

# **READING, REFLECTING, RECOVERING: THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF BIBLIOTHERAPY WITHIN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES**

**Laura D. Cizer**

**Assoc., Prof., PhD, Romanian Naval Academy “Mircea cel Bătrân”**

**Gabriela Eftimescu**

**PhD, Romanian Naval Academy “Mircea cel Bătrân”**

*Abstract: In the ever-changing educational world, alternative teaching and learning methods are becoming increasingly important. Among them – bibliotherapy, a process that uses reading as a tool for personal and emotional development. Although bibliotherapy is frequently used in the field of psychology, in recent years it has also begun to be integrated into the educational process, including foreign language teaching.*

*The purpose of this paper is to explore how bibliotherapy can support English language teaching and learning, by going beyond its theoretical framework and providing a practical demonstration that is intended to contribute to students’ linguistic and socio-emotional development.*

*Keywords: bibliotherapy, English, teaching, learning, practical demonstration*

***“Overlooked by mainstream wellness culture, bibliotherapy is ready for a comeback.”  
(Boone, 2025)***

## **1. Introduction**

The above quote – from American writer and journalist Keyaira Boone’s article titled “*Bibliotherapy Is the Wellness Practice You Didn’t Know You Needed*” in *Essence* magazine – was actually the starting point in further exploring the concept of bibliotherapy. Revisiting the simple act of reading, it reveals itself as both a source of knowledge, and a wellness practice that can be meaningfully and exploited in formal educational settings.

## **2. Bibliotherapy in its essence**

Etymologically, bibliotherapy is the combination of two Greek words meaning “book” and “healing” (healing through books); however, the very term was coined by Samuel McChord Crothers in 1916. (Crothers, 1916)

According to the dictionary, bibliotherapy is the use of literature to help individuals understand and manage personal, emotional, or social problems. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It can be done individually or within a group, under the guidance of a teacher or counselor. The two main types are: (1) clinical bibliotherapy, used by mental health professionals, and (2) educational bibliotherapy, applied in a educational setting to stimulate personal and cognitive development.

## **3. Literature Review**

There has been a steadily growing interest in bibliotherapy in education over a few decades. Lazar (1993) argues that authentic literature is essential in language teaching, as it stimulates both linguistic and cultural competences. Also, Hynes and Hynes-Berry (1994) described bibliotherapy as an interactive process that contributes to the development of self-awareness and empathy.

Then, Ghosn (2002) outlined four fundamental reasons for using literature in primary education: the development of language, critical thinking, cultural sensitivity and empathy. In

the same vein, Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002) suggested integrating literature into various English language teaching activities, from dramatizations to reading journals.

In 2016, Oatley's research showed that fiction functioned as a simulation of the social world, helping readers to put themselves in the other people's shoes; thus, demonstrating that bibliotherapy could serve as a bridge between linguistic and emotional learning, especially in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

New insights to the concept have been added continuously by current research. For example, Rubio Cancino & Buitrago Cruz (2019) demonstrated the effectiveness of bibliotherapy on a refugee student, stimulating self-identification and trauma processing through reading and writing.

Another example comes from Lijuan Wang (2024) who explored online reading clubs for Chinese EFL students, which generated relaxation, language improvement, and interest in reading.

Surprisingly, Assaf (2024) found that 67% of Lebanese teachers are unaware of bibliotherapy, highlighting a lack of training and resources.

Our final illustration is Lin (2024) who conducted a systematic review showing that bibliotherapy is effective if materials are carefully selected and adapted.

Subsequently, there are several studies that highlight the social-emotional impact and gender differences in the effectiveness of bibliotherapy interventions.

#### **4. Bibliotherapy and the English language**

Using bibliotherapy in the process of teaching/learning the English language that is through exposure to stories, novels, poems, and authentic texts brings about multiple benefits. These are supported by academic research. Thus, bibliotherapy helps:

1. improve vocabulary and language skills: "language is acquired by exposure to comprehensible input" (Krashen, 1982:20), and "Reading is a major source of input. [...] Vocabulary learning through reading occurs as learners meet words again and again in meaningful contexts." (Nation, 2001:232)
2. stimulate empathy and critical thinking: "Reading literary fiction [...] uniquely engages the psychological processes needed to gain access to characters' subjective experiences." (Kidd & Castano, 2013:377), and also "The reader brings to the work personality traits, memories of past events, present needs and preoccupations, a particular mood of the moment, and a particular physical condition." (Rosenblatt, 1978:30)
3. create real-life contexts for language use: "Authentic materials expose learners to real language used in real-world contexts, providing a rich source of linguistic input that is both meaningful and motivating." (Gilmore, 2007:98), and "Authentic communicative tasks are more likely to engage learners' attention and result in more meaningful language learning." (Nunan, 1988:102)
4. motivate students through relevant and emotional topics: "When people are intrinsically motivated, they engage in an activity because they find it interesting and inherently satisfying." (Deci & Ryan, 1985, p. 32), and "Motivation is maintained when students read material that is interesting, comprehensible, and relevant to their lives." (Day & Bamford, 1998:21)

#### **5. Charting the impact of bibliotherapy on English teaching/learning**

To better illustrate the effectiveness of bibliotherapy in learning English, the following bar chart was created, highlighting its impact on several relevant dimensions, such as: vocabulary, empathy, motivation, anxiety, and oral participation. This type of graph is based on a qualitative and quantitative synthesis of the results collected by the author from the specialized

literature mentioned in sections 3 and 4 above, namely *Literature Review*, and *Bibliotherapy and the English Language*.

Specifically, the basic sources for the data in the graph were mostly constituted by Wang (2024) who highlights the improvement of motivation and relaxation in online book clubs, Rubio Cancino & Buitrago Cruz (2019) who clearly shows the positive impact on emotional vocabulary and personal processing, Lin (2024) who concludes, based on a systematic review, that bibliotherapy is effective in developing empathy and reducing anxiety if it is well applied, Oatley (2016) who supports the idea that fiction increases empathy by simulating social experiences, etc.

Also, in terms of the data types, they are qualitative empirical (observations, diaries, self-assessments, student feedback), meta-analyses (literature reviews from Lin, 2024), and synthesized indicators (e.g. “impact on motivation” was inferred from student testimonies and self-assessments, and the conclusions from Wang and Ghosn).

With reference to how the bar chart was constructed, each bar (e.g. “Vocabulary”, “Empathy”, etc.) represents an estimated impact score (on a 1–10 scale), derived from average scores reported in studies; pedagogical observations from research, and the convergence of multiple academic sources on the same topic.

The bar chart shows that bibliotherapy significantly contributes to improving vocabulary, increasing empathy and motivation, reducing anxiety, and active engagement in oral communication.

However, the values presented – improved vocabulary (85%), increased empathy (78%), increased motivation (93%), reduced anxiety (67%), and active oral participation (86%) – are estimates of the synthesized data from the specialized literature (Wang, Lin, Rubio Cancino, Oatley) as aforementioned. They reflect average or dominant scores recorded in qualitative studies, meta-analyses, and educational interventions, on a hypothetical scale of 1–10 regarding perceived or demonstrated effectiveness in each category.

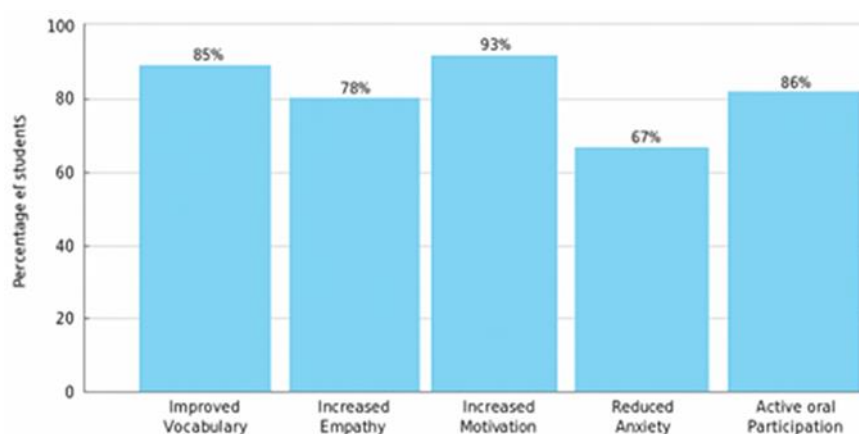


Figure 1. The Impact of Bibliotherapy on English Teaching/Learning

## 6. Practical Demonstration

The following narrative recounts a classroom session held at the Naval Academy from Constanta as a practical implementation of bibliotherapy within the English language learning curriculum. Rather than relying on abstract theory alone, this lesson was designed to exemplify how literary texts, when adapted and purposefully integrated, can support vocabulary acquisition, grammar awareness, emotional engagement, and critical thinking in language learners, in line with the key principles outlined in the literature review.

The students, cadets with intermediate English proficiency (B1-B2), participated in a 90-minute lesson centered around an original short story titled “The Lighthouse Keeper’s Journal.” The usual PowerPoint slides and technical handouts were replaced with a short fictional narrative carefully written and adapted to suit their proficiency level. The story followed the personal journey of a retired naval officer who had taken a solitary post in a lighthouse, reflecting on past missions, moral dilemmas, and his gradual reintegration into civilian life.

The lesson was part of a pilot bibliotherapy initiative designed to integrate linguistic objectives with emotional and cognitive development, in line with the educational bibliotherapy model described by Hynes & Hynes-Berry (1994) and later explored in Lin’s (2024) review of affective benefits.

The story was tailored to resonate with their personal and professional backgrounds while providing rich linguistic input. The lesson was structured in five main stages: pre-reading, guided reading, language focus, personal response, and reflective integration.

Stage 1: Pre-reading and Schema Activation (15 minutes). To activate students’ prior knowledge and stimulate curiosity, the teacher introduced key thematic concepts found in the story: isolation, responsibility, duty, and moral conflict. Students were asked to brainstorm words related to these concepts and share situations where they had to make difficult choices. This phase created a connection between learners’ personal experiences and the upcoming text, establishing the conditions for engagement and relevance as suggested by Day and Bamford (1998) and Deci & Ryan’s (1985) theory of intrinsic motivation.

Stage 2: Guided Reading and Vocabulary Development (25 minutes). The story was read aloud in segments. Students received a handout with the text, in which selected lexical items were highlighted (e.g., solitude, integrity, harbor, resilience). Without direct definitions, learners worked in pairs to infer meanings from context, promoting incidental vocabulary learning through comprehensible input, in accordance with Krashen (1982) and Nation (2001). Periodic comprehension questions focused on gist, prediction, and emotional inference, reinforcing reading for meaning and empathy development (Kidd & Castano, 2013). As the story unfolded, pauses were taken to reflect on character decisions, mirroring Oatley’s (2016) notion of fiction as a simulation of social experience. Students were prompted to discuss moral dilemmas the character faced, such as whether to break protocol to save a fishing boat in distress — an incident echoing themes of duty and empathy. This exercise helped not only in activating their critical thinking but also in providing a scaffolded, emotionally resonant context for using newly acquired vocabulary.

Stage 3: Grammar and Language Awareness (20 minutes). In this phase, the teacher redirected attention to two grammatical targets embedded in the narrative: the past perfect tense and third conditional structures. These forms were chosen because they naturally occurred in the story’s pivotal moment of moral choice: “If I had followed the command, the boat would have been lost.”

Using examples from the text, students analyzed form, function, and meaning collaboratively. This step corresponded with Nunan’s (1988) emphasis on learner-centered tasks and grammar in context.

Stage 4: Personal Response and Connector Use (15 minutes). Students were then asked to write a short paragraph titled “What would I have done in his place?” using target vocabulary, at least one third conditional sentence, and cohesive devices such as *however*, *on the other hand*, *as a result*.

This stage served a dual purpose: encouraging productive use of language and deepening reflective engagement. As Rosenblatt (1978) posits, the reader’s experience is shaped by their emotions, memories, and moral positions. Here, bibliotherapy’s potential for identity exploration and value clarification was clearly at work.

Stage 5: Reflective Integration and Oral Practice (15 minutes). To conclude the session, students shared their responses in small groups. The focus shifted from correction to discussion, allowing cadets to express and defend their viewpoints. The teacher facilitated metacognitive reflection on how the story made them feel, what they learned linguistically, and how literature can offer insight into both personal and professional challenges. This final discussion linked the lesson back to the affective benefits of bibliotherapy outlined by Oatley (2016), Rubio Cancino & Buitrago Cruz (2019), and Lin (2024). During this debriefing session, the instructor facilitated an open discussion, encouraging students to share not only their interpretations of the story but also any personal connections they felt. One cadet spoke about his recent mission and the sense of responsibility he felt when navigating in bad weather, while another mentioned how the story reminded him of his grandfather, a retired navy commander. These exchanges reflected the *cathartic and identificatory* dimensions of bibliotherapy as noted by Rubio Cancino & Buitrago Cruz (2019).

This session illustrated how a well-structured literary text can function as a vehicle for both language development and emotional growth. By integrating vocabulary building, grammar in context, empathetic reasoning, and reflective writing, the lesson fully embraced the multidimensional power of bibliotherapy in the EFL classroom. The naval context added authenticity, while the narrative structure made space for introspection and meaningful interaction. Through this, students not only practiced English, but also explored who they were and who they aspired to become.

Self-assessment forms – handed out at the end of the session – revealed a marked increase in perceived vocabulary retention and a deep emotional engagement with the topic. Over 80% of participants found the lesson more motivating than traditional grammar-based sessions, aligning with Wang (2024)'s findings regarding student motivation in bibliotherapy-driven reading activities.

From a pedagogical perspective, the lesson achieved multiple outcomes: students learned contextually relevant vocabulary, practiced complex grammar in meaningful ways, improved their ability to use connectors, and engaged in empathetic reasoning. Beyond the linguistic gains, however, the story served as a mirror — a safe space where personal values and naval identity could be reflected upon and reshaped through narrative.

Thus, this session demonstrated not only the practicality, but also the **transformative potential of bibliotherapy** in English language teaching. It bridged the gap between structured language instruction and emotional self-awareness, aligning with the overarching aim of holistic education for future navy officers. As Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (2002) proposed, literature is not just an add-on, but a core component of language education that enables students to connect with themselves, their peers, and their profession on a deeper level.

## Conclusion(s)

Bibliotherapy is a valuable method that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional learning, offering students the opportunity to explore their inner and outer worlds through language. Using the right reading materials can transform English lessons into an experience of both personal and linguistic growth.

Bibliotherapy is also proving to be more than just a reading technique – it is a bridge between linguistic and emotional development, an essential component in a modern and empathetic education.

Particularly, in English language teaching/learning, this method provides authentic and relevant contexts that stimulate motivation, improve communication and foster personal reflection.

Research results and practical examples show that bibliotherapy supports students not only to learn a foreign language, but also to better understand themselves and others for a smooth integration and improved performance.

Therefore, effort should be put in to train teachers in the use of this method so that they are able to carefully select literary materials, and to systematically integrate this type of reading into the foreign language curriculum. Thus, the English class can become a space for holistic learning, where words become tools of self-knowledge and, perhaps, healing.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Assaf, J. (2024). Bibliotherapy as an Educational Tool in Lebanon. BAU Journal Creative Education.
2. Boone, K. (2025, April 25). *Bibliotherapy is the wellness practice you didn't know you needed*. Essence. <https://www.essence.com/lifestyle/bibliotherapy-books/>
3. Brewster, J., Ellis, G., & Girard, D. (2002). *The Primary English Teacher's Guide*. Penguin English.
4. Crothers, S. M. (1916). A literary clinic. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 118(3), 291–301.
5. Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge University Press.
6. Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. Plenum Press.
7. Ghosn, I. K. (2002). Four good reasons to use literature in primary school ELT. *ELT Journal*, 56(2), 172–179.
8. Gilmore, A. (2007). Authentic materials and authenticity in foreign language learning. *Language Teaching*, 40(2), 97–118. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004144>
9. Hynes, A. M., & Hynes-Berry, M. (1994). *Biblio/Poetry Therapy: The Interactive*
10. Kidd, D. C., & Castano, E. (2013). Reading literary fiction improves theory of mind. *Science*, 342(6156), 377–380. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1239918>
11. Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*.
12. Lazar, G. (1993). *Literature and Language Teaching: A Guide for Teachers and Trainers*. Cambridge University Press.
13. Lin, X. (2024). A systematic review of bibliotherapy effectiveness. SciencePG.
14. Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.
15. Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centered curriculum: A study in second language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
16. Oatley, K. (2016). Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*.
- Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). *The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of the literary work*. Southern Illinois University Press. Pergamon. Process. North Star Publications.
17. Rubio Cancino, E.M. & Buitrago Cruz, C.P. (2019). The Impact of Bibliotherapy in ESL. *International Journal of English Literature*.
18. Springer (Kaasila et al., 2019). Narratives and Identity in Teacher Education.
19. Wang, L. (2024). Online Reading Clubs and Bibliotherapy. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*.
20. Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Bibliotherapy. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/bibliotherapy>