



## Using Homer's Odyssey as a Culturally Familiar Literary Text in Foreign Language Teaching

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**Abstract**

There has been increasing interest among TESOL teachers in the use of literary text as a resource in language learning because it enhances students' language skills and educational potential. This case study explores students' engagement with Homer's Odyssey as a culturally familiar literary text in their learning of English as a foreign language, in a Cypriot secondary school context. As a teacher-researcher, I designed and delivered an intervention of nine sessions to three classes of twenty Year 2 students. Reader-response theory was used to explore students' reactions to the literary text. This study provides a new context, a secondary school setting; most of the previous empirical studies have been undertaken in university settings and have focused on reading comprehension. The present study focuses on students' voices, through exploring their perceptions and their responses to the literary text. The findings revealed students' positive engagement, through their active involvement in the sessions and their enjoyment of the classes. Students' emotional engagement with the text made them enrich their vocabulary and engage in writing and speaking tasks. Cultural familiarity provides appropriate scaffolding for teachers to use literary text in EFL teaching; culturally familiar literary text can enhance language teaching when used as an additional material to EFL curriculum. This teaching approach can therefore serve as a guideline for language teachers and curriculum enhancement purposes.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, there has been increasing interest in the idea of using literary text in the language classroom as a teaching approach (Collie and Slater, 1987; Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2008; Chalikendy, 2015; Abdusalomov and Abdunazarovich Abdusalomov, 2022; Makhdievna, 2022). However, there are not enough empirical studies to support the claims made in reviews. The present research provides a novel approach to using culturally familiar literature for teaching English as a foreign language in the case-study school and in the Cypriot context, where students' native language is Greek.

My personal experience as a student of having had English lessons at a Cypriot secondary school prompted my interest in this research. I felt that my English language lessons did not give me opportunities to develop my English language skills to a great extent and challenge

myself. I found that we were doing the same types of activities, as we only used the language textbook at school and we focused on vocabulary and grammatical activities. The curriculum has not dramatically changed since I finished public secondary school in Cyprus. Even though the language textbook has changed, it still does not offer many opportunities for high motivation and participation. The types of activities and materials used are very important in enhancing the students' motivation to participate when learning a foreign language, so reflecting on them is significant. I perceived that a culturally familiar literary text can be used as additional material to the language textbook.

Year 2 students, in the Cypriot gymnasium, lower secondary school, have English lessons three school periods per week and they have the equivalent CEFR A2+ level. These classes use the language textbook: *Eyes Open 2* (Goldstein et al., 2015). My analysis of this textbook is that it focuses on vocabulary, reading, grammar and listening. The most common types of exercises are gap-filling exercises and asking the students to choose the correct answers. There is one speaking task in each unit, such as asking the students about their role models and talking about mobile phones. There is also one writing task at the end of each unit; as part of Unit 2, the students are asked to describe their hero/a person they admire. Other writing tasks in the language textbook include writing an email and writing a story. However, the language textbook does not give students enough opportunities to practise their speaking and writing skills and enhance their ability to express themselves in the English language.

The present research is linked to some of the learning outcomes of the curriculum in Cyprus. For example, with regard to speaking, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC, 2018) in the Scheme of Work states that learners will be able to ask how people feel in different situations and explain why they like or dislike something. As noted in the Scheme of Work, teachers can use additional material to satisfy students' needs and interests (MoEC, 2018). Homer's *Odyssey* in English translations was integrated as additional material for this research.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Cultural familiarity in foreign language learning**

Homer's *Odyssey* has been selected as the literary text in this research because of its lexical range, plot and characters (Griffin, 2004). Cultural familiarity is another reason why this text has been selected. This section explores the use of culturally familiar literature in foreign language learning, in different contexts.

### **2.2. Facilitating students' understanding of the text**

The idea that the use of culturally familiar literature facilitates the use of literature in foreign language learning, has been supported by relevant scholarship. As Brumfit (1985, p. 117) argues, ‘Shared history, religion or literary tradition clearly contribute to the ease with which the function of cultural symbols operate across linguistic boundaries’. Lee (2007) undertook research in Korea to explore the effects of textual enhancement and topic familiarity in foreign language learning. Lee concluded that reading culturally familiar topics helped the 17-year-old students to have a better understanding of the reading, but this did not have a positive impact on the learning of the target form, the passive form. However, textual enhancement, and the use of visual methods like ‘underlining, boldfacing, colour-coding, italicizing, capitalizing or using different fonts’ (Lee, 2007, p.90) aided the learning of passive form, while it did not facilitate reading comprehension.

It has been consistently argued that cultural familiarity promotes EFL students’ understanding of a literary text (Floyd and Carrell, 1987; Johnson, 1981; Gürkan, 2012). An experimental study with ESL university students in Illinois USA (Floyd and Carrell, 1987) shows that cultural familiarity contributes to reading comprehension to a greater extent than ‘syntactic complexity’ (p. 103). Similarly, Johnson (1981) undertook an empirical study, with Iranian university students. Half of the participants engaged with an Iranian story in English and an American story and the remainder of them read the same stories in simplified English. The findings revealed that ‘lack of knowledge both of the language and the culturally determined background seemed to affect recall of propositions from the American story by the Iranian students’ (Johnson, 1981, p. 173). On the other hand, the cultural background of the story affected the ESL students’ reading comprehension more than syntactic complexity. The conclusion of this research is therefore that the use of Iranian stories allowed Iranian students to predict the meaning of the story and facilitate linguistic analysis, because of their familiarity with the content of the story. The use of such learning strategies and students’ investment in learning are related to cognitive engagement (Harris, 2011). When students use cognitive strategies that promote understanding, they are cognitively engaged in the learning environment. Among vocabulary strategies in second language learning is linking new lexis to existing knowledge (Cook, 2016). Culturally familiar literature can therefore contribute to facilitating vocabulary acquisition. This links to students’ cognitive engagement, as the students can build new knowledge into prior familiarity.

Gürkan’s (2012) empirical research revealed that Turkish EFL university student-participants, who engaged with a nativised version of a story outperformed participants reading the original short story. The original story narrated a day of a couple trying to spend a Sunday off in the

city of New York, while the nativised story was adapted to Kocaeli context and the names of the characters, and places, as well as the 'conceptual cues' were also changed (Gürkan, 2012, p. 1199). Therefore, Gürkan argues that using either culturally familiar or nativist texts can activate readers' schemata. Students can therefore use their previous knowledge when engaging with a text characterised by cultural elements. The present research also explores whether the use of the *Odyssey*, as a culturally familiar literary text, can facilitate the use of literature in foreign language teaching and learning. However, the novelty of the present research is that it not only explores students' reading comprehension, but also written, and spoken skills and whether the use of the *Odyssey* can expose them to other educational benefits, such as the opportunity to engage in analysis, synthesis, creativity, evaluation, and emotionally invest in the literary text.

The effects of content schema on students' literal and inferential comprehension were examined by Kukus (2021) in an empirical study conducted at a university in Indonesia. The participants were students at the School of English Education and the method used to collect data was testing. As part of Kukus' research, the content schema was the students' religious background. This quantitative study found that students' familiarity with religious-related texts significantly affected their literal and inferential comprehension. Prior knowledge can therefore contribute positively to learners' comprehension when reading a text in a foreign language. A limitation of this research was that the data collection was conducted in only one meeting. It would benefit from qualitative data to assist the quantitative analysis, to reveal students' performance in more detail.

### **2.3. Previous knowledge builds students' positive engagement**

It has been suggested that asking students to retell short stories drawn from their cultural background can motivate them (Lazar, 1993). This might be because of students' familiarity with the stories, which can increase their confidence to participate in the language lesson. Students' levels of enjoyment, confidence, boredom or anxiety constitute affective/emotional components of engagement (Lawson and Lawson, 2013; Harris, 2011). In the context of retelling culturally familiar stories, students' positive or negative feelings in the classroom therefore constitute their affective/emotional components of engagement and their levels of participation, their involvement in school constitutes their behavioural components of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Harris, 2011). Cultural familiarity can contribute to students' engagement in the foreign language classroom. An empirical study in Rwanda (Samuelson et al., 2018) investigates the use of familiar stories drawn from the children's cultural heritage in teaching English as a foreign language. The children, who were primary

school students, were able to retell familiar stories in English translations, undertake reader's theatre and therefore practise their English language skills. The researchers observed these classes and the findings revealed students' engagement when using these stories.

Viswanath and Mohanty's study (2019) in an Indian context supports the point that folktales facilitate the development of English language skills, creativity and thinking skills. Before implementing a familiar text in the students' lessons, interviews were undertaken with the students. All the students expressed their preference for using familiar stories rather than the stories used in their language textbooks. When using a folktale, the English teacher reported on students' involvement in these lessons. The teacher also noticed improvements in compliance with the homework, which shows their eagerness to engage in activities, using a familiar text. The research focuses on 6-7 year-old students' participation when using folktales in teaching English to underprivileged rural children, as part of a government-sponsored scheme. My research aims to add to these studies, by examining in what ways students engage or do not engage with a culturally familiar literary text, in their learning of English as a foreign language, in a Cypriot context. It is not only the context that is novel but also the research design that makes this research novel.

Most of the empirical studies on the use of culturally familiar literature in foreign language teaching have been conducted in university settings (Floyd and Carrell, 1987; Johnson, 1981; Gürkan, 2012; Kukul, 2021). There have also been recent empirical studies with primary school students (Samuelson et al., 2018; Viswanath and Mohanty, 2019), while this topic is specifically under investigation in secondary school settings. There has also been a focus on the effects of cultural familiarity on reading comprehension, while this study is not only targeted at reading, but also at other aspects of teaching English as a foreign language, and students' engagement and/or disengagement. Research question one explores students' engagement and/or disengagement when using Homer's *Odyssey* in these students' English language lessons. Therefore, the present research fills a gap in relation to both the context and the approach.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Reader-response theory offers a set of tools to understand learners' engagement with literary text. There is a range of approaches to this theory, but in its general sense, it values the reader in the process of reading and suggests that the text guides the reader's active creation of meaning (Rosenblatt, 1970; 1978; 1982; 1986; Iser, 1972; Holland, 1975). Rosenblatt (1982) argues that reading is a transactional process between a reader and a text.

She introduces two kinds of reading: 'efferent reading', only aiming to receive information, and 'aesthetic reading', described as 'a unique creation' of reading (Rosenblatt, 1982) made by the reader's thought, in the sense that every reader involves his/her own experience in reading. Encouraging students to experience an aesthetic transaction in an educational setting is regarded as something beneficial by Rosenblatt (1986), which is linked to my enquiry that literary text might engage students' higher-order thinking. As part of this research, the concept of reader response was used in a learning environment to explore the nature of interaction which took place between the students and the literary text. It applies Rosenblatt's model of reader-response theory as a framework to examine the significance, if any, of using literature in language teaching, how students develop their interpretation of the meaning of a literary text, and what impact this may have on foreign language learning.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

##### **4.1. Qualitative approach**

Qualitative researchers aim to understand people's perceptions of the world and their experiences of situations (Willig, 2008). A qualitative approach was best for this study because it enables a deep understanding of students' responses to the literary text in the specific research context. Students' and teachers' perceptions of the intervention are better to gain from qualitative research than quantitative, as these cannot be easily put into numbers. Their perceptions can therefore be elicited in greater depth and detail with a greater degree of nuance.

This is a case-study research, which is influenced by intervention research. This study explores if the text used in the intervention, which is a change in classroom practice, can promote students' engagement and language learning. This study specifically involves three classes of twenty 13-year-old, Year 2 students in a Cypriot lower secondary public school. It evaluates the effectiveness of using Homer's *Odyssey* in teaching English as a foreign language in formal secondary education. Some of the elements of the case study are a rich and holistic description of contexts, an in-depth study of one setting, and a concern for the particular and multiple methods of data collection (Cohen et al., 2018). Understanding the case itself and its uniqueness is therefore significant (Stake, 1995; Willig, 2008).

I have selected to use English translations of Homer's *Odyssey*, as Cypriot students are familiar with the adventures of Odysseus; they would have been learning about them since they were in primary school, as part of their History lessons. Moreover, in Year 1 of secondary school, Cypriot students start learning Ancient Greek, a highly difficult language, through the use of Homer's *Odyssey*, which facilitates their learning because of content familiarity. It is this

approach that I aimed to use in my specific research, to diminish the perceived difficulty of using literary texts in teaching English to Cypriot students. Different translations (e.g. Milbourne, 2016; Politou-Ververi, 2018) of the literary text were used. These editions of the *Odyssey* were abridged so that they were suitable to the age and level of the Cypriot students. They also included images, which might have positively affected the students’ understanding of the text. Table 1 demonstrates the lesson plans used in the intervention.

Table 1: Lesson plans of the sessions of the intervention

Lesson	Theme of the <i>Odyssey</i>	Lesson objective(s)	Plan
Lesson 1	Introduction	Students’ knowledge of the text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Brainstorming</li> <li>Story map in groups.</li> <li>Summary of an episode of the <i>Odyssey</i> in Greek, in groups.</li> <li>First set of focus groups</li> </ul>
Lesson 2	The Cyclops	Reading comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Showing a presentation with pictures.</li> <li>Asking students to put cut sections of the text in order, in groups.</li> <li>Written assessment: Asking the students to answer a few questions.</li> </ul>
Lesson 3	Circe	Grammar: Past Simple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have students read a part of the text and highlight the past tense verbs. Students throw a ball to one another and as they catch it, they write a verb on the board.</li> <li>Get them to discuss what happened in that chapter, using the past tense of the verbs.</li> <li>Grammatical assessment: Give students a piece of text on ‘Circe’ with grammatical mistakes in Past Simple, and ask them to correct it.</li> </ul>
Lesson 4	Sirens and Scylla and Charybdis	Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reading these episodes and having a whole-class discussion. Students throw a ball at one another and as they catch it, they answer a question.</li> <li>Activity: discuss in groups a few questions concerning these episodes. One member of each group takes notes and then tells their answers in front of the classroom.</li> </ul>

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Lesson 5	Main characters and previous episodes	Sentence structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sentence building (Lego bricks) Subject (yellow brick)-Verb (red brick)-noun (blue brick).</li> <li>• Introducing the adjective (green brick), a literary device used a lot, by Homer.</li> <li>• Activity: Writing adjectives for Odysseus and Penelope and putting some sentences about the Odyssey at the appropriate Lego structure.</li> <li>• Extra Activity: Write sentences to summarise any of the chapters we did in the previous lessons, using Past Simple.</li> </ul>
Lesson 6	The Final Battle	Figurative language and comprehension and interpretation of an audio-visual input of the text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introducing metaphors and similes</li> <li>• Activity: Give them a list of examples of some metaphors and similes from the text, and ask them to identify them.</li> <li>• Show part of the film The Odyssey 1997 and ask the students to answer the questions e.g. How do Odysseus and Penelope feel when Penelope sets the test of the bow? What is the reaction of the suitors? Do you sympathise with Odysseus?</li> </ul>
Lesson 7	The recognition scene: Odysseus and Penelope	Reading comprehension and writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading the text.</li> <li>• Discussing as a whole class and asking questions related to metaphors and similes in the text.</li> <li>• Written assessment: Asking them to write in speech bubbles what Odysseus or Penelope are thinking and feeling at this particular point in the story (in pairs).</li> </ul>
Lesson 8	Summative assessment	Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explaining the summative assessment.</li> <li>• Providing the students with a scaffolding activity to complete as a starter.</li> <li>• Students undertake their summative assessment in pairs or individually.</li> </ul>
Lesson 9	Feelings of Odysseus and Penelope	Speaking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group activity: How does Odysseus feel when he struggles to go to Ithaca? How does Penelope feel when she is waiting for Odysseus to return to Ithaca? Each group will discuss their ideas in English. One member of each group takes notes.</li> <li>• Second set of focus groups</li> </ul>

#### 4.2. Sample

Significant arrangements that increase rigour are how the sample is related to the sample universe, the selection of an applicable sampling strategy and a robust approach for identifying the sample (Robinson, 2014). Purposive sampling (Coolican, 2009) was used in this case-study research, as the school is a suburban public lower secondary school in Cyprus, which is representative of its type in terms of the number and level of students and the curriculum. The sample was also a sample of convenience, being 'easily available' (Coolican, 2009, p. 55), because the head teacher consented to undertake the research in this school. After having had



an introduction to the first gatekeeper, the head teacher, through a mutual connection, I met him to discuss details of the intervention and evaluate if the school was fit for purpose.

The student participants of the research were sixty thirteen-year-old students, who study English as a foreign language as part of their formal school curriculum. All the participants are Cypriots and their native language is Greek. The Year 2 students have English lessons for three periods per week. The intervention was integrated in one out of these periods per week; each period lasted forty minutes. The students in Cyprus start having English lessons twice per week when they start primary school and they are six years old. In Year 1 and Year 2 of the secondary school, they have English lessons three times per week. Other participants were the English language teacher, who observed all the sessions and the teacher of Ancient Greek, who observed the students doing their summative assessment and taught them the literary text in Ancient Greek the previous year.

### **4.3. Crystallisation and Research Questions**

Case-study research accepts that many variables operate in a case and more than one method for data collection and different sources of evidence are needed, so that the implications of these variables are caught (Cohen et al., 2018). As Ellingson (2009, p. 11) states: ‘Multiple ways of knowing are analogous to viewing an object through a crystal’. The term crystallisation was originally used by Richardson (2000), who argues that ‘crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic’ (p. 934). Richardson (2000) addresses the use of creative methods such as visual presentations and fiction stories. This research links to the notion of creativity, with regard to the research design and the students being actively involved in the data collection. The assessments used can be seen as both creative and formative. The concept of crystallisation (Richardson, 2000; Ellingson, 2009; Ellingson, 2014) therefore characterises this qualitative study, because of the use of different methods to generate data, which enhances the validity of this research. Different forms of representation are employed in this research, through students’ and teachers’ perspectives, as well as different types of students’ assessments.

The Research Questions are:

1. In what ways do Cypriot secondary school students demonstrate engagement and/or disengagement in their learning when using Homer’s *Odyssey* as a culturally familiar literary text in learning English as a foreign language?
2. Which aspects of learning are demonstrated when using the *Odyssey* as a culturally

familiar literary text with these students in their learning of English as a foreign language?

3. Is reader-response theory helpful in understanding students' engagement with literary text in foreign language learning?

Table 2 shows the data sets used to address the research questions. Students' focus groups and the English teacher's observation schedules generated data on students' engagement. Students' in-class formative assessments and summative assessments generated data on their learning and reader responses. All the research questions were addressed by data from students' structured conversations and semi-structured interviews with the teachers. This approach generated rich data and therefore enhanced the validity of the findings. For the purposes of this article, the research question one is addressed.

Table 2: Data sets

<b>RQs</b>	<b>Data sets</b>
<b>RQ1 (engagement)</b>	<b>Students' focus groups</b>
	<b>Students' structured conversations</b>
	<b>Interviews with the English language teacher</b>
	<b>Interview with the teacher of Ancient Greek</b>
	<b>English language teacher's observation schedules</b>
<b>RQ2 (learning)</b>	<b>Students' formative assessments</b>
	<b>Students' summative assessment</b>
	<b>Students' structured conversations</b>
	<b>Interviews with the English language teacher</b>
	<b>Interview with the teacher of Ancient Greek</b>
<b>RQ3 (RRT)</b>	<b>Students' formative assessments</b>
	<b>Students' summative assessment</b>
	<b>Students' structured conversations</b>
	<b>Interviews with the English language teacher</b>
	<b>Interview with the teacher of Ancient Greek</b>

## **5. FINDINGS**

This section presents data on students' engagement with their English language learning during the intervention of using the Odyssey. It responds to research question one. First, it presents the findings from students' focus groups, students' structured conversations, interviews with the English language teacher and observation schedules undertaken by the English teacher. Then, it discusses the findings concerning the concept of cultural

familiarity and shows how they relate to literature on cognitive engagement and intrinsic motivation. The findings suggest that students' familiarity with the narrative of the *Odyssey* gave them competence and facilitated their understanding and engagement with the text.

### 5.1. Focus groups

An inductive approach was used to analyse the data addressing the first research question. I analysed the focus groups' data using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2019; 2020) model of thematic analysis. The themes were reviewed and named and are presented here, including illustrative and informative extracts. Analysis of students' responses has revealed their reactions to the integration of Greek mythology in their English lessons. Table 3 illustrates the main themes that arose from the focus groups.

Table 3: Focus groups' themes

<b>Focus group 1</b>	
Q1: 'When did you first come into contact with Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> '?	school curriculum  other media (cartoons, videos, films, fairy tales)
Q2: 'How do you feel about using <i>Odyssey</i> in your English lessons'?	eagerness curiosity concern
<b>Focus group 2</b>	
Q1: 'How do you feel about the use of Greek mythology in English translations in your English lessons'?	enjoyment new vocabulary boring difficult
Q2: 'If I used an unknown English literary text to do the same lessons with you, it would be as easy?'	very difficult very difficult and boring as easy

### 5.2. Focus Groups Session 1

The Focus Group 1 questions aimed to explore whether students were culturally familiar with the literary text used for this research, and the students' initial responses and feelings about the

use of the text in their English lessons. All groups reported that they came into contact with Homer's *Odyssey*, as a topic in their Ancient Greek classes, in Year 1 of secondary school. Eight responses out of eighteen also indicated that students came into contact with Homer's *Odyssey* through different media, such as cartoons, videos, films, and fairy tales. Consequently, responses indicated that all the students were familiar with this literary text. The student reporting for group 2 commented:

*One girl in our group read it as a fairy tale when she was younger and she remembers it. Another girl in our group, through fairy tales in primary school. The other two members of our team, through the subject of Ancient Greek, in secondary school.*

The focus group data, therefore, confirmed my expectation that the students would be culturally familiar with Homer's *Odyssey*. This was significant because the use of this literary text would facilitate their understanding and involvement in their English lessons.

In response to question two: 'How do you feel about using *Odyssey* in your English lessons?', the most common themes were the students' eagerness, curiosity and enthusiasm about using Homer's *Odyssey* in their lessons. There were twelve out of eighteen responses with any of these themes shared by the groups. The fact that the students were looking forward to using Greek mythology in their English lessons was the most common theme shared by the groups, as seven groups expressed their eagerness or excitement. As group 7 perceived: '*We feel enthusiasm, eagerness, joy*', which shows that they were looking forward to using this text. Six groups also shared their curiosity in the sense of eagerness, about the integration of Greek mythology in their English lessons: '*We feel curiosity because we will use literature in our English lessons for the first time*' (Group 4).

There were also three out of eighteen responses that indicated students' concern about these lessons. An example of them was the following, from group 13: '*We feel anxious and curious. We are a little worried about the fact that we will be taught *Odyssey* in the English language.* Students from Group 11 were apprehensive but also looking forward to expressing their knowledge of the text in English: '*We feel that it will be difficult but also fun, as we will work with our classmates to find answers and we will be able to express our knowledge in English*'. Most of the students therefore approached the intervention with positive attitudes, which helped implement it.

### **5.3.Focus Groups Session 9**

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At the end of the sequence of nine lessons, most groups shared a common belief that the lessons were enjoyable, as fourteen out of twenty responses indicated the students' enjoyment. As group 38 reported:

*We liked very much the use of Greek mythology in English translations because we enriched our vocabulary. If we had this opportunity again, I would like to use a different book of Greek mythology and work the same way.*

This data shows the students' desire to repeat the same teaching, through the use of another literary text, drawn from their cultural background. A student in group 28 highlighted that their familiarity with the text had an impact on their enjoyment: '[...] I also enjoyed working on a known adventure and not an unknown, that we wouldn't know at all [...]']

Another theme emerging from the data is that the students engaged with new vocabulary. Seven responses shared this view. The interest and enjoyment of the students are linked to vocabulary acquisition, which is evident throughout students' comments during focus group 19:

*Important and interesting because it helped us learn useful English words that we didn't know [...] What is more, through the games of these lessons, our English lessons became more enjoyable and easy to learn the vocabulary. Also, it helped us to understand better Odysseus' adventure and made the text we used in Ancient Greek, more interesting for us, and our English lessons more enjoyable and relaxed.*

The above response shows that students think that the sessions helped them enrich their vocabulary more easily because the lessons were enjoyable and the students were relaxed, as the literary text was familiar.

The following data from group 29 shows that students found the use of culturally familiar literature useful for language learning, to develop both their vocabulary and grammar:

*We believe that the use of Greek mythology in English translations in the English course is quite useful, since you cannot only develop your vocabulary, but also your grammar [...] In conclusion, this knowledge is very useful to us and will lead us throughout our lives.*

The final sentence of this extract emphasises these students' perception that the sessions they had attended will be significant for them in the future.

There were not any totally negative responses; the ones that had negative aspects in terms of lack of engagement or level of difficulty, also contained some positive elements. There were two groups' responses out of twenty that indicated that the students found the classes boring. As group 26 wrote: *'These activities seem important to us. They also help us work together even though it's boring'*. There were two groups that mentioned that it was difficult, while it would be more difficult if they used an unknown literary text. As group 36 stated: *'It is interesting but it is quite difficult to express yourself. If we used an unknown literary text, the difference of difficulty would be noticeable. Still, it was quite amusing'*. The following comments were made by the other group, group 20: *'The use of mythology in English makes it difficult, but we have been taught the text since Year 1 of secondary school and it is therefore not so difficult, and the summative assessment has helped us to enrich creativity in English'*. However, these two groups have positive comments, either showing their enjoyment or saying that the summative assessment helped them to enrich their creativity in English.

Concerning the difficulty of using an unknown text, the most common response was that it would make the lessons very difficult. The response from group 24 said that the use of an unknown book would make the lessons *'very difficult and boring'*. A minority of responses included different views. There was one group's response out of twenty that indicated that students would like to use a different book: *'It would be nice if we used a different book because the Odyssey doesn't make us enthusiastic about it. However, these lessons were fun and we had a nice time'* (Group 33). Finally, Group 35 said that *'it would be as easy if we were given an unknown text'*. The students having written this response, appeared to have very good knowledge of English. This indicates that the method of using an unfamiliar English literary text could be levelled to higher level students. Overall, students' familiarity with the text made them more confident to engage with it in their English lessons.

#### **5.4. Students structured conversations**

Three sets of students' structured conversations were collected. Each group of students included three students from each class who volunteered to participate. The students were asked some engagement questions in Greek that I later translated into English. The most common themes were the students' positive feelings: interest linked to cultural familiarity, and ease of vocabulary acquisition when the Odyssey was used in their English lessons. Another dominant theme was students' perception that it would be more difficult to use an unknown English literary text, which might cause students' lack of participation. For the purposes of this article, evidence from the third conversation will be used.

In students' structured conversation 3, I used a follow-up question emerging from the discussion with the students. When asked about the differences between the lessons using the language textbook and the lessons using the literary text, Christos argued that the authenticity of a literary book can improve reading and speaking skills, more than a language textbook. As he said: *'It is better that we used a literary book because most of the students just learn the exercises, and when they come to the real world, they do not understand the meaning of different books, they cannot even speak, so the use of a literary book helps'* (lines 52-55). They were also asked if the language textbook offered them the same opportunities to use their critical thinking. Christophoros said: *'No, because the English school book is mostly focused on exercises (line 65) [...] you fill in words, it is not something difficult, that will help you in your life. It is something you do mechanically because you do it all the time (lines 68-69). He also noted that the *Odyssey* facilitated vocabulary acquisition: 'It helped us [...] learn how to express yourself in English and learn new vocabulary' (line 79). This response shows that the use of a literary text offered the students something more than the language textbook, which has exercises that they do mechanically. As for the summative assessment, the students did not find the summative assessment very difficult, even though it was different compared to the activities they were used to. As Christophoros stated: *'As for me, I wrote a mini-story. It was very interesting and easy at the same time, and it makes you think more creatively and it is something very different compared to what we do at school'* (lines 91-93).*

Students agreed that it would be more difficult to do the same lessons if an unknown text was used. According to Chloe's view: *'it would be more difficult for most of the students, because using an unknown text and starting to build understanding from the beginning, is more difficult than teaching an already known text'* (lines 96-98). As Christos said: *'I think that for the students who were familiar with English, it would not be very difficult [...] For most students, who know less English, it would be very difficult and they would not manage to do it (lines 101-105). These students agreed that the level of difficulty would be higher if I had used an unknown English literary text, so the use of a culturally familiar text was appropriate. Christophoros initiated his response that is in accordance with the theme of students' positive feelings linked to cultural familiarity: 'I agree. And on the other hand, it wouldn't be so interesting, since the students knew the plot, could therefore follow the story and they could link their knowledge' (lines 106-108). Despite having unfamiliar words in the *Odyssey*, he added that: *'They [students] could link their knowledge, but if it was another book, unknown, they could not say their opinion in the lessons, most of the students could not even participate'* (lines 110-112). Christophoros claimed that the students' familiarity with the literary text*



enabled them to engage and give their opinions. Therefore, the students were convinced that using a culturally familiar literary text contributes to the student's active role in the foreign language classroom.

### **5.5. Interviews with the English language teacher**

The first interview with the regular English language teacher, Mrs Andreou, who observed the lessons I taught, was undertaken after my first five sessions with all the classes. In relation to students' engagement, the main themes were students' curiosity, eagerness and the teacher's perspective that if using an unknown literary text to do the same teaching, students would lack both participation and positive feelings.

The English teacher was firstly asked to talk me through her experience of observing lessons 1, 2 and 4 in terms of students' engagement. As she said:

*At the beginning, students were curious about the lesson but were willing to participate and they were able to complete the story map you had given them, in lesson 1. In lesson 2, they were also engaged to cut and put the pictures in order and they managed to do it successfully. I noticed that they were pleased when they completed the activity and it was correct. In lesson 4, students had the chance to express their opinion about Odysseus' feelings, most of them were able to answer the questions in English (lines 8-14).*

Students' high levels of engagement, in terms of participating and being eager and pleased when completing an activity correctly, are illustrated. According to Mrs Andreou, the students' competence to complete an activity caused positive feelings.

When asked about her view on content familiarity, she claimed: *'The fact that students were familiar with this literary text helped them. It would be more difficult if the text was completely unknown, to understand it'* (lines 68-69). The English teacher therefore expressed the same view as the students, in terms of the difficulty of using an unknown text. She was further asked if we would have the same levels of engagement and she answered: *'I don't think so [...] it would be more difficult for them to understand and want to participate. They would be unwilling to participate and maybe scared'* (lines 74-76). Cultural familiarity was endorsed by the teacher, and she gave similar answers to the students, regarding this approach. This data shows that the use of a culturally familiar literary text played an important role in the students' high levels of engagement, as it made the students confident to participate.

In the second interview, conducted after completing all the sessions at each class, the teacher talked about students' enthusiasm, and a level of difficulty in some activities, which did not lead to disengagement. Students' initiative to work more, was also noted.

The teacher was asked about her experience of lessons 5 and 7, in terms of students' engagement. As for Lesson 5, she claimed:

*I noticed that students liked your presentation [using Lego bricks to teach sentence structure] and they engaged a lot. They worked in pairs to find the adjectives about Odysseus and Penelope. They also had to use their critical thinking, to characterise the two heroes. I saw that they showed enthusiasm for putting the sentences at the appropriate Lego structures. Even though some students found it difficult to write their own sentences, eventually they managed to write at least small sentences (lines 4-11).*

The teacher highlighted that the students were enthusiastic to complete the activity on sentence structure, and noticed a level of difficulty for some to complete an activity. As for Lesson 7, she noted that: '*During the paired activity, they engaged and most pairs wrote both Odysseus' and Penelope's thoughts, even though they were asked to write either for Odysseus or Penelope*' (lines 14-16). Students' enjoyment was emphasised through their initiative to work more than they were asked to, as part of this activity. As expected from her interviews, the English teacher captured the dynamics of the classroom.

### **5.6.Observation schedules**

An observation schedule was completed by the regular English language teacher, during every session of each class that I taught. The schedules collected data on students' engagement during the sessions and allowed the crystallisation (Richardson, 2000; Ellingson, 2009; Ellingson, 2014) of the findings in relation to the research question on students' engagement. This data was added to the data about students' experience of the class, collected in students' focus groups and students' structured conversations. In most of the sessions, the teacher observed a small number of students doing a specific activity, to ensure the internal validity of the data. A group of four students or two pairs were mainly observed, during a group or paired activity, and the teacher observed different students in each lesson.

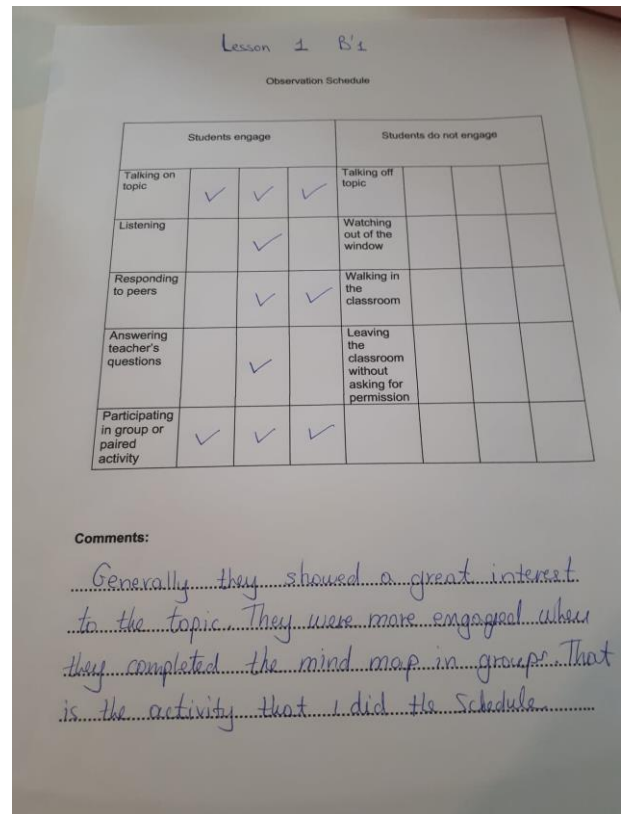
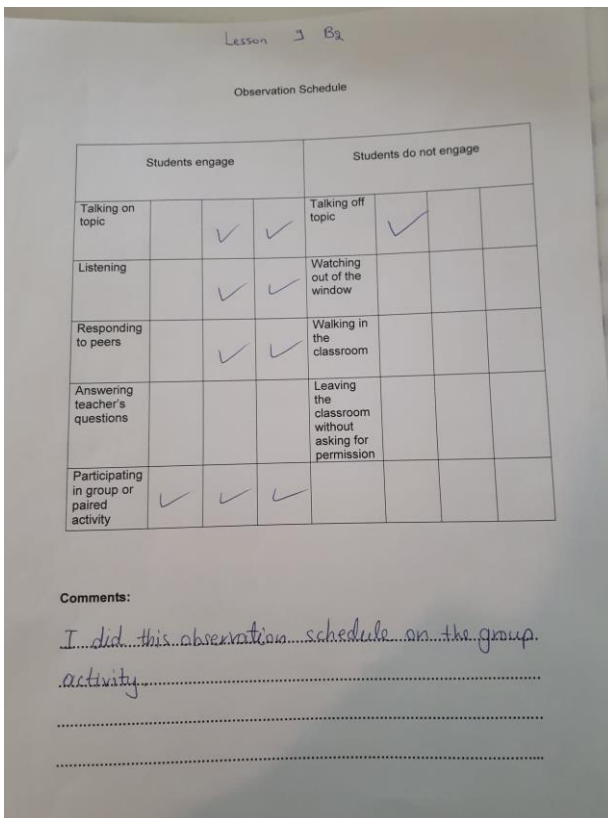
The engagement rate of all the observation schedules (weighted average) was 90.1%. Nineteen out of twenty-seven schedules illustrated 100% engagement, as the English teacher did not

observe any elements of disengagement. Eight schedules showed 66.7% engagement because the teacher recorded an element of disengagement at the first of the three time intervals.

Figure i illustrates a representative sample of a schedule with an element of disengagement: ‘talking off topic’, spontaneously, at the first of the three time intervals, of a 15-minute group activity, carried out at Lesson 9 (B2 class). Each time interval carries 33.3% weight, therefore 66.7% engagement was recorded in this schedule. During the next two time intervals, the teacher noted that students engaged by ‘talking on topic’, ‘listening’, and ‘responding to peers’. Figure ii shows a sample of a schedule, only demonstrating elements of students’ engagement. This schedule was completed by the English teacher, through observing a group, completing the mind map on *Odyssey*, at Lesson 1 (B1 class). The students were constantly ‘talking on topic’, and after the first few minutes, they were ‘responding to peers’. They were ‘listening’ at the second time interval, and they spontaneously answered my questions. The regular English teacher also wrote some general comments on observing this specific lesson: ‘Generally, they showed a great interest to the topic. They were more engaged when they completed the mind map in groups’.

Figure i: Observation schedule at Lesson 9 (B2)

Figure ii: Observation schedule at Lesson 1 (B1)



## 6. DISCUSSION

The findings show that students' engagement was evident in the course of the lessons. In the context of this research, the concept of engagement refers to the students' feelings about the use of culturally familiar literature in their English lessons; their levels of enjoyment or boredom and concern, the extent to which the students participated in the sessions, stayed on task and the fact that they employed their prior knowledge of the *Odyssey* to engage in the sessions. The findings of this research suggest that '[C]ultural correspondence' is a sociocultural indicator of engagement, which 'refers to the extent to which a particular task, activity, or setting socially and/or cognitively activates and/or connects with students' prior knowledge and experience' (Lawson and Lawson, 2013, p. 447). The following discussion will focus on the way cultural familiarity is linked to students' cognitive engagement and intrinsic motivation.

Some of the findings of this study are in line with previous studies exploring the use of literary text in foreign language learning. This study revealed participants' positive reactions to the intervention, students' opportunity to be creative and express their feelings. Mitsigkas' empirical research (2015a) showed both teachers' and students' positive perceptions regarding the use of novels in teaching English as a foreign language in a Cypriot context. Specifically, students' experience when using novels in the language classroom was deemed as enjoyable, because of their personal involvement in the classroom. Students' motivation is only achieved when they are emotionally involved with a text (Elliott, 1990). Students in my research had the opportunity to enhance their creativity and express their emotions. For example, Barbara evaluated the summative assessment as '*creative*', as part of the structured conversation two, '*because we [the students] could convey our opinion, continue the story in our own way, and express our feelings*'. Students' creativity and autonomy were also stressed in Viana's and Zyngier's (2020) study in a Brazilian high-school context. While attending a language-literature workshop, these students reflected on their experiences after each session. The results of that study indicated that the students liked the activities which provided opportunities for them to be creative and autonomous. The importance of fostering students' creativity was also highlighted by teachers, in an empirical study in a high school in Italy. The teachers perceived the use of literary text in foreign language learning as '*creative*', '*more active*' and '*stimulating*' (Sirico, 2021, p. 229). The emotional appeal of literature was also stressed by Sirico (2021) and it is important to note the change in teacher's perceptions after looking at the three lesson plans integrating different genres of literary text. The change in the teachers' perceptions in this research was in relation to aspects, such as students' emotional appeal and development of

interpretative skills. The teachers also valued the use of literature as a source of language learners' engagement in the classroom. They did not anticipate this before looking at the three lesson plans. The findings of the present research demonstrated students' positive engagement when using a text drawn from their cultural background, in English translations. Similarly, Lazar (1993) suggests that culturally familiar stories as a motivating resource in language teaching, as these stories are relevant to the students' background and the students are familiar with the themes. Students' familiarity with the themes of the literary text corresponds with the present research findings. Selecting a text carefully may arouse learners' participation and enthusiasm and therefore contribute to their language acquisition (Mitsigkas, 2015b). The findings of the present research value the use of culturally familiar literature in foreign language teaching.

It has been consistently argued that engagement consists of affective/emotional, behavioural and cognitive components (Fredricks et al., 2004; Appleton et al., 2008; Harris, 2011; Hipkins, 2012; Lawson and Lawson, 2013). Affective/emotional components of engagement have been defined as students' levels of interest, enjoyment, boredom, anxiety and attitudes towards learning (Lawson and Lawson, 2013; Harris, 2011). Affective/Emotional components of engagement were evaluated through students' focus groups and students' structured conversations and the findings showed students' positive reactions to the use of culturally familiar literature in their English lessons. The majority of the students expressed their enjoyment and interest. Behavioural aspects of engagement refer to students' participation in academic activities (Fredricks et al., 2004; Harris, 2011). Behavioural engagement was examined through the teacher's observation schedules and the interviews with the teachers; high levels of participation were demonstrated by these data sets. Cognitive engagement 'relates to students' personal investment in learning, including goal-setting, intrinsic motivation [...] and use of learning strategies' (Harris, 2011, p. 377). Cognitive engagement refers to students' willingness to invest and exert effort in learning, while using cognitive strategies that promote understanding. The findings drawn from students' focus groups, structured conversations and teachers' interviews indicate that the learning strategy the students used through relating their tasks with prior knowledge of the *Odyssey* had an important impact on their high levels of engagement. Students, in the focus groups, for example, said they '*...]* enjoyed working on a known adventure and not an unknown, that we wouldn't know at all'. Therefore, students' cultural familiarity contributed to their cognitive engagement.

In the following discussion, I will concentrate more on cognitive engagement, as it is linked to cultural familiarity, which is a key feature of this study. One of the significant components of

cognitive engagement is intrinsic motivation. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004, p. 68) argue that 'the cognitive engagement literature can be strengthened by drawing on the broader motivational literature on goals and intrinsic motivation'. In my research, the only link between cognitive engagement and motivation theory is intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation, as described by Self-Determination theory, requires satisfaction of the needs for competence, relatedness and autonomy, to achieve psychological growth (Deci and Ryan, 2000). Intrinsic motivation is considered to contribute to better learning (Deci, 1976; Deci and Ryan, 2000), and it can influence student engagement. Intrinsic motivation was facilitated, as the students knew that their performance in our sessions would not have an impact on their evaluation, which supports the view of Deci and Ryan (2000). Students' autonomy is generally considered as an important factor to enhancing engagement in the foreign language classroom. This view is also supported by Connell (1990). Students' autonomy in my study will be discussed later in this section. Students' familiarity with the text enabled their cognitive engagement, as the students and teaching staff agreed that the use of Homer's *Odyssey* facilitated students' engagement. Using culturally familiar literature in the Cypriot context therefore diminished the perceived difficulty of using literature in foreign language learning.

Cultural familiarity with the *Odyssey* enhanced the students' confidence in engaging with the text and contributed to their active participation in the EFL classroom. The comments from the focus groups and students' structured conversations showed their confidence in engaging with the *Odyssey*. Students' greater sense of ownership enhanced confidence in their understanding of the literary text, which is illustrated, for example, by the following extract from students' structured conversations: '[...] *Because we already knew the story, it helped us, it was easier for us, but we could also consider a different point of view [...]*'. Therefore, their cultural familiarity links to their intrinsic motivation, which promotes people's need for self-satisfaction when achieving a goal. Students' enjoyment was recorded in the second set of focus groups, as they expressed their positive feelings about the use of the *Odyssey*, which led to new vocabulary acquisition. Competence is also regarded as a crucial influence on intrinsic motivation (Deci and Ryan, 2000), so the fact that I mitigated the difficulty of using literature in the EFL classroom through the use of Homer's text, facilitated students' competence. The use of an unfamiliar English literary text would make students '*unwilling to participate and maybe scared*', according to data drawn from the English language teacher's interview, speaking from her experience as a teacher. The students' competence in terms of their knowledge of Odysseus' adventures, allowed these sessions to be accessible to them, despite the level of difficulty of using translations of the *Odyssey*, in English.

It has been argued that motivation is the direction and quality of one's energies (Maehr and Meyer, 1997), while engagement is the action or behaviour, being described as 'energy in action' (Russell et al., 2005). Motivation is therefore not sufficient for engagement, as it is associated with the question of 'why am I doing this?' (Appleton et al., 2008, p. 379). In the context of my research, intrinsic motivation is linked to cognitive engagement, as content familiarity facilitated students' competence. As Deci and Ryan (2000, p. 233) argue:

Intrinsically motivated behaviours are those that are freely engaged out of interest without the necessity of separable consequences, and, to be maintained, they require satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and competence.

The absence of rewards, in terms of grades and perceived risk of bad impact on the grades, as was the case in my research in a Cypriot secondary school, could lead to increased intrinsic motivation. Motivational strategies, such as rewards and threats, undermine autonomy. Deci and Ryan (2000, p. 263) further argue that 'the degree of basic psychological need satisfaction influences development, performance, and well-being'. Similarly, Dörnyei (2003) argues that motivation links to achievement, and therefore highlights that students' motivation will possibly contribute to their successful performance.

Students' cognitive engagement: prior knowledge of the narrative of the *Odyssey* as a learning strategy used in the context of this research, enhanced their capacity to predict meaning, and understanding. Data drawn from the focus groups show that the students were receptive to new vocabulary, because of the use of a familiar story: '[...] our English lessons became more enjoyable and easy to learn the vocabulary [...]'. According to reader-response theory, the reader makes his/her own interpretation of a text, rather than trying to follow the author's interpretation (Iser, 1972; Holland, 1975; Rosenblatt, 1982). Reader response links to students' autonomy, one of the characteristics of intrinsic motivation, because students feel they have ownership of the text. Reader response is explored in this study, using the model of Rosenblatt, that considers reading as a transactional process between a reader and a text (1982). The impact of reader response will not be examined in more detail in this article. The findings of my study are in agreement with Viswanath's and Mohanty's (2019) study, which concluded that cultural familiarity brought an element of students' enthusiasm, in an Indian context. Building on previous knowledge is significant to arouse students' confidence, which can therefore contribute to their engagement in the language classroom. Benati (2020) also notes that it is difficult to engage with complex language, through unfamiliar topics and encourages teachers to select a text in relation to learners' topic familiarity; students' interest is aroused through

engagement with material significant to them in reading comprehension tasks. My research was not only focused on reading comprehension, but also writing, speaking and emotional connection with the text to produce higher order thinking to nudge students towards using a wider range of vocabulary.

This article addressed the following research question:

In what ways do Cypriot secondary school students demonstrate engagement and/or disengagement in their learning when using Homer's *Odyssey* as a culturally familiar literary text in learning English as a foreign language?

The findings showed that cultural familiarity facilitated students' involvement in the sessions. The students participated in the sessions and stayed on task by talking on topic and responding to peers, apart from a few instances of talking off topic, at the beginning of a task. They expressed their enjoyment in using the *Odyssey* and perceived that vocabulary acquisition and critical thinking were facilitated. The teachers also evaluated students' positive reactions to the tasks, as part of the sessions, despite the difficulty of some students in certain activities. Cultural familiarity is an "affordance" which supports and enables learning; as Hipkins aptly claims that affordances could include students' 'personal interest in and connections to the contexts of learning, including prior knowledge and experiences on which they might draw' (2012, p. 442). The importance of students' engagement is paramount to improving learning as well as emotional and social outcomes for them and examining factors that influence engagement has implications for intervention practice and policies (Appleton et al., 2008).

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The present study is original because it contributes in a new way to the body of research on foreign language learning. It uses the novel method of using culturally familiar literature in teaching English in the Cypriot context and through delivering a number of sessions, explores students' engagement. Students' cognitive engagement and intrinsic motivation is a benefit to foreign language learning and cultural familiarity is relevant, as the text used in this research gave students competence and autonomy to engage with it, because they had prior knowledge of the narrative. Students' familiarity made them proactive in vocabulary learning, as their ownership of the text invited them to express themselves using new vocabulary. This article demonstrated the positive effects of using this material on students' engagement.

Cultural familiarity is therefore a significant conceptual element of the present empirical study. The findings show that it provides scaffolding for using literary text in foreign language



teaching and learning. It softens the students' cognitive load in situations where they have already been engaged with the plot of the text from their previous knowledge. The student participants of the present study developed a particular learning strategy, which was drawing on their previous knowledge of Homer's *Odyssey* in order to cognitively engage with this literary text in their English language lessons.

The pedagogical impact of the findings of this study on the area of materials design and development is prominent. I argue for implementing the use of culturally familiar literature in the curriculum of teaching English as a foreign language rather than focusing on the use of the language textbook only. A literary text is a type of authentic text and using such authentic texts for English Language Teaching purposes can benefit the language learners. Evidence from this study suggests that using texts that learners are familiar with in their native language can raise their confidence and facilitate their understanding in reading the text in a foreign language. Culturally familiar literature can therefore be embedded in the curriculum, along with the language textbook. It constitutes a promising approach so that the students can benefit from the use of literary text in foreign language learning and it can enhance students' engagement in the lessons. When students are familiar with the plot and the characters of a literary text, they can be more eager to read this in a foreign language and do language activities in relation to it.

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