DEVELOPING PROSPECTIVE PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' COMPETENCE IN WORKING WITH CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract. Young children meet literature through the voice of an adult, so the way a teacher selects, reads and talks about a book largely determines what the book means to a child. Yet teacher preparation often reduces this work to knowing the history of children's literature and following methodological recommendations. This article describes an approach to developing prospective preschool teachers' competence in working with children's literature, implemented in retraining courses at a regional center of pedagogical skills in Uzbekistan. The competence is conceptualised as comprising literary-analytical, performative (expressive reading and storytelling), methodological and reflective components. The "Book Workshop" approach combined three strands: selecting and analysing texts for children of different ages, practising expressive reading and storytelling with audio self-recording, and designing book talk and creative activities based on children's personal responses. Compared with trainees in a conventional course, workshop participants justified their choice of texts with reference to children's age and literary qualities, read with more varied pace, pauses and character voices, and replaced recall questions after reading with open invitations to share impressions, puzzles and connections. Children in their sessions talked more and responded to one another's ideas. The findings suggest that performative skill and a dialogic stance towards children's responses need to be practised explicitly in teacher preparation.

Keywords: children's literature; prospective preschool teachers; teacher competence; expressive reading; storytelling; book talk; retraining.

1. INTRODUCTION

Young children meet literature for the first time through the voice of a teacher or parent. They cannot yet read, so how a story reaches them depends entirely on the adult. The same fairy tale can hold a group spellbound when one teacher reads it and leave the children restless and chatting when another does. Chukovsky (1970), writing about children aged two to five, emphasised their natural attraction to poetic language, rhyme and rhythm and argued that adults should nurture it through well-chosen texts and lively performance. In this sense, the teacher is the mediator between the child and the book.

Literature plays many roles in a child's development. It enriches language, stimulates imagination, shapes moral ideas and helps children understand other people's feelings. A meta-analysis by Bus, van IJzendoorn and Pellegrini (1995) confirmed that joint book reading with adults has a substantial effect on children's language development and later reading. Sipe (2008) showed that young children are not merely listeners during story reading but active interpreters who respond to characters, link events to their own lives and even "enter" the story through play. According to Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory, the meaning of a literary work arises in the interaction between reader and text. The teacher's task, then, is not to "explain" a story to children but to create conditions for this living transaction between the child and the book.

In Uzbekistan, the national preschool curriculum "Ilk qadam" (First Step) treats introducing children to literature as an important part of the speech and communication area. Uzbek children's literature offers rich material for this work: folk tales, riddles and tongue twisters, as well as the works of poets and writers such as Quddus Muhammadiy, Po'lat Mo'min, Zafar Diyor, Tursunboy Adashboyev and Anvar Obidjon. Methods of introducing preschool children to literature have been described by Gurovich et al. (1999) and, in Uzbek, by Qodirova and Qodirova (2019) and Jumaboyev (2011).

Our observations in retraining courses, however, revealed serious gaps in teachers' preparation for this work. First, many trainees chose texts on the basis of

topic alone, without considering children's age or the literary quality of the text. For example, a long poem rich in complex imagery was chosen for three-year-olds simply because it fitted an "Autumn" theme. Second, expressive reading was often delivered in a monotone, with eyes fixed on the page and little contact with the children. Third, conversation after reading was limited to questions that asked children to repeat the content – "Who were the characters? What did the fox do?" – leaving almost no room for children to share their own impressions. In such sessions, the book became not a source of pleasure but a task to which the right answer had to be given.

The aim of this study was to develop an approach to building prospective preschool teachers' competence in working with children's literature and to test it in a retraining context. The objectives were: (1) to define the components of this competence; (2) to develop criteria for selecting texts for children; and (3) to implement the "Book Workshop" approach and analyse its outcomes.

2. METHODS

2.1. Setting and participants. The study was conducted in 2025–2026 in preschool education retraining courses at the Fergana Regional Center of Pedagogical Skills, with an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG). Participants held higher education degrees in education or in other fields and varied in age and work experience. Participation was voluntary, and all data were processed anonymously.

2.2. Components and instruments. Competence in working with children's literature was assessed across four components: **literary-analytical** (knowledge of genres and examples of children's literature; ability to analyse a text in terms of children's age and literary quality); **performative** (expressive reading and storytelling from memory, using voice, pauses, facial expression and eye contact with children); **methodological** (ability to design and conduct sessions introducing a text, book talk and creative activities based on it); and **reflective** (ability to analyse one's own performance and conversation with children).

Data were collected through a knowledge test on children's literature; a task requiring trainees to select a text for a given age group from a set of works and justify the choice; audio recordings of trainees' expressive reading; session plans; observation of sessions conducted during placements; and reflective journals. Reading recordings and observations were scored independently by two lecturers using a rubric prepared in advance.

2.3. The Book Workshop. In the EG, course sessions on children's literature and speech-development methodology were reorganised as a "Book Workshop" with three strands.

Selecting and analysing texts. In each session, trainees read several texts intended for different age groups and discussed them using simple questions: Are the length and language of the text accessible to a child of this age? Is the chain of events clear, and are there repeated elements? Is there a character or situation in which a child might recognise herself? Does the text only teach a lesson, or does it also invite the child to think, feel and laugh? For example, a cumulative folk tale with a repeated refrain was compared with Anvar Obidjon's humorous poems, and trainees discussed at what age and for what purpose each might be used. Over the course, each trainee compiled a "small library" – a list of selected and justified texts for each age group.

Practising expressive reading and storytelling. Each trainee read a short tale or poem, recorded it on a phone, listened to the recording and analysed it with a partner, focusing on intonation, pace, pauses, differentiating characters' voices and highlighting key words. At the next stage, trainees practised telling stories without the book, looking at the children. Telling a tale from memory was the hardest task for many, but it was precisely this that enabled genuine contact with the listeners.

Designing book talk and creative activities. Conversation after reading was based on Chambers's (2011) "Tell me" approach, in which children are not tested on content but invited to share their own responses: "What did you like in the story?", "Was there anything that surprised or puzzled you?", "Has anything like

this ever happened to you?" Trainees also designed creative activities such as continuing the story, "writing" a letter to a character, puppet theatre and dramatisation, and drawing pictures for the story. Short recommendations for involving parents in family reading were also prepared.

During placements, trainees conducted literature sessions in partner preschools and analysed the group's book corner, making suggestions for enriching it. In the CG, the course followed the existing curriculum in the conventional format of lectures and seminars.

3. RESULTS

The initial assessment showed a similar picture in both groups. Trainees knew the folk tales they had heard in childhood well, but their familiarity with contemporary Uzbek children's literature was limited. In the text-selection task, most justified their choice by topic alone ("fits the theme", "has educational value") and rarely mentioned children's age or the text's literary features. Reading recordings frequently showed a monotone, hurried pace and an absence of pauses. Questions planned for book talk were aimed mainly at recall of content.

By the end of the course, a number of qualitative changes were evident in the EG. In the text-selection task, trainees justified their choices using several criteria. One trainee, choosing a cumulative tale for the youngest group, wrote: "The children can say the repeated part together with me, which draws them into listening and speaking." Trainees' "small libraries" included works by contemporary Uzbek poets and writers alongside folk tales.

Expressive reading also changed noticeably. In repeated recordings, trainees slowed their pace, paused at important moments, differentiated characters' voices and looked at the children more often. Many said that hearing their own voice on a recording for the first time came as a surprise and that they had sounded "too fast and boring".

Observation of placement sessions showed the clearest change in book talk. EG trainees did not stop at asking about content but invited children's impressions,

questions and examples from their own lives. As a result, conversations became longer and livelier, and children began to respond to one another's ideas. In dramatisation and puppet theatre activities, even usually quiet children tried to speak in a character's voice.

One trainee wrote in her journal: "I always used to ask after a tale, 'What does this story teach us?', and the children gave the answer I expected. This time I asked, 'Which part did you like?' One boy said he didn't like the part where the wolf cried, because he felt sorry for the wolf. I didn't expect that answer, but that's exactly when a real conversation began." In the CG, knowledge grew, but changes in expressive reading and conversational style were smaller.

4. DISCUSSION

The results suggest that competence in working with children's literature cannot be developed through studying literary history and methodological recommendations alone. An important part of this competence is performative – the skill of bringing a text to life for children – and it develops only through practice, listening to one's own performance and analysing it. Audio recording proved a simple but effective tool: trainees corrected their weaknesses faster when they heard them themselves than when a lecturer pointed them out.

The change in book talk is consistent with the views of Sipe (2008) and Rosenblatt (1978): when children respond to a text with their own experience and feelings, its meaning becomes personally significant to them. The conventional question "What does this story teach us?" fixes the meaning in advance and leaves no room for the child's own interpretation. Chambers's (2011) approach enabled teachers to listen to children's ideas with genuine interest and to build conversation from them. This did not mean that the moral content of stories was lost: as trainees observed, such conclusions emerged in children's conversation more naturally and on the children's own initiative.

Working with selection criteria helped trainees realise that a text that fits a theme and a text that fits a child are not the same thing. This is also important for

making conscious use of the rich heritage of Uzbek children's literature, as many trainees discovered contemporary authors for the first time during the course.

The study has limitations. It was conducted at one center of pedagogical skills over a limited period, and groups were not randomly assigned. We assessed trainees' competence; changes in children's interest in books and in their speech require longer-term observation. Although evaluation of expressive reading is to some extent subjective, the use of two independent raters and a predefined rubric reduced this effect.

In practical terms, the Book Workshop requires no additional teaching hours and is implemented by reorganising existing sessions. The age-graded reading lists compiled by trainees, the rubric for evaluating expressive reading and the sample book-talk questions can be used in other centers of pedagogical skills, in university programmes and in in-service training for practising teachers.

5. CONCLUSION

Prospective preschool teachers' competence in working with children's literature comprises literary-analytical, performative, methodological and reflective components. The Book Workshop approach, which combines selecting and analysing texts, practising expressive reading with audio self-recording, and designing book talk and creative activities based on children's personal responses, proved effective in developing it. The most important outcome was that trainees learned to turn story time from a task that checks children's knowledge into a shared, joyful discovery and a lively conversation. Future research will examine the effect of the approach on children's interest in books and their connected speech, as well as teacher–parent cooperation in promoting family reading.

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