



# ‘Literature Always Anticipates Life’: Selecting Target Language Literary Texts for Simulation

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## Overview

True to the words of Oscar Wilde, one of the defining features of literature is the crucial role its contemporary backdrop has had in influencing its creation—from the dystopian fiction of the early 20th Century that framed the social and political unrest, to the technology age and the subsequent boom in science fiction. While it is true that not all fiction is created equal (or, some would say, some more equal than others), when assessing the needs of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in secondary education, it is important to consider this cultural context, among other factors, that may help or hinder a student’s learning. With this in mind, when working with simulation scenarios centred on literary texts, it is vital that teachers are aware of how to choose said texts based on the strengths of said methodology as well as their own educational objectives. Centring on textual features such as cultural appropriacy, length, linguistic difficulty, and thematic content, this chapter will discuss not only *what* can be considered useful literature to work with alongside simulation, but also *how* these texts can be brought into play in order to help students of secondary education get the most out of their EFL classes. Used correctly, literature presented through simulation has the ability to unlock endless possibilities for students, both academically and beyond.

## Keywords

Literature · Simulation · English as a foreign language/English as a second language · Literary texts

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## Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, the reader should be able to:

- Recognise the important factors that are involved when selecting target language literature to be presented through Simulation and Virtual Exchange.
- Identify key features of a literary work that would make it an ideal text to be used in simulation and Virtual Exchange and explain why these features are desirable.
- Explain how texts with desirable features can be used in order to help students of secondary education with their English Language studies.

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## 12.1 How Can Literature Complement Simulation Scenarios in EFL Classes?

In order to be able to effectively select appropriate literary texts that allow our students to unlock their maximum potential when using simulation, it is important to discuss what literature actually is. The present-day definition of literature is far more inclusive than that of the past century, as nowadays other textual mediums such as advertisements, newspaper reports, magazines, song lyrics, blogs, internet, and other multimodal texts can also be included under this umbrella term (Carter, 2007; The Council of Europe, 2020). This, therefore, broadens the range of what literary works we as teachers can use to inspire and motivate students studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in secondary education.

With such a wide choice, however, comes the problem of *how* to choose. When it comes to selecting literary texts for EFL learners, it is generally accepted that practical factors such as linguistic difficulty, length, cultural difficulty and cultural appropriacy often present problems (Lazar, 1990; Bobkina & Romero, 2014; The British Council, N.d.). These difficulties greatly reflect the aspects of Simulation and Virtual Exchange that help it to be a useful tool in language learning as explained below by Devos et al.:

Teaching a foreign language through simulations allows students to experiment with new vocabulary and structures, combines language learning and the development of professional competencies, promotes identification with the target culture and reduces the language interference, (2021).

Also, while much research has been conducted on how to tackle these issues in a more general classroom context, not much has been discussed about how to identify texts appropriate for and relevant to such skills and challenges that simulation brings.

Therefore, this chapter aims to delve deeper into the impact that these practical factors have when literature is designed to be presented through Simulation and Virtual Exchange, as it is clear that using both together highly benefits students. For example, when using an important plot event, an emotional conflict in a character, or even a decision on when/how to use said piece of literature and employing it as

the basis for a simulation scenario, based on 'real-world systems or phenomena' (Lunce, 2006, p. 37). Considering the factors mentioned above, a practical guide is proposed for choosing texts for projects involving using literature alongside Simulation and Virtual Exchange, discussing *what* texts can be considered useful to use alongside simulation, and *how* they can be used, in order to help students of secondary education benefit the most from their EFL classes.

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## 12.2 A Question of Culture: Literature with a Big or Small 'L'?

McRae (1994) talks about two kinds of literature, one with a large 'L', and one with a small 'l'. Literature with a large 'L' is thought to be the 'best' works, a term exclusive only to those that are included in the literary canon, whereas literature with a small 'l' is more inclusive regarding subject matter, origin, and style (Maley, 2001). When considering the choice between these two types of literature, many educational professionals can agree on two things.

First, literature can be a cultural minefield which can bog students down. This may not only affect them at an academic level but also at a motivational one (Lazar, 1990). Second, the topic or themes must pique the students' interest and grab their attention (The British Council, N.d.).

This section will address problem number one. The second will be dealt with later in the chapter.

One of the most anticipated problems when working with canonical Literature in EFL studies is the oftentimes heavy cultural and historical references that are entwined within each work (Marley, 2001). However, there are benefits of exposing students to such information, such as developing the ability to understand and appreciate other cultures, as well as being able to analyse the literature from a contemporary perspective (Carter & Long 1991, cited in Maley, 2001, p. 182). Therefore, as educational professionals, it is up to us to find this balance in the literature that we choose to present to our students.

When presented through Simulation/Virtual Exchange, it can be argued that a wider and more in-depth range of unfamiliar cultural content in literature can be explored. This is largely thanks to the cooperative nature of Simulation and Virtual Exchange, which affords learners a number of cultural benefits. Firstly, the student interaction it demands promotes the incorporation and retention of new information, due to the fact that it gives students the opportunity to actively process information through interacting with their peers (Ravenscroft et al., 1999). The explanation for this can be found in the term coined by Vygotsky as the 'Zone of Proximal Development',<sup>1</sup> which refers to what a student can achieve working independently compared to what they can achieve working in a group with members of a higher

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<sup>1</sup> A term to describe the difference between what a learner can achieve on their own, and what they can achieve with help from someone with more knowledge.

level than their own (Vygotsky, 1978). This is what helps learners work cooperatively: operating within each other's zones of proximal development means that they can achieve more advanced knowledge and behaviours than if they were to work individually (Slavin, 2014).

Furthermore, this dialogue presents a greater chance for cultures to mix between the students themselves, an observation which is particularly relevant to Virtual Exchange where students are more likely to come from different backgrounds. 'The Principle of Multiplicity' states that no two learners will see the world in the same way, and the interaction of these different points of view when learning and trying to understand concepts make learners more tolerant of other cultures and ambiguity (Ryan, 1997, cited in Ravenscroft et al., 1999, p. 165). Thus, students are given another advantage when it comes to addressing culture.

In this way, it can be said that, by working together to investigate the texts, secondary students using simulation to work with literature can be exposed not only to canonical literature which requires slightly more advanced cultural understanding but also other more modern texts that require more cultural information to be better understood. In fact, depending on the focus of the class objectives, more modern, cross-cultural, non-canonical texts might be more beneficial to students, allowing them to relate to situations that are more reflective of their own day and age (Tseng, 2010), and therefore reinforcing the real-life contexts promoted by simulation (Park et al., 2016).

So, from a practical point of view, when tackling more difficult cultural aspects of a text in this way, instructors can promote the importance of their own research (and the sharing of findings) in the cultural understanding of texts. The activity scenario of the simulation can also be designed to reflect the importance of such research in the target language—including dedicating in-class hours to it if necessary. Using this cultural and historical background that they have collectively researched, students will have more practice with forming and vocalising their own interpretations of texts that are relevant 'to themselves and their society but which may be enriched and validated by useful information we might provide for them.' (Lazar, 1990, p. 209). Bearing this in mind, it is clear that, while more modern non-canonical texts might allow students to better relate to the overall realistic objectives of simulation, Simulation and Virtual Exchange provide learners with the right educational environment to benefit from both canonical and non-canonical literature. With the correct usage, both types of literature can be used with simulation, as long as the facilitator has clear learning objectives and is well equipped to anticipate problems beforehand. However, another problem that is associated with canonical literature (and less so with more contemporary choices) is the linguistic difficulty of the text, which is addressed below.

### 12.3 Language Adequacy: What Language is Best for Simulations Using Literature in EFL Learning?

Overly complicated linguistic terms and baggage (common to canonical texts) can become a barrier to learning when dealing with literature in a foreign language (Marley, 2001). This is especially true when looking at texts that include a vast amount of literary language that distorts and manipulates meaning (Lazar, 1990). However, Carter and McRae, who advocate for providing learners with more opportunities to experience and produce language in its more creative aspects, argue that introducing learners to more complex language offers its own advantages within language learning, such as opening doors to cultural awareness (Carter & McRae, 1996). Stephen Krashen also observes that, in order to improve language skills, students must be exposed to language 'a little beyond' their own level (Krashen, 1982, p. 22).

With this in mind, when it comes to selecting appropriate literature to use in Simulation and Virtual Exchange scenarios in terms of language adequacy, once more the principles of Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' and Ryan's 'Principle of Multiplicity' are important to consider. They stand to prove that Simulation is a more effective learning method due to its cooperative qualities (Clapper, 2015), and therefore higher levels of work and understanding can be achieved. By working together to understand texts, learners using Simulation will be able to collectively access literature of a *slightly* higher lexical and semantic difficulty to that of their own individual level as they will be operating in the zones of proximal development of all the group members. This affords students valuable, meaningful exposure to target language texts and allows them to reap both the linguistic and cultural benefits (Carter & McRae, 1996; Krashen, 1982). This also minimises the problem of textual reduction<sup>2</sup> when using adaptations, a common solution to the linguistic problems presented when using canonical texts, through which language and cultural richness is sometimes lost (Bibby, 2014).

Having said that, it is important to ensure that the language level of the selected texts is not so difficult that even the combined group effort has trouble with understanding it. If a piece of literature is presented to learners as too difficult to understand without great effort, this will naturally produce within them a negative, demotivational effect (Bibby, 2014; The British Council, N.d.) which is clearly not conducive to a successful learning environment. The fine line between selecting texts that are challenging for students but that do not motivate them must be respected.

Finally, it is also important for the instructor to identify the goals and objectives for students regarding literature and language so as to be able to emphasise work on those particular areas. As Marley (2001) states, language activities with literature are normally either concerned with the linguistic analysis of the text or sparking ideas for a variety of language activities. Therefore, in real classroom environments,

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<sup>2</sup> Taking away important elements from a text by simplifying key cultural themes or language (for example) so as to make it more accessible for lower-level readers.

it would be a good idea for EFL students working with a piece of literature through Simulation or Virtual Exchange to collectively analyse and understand the text, most likely in the briefing stages. Then, in the subsequent stages, the text can be used as a springboard for other language activities that heavily rely upon communicative techniques (Marley, 2001) such as those used in Simulation and Virtual Exchange.

Similarly, student Simulation groups must be selected and monitored accordingly, so that the texts assigned are of a slightly higher level for the whole group, and not for only a handful of students, so as to avoid frustration. It would be prudent for the instructor to design the parameters of the simulation scenario in such a way that the use of key linguistic points that a text deals with, such as specialist vocabulary or phrasing, or grammatical structures, are encouraged throughout. In this way, knowledge of the key points of the language, presented in literature, is cemented through meaningful, life-like contexts provided by Simulation and Virtual Exchange, and therefore real learning is encouraged.

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## **12.4 Length and Time: What Length of Text is Needed for Successful Reading in Simulations and How Much Time Should be Dedicated to It?**

The length of a text and the time that it takes to work with it is another important factor that can cause issues for EFL learners (Lazar, 1990). The same can be said for Simulation, as has been mentioned in a previous chapter. Therefore, it is important to pay close attention to this aspect when choosing the type of literature that is going to be used in a Simulation or Virtual Exchange scenario.

It has been observed that, despite being aware of the benefits that studying target language literature can have for learners of a foreign language, both students and teachers alike simply feel that they do not have time to dissect a whole novel and complete all the other tasks and objectives that they have to achieve in class (Jones & Carter, 2012). Some students feel intimidated by the thought of working with longer pieces of literature and find the prospect of it daunting, while others find that the lack of repetition and cultural support in shorter texts makes them more difficult to work with (Bobinka and Romero, 2014).

Therefore, when presenting such texts through Simulation or Virtual Exchange, in order to make the most of the time at hand, it may be beneficial to adopt a different technique regarding the reading. Encouraging students to read outside of class time via Flipped Learning or Inverted Classroom,<sup>3</sup> a type of blended learning<sup>4</sup> technique, can reduce time spent reading in class and allow students to optimise their time. Flipped learning has been proven to be beneficial to EFL students in a number of ways. It facilitates the treatment of different types of literature/reading

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<sup>3</sup> A classroom strategy in which students' complete readings at home and use class time instead to discuss the text and any subsequent questions they might have.

<sup>4</sup> An educational methodology in which online learning is used alongside face-to-face instruction.

texts in EFL classes, in secondary and higher education (Angelini, 2016; Challob, 2021) and promotes advancements in reading skills among secondary students (Hamdani, 2019). It has also been proven to work well alongside Simulations when presenting literature regarding linguistic, cultural, and social aspects (Angelini, 2016).

As well as being accessible to all learning types, this flipped approach to tackling reading literature invites learners to do topic reading and research outside of class hours, using the different technology available to them. In this way, in-class time is saved for asking and answering questions and discussion about the topic (Lage et al., 2000). By introducing literature to students through Flipped Learning in the briefing stages of Simulation so that they can work together to understand the text, and then allowing them to present their findings and offer an analysis in the debriefing, classroom time can be optimised, and students will still develop the essential skills that are involved in studying literature through Simulation.

However, it is important to remember that blended learning might not be possible in all situations (e.g., students may not have the resources at home to be able to carry out their independent investigation correctly). In this instance, a text that strikes a middle ground between students' fears about length can be sought. A piece of literature that is not too long so as to intimidate students, but not too short so as to leave them with too little to work with, like many Young Adult Fiction texts, for example. Group structures and cooperative activities can also be utilised to facilitate the treatment of literature through Simulation in the classroom if blended learning is not possible. In this way, while the time-saving benefits of Flipped Learning cannot be enjoyed, class time can still be used for group and peer interaction and engagement with the text and Simulation scenario. This use of time is also beneficial in that it is used to focus on the learner and develop their knowledge, experiences and interpretations—rather than having these things externally handed to them through the work of someone else.

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## **12.5 Themes and Genres: What Thematic Content/Genre Has the Most Potential When Combined with Simulation and Virtual Exchange?**

As with the length of a text, learners' attention will also be affected by the content of the text itself. Here, the second point previously mentioned about interesting and motivating the students is addressed. As reading always implies both a reader and a text (Fialho, 2019), it is important to remember not to divide these two entities, by making sure that textual content is relevant to learners and their realities. For instance, apart from the cultural, historical, and sometimes aesthetic significance present in many works of literature, they also afford the reader a personal approach. This provides learners with a backdrop against which to think, feel, and test their own beliefs (Morgan, 1993). If the content of the literature already relates to the

students in some way, this will facilitate these processes, particularly when looking at foreign language literature.

In turn, a crucial part of Simulation and Virtual Exchange is ‘reality of function’. Here, participants must behave as though the Simulation situation were real (Levine, 2004). As the educational power of Simulation and Virtual Exchange is found within the reality of communication (Jones, 1995), it stands to reason that elements of the real world should be integrated into the text to achieve the proposed cooperative learning goals (Park et al., 2016). In fact, studies have shown that, generally, EFL students that work with literature identify realistic fiction to be among their preferred genres (Tseng, 2010).

Therefore, although it is clear that Simulation does not have to reproduce actual reality (Jones, 1995), by employing realist literature, students will have less difficulty when relating personally to a text and will have more motivation to work with it. Moreover, it is easier to relate real-world language experiences to texts that present real-world themes, so these types of texts help students to delve deeper into a language with a more familiar feeling and avoid unnecessary confusion. It might also be useful to work with a text that centres on only one or a few specific themes, especially if a work of speculative fiction has been chosen. This will help to make the purposes and roles of the proposed Simulation clearer and allow students to focus their language practice on a more specific area.

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## **12.6 Conclusion: So, is There a ‘Perfect’ Text to Present Literature Through Simulation and Virtual Exchange?**

Based on the analysis carried out throughout the chapter, while there is no definitive one-size-fits-all text to employ alongside Simulation, it can be argued that more contemporary, shorter, young adult novels/texts that tend to lean towards realism could be suggested as a good place to start. Similarly, texts that meet the previous criteria and that also centre on a specific theme could prove especially beneficial, with reading being done via flipped learning, if possible, in order to optimise classroom time.

That is not to say that adaptations of canonical novels and poems (perhaps again with more realist tendencies given the nature of Simulation and Virtual Exchange) should be ruled out completely. In fact, in specific instances, shorter sections of un-adapted canonical texts could be used to achieve specific learning objectives (whether they be cultural or linguistic). However, care must be taken to ensure that this approach (with adaptations or not) does not become reductive and that enough links can be made by learners to real-life scenarios—supporting the fundamental characteristics of simulation and virtual exchange.

When choosing literary texts to work with Simulation, it is possible to offer learners an integrated literary approach through which they are introduced to a level of English slightly higher than their own. This allows them to access more



advanced knowledge and skills, and work with texts that would not normally be considered appropriate for students of the same ability working individually - a critical step for one's own language development.

While this question has been approached from a language-learning perspective, it is possible to apply it to other subjects also. For instance, how can we choose literary texts to work with Simulation when aiming to achieve objectives in other areas, such as social science, religion, and citizenship, and even literature studies in the learners' native language. There are many areas to explore, and each one with its own unique objective that should be reflected in the choice of literature proposed for Simulation.

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## 12.7 Summary

This chapter aims to provide readers with a guide on how to choose literary texts that will best support EFL learners when presented through Simulation scenarios. It addresses crucial areas that are normally identified as problematic when working with literature in general terms with students that are learning English: culture, language, length, and genre. Focusing on (but not limited to) students of secondary education, educators can hope to find in this chapter a comprehensive overview of the desirable features of these four categories that influence the choice of said texts based on the strengths of said methodology as well as their own educational objectives.

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