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form?" (Shelley, 1993). The Richmond Reader version, on the other hand, describes the scene as follows: "I cannot describe my feelings at that moment" (Shelley, 2012). Although the gist stays the same, Victor's efforts and a first description of his creature have been omitted in the simplified version.

Regarding parts of speech, the second hypothesis claims that the relative number of adverbs and adjectives decreases along with a decrease in language level, as publishers tend to omit anything they consider to be less important to the story during the process of simplification (Lucas, 1991). For the same reason, it is expected that the relative number of verbs increases in the simplified versions. As graded readers reduce descriptions in favour of driving the plot forward, the number of verbs relative to the number

	Original reader Part I, Chapter IV, p. 38 - 39	Richmond Readers (B1) Chapter 5, p. 19 - 21	Macmillan Readers (A2) Chapter 2, p. 14 - 15	Starry Forest Books (A1) p. 3 - 6
Number of words	311 (100%)	153 (100%)	221 (100%)	17 (100%)
Difficulty of words	**A1** 193 (62%) **A2** 36 (11,6%) **B1** 20 (6,4%) **B2** 13 (4,1%) **C1** 7 (2,3%) **C2** 7 (2,3%) **Unlisted** 35 (11,3%)	**A1** 113 (73,9%) **A2** 21 (13,9%) **B1** 15 (9,9%) **B2** 2 (1,3%) **Unlisted** 2 (1,3%)	**A1** 156 (70,6%) **A2** 35 (15,8%) **B1** 23 (10,4%) **B2** 4 (1,8%) **C2** 3 (1,4%)	**A1** 7 (41,2%) **A2** 2 (11,7%) **B1** 2 (11,7%) **B2** 1 (5,9%) **Unlisted** 5 (29,4%)
Number of sentences	13	15	34	5
Average number of words per sentence	23,9	10,2	6,5	3,4
Main clauses	18	18	41	4
Subordinate clauses	11	3	1	0
Noun	68 (21,1%)	35 (25,9%)	47 (21,3%)	6 (35,3%)
Article / determiner	50 (15,6%)	20 (13%)	40 (18,0%)	2 (11,8%)
Adjective	31 (9,6%)	14 (9,2%)	22 (10%)	0 (0%)
Verb	52 (16,1%)	30 (19,6%)	49 (22,1%)	4 (23,5%)
Adverb	19 (5,9%)	10 (6,5%)	13 (5,8%)	1 (5,9%)
Preposition	37 (11,5%)	14 (9,2%)	10 (4,5%)	0
Pronoun	27 (8,4%)	17 (11,1%)	19 (8,5%)	1 (5,9%)
Conjunction	22 (6,8%)	9 (5,8%)	16 (7,2%)	0
Other (Interjections, numerals, infinitive markers)	5 (1.6%)	4 (2,6%)	5 (2,3%)	4 (23,5%)

Table 1

Linguistic analysis. Adapted from "Graded readers in the EFL classroom. A literary and linguistic analysis of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus *and its graded reader versions and a practical implication into the EFL classroom." (Justus, 2023)*

of words should automatically increase. The second hypothesis could not be verified. The total relative number of adverbs and adjectives does not vary significantly between the different versions. If we examine the numbers, adverbs account for 5,9% of all words in the original, for 6,5% in the Richmond Readers edition, and for 5,8% in the Macmillan version. The relative number for adverbs is therefore similar throughout all versions.

The third hypothesis, which claims that the relative number of verbs in each passage increases with a decrease in CEFR language level, could also only be partly verified. While it is the case in Table 1 with verbs accounting for 16,1% of all words in the original, 19,6% in Richmond Readers, 22,1% in Macmillan, and 23,5% in Starry Forest books, another passage has shown that the original may even use the most verbs relative to the total number of words.

Lastly, with a focus on sentence structure, three claims made by Hill (2008) and Dirks (2004) were examined, namely that 1) the relative number of main and subordinate clauses increases to the relative number of sentences with increasing language level, 2) that the sentence length decreases with language level, and 3) that easier versions use more dialogue to tell the plot. All three claims have been proven to be true. The original scores highest in relative number of main and subordinate clauses to relative number of

sentences and highest in sentence length. Both factors also increase or decrease along with the CEFR language level. Furthermore, the easier versions also use more dialogue to tell the plot. However, the difference between the original, Richmond Readers, and Macmillan are not substantial. Starry Forest Books' version is the only one that mainly uses dialogue to tell the plot.

Literary analysis

The lexical and syntactical differences also influence the representation of the literary material. Overall, great changes could be discovered on the literary level. While there are substantial overlaps with regard to direct characterisation, changes can be observed on the level of indirect characterisation, as most characters talk, behave, and look differently than in the original. For example, in the first passage, Victor is mainly characterised indirectly through his speech throughout all versions. However, whereas his speech pattern and vocabulary indicate that he is eloquent, observant, smart, lonely, as well as fanatic, anxious, disgusted and disappointed in the original, he is reduced to being smart, observant, anxious and disappointed in Richmond Readers. In the Macmillan version, his personality undergoes further changes. While he remains smart and observant, his emotions switch from anxious, disgusted and disappointed to excited and shocked. In Starry Forest Books he even loses all linguistic characterisation. Moreover, it is important to note that emotions are far less prevalent in the graded reader versions than in the original. This is due to the linguistic adaptation. As the texts are significantly abbreviated, fewer words are available to explore many of Victor's difficult emotions. Also, by using simpler synonyms, nuances of Victor's emotions are lost. Given that Shelley's original is strongly driven by the characters' emotions, the reduction and alteration of emotions is a huge literary loss.

Classroom Project Outline

Based on the previous analyses, a classroom project was designed. Firstly, it wants to recover the literary meaning which has been lost during the linguistic simplification by implementing tasks

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which heavily focus on the characters' emotions. Secondly, it aims to foster both subject-specific and transversal competences of curriculum 21, namely *Writing, Speaking, Reading,* and *Empathy.*

The classroom project has been outlined for secondary school students in the 13 – 15 age bracket with varying English language skills. The heterogeneous composition of the class enables showcasing the potential of graded readers in heterogeneous settings. To foster both the subject-specific and transversal skills, the entire classroom project follows the guidelines of Task-based language teaching (TBLT). The specific activities vary depending on learning goal and targeted competency. The strong focus of TBLT on meaning- and comprehension-focused in- and output served as the main reason for choosing this method (Grimm et al., 2015). It strongly correlates with findings that attribute a great learning potential to graded readers when they are used in connection with meaning-based approaches (Nation & Deweerdt, 2001). With regard to fostering pupils' ability to empathise with literary characters, TBLT is also a suitable choice, as this teaching approach fosters holistic learning (Vogt, 2017).

The classroom project itself was designed around Macmillan's and Richmond Readers' graded reader versions of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In order to develop the pupils' language skills, a combination

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of pre-, while- and post-activities encourage the learners to emotionally and cognitively engage with the material and the characters. With regard to empathy learning, Jamieson (2015) points out that pupils need to be presented with learning activities that focus on the characters' thoughts and emotions for the learners to develop empathy skills. This is achieved through a variety of tasks that ask the pupils different questions about the characters (see Figure 1, for example).

In order to ensure pupils' emotional and cognitive engagement with the characters, their literal understanding of the text needs to be secured first. Therefore, all empathy-focused tasks are preceded by a variety of other tasks that focus on the text as a whole. There, pupils work on their vocabulary, make assumptions, check the validity of different statements, summarise the passages, among other
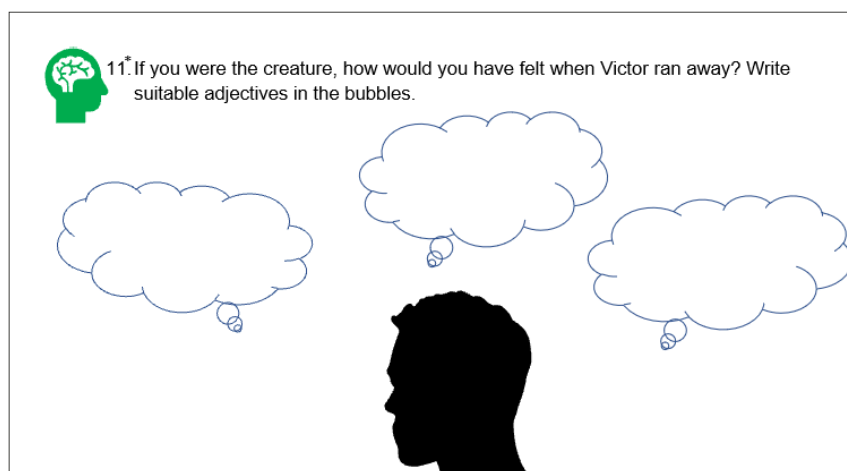
Figure 1

Example task. From *"Graded readers in the EFL classroom. A literary and linguistic analysis of Mary Shelley's* Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus *and its graded reader versions and a practical implication into the EFL classroom."* (Justus, 2023)

things. Only after the pupils have developed an understanding of the passage are they encouraged to talk, think, and write about the emotions and thoughts of the characters. Most tasks were also designed to be completed or discussed cooperatively in order to allow pupils to further work on their own empathy skills. By discussing their interpretations with others, they need to verbalise their thoughts whilst also listening and acknowledging other people's interpretations of the same passage.

Discussion

As seen in the results above, the linguistic simplifications have consequences on both the linguistic and literary material. Although some scholars argue against the use of graded readers in the EFL classroom for these reasons (cf. Yano et al, 1994, Nation & Ming-Tzu, 1999), this master's thesis heavily encourages the use of graded readers in meaning- and comprehension-focused settings. Moreover, graded readers are an optimal learning resource for those approaches. The linguistic changes enable pupils to engage with texts and themes they would not encounter otherwise, as the linguistic requirements are too demanding. Additionally, even though the literary material deviates from the original, teachers can recover the most important themes and meanings through a variety of tasks. If complemented with tasks such as the ones outlined above, graded readers can be a compelling and effective learning resource to develop both language and transversal competences.

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