

## DEVELOPING ENGLISH READING SKILLS THROUGH FANTASY LITERATURE: STRATEGIES AND CLASSROOMS TASKS

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**Abstract.** *The article offers a methodological framework, including reading strategies and classroom tasks, for developing English reading skills through fantasy literature. While the role of authentic texts in teaching English is often underestimated, their use greatly enhances learners' progress and creates space for independent study. Fantasy literature is particularly effective in this regard, as it enhances both emotional and cognitive development. The proposed framework is based on an interactive model of reading, combining two processes – top-down process (evoking learners' background knowledge to make hypotheses) and bottom-up processes (decoding language forms). This paper distinguishes between main reading strategies (directing learners towards the text comprehension), and supporting reading strategies (sustaining learners' attention and motivation). The authors emphasize the crucial role of a three-stage approach (before-, while, and after-reading) in enhancing language acquisition among students of intermediate and advanced levels, each stage having its own objectives. The pre-reading stage aims at activating learners' background knowledge; the while-reading stage develops skimming and scanning skills, and the post-reading stage demands from learners higher-order thinking and productive language use. With regard to these three stages, Fantasy genre has proved good at displaying imaginative potential necessary for enhancing readers' mental lexicon and linguistic constructions. Additionally, the study suggests the structure and reading tasks within pre-, while-, and post-reading strategies, highlighting the importance of differential tasks and linguistic focus for different proficiency levels (B1–C1). By providing samples of content-focused tasks, as well as tasks aimed at lexical and grammatical development for different language levels (B1–C1), the paper ultimately offers a structured and practical approach for teaching English through fantasy texts in the EFL classroom.*

**Key words:** *fantasy literature, reading strategies, linguistic intuition, reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, top-down reading, bottom-up reading, critical literacy.*

## ФОРМУВАННЯ НАВИЧОК ЧИТАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ ЗА ДОПОМОГОЮ ФЕНТЕЗІЙНОГО МАТЕРІАЛУ: СТРАТЕГІЯ ТА ВПРАВИ

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**Анотація.** У статті запропоновано методологічні засади, зокрема стратегії читання й аудиторні завдання, для формування навичок читання англійською мовою на матеріалі фентезійної літератури. Роль автентичних текстів у викладанні англійської мови часто недооцінюється, проте їх використання значно покращує результати навчання й заохочує студентів до самостійної роботи. У цьому контексті використання фентезійної літератури є особливо ефективним, оскільки цей жанр сприяє емоційному та когнітивному розвитку здобувачів освіти. Запропоновані методологічні засади ґрунтуються на інтерактивній моделі читання, котра поєднує два процеси: низхідний (активізація фонових знань студентів для генерування гіпотез) і висхідний (декодування мовних одиниць). У статті зосереджено увагу на основних стратегіях читання, які спрямовані на розумінні тексту, і допоміжних, що стимулюють увагу й залученість студентів. Дослідження доводить ключову роль триетапного підходу – передтекстового (*pre-reading*), текстового (*while-reading*) і післятекстового (*post-reading*) – в опануванні мови студентами середнього й поглибленого рівнів. Зазначається, що кожен із зазначених етапів спрямований на досягнення певної мети. Так, передтекстовий етап орієнтований на активізацію фонових знань; текстовий – на розвиток навичок ознайомлювального (*skimming*) і пошукового (*scanning*) читання; післятекстовий етап призначений для продуктивного використання студентами мови. У статті звернено увагу на те, що в межах цих трьох етапів жанр фентезі є ефективним у розкритті творчого потенціалу, необхідного для збагачення студентів ментальним лексиконом і мовними конструкціями. На підставі цього в дослідженні пропонується структура й типи завдань у межах передтекстових, текстових і післятекстових стратегій з акцентом на важливості диференційованих завдань і лінгвістичного фокусу для різних рівнів володіння мовою (B1–C1). Пропонується структурований і практичний підхід до викладання англійської мови на матеріалі фентезійних текстів в умовах іноземного навчання (EFL) за рахунок прикладів завдань, що орієнтовані на зміст, і завдань, котрі спрямовані на розвиток лексичних і граматичних навичок.

**Ключові слова:** фентезійна література, стратегії читання, лінгвістична інтуїція, розуміння прочитаного, опанування вокабуляру, низхідна стратегія читання, висхідна стратегія читання, критична грамотність.

**Establishing the problem.** In recent years, the development of effective reading skills has emerged as a central objective in university-level English language instruction. Reading proficiency plays a vital role in enabling learners to comprehend, interpret, and critically engage with complex texts – an essential component of language education across a variety of academic programs. However, many university students, especially those enrolled in teacher train-

ing programs, continue to demonstrate limited engagement with reading tasks, reduced motivation, and difficulty in sustaining focus during the reading process. These challenges are further exacerbated when reading materials lack authenticity, relevance, or narrative appeal.

Previous research in applied linguistics and foreign language teaching has underscored the value of integrating authentic texts into the curriculum to enhance language acquisi-

tion and foster learner autonomy [8; 6]. Moreover, scholars have argued that exposure to literature – and especially genres that promote emotional and cognitive engagement – can significantly support both linguistic development and critical thinking [4, p. 3; 13, p. 465]. Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to the specific potential of fantasy literature as a pedagogical tool in academic reading instruction, despite its increasing popularity and cultural relevance.

This article seeks to explore the educational benefits of using fantasy fiction in the English language classroom at the university level. The **purpose** of the article is to present a methodological framework for developing students' reading skills through carefully selected fantasy texts, with an emphasis on building both comprehension and linguistic competence.

The **subject** of the article is the process of reading instruction in university courses. The **object** is the application of fantasy literature as a means of enhancing reading comprehension and language development within that process. By addressing this intersection of genre literature and language pedagogy, the article aims to contribute to innovative teaching practices that align with students' interests, cognitive needs, and professional aspirations.

**Main issues.** Contemporary approaches to teaching reading in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reflect an evolution from purely mechanical decoding of text toward a more interactive, meaning-based process. The **interactive model of reading**, which synthesizes both **bottom-up** (decoding individual words and structures) and **top-down** (using prior knowledge and context) processes [8], is now widely accepted as a foundational framework.

In line with communicative language teaching (CLT), reading is seen as a dynamic interaction between text and reader, where comprehension involves linguistic decoding, inferencing, schema activation, and critical reflection [17]. More recent paradigms such as Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) emphasize purposeful reading tasks that mirror real-world uses of language [7; 5], thereby enhancing motivation and transfer of skills.

Explicit instruction in reading strategies is recognized as essential for promoting effective reading comprehension, particularly among learners of intermediate and advanced levels [2]. Strategies typically fall into three broad stages:

**Pre-reading:** Activating background knowledge, predicting content, and identifying reading purposes help prepare learners to engage with the text more meaningfully.

**While-reading:** Strategies such as scanning for specific information, identifying main ideas, making inferences, and monitoring comprehension support active engagement with the text.

**Post-reading:** Summarizing, paraphrasing, critically evaluating the text, and relating it to personal experience or wider contexts help consolidate comprehension and promote deeper processing [6, p. 5; 8, p. 6].

Integrating such strategies into reading instruction allows students not only to decode texts but also to develop metacognitive awareness of their own reading processes [2, p. 10]. Among the diverse genres that can enrich reading instruction, fantasy fiction stands out for its unique capacity to engage learners' imaginations, foster inferential thinking, and deepen comprehension through richly layered narratives.

Modern fantasy literature traces its origins to the nineteenth century, with foundational contributions from authors like W. Maurice and J. MacDonald [11, p. 16–17]. This period marked a significant step in the genre's evolution from its roots in ancient mythological and folklore traditions. However, fantasy truly solidified into a distinct literary genre in the 20th century, largely propelled by the influential works of authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Ursula K. Le Guin. It is characterized by the creation of imaginary worlds where magic and the supernatural are central to the narrative. In a broad sense, fantasy literature encompasses everything fantastic that is beyond the boundaries of everyday human experience [14, p. 7], a story that deals with impossible and supernatural things. In a narrow sense, fantasy is a type of fiction of hypothetical and imaginary content that depicts wonder, mystery, or magic—a sense of the possible beyond the ordinary, material, rationally predictable world in which we live and is associated with magical stories based on myths, legends, fairy tales, and folklore [11, p. 1]. The genre encompasses multiple subtypes, including: 1) **High fantasy:** epic narratives set in completely invented worlds (e.g., *The Lord of the Rings*); 2) **Urban fantasy:** magical elements set against a contemporary urban backdrop (e.g., *Harry Potter*); 3) **Portal fantasy:** characters travel from the real world into

a fantasy realm (e.g., *The Chronicles of Narnia*); 4) **Dark fantasy**: blends fantasy with horror elements (e.g., works by Neil Gaiman) [16]. We strongly believe that fantasy's imaginative potential and its universal themes of heroism, identity, and moral conflict resonate strongly with language learners, making it a pedagogically promising genre.

Fantasy fiction offers several intrinsic characteristics that strongly support the development of reading skills and broader cognitive processes in the EFL classroom.

Firstly, reading fantasy promotes linguistic intuition, vocabulary acquisition, and grammatical competence. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, language acquisition is most effective when learners are exposed to **comprehensible input** – language slightly above their current level, made understandable through context [1, p. 78–79; 10]. When words and images fully overlap or leave no gaps, the reader's imagination is limited, resulting in a passive experience. But when words and images offer differing or conflicting information that encourages the reader to question, interpret, and engage more deeply. Fantasy texts typically exemplify this process: they present rich and challenging language in highly contextualized, immersive settings [18, p. 6]. The **context effect** – wherein new words and expressions are rendered comprehensible through their embedding within the narrative – enables learners to deduce meaning naturally [9, p. 326]. For instance, in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* or Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea Quartet*, a variety of invented terms and culturally unfamiliar references appear frequently. However, through repetition and narrative context, these terms do not hinder understanding but rather stimulate acquisition of lexis and structures.

Secondly, fantasy literature enhances imaginative and cognitive engagement. The genre often requires readers to visualize unfamiliar worlds, characters, and events, thus stimulating visual and associative memory processes [18, p. 3]. Research suggests that visualization aids in deeper learning and longer-term retention of new linguistic forms [12]. Through constructing mental imagery and conceptualizing fictional settings, readers enrich their mental lexicon and internalize linguistic constructions more effectively.

Moreover, fantasy fiction aligns with the broader cognitive principle that the human mind is fundamentally organized around images

and narrative structures. The integration of sensory imagery – combining visual, auditory, emotional, and spatial dimensions – fosters complex conceptual thinking and supports narrative comprehension [15, p. 207]. In this sense, fantasy promotes not only the learning of language but also the development of cognitive flexibility, creative reasoning, and sophisticated interpretive skills. The genre's capacity to encode abstract emotions and moral dilemmas into concrete images and events offers learners rich opportunities for reflection and critical engagement with text [15, p. 208].

Lastly, fantasy texts frequently exhibit intertextuality, referencing myths, classical literature, and contemporary culture. This demands an active reading stance, encouraging learners to connect background knowledge with new textual encounters – a key process in developing higher-order comprehension and critical literacy [13]. The genre of fantasy literature, when strategically incorporated into EFL reading instruction, provides an ideal platform for advancing linguistic, cognitive, and critical capacities among university learners.

The following sections outline the structure and progression of reading tasks (Pre-, While-, Post-reading), while the tables below provide examples of differentiated tasks and linguistic focus for varying proficiency levels (B1–C1), summarizing the overall approach.

An effective reading pedagogy for university-level English language learners must balance main and supporting strategies. The former guide students toward the text and comprehension (e.g., memorization, understanding), while the latter sustain attention and motivation throughout the reading process [1]. Reading strategies are understood as complex sets of actions and operations that aim to achieve comprehension and retention of a text's content. They involve both cognitive and metacognitive dimensions, such as information analysis, synthesis, monitoring of one's understanding, reflection, and evaluation [2; 8]. On an individual level, the deployment of a reading strategy in a given context becomes a reading tactic.

The **top-down** and **bottom-up** processing strategies remain fundamental: **top-down reading** begins with the reader's background knowledge, communicative competence, and expectations, shaping hypotheses about the text's content. The reader then confirms or revises these expecta-



tions during reading. The **S-Q-3R method** (Survey – Question – Read – Recite – Review) offers a systematic structure for this approach. **Bottom-up reading** progresses sequentially, beginning with grapheme/phoneme recognition and building upward toward sentences, paragraphs, and overall meaning [17, p. 36–38]. This approach ensures precise decoding of language forms.

In American methodology, the **K-W-H-L strategy** (Know – Want to know – How to learn more – Learned), first introduced by Ogle in 1986, has proven effective in structuring learners' reading processes [3, p. 478]. The overall structure of reading instruction generally follows three stages: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. Each stage benefits from specific types of exercises that can be effectively designed around fantasy literature.

**Pre-Reading Stage.** The aim of this stage is to activate background knowledge, foster interest, and set expectations. The examples of the tasks are given in table 1a.

These exercises prepare learners for **top-down comprehension** by activating schemas and stimulating curiosity.

Table 1a

#### Examples of Pre-Reading Tasks

Tasks	Examples
– Brainstorming/ Mind mapping	– Create a mind map on “Elements of Fantasy”. – Discuss: What fantasy books have you read? What elements (magic, mythical creatures, imaginary worlds) did they include?
– Predicting from title or images	– Predict plot based on title (The Dragon's Oath). – Define “quest” – What could the hero's goal be?
– KWL Chart	– Complete before and after reading.

**While-Reading Stage.** The goal here is to develop skimming, scanning, global comprehension, and detailed reading. The possible tasks are provided in table 1b.

Such exercises support **bottom-up processing**, focusing attention on linguistic forms and accurate comprehension.

**Post-Reading Stage.** At this point, learners engage in higher-order thinking and productive language use which is achieved by implementing the tasks given in table 1c.

Table 1b

#### Examples of While-Reading Tasks

Type of the task	Example
– Skimming and scanning	– Locate where a magical object or event is mentioned. – Skim an excerpt and identify the main character and setting. – Find and analyze words related to magic. – Identify internal vs. external conflicts in the narrative.
– Information gap/matching	– Match characters with traits, actions, functions.
– True/False/Not Given	– Provide justification from the text.
– Diagram/Map labeling	– Label a fantasy map based on textual description.

Such tasks promote critical comprehension, lexical expansion, and grammatical development through engagement and creativity.

Fantasy texts provide a rich source of lexis, including: archaic words (e.g., *thee*, *thou*, *henceforth*); neologisms (invented magical terms); collocations and idioms embedded in

Table 1c

#### Examples of Post-Reading Tasks

Type of the task	Example
– Graphic organizers – (Venn diagram, timeline)	– Compare characters or fantasy worlds. – Create a timeline of key events.
– Plot reconstruction	– Choose five key words representing the magical world. – Summarize the chapter using genre-specific phrases.
– Interpretation	– Discuss quotes such as: “Power is a gift and a curse.” – Justify or critique a character's actions.
– Role play/ Dialogue reconstruction	– Create dialogues between characters.
– Glossary/Visual dictionary	– Develop a picture dictionary of fantasy-related terms.
– Critical reading questions	– Evaluate the hero's decisions — were they fair?
– Creative writing	– Write alternative endings. – Compose diary entries from a character's point of view. – Extend dialogues to explore new narrative possibilities.

narrative contexts. Similarly, they foster acquisition of complex grammatical structures, such as: Conditionals (e.g., “*If the spell is broken...*”), Reported speech (characters quoting prophecies), Passive voice (often used in myth-like descriptions: “*The crown was forged in ancient times*”). Visualization and contextual learning further support linguistic intuition, helping learners internalize forms without rote memorization.

Since learners at different proficiency levels demonstrate varying strategies for text processing and comprehension, it is important to provide tasks that are appropriate to their current abilities. Differentiating activities by level (B1–B2, B2–C1) enables a more flexible and effective learning process, supporting the principles of individualized instruction (see Table 2a, Table 2b).

In this article, task examples are presented in a generalized form in order to offer a flexible

Table 2a

**Content-focused reading tasks and strategies differentiated by student language level (B1–C1)**

B1-B2	B2-C1
Pre-reading tasks	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Brainstorm basic fantasy elements (dragons, magic)</li> <li>– Predict plot based on title</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Discuss themes in fantasy (good vs evil, power, identity).</li> <li>– Predict narrative structure, character arcs.</li> </ul>
While reading	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Skim for key events, identify main characters</li> <li>– Match vocabulary with pictures</li> <li>– Simple T/F comprehension questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Analyze motives, relationships between characters.</li> <li>– Identify figurative language (metaphors, similes) and discuss effect.</li> <li>– Infer author’s perspective, themes, symbolism.</li> </ul>
Post-reading	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Write a simple summary</li> <li>– Fill in a timeline</li> <li>– Role play simple dialogues</li> <li>– Picture dictionary of fantasy terms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Write a critical review or comparative essay.</li> <li>– Discuss how the fantasy world reflects real-world issues (gender, politics, morality).</li> <li>– Develop original dialogue exploring character dilemmas or moral choices.</li> <li>– Create a lexical map of thematic vocabulary (magic, conflict, transformation).</li> <li>– How does this text conform to/subvert the conventions of fantasy fiction?</li> <li>– Compare the image of the hero in this fantasy story to folk traditions in your culture.</li> <li>– Compare how the hero’s journey in the selected fantasy text reflects or differs from traditional epic narratives in your own cultural background.</li> <li>– Identify and analyze the ways in which the fantasy text conforms to or subverts typical genre conventions (e.g., character archetypes, narrative structure, world-building).</li> <li>– Discuss how themes in the fantasy story (such as power, justice, or otherness) resonate with contemporary real-world issues.</li> <li>– Write a reflective essay: “What can fantasy literature teach us about human nature and society?”</li> </ul>

Table 2b

**Examples of lexical and grammatical development through reading tasks (B1–C1)**

B1-B2	B2-C1
Lexical focus	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– High-frequency words, useful collocations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Low-frequency words, stylistic variation, metaphorical usage.</li> </ul>
Grammatical focus	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Complex sentences, conditionals, reported speech.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Subjunctive mood, rhetorical questions, discourse markers, narrative tense shifts.</li> </ul>

Table 3

**Sample Tasks Based on Selected Fantasy Texts (differentiated by language level)**

B1–B2	B2–C1
1. The Hobbit (J.R.R. Tolkien), Chapter 1: “An Unexpected Party” Excerpt: “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell...”	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Find descriptive adjectives in the excerpt.</li> <li>– What do they tell us about the hobbit’s character and preferences?</li> <li>– Create a short paragraph describing the hobbit’s home in your own words.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What does Tolkien’s use of contrasts (nasty/pleasant, dirty/clean) reveal about tone and narrator’s attitude?</li> <li>– How does this opening sentence set the mood for the story?</li> </ul>
2. A Wizard of Earthsea (Ursula K. Le Guin), Chapter 3 Excerpt: “And he began to understand the weight of names, and how naming was a kind of magic in the world”.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What is meant by “naming was a kind of magic”? Paraphrase the sentence.</li> <li>– Find all words connected to magic in the paragraph.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How does the concept of “names” relate to power and identity in the novel?</li> <li>– Write a reflection: In your culture, do names carry special meaning or significance?</li> </ul>
3. Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone (J.K. Rowling), Chapter 9: “The Midnight Duel” Excerpt: “Harry caught sight of a narrow door standing ajar. He pushed it open and slipped inside – and found himself face to face with a huge, three-headed dog”.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– What adjectives would you use to describe the creature?</li> <li>– What does Harry’s action (“slipped inside”) tell us about his personality?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Analyze the narrative technique: How does Rowling create suspense in this passage?</li> <li>– Rewrite the scene from the point of view of the dog or another character.</li> </ul>

methodological framework that can be adapted to a wide variety of literary texts. This approach allows instructors to select works that best align with their students’ proficiency levels, interests, and curricular goals. For illustration purposes, several model tasks based on specific works of fantasy literature (e.g., Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, Le Guin’s *Earthsea* series, Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series) are provided, demonstrating how the proposed strategies can be concretely applied in classroom settings.

**Summary.** This structured approach – drawing on main and supporting reading strategies,

integrated across three stages – demonstrates how fantasy literature can serve as an exceptionally effective medium for developing reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammatical proficiency, and critical thinking skills among EFL university learners. The proposed framework, rooted in differentiated instruction and supported by a variety of adaptable tasks, allows for both linguistic and cognitive development across learner levels. Future research might explore the integration of digital fantasy media or cross-genre comparisons to expand the instructional potential of literature in language education.

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