# A WHODUNIT IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

## AS HISTÓRIAS DE DETETIVE NA AULA DE INGLÊS COMO LÍGUA ESTRANGEIRA

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**Abstract**

In the present article a discussion about the importance of Literature to the English as a foreign language (EFL) learning and teaching process is presented. Some scholars, as McKay (1982), do not agree with the idea of using Literature in teaching EFL, arguing that no meaningful advantages can be harnessed from it. Other linguists perceive Literature as an essential source of materials which could enhance the learning and teaching of the foreign language. The latter view is defended by linguists such as Paran (2008), Malley (2001), Carter and Long (1991). They are unanimous to highlight the benefits Literature can bring to language learning. In fact, using Literature can promote not only a linguistic gain but also a cultural and personal improvement to the learners. Yet, teachers may find it difficult to apply Literature in the English classroom because of lack of material, reluctance of students, time and expertise for planning lessons based on Literature. In order to show how some of these problems can be overcome, a plan of five lessons based on a Sherlock Holmes's detective story is presented, including a section on the theory of using detective stories.

**Keywords**: English as foreign language. Literature. Detective story. Lesson plan. Sherlock Holmes.

**Resumo**

No presente artigo é apresentada uma discussão sobre a importância da Literatura para o ensino e aprendizado de inglês como língua estrangeira (ILE). Alguns estudiosos, como McKay (1982) não acreditam que o uso de Literatura no ensino de línguas estrangeiras possa beneficiar o aprendizado de ILE, outros linguistas, no entanto, percebem a Literatura como uma fonte de materiais que poderia melhorar o ensino e aprendizado de língua estrangeira. Em defesa da Literatura estão pesquisadores e linguistas tais como Paran, Malley, Carter e Long entre outros, os quais são unanimes em destacar que ao trazer a Literatura para o ensino de ILE os aprendizes adquirem não só conhecimento linguístico mas também cultural e intrapessoal. Ainda assim, é possível que professores de ILE sintam-se desconfortáveis ao aplicar a Literatura na sala de aula devido à falta de materiais, relutância dos estudantes, tempo e conhecimentos específicos. A fim de mostrar como alguns desses problemas podem ser sanados, foi estruturado pequeno projeto de cinco aulas baseadas em uma história de detetives protagonizada por Sherlock Holmes. A fim de fornecer fundamentos teóricos ao professor foi incluída uma seção sobre a Literatura de mistério.

**Palavras-chave**: Inglês. Literatura. História de detetives. Planejamento de aulas. Sherlock Holmes.

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**Introduction**

How important is literature to the learning of English as a foreign language (EFL)? The connection between language learning and literature studies goes back to ancient times. However, currently, this issue has become a controversial one: on one hand, linguists as McKay (1982) do not find this relationship beneficial in terms of linguistic gains and ease of learning a language for communicative purposes. On the other hand, other scholars see the relevance of literature in the EFL learning\teaching process and suggest the incorporation of activities which exploit the literary text in an EFL classroom.

In a world where the written word has lost its importance to multimedia texts and extensive reading practice has become almost obsolete if compared to the virtual entertainment, it seems that literature cannot count on many supporters. Besides, most of the time teachers who want to adopt the literary text in the EFL classroom may find it difficult to work with them because students are not fond of literature and supporting materials for teachers are scarce. The teacher must build their own materials and search for suitable texts and activities for their students. In addition, the teacher has to spend a lot of time planning lessons and searching for reading texts. One may ask, is this endeavor really worth it? To what extent is literature good for the teacher's job? Moreover, how can English teachers motivate students' interest in literature, if the Internet has become more attractive, more accessible and easier than the traditional paper book?

This article presents a discussion about the role played by Literature in the EFL learning\teaching process and how the use of detective stories could attract students and enrich the English class and help students improve their linguistic skills.

**1.    Literature and English Language Teaching**

Bringing Literature to the EFL classroom has been a complex issue in the field of foreign language teaching. Some scholars state that the use of literature makes no difference in the process of learning a foreign language. Paran (2008), on the other hand, analyzes research done in the field and comments on those who disagree with the idea of literature enhancing EFL teaching\learning. The author is one of the defendants of the Literature in the EFL classroom. In his opinion:

> The point is that literary texts are suitable (for English as a foreign language teaching\learning) because language is learned by human beings, and the interest

and love of literature for its various qualities is a human characteristic" (PARAN, 2008, p.14)

Paran (2008) reminds scholars and teachers of the fact that language learners cannot be isolated from the cultural and social meaning of the language. Interestingly, Malley (2001) corroborates with Paran and remarks that literature, as one of the manifestations of language, is part of the culture of the society and it is not restricted to classic texts anymore.

Some people think of Literature as a collection of long and boring texts, written in formal language. Literature has always been treated as a treasure, consequently students feel incapable of enjoying or even reading the texts, which are constantly referred to as difficult. Students cannot see literature other than anything untouchable or even forbidden to them for they are considered illiterate and possibly unable to understand the words of what is called Literature.

Yet, it is implausible to keep students away from Literature, even though they may feel uncomfortable, reluctant or uninterested in the matter. As matter of fact, reluctance and lack of interest may be either a consequence of a bad experience when studying Literature or insufficient knowledge about it. Furthermore, English teachers rarely make an effective link between Language Teaching and Literature. Literary texts are frequently used too superficially to cause some effect on students' learning; or, conversely, the literary text is deeply overworked so that students' motivation starts decreasing. The teacher´s lesson plan must be well prepared to engage in a methodology which promotes language learning connected to Literature. But what are the advantages and linguistic gains? Khatib (2011) lists some merits of Literature as a tool for language learning purposes: authenticity, motivation, cultural/intercultural awareness and globalization, intensive/extensive reading practice, sociolinguistic/pragmatic knowledge, grammar and vocabulary knowledge, language skills, emotional intelligence and critical thinking. Some of these points are discussed by Aghagolzadeh (2012) who reinforces the role of Literature to the EFL teaching/learning. Malley (2001) points out that there are at least three reasons for teaching literature: for language model, cultural model and personal growth model.

a)      Language model: the literary text may be used as example of certain patterns and structures;

b)      Cultural model: the text may be used to enable students to understand and appreciate cultures and ideologies different to their own;

c)      Personal growth: the literary text may engage students in personal enjoyment and emotional experiences.

It is important and relevant to stress that the three reasons above meet the parameters stated by the Brazilian National Curricular Guidelines for state schools (*Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais,* 2000) and the principles presented in the National Curricular Guidelines Plus (*PCN+* - the extension of the national guidelines). These two documents bring some guidance for the building of syllabuses and pedagogic planning for Language teaching in Brazilian schools. *PCN+* suggests that students need to develop the competence to use language in three levels: interactively, grammatically and textually, besides which students may develop the ability to read and interpret and also to produce and comprehend texts actively. The ability of Reading and Writing are highlighted in this process: "the primordial competence of foreign language teaching (…) must be Reading, and as a consequence the interpretation of texts" (*PCN+*, 2012 p.97). The guidelines straightforwardly strengthen the power of Literature in the EFL classroom, for as Malley (2001) points out, the literary text can be the springboard to a large variety of language activities which range from problem solving and information gap to extensive reading, reading circles and creative writing.

In addition, the literary text has the intrinsic power of motivation due to the universality and non-triviality of the Literature. It also invites multiple interpretations which can provide effective material for discussion in the classroom. These possibilities have been exploited by authors such as Paran (2006) and Collie and Slater (1987). Another fundamental source is *Teaching Literature* by Carter and Long (1991); this work deals not only with the practical use of literature in EFL contexts but also with the academic debates it often raises.

An analysis of the activities presented in the works cited may demonstrate that scholars strongly believe in Literature as the right source of authentic material for enhancing writing and reading skills. Sebba and Ferreira (2012), for example, bring writing activities based on narratives and fables for Brazilian students of English as a foreign language. They also suggest the use of different genres in order to expose students to a large number of language usages. Similarly Sabota (2012) emphasizes the use of the literary text in reading practice. She presents activities using classics of the literature such as poetry, biographies, short and long novels as well as oral literature e.g. proverbs.

The matter of using or not using Literature in the EFL context seems arbitrary. Yet, bringing literary texts as a material for foreign language teaching\learning is advantageous because it can augment students' linguistic, cultural and social knowledge. Moreover, considering text as any meaningful expression, students can improve their linguistic knowledge by getting acquainted with different kinds of texts and genre. Actually there are

scholars who go beyond this. They state that the effective way to teach and learn a language is by providing learners with meaningful contexts and engaging them in social practice. According to Paiva (2006) this engagement is only possible when the teaching methodology supports a genre-based approach. For Cristovão (2010), a teaching methodology based on genre can help learners develop their language skills: their knowledge about the context of the text, their knowledge about the organization of the meanings of the text and their knowledge of language devices needed for text production. These abilities are crucial to develop learners' sense of acceptability and feasibility in some texts (sentences, utterances, phrases and so on) in a given language.

Nevertheless the teacher, who intends to apply Literature in his\her EFL classroom, goes far from his\her comfort zone to research for and conceive suitable lessons for his\her teaching and learning objectives. It means a lot of planning and searching for texts which can motivate the students.

Literature is hugely diverse and the large variety of genres makes the literary text an endless source of material. Moreover, there is the possibility of connecting what is in fashion (cinema, music, web pages and so on) nowadays to ordinary literary genres in order to show students how Literature is used as basis for the plots of movies, soap operas, video games and even songs. One genre that seems to appeal to young students is detective or mystery stories. The genre attracts readers because of the enjoyment that this kind of text brings and the analytical and exploratory thinking which is the basis of almost all detective stories. Therefore, by exploiting a mystery story, the teacher can work on students' linguistic competence (namely writing and reading skills), cultural background, personal growth as well as their ability to analyze facts and to come up with some deductions. Moreover, nowadays mystery and detective stories have inspired the cinema, cartoons and comics; even though the genre is overworked people still like it. Why? The following section presents some interesting facts about mystery literature, namely, Sherlock Holmes's stories.

## 2.      Whodunit, detectives and enigma: The Mystery Literature

According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary, a mystery is something not understood or beyond understanding. Possibly this explains why mystery stories are so famous and catch the attention of numerous readers. Recently blockbusters such as Da Vinci Code and The Lost Symbol have been read by thousands of young readers whose interests

could be lead to early works of mystery narratives. As a genre, Mandel (1984) characterizes the mystery story as a work of fiction which deals with a puzzling crime.

In fact, mystery literature is not new. Some scholars agree that Edgar Allan Poe created the first mystery stories. Those stories became popular and lots of crime stories have been published all around the world, most of them are called "detective stories". According to Mandel (1984)

> The first great detective story writers were Edgar Allan Poe, Emile Gaboriau, William Wilkie Collins, Arthur Conan Doyle (…) but the real progenitor of the detective story, or at least the person most responsible for its enormous popularity, was of course Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes (p19-20)

It is known that some of the most famous mystery (detective) stories were written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes. Actually, Sherlock Holmes's fame consolidated the detective story as a genre that became popular at the end of the 19th century.

In the 19th century, agriculture lost its prominence to industrial manufacturing and technology-intensive services. The modern industry caused too many changes in the world's economy and society, in Wegenroth's opinion "never before in history and never within a single lifetime had so much novel culture material been produced" (WEGENROTH, 2000, p. 1). The modern society also witnessed the rise of a new wealthy class: the industrial bourgeoisie. The author characterizes this new class as essentially capitalist and individualist, Mandel (1984) also declares that the ascension of capitalism influenced not only the motives for committing crimes but also the frequency and sophistication of them.

> Passion, greed, power, envy, jealousy and property do not merely set individual against individual, but increasingly involve conflicts between individuals and groups or families, and (…). Crime becomes a means by which to climb a social ladder, or remain a capitalist despite financial disasters. (MANDEL, 1984, p47)

Mandel (1984) also points out that in the English society of 19th century the crime – specially the murder – was a mere consequence of the individualism that characterized people's behaviour. Most of the crimes, it seems, were motivated by the need (or desire) for maintaining wealth or acquiring it. Those types of crimes are very common in detective stories. In sum, it is possible to state that the genre was born in a context of a growing economical system centred in the production and industrial development and a society that was getting markedly indifferent to community life.

Another characteristic of detective stories is the scientific perspective used by the detectives to solve crimes. It is evident in a character such as Sherlock Holmes, created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The famous detective was inspired by Dr. Joseph Bell, a professor at

Medical School of Edinburgh (and also Doyle's tutor). According to Peter Brimacombe, Dr. Bell had acute powers of observation, analysis and deduction and these are the very characteristics of Sherlock Holmes: " a cerebral detective: cases were solved by science, logic and reason, and criminals caught using brain power rather than mere brutal force" (BRIMACOMBE, 2009, p.10).

It is important to note that not all detective stories involve a murder. Some of them are about robbery or puzzling events that disturb a victim. In fact, the crime *per se* is not important. What is essential in the detective story is the mystery, or as Mandel (1984) says: the very subject of a detective story is the enigma. This word is closely related to mystery. The enigmatic atmosphere of the story and the way it is built by the author are responsible to the success of a detective story. Together with the detective, the reader tries to unfold the mysteries hidden among the facts: the reader is prompted to follow the detective's thinking and also to solve the puzzle. Mandel (1984) highlights that in the detective story resides a battle of wits, which happens in two levels: between the detective and the criminal and between the reader and the author. On one hand the reader may attempt to outmatch the author and if it really happens, the author would be considered an unsuccessful storyteller whilst on the other hand, the conflict between the detective and his antagonist must end up with the uncovering of the criminal as well as the solution to all outstanding enigmas.

## 3.      How to use the Whodunit in class

This section presents a structured lesson plan based on a Sherlock Holmes's story. The methodology suggested here emphasizes Reading and Writing skills as well as intends to raise students' interest in Sherlock Holmes stories and other well-acclaimed mystery stories. Other objectives that can be achieved are: Improvement of students' linguistic skills, development of language learning through the appreciation of literary texts and exercise of the analytical and exploratory thinking in the classroom. As a result students will be motivated to practice the analysis and deduction; this is a good opportunity to resort to knowledge of other disciplines such as Mathematics, Philosophy or History.

The planning outlined here is suitable for a class between 25 to 35 students.  The level of the students must be above A2 and the age range to be between 14 and 17 years old.  The methodology covers five sessions that have to be applied one per week. Each session is planned to last about 1 hour. The story chosen is an adaptation for A2 students named Speckled Band but the teacher is free to select another story. It is important to remark that the

teacher is free to make some changes in the planning suggested here in order to make it suitable to his\her teaching context.

## 4.      Lesson Plan: Whodunit - Speckled band

### 1st session: getting started.

The first session will consist of the following steps:

- Presenting Mystery and Crime in Contemporary Literature and Cinema in order to give some examples of characters related to Mystery and crime from books, movies and cartoons such as: Dan Brown's Robert Langdon, Agatha Christie's Poirot, Scooby-Doo and Mystery Inc. CSI.
- Introducing Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson using some pictures and words that are related to Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson:

*Detective, mystery, crime, criminal, pipe, lens, coat, deerstalker hat, cane, doctor, office, clues, tracks, victim, client and police.*

Firstly the teacher should show the pictures of objects and say what they are.  Then, using Power Point slides, the teacher shows the spelling of the words. Students can be encouraged to repeat them. After that, the teacher can ask students to separate what objects are related to Sherlock and Dr. Watson.

The teacher gives students a piece of paper with pictures of the silhouette of the two characters. Students are supposed to write the words related to each character in the pictures.

As soon as they finish their task, students can compare the results with the classmates.

Picture 1. Silhouette of Sherlock and Watson. Source: Stockphotos

- Describing the Detective and the Doctor to characterize the detective and the doctor.

The teacher shows parts of the movie Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows (2011). Then the teacher presents the list of adjectives to students (picture 2). For homework, the teacher asks students to bring at least 3 adjectives to characterize the detective and the doctor. It is possible that students will have to search for the meaning of some of the adjectives in the list.

By the end of the session, students will be encouraged to evaluate the class. They will be asked to write about the expectations, their likes and dislikes on a piece of paper.



Picture 2. Adjectives. Source: wordle.com

**2ⁿᵈ session: The circle – Helen's story.**

In the beginning of the second session students characterize the detective and the doctor using the adjectives from the list given in the prior class. The teacher may suggest students discuss their answers in pairs. After that, the teacher presents the title of a Sherlock Holmes's case: The Speckled band. This story is from a collection of adapted texts for language learners levelled from A2 and above. It must be clear to the students that they have to read the text collectively in a Reading Circle. It is important to create some rules before applying the technique, here are some suggestions:

1. Reading circles are formed by 7 students;
2. The students must be seated in a circle;
3. Three roles are important to the development of the circle:
    a. The Glossary is the student who looks up words in dictionary;
    b. The Manager is the student who manages the turns of reading;
    c. The Annotator is the student who take notes if necessary;
4. The roles must be played by different students in each circle;
5. The time of reading is 30min;
6. Students can discuss what they read at the end of the reading session.

Before reading it is essential to raise students' interest by asking them to discuss about the title of the text and the title of the chapter. Then the teacher gives them the first chapter and after giving them the instructions to be followed they start reading the text. In the reading circle a student reads aloud and the others follow him\her, then another student continues

reading the text and so on. They can stop the reading to look up words or to discuss the content of the text. As the group of students reaches the end of the chapter the teacher can ask them to answer the chart Reacting to The Chapter:

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**Speckled Band: Helen's Story**

1. **How are the characters related? Take evidences from the text.**

**Sherlock Holmes   to Dr. Watson**

| Friend | brother | cousin | enemy |
|--------|---------|--------|-------|

**Evidence:**
_____

**Julia   to   Helen Stoner**

| Sister | enemy | cousin | workmate |
|--------|-------|--------|----------|

**Evidence:**
_____

**Grimesby   Roylott   to   Helen Stoner**

| Father | uncle | stepfather | husband |
|--------|-------|------------|---------|

**Evidence:**
_____

2. **Complete the sentence with the name of the character:**

Grimesby Roylott     **Helen Stoner**     Sherlock Holmes
**Dr. Watson**              Julia Stoner

| | |
|---|---|
| _____ | **was still living in with Sherlock Holmes in Baker Street** |
| _____ | **killed a servant.** |
| _____ | **died 2 years ago** |
| _____ | **was afraid of animals and gypsies.** |
| _____ | **made lots of questions to Helen.** |

3. **Use codes to mark the characteristics of the characters:**

| J | Julia Stoner |
|---|--------------|
| H | Helen Stoner |
| G | Grimesby Roylott |

| | scared | | Terrifying |
|---|--------|---|-----------|
| | violent | | Desperate |
| | unhappy | | Sad |

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Before closing the session, the teacher may find it relevant to give students some time to evaluate the experience of the Reading Circle.

**3ʳᵈ Session: Reading circle - Holmes and Watson visit the house**

In this session, the teacher presents the second chapter of the story, but before reading the text students must be encouraged to talk about what they think it is going to happen in Chapter 2. At this point, the crime is still a mystery therefore it is hard to guess how the girl was murdered. In this chapter, Sherlock Holmes visits the house where the crime was committed and he starts collecting the clues to the investigation. The teacher invites the students to the reading circle again. Before they start reading, the teacher gives the students a large picture of Roylott's house (picture 3). In the picture there are some areas that are important to the story and Sherlock Holmes checks these places carefully. After reading the chapter students have to identify the parts of the house in the picture.
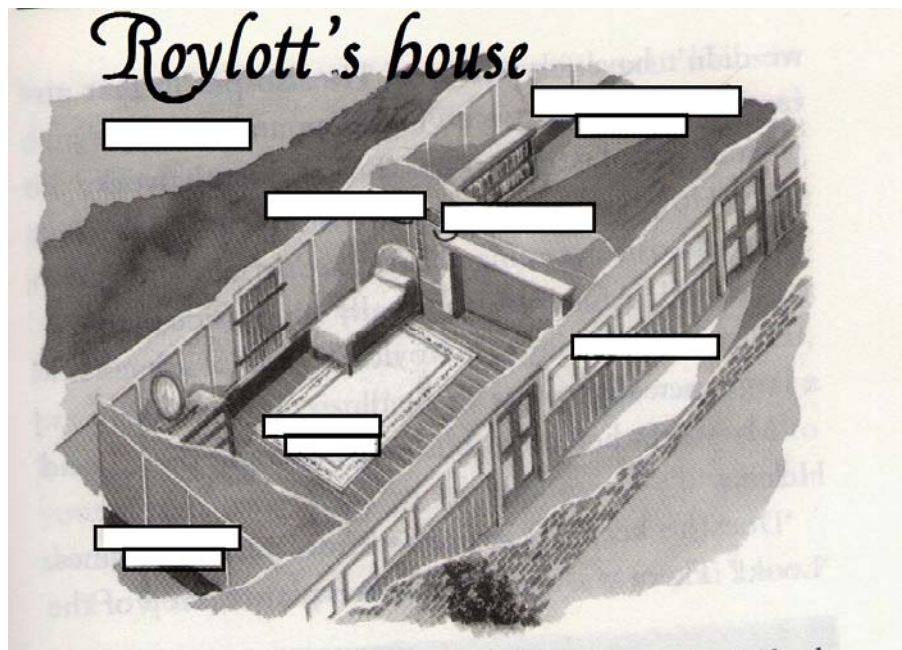


Picture 3. Roylott's house. Source: Doyle (2008)

At the end of this session, the teacher sets the task for the next class: to collect clues. Students must refer back to the text to extract the clues they think are crucial to solve the crime.

**4ᵗʰ Session: Preparing to the End**

This session is divided into two moments. Firstly, the teacher must encourage students to discuss the clues they found. In order to help students organize the information they identified as clue, the teacher asks them to complete the Jigsaw of clues (see picture 4). In a

blank sheet with the pattern of a jigsaw puzzle, students have to write the word\sentence of the clue in each piece of the jigsaw.

The objective of the task is to connect a group of words and sentences that can help to solve the crime. After this, students are requested to expose their jigsaw of clues.

Secondly, students are invited to guess the end of the story based on the two chapters they read and the clues they found. Students are supposed to write a short text in which they predict the end of the mystery. However, the teacher asks students to write their text using a technique called collage. On a large piece of paper (A3), students can paste pictures and words from newspapers and magazines to create their texts. The technique is useful because it develops the ability to summarize and produce texts.
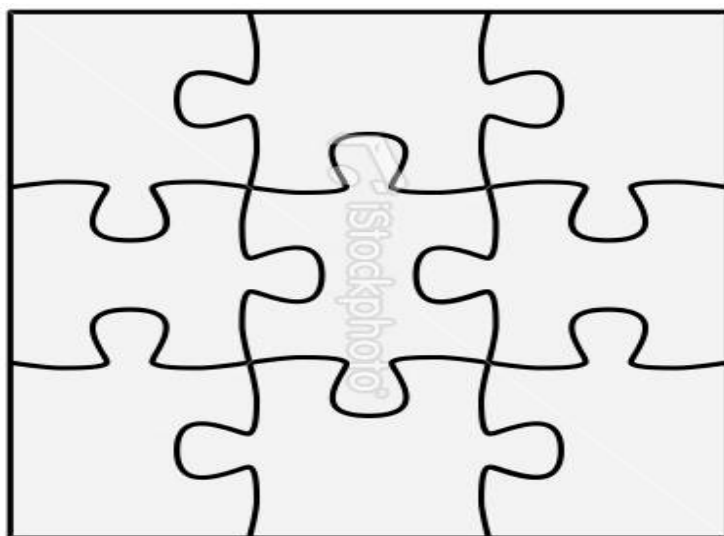
Picture 4. Jigsaw puzzle. Source: stockphotos

## 5<sup>th</sup> Session the last circle: the end - Death in the night

In this session, the teacher invites students to form the last reading circle. Firstly the teacher encourages students to talk about the title of the last chapter: Death in The Night. Presumably students may say that somebody is going to die. The teacher may find it interesting to have a poster with faces of the characters so that students can guess who the last victim is. After reading the chapter, the teacher may ask students if their expectations about the end of the story were met, the teacher may also ask students to summarize the story. The teacher can suggest other Conan Doyle's stories or whodunits written by other authors.

## Conclusion

The use of literature in the EFL class requires a different approach to develop the lesson and the activities. In order to keep students' interest and motivation, the reading activities have to be dynamic, thus a reading circle is a useful way to keep students reading

and sharing the meaning of what they read. However, in a multilevel class, some students may find it easier to read the text alone. In such cases, the teacher must make it clear that the reading circle represents an opportunity to share the understanding of a literary text in the foreign language (L2)  which requests lots of interpretation.

The lesson plan presented here is also an opportunity to create interdisciplinary links between English learning and other disciplines. As it was discussed in section 2, detective stories paint a very fine picture of a wealthy industrial society. This theme may lead to an analysis of the historic context of detective stories and how it is portrayed in the plot. Teachers may also find a connection to Geography in the sense of the importance of visualizing the places, cities, countries and social types presented in the detective stories. It is possible that the effort to follow the detective to understand the enigmas may stimulate students' analytical and logical thinking skills which are slightly related to Mathematics. Finally, the act of reading in L2 is beneficial to the students' text production in their mother tongue.

Therefore, an EFL class may go beyond its specific objective – which is to practice language – as it incorporates literature as the medium of studying the language. In fact, literature is one of the manifestations of real language and it cannot be neglected by teachers and learners. The literary text is also a meeting point for disciplines due to the diversity of the themes that exists in literature. Moreover, it must be pointed out  that EFL teaching can contribute to students' education and Literature (not only the genre emphasized here) is part of the human culture: all cultures have their own set of stories written or not, but all of them are inseparable from the language. So, bringing literature to the EFL class is also a way of respecting and taking care of the legacy of the language expressed in texts.

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