

Nurturing EFL Preservice Teachers' Literary Competence Through Picturebooks

Desarrollo de la competencia literaria de futuros docentes de inglés mediante libros ilustrados

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This study investigates the development of literary competence in 12 EFL preservice teachers participating in a literature course in Santiago (Chile). The research employs content analysis to identify diverse literary competences within the participants. Findings identify participant strengths in analyzing plot intricacies and character nuances, effectively summarizing events, and understanding complex plot, setting, and character dynamics. A positive learning trajectory was identified, indicating continuous growth in their literary competence. The study underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to EFL teacher education that recognizes picturebooks as invaluable tools for enhancing the literary acumen of future educators, offering a viable means of improving language learning and cultural understanding.

Keywords: EFL preservice teachers, literary competence, picturebooks, reader response

Este estudio analiza el desarrollo de la competencia literaria de doce docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera en formación que cursaron una asignatura de literatura en Santiago (Chile). Mediante un análisis de contenido, se identificaron diversas competencias literarias entre los participantes. Los resultados evidencian fortalezas en el análisis de la trama, la caracterización y el resumen de los eventos. Se observó una evolución positiva en su competencia literaria, aunque persistieron brechas en el análisis estético y estilístico, en la empatía hacia los personajes y en las conexiones intertextuales. El estudio destaca el valor de los libros ilustrados para promover habilidades analíticas complejas y aboga por una formación docente en inglés que incorpore estos textos como herramientas clave para enriquecer el aprendizaje literario.

Palabras clave: competencia literaria, docentes de inglés en formación, libros ilustrados, respuesta lectora

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Introduction

Developing literary competence among English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers is crucial, as it equips them with the skills to effectively engage and inspire their students through the rich world of literature, thereby enhancing language learning and fostering a deeper cultural understanding (Teranishi et al., 2015). However, while literary competence remains significant in the preparation of future EFL teachers, it is often inadequately emphasized and explicitly addressed in the curriculum (Paran, 2008). In this context, literary competence is understood as the set of skills and abilities necessary to interpret and engage with literary texts (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019; Culler, 1997; Spiro, 1991).

The curricular frameworks of many EFL teacher education programs frequently prioritize language proficiency and pedagogical techniques (Barahona, 2016), sometimes overshadowing the critical role that literary competence can perform in nurturing well-rounded language educators.

Within Chilean EFL teacher education programs, the inclusion of literature courses specifically tailored for future educators is notably limited. Moreover, when such courses are integrated, the emphasis is most often on studying the classics (Romero-Karlsson, 2016), sidelining the essential goal of fostering comprehensive literary competence among prospective teachers. In response, the study reported here was designed to examine the development of the types of literary competence in a group of preservice teachers enrolled in an EFL teacher education program in Santiago, Chile. The development of literary competence was explored through their reader response journals on nine picturebooks.

Literature Review

Literary Competence in the Preparation of EFL Teachers

Recent studies on the development of literary competence have emphasized the role of literature in

English language teaching, highlighting its authenticity in enriching cultural understanding, language comprehension, and student engagement (Hall, 2015). Additionally, the significance of literary competence within EFL education has been foregrounded, due to its influence on pedagogy and teacher readiness (Calafato, 2023).

A strong command of literary elements can empower EFL educators to most effectively foster their students' language skills, critical thinking, cultural awareness, and empathy. Integrating literary competence into teacher education can equip educators with tools to navigate the complex educational landscape, enhancing language proficiency and pedagogy by deepening their understanding of how literature can inspire creativity, intercultural dialogue, and enthusiasm for lifelong learning.

However, EFL teacher preparation often prioritizes language and pedagogical approaches, overlooking the importance of literary competence (Paran, 2008). This neglect has resulted in limited research focusing on foreign language teachers' literary competence (Calafato, 2023). Yet, some studies (e.g., Calafato & Paran, 2019) reveal that although teachers recognize the benefits of literature in language learning, their university courses provide insufficient exposure to literature. The results of Calafato and Paran's (2019) study led the authors to propose enriching teacher education programs with curricular activities that provide practical instruction in applying literature to language lessons, in addition to theoretical understanding. Similarly, Romero-Karlsson (2016) identified the value of literature in developing language proficiency within initial English education programs in Chile, even though its intrinsic aesthetic value is often overlooked.

The Reader-Response Approach and Literary Competence

The reader-response approach, widely embraced in foreign language teaching contexts (Paran, 2008),

emphasizes the active role of the reader in interpreting and constructing meaning from a text (Rosenblatt, 1994). According to this view, the meaning of a literary work is not solely determined by the author's intentions or the text itself; instead, it emerges collaboratively through reader-text interaction. The experience, emotions, cultural background, and personal interpretations of readers play a pivotal role in shaping their understanding of the text (Rosenblatt, 1994). This approach highlights the dynamic nature of reading, in which different readers extract different meanings from the same text. Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reader response further explains this process as a two-way interaction in which meaning is constructed through the reader's simultaneous engagement with the text on both an efferent level—focused on extracting information—and an aesthetic level—centered on the feelings and experiences evoked by the reading act.

Reader-response theory is essentially concerned with literature reading. Its implications for teaching literature in a foreign language center on fostering the reader-text relationship, activating exploration in the literature class, cultivating students' literary competence (the ability to read literature aesthetically), and providing a supportive space for sharing and developing students' responses (Nguyen, 2016; Paran, 2008).

In addition, numerous studies have integrated transactional theory with related strategies, such as role-plays, group discussions, readers' journals, and projects. For instance, Tutaş (2006) observed a shift from teacher-centered literary analysis to a transactional approach. Similarly, Nguyen (2016) investigated a project in Vietnam that employed an interactive approach, focusing on students' perspectives of their learning journey. The findings indicate that this pedagogy not only encouraged students to become more active, dialogic, and reflective in their interpretation of texts but also exposed them to the challenges of introducing a new learning paradigm in a traditional setting.

Literary competence involves effectively engaging with and interpreting literary texts (Culler, 2002). This includes comprehending and analyzing literary elements like narrative structures, themes, symbols, and cultural contexts. While Culler (1997, 2002) emphasizes formal textual analysis, other scholars have argued that a comprehensive understanding of literary competence should embrace both aesthetic and subjective interpretations. For instance, Spiro (1991) suggests that beyond textual skills, literary competence should entail forming personal connections between the text and the reader's life experiences, including empathy for characters, aesthetic appreciation, and contextualization within cultural and historical backgrounds. Martinsson (2018) proposes a model of literary competence that identifies parallels between fictional and real worlds, grasps sociopolitical contexts, engages with aesthetics and style, deciphers themes and symbols, and empathizes with characters. Similarly, Alter and Ratheiser (2019) endorse this perspective, emphasizing aesthetic and subjective readings in their model and introducing categories such as empathetic competence, aesthetic and stylistic competence, cultural and discursive competence, and interpretative competence.

The reader-response approach closely aligns with the concept of literary competence by highlighting the reader's active engagement and interpretive skills in interacting with literary texts. Therefore, literary competence is understood as not just analyzing formal textual elements, but also engaging with the text on personal and emotional levels. The reader-response approach resonates with this notion by acknowledging that readers with developed literary competence can adeptly connect the text to their own experiences, emotions, and cultural contexts, thereby enriching their understanding of it. In essence, literary competence, influenced by the reader-response approach, encompasses the reader's ability to engage with a text meaningfully and contribute unique perspectives to its interpretation. This approach encompasses both

efferent readings—such as textual reconstructions, thematic and symbolic interpretations, and causal relationships within the plot, setting, and characters—and aesthetic and subjective readings, such as emotional responses, immersion in the fictional world, and connections between the text and readers' reality.

In the context of literary competence research in EFL preservice teacher education, only a limited number of studies have shed light on the development of this skill among EFL preservice teachers. For instance, Prasasti et al. (2022) examined the literary competence of 32 students at a private Indonesian university. Participants wrote essays on Aesop's *The Fox and the Crow* and their responses were analyzed using Spiro's (1991) literary competence model. The results suggested that participants demonstrated literary competence by connecting the text to personal experiences, empathizing with it, and placing it within a broader sociocultural context. Afifuddin (2017) examined English major students in Indonesia, focusing on critical readings of English poems. However, only a minority of participants (12%) displayed elevated critical responses indicative of literary competence. Expanding on this understanding, Qutub (2018) conducted research in Saudi Arabia with EFL preservice teachers, comparing intelligence-theory-based teaching methods with traditional ones. The results demonstrated a significant improvement in literary competence in the experimental group, underscoring the potential of innovative pedagogical approaches.

Further, Gómez-Rodríguez (2018) explored the development of literary competence in Colombian EFL preservice teachers through critical reading activities. This study highlighted the role of authentic texts and critical-thinking tasks not only in enhancing foreign-language proficiency but also in fostering literary competence. Importantly, the study underscored the critical function of teachers in shaping these outcomes by selecting appropriate texts and designing effective activities.

Within the Chilean EFL context, Romero-Karlsson and Barahona (2024) explored the types of literary competences that were fostered by a group of EFL preservice teachers in their post-reading activities on picturebooks. The results of this study showed that the preservice teachers primarily fostered text-oriented literary competences, such as the ability to carry out plot and character analysis, whereas reader-oriented literary competences were less common.

The Potential of Picturebooks to Develop Literary Competence

A growing body of literature has demonstrated that picturebooks, employing dual codes of text and imagery, emerge as potent catalysts for fostering literary competence and cultivating dialogues around cultural awareness (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Pantaleo, 2015; Valencia Leguizamón & Real, 2019). This inherent potential renders picturebooks as effective tools in the EFL classroom for encouraging the authentic use of the language (Mourão, 2016). Their visually engaging content can entice readers, encouraging contemplation of social dimensions like racial, ethnic, and social diversity (Wu, 2017). Furthermore, the analysis of picturebooks can be a means of introducing intricate literary concepts that might seem abstract, challenging, and technical when presented in the novel format (Jönsson, 2019). Post-modern picturebooks emerge as prime tools for enhancing students' grasp of complex literary devices, including intertextuality, genre fusion, ambiguity, and irony, facilitating the intricate interplay between text and imagery (Serafini, 2015).

A growing number of studies, including the work of Valencia Leguizamón and Real (2019), have highlighted the effectiveness of incorporating picturebooks as a robust strategy to foster holistic literary competence among learners. This pedagogical approach goes beyond mere literal reading, as picturebooks can foster multifaceted engagement, prompting readers to delve into the intricate interplay of nuances, complexi-

ties, and layered meanings woven into the narrative. By immersing themselves in these visual and textual intricacies, individuals are encouraged to embark on a journey of critical involvement with literary works. This journey entails not only recognizing diverse perspectives embedded within a story but also articulating insightful interpretations that harmonize with readers' individual experiences and worldviews (Sipe, 2000). Consequently, the integration of picturebooks serves as a conduit for nurturing comprehensive literary competence, allowing readers to explore more deeply, engage in more sophisticated forms of analysis, and ultimately cultivate a heightened comprehension of literature's impact on their lives. However, despite this clear potential, empirical research documenting how preservice teachers cultivate literary competence through picturebook reading remains limited.

Research Methodology

Participants and Context of the Study

The study's participants were 12 preservice teachers (11 women and one man). Although 16 were enrolled in the course, only 12 consented to participate in this research. The participants were preparing to become certified elementary and high school English teachers in Chile and possessed B1-level English proficiency (intermediate, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*). To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used when reporting outcomes.

A 12-week literature reading course was part of the fourth semester of an EFL teacher education program at a private university in Santiago, Chile. The pedagogy of the course included weekly seminars, where participants engaged in guided reading sessions using picturebooks. These seminars focused on various literary elements within picturebooks, including paratext, plot, characters, setting, narrator/narratee, interplay

between pictures and text, intertextuality, and style. Each week, a new literary element was introduced to enhance participants' literary competence. From Weeks 2 to 10, the program focused on individual picturebooks through classroom discussions and guided post-reading activities designed to help participants approach texts from multiple perspectives. These guided post-reading tasks supported the development of interpretive and analytical skills, encouraging responses to style, form, and content, as well as emotional engagement and personal connections. Beyond reading picturebooks, participants also studied texts on the analysis of literary elements to encourage more comprehensive and intricate responses to picturebooks (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Valencia Leguizamón & Real, 2019). Table 1 lists the picturebooks that were studied throughout the reading course.

The picturebooks were selected for their potential to develop preservice teachers' literary competence (i.e., the ability to engage meaningfully with a text and contribute unique perspectives to its interpretation). In this sense, reading these picturebooks allowed participants to undertake textual reconstructions, thematic and symbolic interpretations, and causal relationships within the plot, setting, and characters; as well as aesthetic and subjective readings, such as emotional response, immersion in the fictional world, and connections between the text and the participants' reality.

Methodological Approach

We adopted a case study methodology given its potential to provide a potent basis for the analysis of complex issues within a situated educational context (Yin, 2009). The case study design enabled an in-depth, contextualized understanding of how participants expressed and developed literary competence in response to guided picturebook readings. Author 1 was also the reading course instructor, a common arrangement in case study designs (Cohen et al., 2018).

Table 1. List of Picturebooks Studied in the Course

No.	Author and illustrator	Year of publication	Title	Publisher
1	Carola Lindstrom and Michaela Goade	2020	<i>We Are Water Protectors</i>	Roaring Brook Press
2	Roberto Innocenti	1985	<i>Rose Blanche</i>	Creative Paperbacks
3	Irene Latham, Karim Shamsi-Basha, and Yuko Shimizu	2020	<i>The Cat Man of Aleppo</i>	Penguin Random House
4	Jen Bryant and Melissa Sweet	2008	<i>A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams</i>	Eerdmans Books for Young Readers
5	Zeta Elliot and Noa Denmon	2020	<i>A Place Inside of Me</i>	Farrar Straus Giroux Books
6	Margaret Wild and Ron Brooks	2004	<i>Fox</i>	Allen & Unwin Children's Books
7	Shaun Tan	2001	<i>Red Tree</i>	Lothian Books
8	Deborah Underwood	2020	<i>Outside In</i>	Houghton Mifflin Harcourt
9	Javaka Steptoe	2016	<i>Radiant Child</i>	Little Brown Young Readers

The research questions that guided the study were:

1. What types of literary competence did preservice teachers develop during the reading course?
2. To what extent were picturebooks effective tools to develop literary competence?

Data Collection

Data sources included students' written reading journals produced throughout the semester, which were later analyzed through inductive content analysis. Each participant wrote weekly responses in their journals, producing a total of nine responses corresponding to the nine selected picturebooks. The responses were prompted by questions prepared by the teacher and focused on literary elements such as plot, theme, character, setting, metaphors, the interplay between image and text, and narration. The questions also prompted the participants to undertake aesthetic and subjective readings of the selected picturebooks. The writing instructions are included in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

We employed content analysis to systematically examine participants' reading response journals. The journals were scrutinized to identify meaning units, defined as words, sentences, or paragraphs with related content and context (Cohen et al., 2018). Inductive coding was applied to these meaning units. After coding all units, they were grouped into categories according to the type of literary competence they represented. These categories were adapted from established models of literary competence (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019; Culler, 1997, 2002; Martinsson, 2018; Spiro, 1991). The resulting categories were then used as the analytical framework for interpreting patterns in the data and are presented in the Results section.

Results

The content analysis revealed changes over time in participants' engagement with the picturebooks across the literary competence categories outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of Literary Competences

Category	Definition
Plot and character analysis competence	Readers examine the plot and/or characters by drawing on textual evidence to support their analysis.
Thematic and symbolic competence	Readers recognize key themes in the text and interpret the significance of symbols and metaphors.
Aesthetic and stylistic competence	Readers evaluate and appreciate literary elements such as structure, language, rhythm, imagery, themes, mood, setting, plot, and character development. They also analyze artistic aspects of illustrations, including color, linework, dimension, and perspective.
Subjective and emotional competence	Readers connect the text to their personal experiences or use the story to deepen their understanding of their own reality. They empathize with characters, events, and settings, engaging with the text on an emotional level.
Cultural competence	Readers identify cultural, historical, or social contexts present in the text. They establish connections between the text's world and real-world experiences or other literary works.

Overall, the frequency of categories was more evenly distributed in the second half of the course (Entries 6–9) than in the first half (Entries 1–5; see Appendix B).

In the early entries, most responses demonstrated competence in plot and character analysis. Although these types of responses continued throughout all entries, the later entries evidenced a broader range of literary competences. There was a notable increase in comments that shed light on the symbolic meaning of events, explored underlying themes and topics, and reflected personal and subjective engagement with the stories. Aesthetic, stylistic, and intertextual competences emerged especially in later stages and in response to structured teaching activities.

These findings indicate that participants progressively developed a more versatile and holistic literary competence as the reading course advanced. Notably, the more even distribution of literary competences observed in the second half of the course marks an important change in participants' responses to the picturebooks. This change likely reflects the impact of the course's pedagogical design, which actively prompted participants to engage with picturebooks through multiple types of

readings. By systematically focusing on different literary elements and forms of reading each week, the course encouraged participants to move beyond plot and character analysis to explore the texts' thematic, symbolic, aesthetic, and intertextual dimensions.

Plot and Character Analysis Competence

This category was the largest in terms of the number of meaning units (see Appendix B). This competence involves understanding plot and character elements in the text and illustrations, summarizing events, recognizing character development, and interpreting how the setting affects characters. Participants frequently demonstrated the ability to summarize the plot, describe significant events, analyze characters' responses to events, and infer character development from both the text and illustrations.

An example of this competence can be seen in Natalia's answer on *Rose Blanche*, in which she describes the scene in detail:

After [Rose] sees the little boy being grabbed by the collar, she decided to follow the route where the truck

went and when she was behind it, getting closer to the concentration camp, she says that the sky was gray and everything was frozen. We can relate this to the fact she was getting closer and closer to the concentration camp, where the Jewish people were, starving, frozen, and full of fear.

In addition to describing the scene, Natalia creatively explains how the mood grows more dramatic as the colors shift toward colder tones when Rose approaches the concentration camp. Natalia then demonstrates that she is conscious of the details provided by the illustrations and Rose's narrative, and how these help create the atmosphere of the event.

Setting/events affect characters was the second most common response, demonstrating that most participants possessed the analytical skills to infer how the plot, setting, situation, and characters interrelated. This is exemplified in Juan's response to *The Cat Man of Aleppo*:

In the beginning, [Alaa] was seen as a happy worker, who enjoyed small details, who enjoyed helping others and living a full life. However, when the war breaks out, the changes begin. First, it is understood that he goes through terrible pain for his town and his people, for all that fear and pain that they go through every day.

Juan's observation shows that he understood the cause-and-effect relationship between the civil war's breakout in the story and the protagonist's emotional response to it, which leads him to actively help the abandoned pets in his community.

Another common type of response concerned *character description*. The participants used evidence from the text or illustrations to describe the characters, as can be seen in Claudia's response to *A Place Inside of Me*:

The protagonist communicates a broad amount of feelings that were hidden, and we can infer that he has taken the courage to start a self-discovery journey to heal those emotions, and transform his sorrow, his rage, and

fears into something powerful that makes him connect to his roots and people. He puts aside the shame that society expected him to have, but instead, he develops indestructible loving bonds with his people that allow him to be proud of who he is and where he belongs.

Claudia's response demonstrates that she can synthesize the protagonist's emotional development from frustration to empowerment. This character description is complex because it requires the ability to infer character development from events depicted in both the illustrations and the text.

The responses in this category suggest that the participants had developed the competence to identify information in the illustrations and the text describing important events in the story, understand the characters' perspectives, and appreciate cause-and-effect relationships among the plot, setting, and characters.

Aesthetic and Stylistic Competence

This competence focuses on participants' evaluations of the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of picturebooks. They evaluated the visual elements (colors, light, shadows, proportions, shapes) in the illustrations and occasionally commented on the text's visual aspects (font and layout). For instance, Juan's response to *We Are Water Protectors* demonstrates the ability to make an overall judgment of the story by identifying its most prominent features, in addition to evaluating its strengths and weaknesses and describing the effect this has on their overall impression:

The story is sublime, spiritual, and awareness [*sic*], with very adequate visual support and a reduced range of characters but that manages to capture the essence of the feeling that the story tries to give, such as the harmonious love between water and people, the depth of vitality, among other things.

However, attention to stylistic features in the text and the interplay between text and illustrations was

limited. One of the exceptions was Isabel's response to *Fox*:

The author uses a lot of warm and dark colours, plus his illustrations are gloomy, enigmatic to the point of leaving the reader with a sense of dread and fear. This author uses very well the frames of each image to create dynamism between the drawings, [which] helps very well to support the text.

Isabel's observations demonstrated that she was conscious of the effects of the visual features on the readers' appreciation and comprehension of the story.

Claudia describes the interplay between text and illustrations, as evident in her response to *The Cat Man of Aleppo*:

The relationship between the illustrations and the text is very important because the text gives us emotions and feelings; on the other hand, the images show us the reality and the context of what is being talked about.

In Claudia's view, the illustrations and the text play complementary roles in the story: the text conveys emotions and feelings, while the illustrations convey the "reality and the context."

Although the participants demonstrated their ability to appreciate and evaluate the aesthetic and stylistic features of the illustrations in the picturebooks (Alter & Ratheiser, 2019; Martinsson, 2018), little attention was paid to the written text and its interplay with the illustrations. Participants' responses lacked more sophisticated analyses of the illustrations, such as shape, proportion, and movement (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2001; Pantaleo, 2015).

Subjective and Emotional Competence

This competence relates to how readers connect with and express emotions towards the text, characters, and events. Participants demonstrated this competence by drawing parallels between the story

and their personal experiences, showing empathy for characters and expressing their personal appreciation or preferences for the picturebooks. For instance, Sofia's response to *Fox* shows how she relates the story to her life experiences and proposes potential solutions for the situations seen in the stories:

The bird still goes out in search of the dog, which shows that many times these experiences occur in real life, where people are separated by the envy of other people or perhaps because life wants it, but it is the work of one to be persevering and trying to return to where one was happy . . . even if it hurts and it seems difficult.

However, participants showed little empathy toward the characters of the stories. An exception was found in Cristina's response to *Fox*:

My first impression of Fox was that he looks [*sic*] like someone who was hurt. His gaze reflects fatigue and conveys sadness. However, it also generated mistrust in me. Maybe it was because of the drawing, since in some parts it seemed that the fox crossed his eyes with mine.

Although Cristina's response differed from that of the other participants, it demonstrates the potential of picturebooks to develop readers' empathy towards the characters. Cristina's example also demonstrates that the diegetic barriers between the reader and the characters momentarily seemed to be broken when Fox's eyes cross hers.

Cultural Competence

This category involves situating the story within a broader sociocultural context and making intertextual connections. Some participants linked the story to real-world political, social, or historical events, showing an awareness of the sociopolitical context. Several of the participants produced ecocritical comments on *We Are Water Protectors*, as seen in Claudia's response:

Currently, there is a tremendous scarcity of water at a global level, and no one is aware of this. It is for this

reason that at the beginning of the book is illustrated [*sic*] an old woman with some young girls taking care [*sic*] and appreciating the water, because from it, life is born.

However, intertextual comparisons with other literary texts or cultural references were less common and appeared in only a few responses. One of the few examples was found in Paulina's response to *Rose Blanche*:

The illustrations in which you can appreciate the flags and patches of some people lead the reader directly to the setting of the story. This happens because they are popular elements whether the reader recognizes them from history or from famous movies such as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and *The Book Thief*.

In this example, Paulina demonstrated her ability to compare cultural productions that depict World War II. Examples of this kind, however, were too few to argue that the participants in general possessed the competence to make intertextual comparisons. Overall, there is less evidence of the development of cultural and intertextual competence in participants.

In summary, preservice teachers developed varying levels of competence in analyzing and interpreting picturebooks during the course. While they generally excelled in plot and character analysis, as well as in thematic and symbolic interpretation, there were limited demonstrations of aesthetic, emotional, and cultural competencies. Improvement was observed in some areas as the course progressed, indicating a positive learning trajectory.

Discussion

The results of this study shed light on the diverse array of literary competences exhibited by participants in their reading responses. In response to our first research question (What types of literary competence did preservice teachers develop during the reading course?), it became apparent that most participants demonstrated a robust ability to analyze various

literary elements, particularly those pertaining to plot and character within the text and the illustrations of picturebooks.

Their proficiency was evident in their skillful summarization of events, recognition of character development, and understanding of the intricate interplay between plot, setting, and character—responses that resonate with Rosenblatt's (1994) notion of efferent readings, in which readers focus on extracting information and meaning from the text rather than engaging with its aesthetic or emotional dimensions. This observation also aligns with Culler's (1997) concept of literary competence, which emphasizes structural awareness and the reader's ability to recognize and interpret the formal conventions of a literary text. These findings resonate with earlier research, notably Afifuddin (2017) and Valencia Leguizamón and Real (2019), both of whom explored literary competences among preservice teachers and found that formal literary elements were prominent in participants' responses. However, they faced challenges in areas such as interpreting images, understanding the book as an object, grasping its conventions, and making connections to other literary works.

While participants excelled in evaluating the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of picturebook illustrations, their consideration of the interplay between text and illustrations was somewhat limited. This finding contrasts with Gómez-Rodríguez's (2018) study, which stressed the importance of considering both text and illustrations in developing literary competence. In our study, participants generally concentrated more on the visual elements of the illustrations, particularly on colors, and less on the textual aspects, suggesting room for improvement in this specific competence.

Participants exhibited commendable ability to connect emotionally with the text, especially in the second half of the reading course (see Appendix B), drawing parallels between the stories and their personal experiences. This observation aligns with the conclusions of

Prasasti et al.'s (2022) research, which emphasized the significance of personal connections in the development of literary competence. However, participants in this study displayed less empathy toward the characters, which does not align with Alter and Ratheiser's (2019) and Spiro's (1991) models of literary competence, where the ability to empathize with characters is considered a central component. This contrasts with the findings of Prasasti et al. (2022), whose study reported a higher frequency of responses demonstrating EFL preservice teachers' ability to connect emotionally and empathize with literary characters.

Concerning the connection of stories to real-world sociopolitical contexts and intertextual comparisons with other literary texts or cultural references, such occurrences were relatively rare among participants. This suggests that participants did not fully engage in the kind of critical reflection that picturebooks ideally promote. As Wu (2017) argues, picturebooks—with their visually engaging content—can motivate readers to analyze social issues such as racial, ethnic, and social diversity, a potential that was only partially realized in this study. However, the present study shows that there was an increase in this type of response for two picturebooks: *We Are Water Protectors* and *A Place Inside of Me*. This suggests that the social topics in these particular books—environmental issues in the former and racial issues in the latter—resonated with the participants. These examples illustrate the potential of picturebooks to prompt engagement with real-world sociopolitical themes, as Wu (2017) suggests, even if such responses were not consistent across all picturebooks in the course.

Turning to the second research question (To what extent were picturebooks effective in developing literary competence?), the results indicate that preservice teachers can indeed develop various types of competence in analyzing and interpreting picturebooks. The interpretation of the text is influenced by the subjectivity of the readers, but it is undeniable that the text itself, with its

semiotic signs and signals, contributes significantly to the interpretations constructed by the readers. A closer examination of some of the picturebooks analyzed in the course suggests that certain texts may have prompted readers to engage in plot and character-oriented analysis, while others encouraged more thematic, symbolic, or aesthetic and stylistic-oriented analysis.

For example, picturebooks like *Rose Blanche* and *The Cat Man of Aleppo* feature easily identifiable sequences of events, inviting readers to analyze the plot and its impact on characters. In contrast, *The Red Tree* focuses on the emotional state of the young protagonist rather than following a strict plot, which may explain the higher frequency of symbolic analysis in response to this text. As mentioned above, *We Are Water Protectors* and *A Place Inside of Me* prompted participants to connect the stories to real-world sociopolitical events, aligning with Wissman's (2019) concept of radiant readings. On the other hand, the unconventional structure of *Fox* encouraged participants to assess the aesthetic and stylistic features. Thus, the characteristics of each picturebook played a significant role in shaping the type of responses generated by readers.

Additionally, the prompts and guiding questions provided by the teacher throughout the course played a crucial role in influencing the nature of participants' responses. Initially, the instructions aimed to establish a foundational understanding of literary elements, such as the interrelation between character and setting and characters' motives. As the semester progressed, the instructions prompted participants to delve deeper into stylistic and compositional features and analyze underlying themes.

Furthermore, the guided reading sessions conducted throughout the course appeared to positively impact participants' development of literary competence. These sessions systematically encouraged participants to approach picturebooks from various angles, focusing on plot, setting, character development, symbolism, stylistic elements, and connections

to personal experiences and real-world sociopolitical contexts.

These guided reading activities were complemented by critical discussions of texts by scholars such as Kümmerling-Meibauer (2015), Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), and Pantaleo (2015), which aimed to foster critical reading skills. The improvements observed in participants' responses, which became more holistic and complex following a systematic instructional period, are consistent with findings from previous studies. Researchers such as Gómez-Rodríguez (2018), Nguyen (2016), Qutub (2018), and Tutaş (2006) also highlight the significant influence of reading instruction on the development of students' literary competences, demonstrating that targeted pedagogical approaches can effectively promote more complex and holistic understandings of literary texts.

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that while picturebooks are undeniably effective in fostering a wide range of responses and literacy skills, some aspects of literary competence, such as intertextuality, evaluative comments on written language, and subjective appreciation, may remain relatively uncommon among participants. Therefore, it is inaccurate to claim that picturebooks alone promote the development of a comprehensive literary competence. Various factors come into play, including the variety and selection of picturebooks, teaching approaches employed, students' individual experiences, their language proficiency levels, and numerous other contextual elements (Nguyen, 2016). For a holistic understanding of the development of literary competence, these additional factors must be considered alongside the undeniable value of picturebooks in nurturing foundational reading skills and sparking a passion for literature.

Conclusions and Implications

The results of this study offer valuable insights into the development of literary competence among EFL preservice teachers through the analysis and

interpretation of picturebooks. Participants displayed a diverse range of literary competences, with notable strengths in analyzing plot and character elements, summarizing events, recognizing character development, and understanding the intricate relationships between plot, setting, and character. These responses align with Rosenblatt's (1994) concept of efferent reading, as well as Culler's (1997) view of literary competence as the ability to recognize and interpret structural features and narrative conventions. Moreover, a positive learning trajectory was discernible among participants, suggesting that their literary competence evolved and improved over the course, echoing observations from previous research (Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Nguyen, 2016; Qutub, 2018; Tutaş, 2006). However, there remains room for further learning in certain areas, such as aesthetic and stylistic analysis, empathizing with characters, and making intertextual connections.

These findings have significant implications for EFL teacher education programs seeking to enhance preservice teachers' literary competence. First and foremost, it emphasizes the importance of incorporating into the curriculum diverse types of literary texts, including picturebooks. Different picturebooks may naturally lend themselves to various types of literary analysis, whether plot-focused, thematic and symbolic, aesthetic and stylistic, or sociopolitical. Therefore, teacher educators should expose preservice teachers to a broad spectrum of picturebooks to encourage multifaceted literary competences, given their proven potential to foster various competences (Gómez-Rodríguez, 2018; Valencia Leguizamón & Real, 2019).

Additionally, teacher preparation programs should foster a deeper understanding of the interplay between text and illustrations in picturebooks, as this aspect was relatively underemphasized by the participants. Moreover, promoting empathy toward characters and facilitating intertextual connections should be integrated into the pedagogical approach.

This study highlights the value of picturebooks as powerful tools for developing literary competences among EFL preservice teachers. Their rich combination of visual and verbal narratives supports a wide range of literary competences, from plot and character analysis to symbolic, aesthetic, and sociopolitical readings. In line with Nguyen (2016) and Tutaş (2006), the results of this study highlight the importance of instructional strategies grounded in reader-response theory—such as guided reading, critical discussions, and targeted prompts—to foster deeper engagement. Lastly, a holistic approach that encompasses all the literary competences listed in Table 2 is recommended when working with picturebooks, as it supports preservice teachers in developing the literary competences essential for meaningful literary instruction in EFL classrooms.

Limitations

The small sample size may have influenced the distribution and frequency of the identified literary competences. A larger and more diverse sample might have given different results. Additionally, the participants were drawn from a single private university in Santiago, Chile, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other institutions. Thus, future studies would benefit from including preservice teachers from multiple universities to provide a more comprehensive and generalizable account.

The course duration (one academic semester) also posed a limitation. While the study aimed to develop a range of literary competences, the limited timeframe may have limited the depth to which these competences could be developed. A longer training period may allow for a more holistic development of complex literary competences such as intertextuality, stylistic analysis, and sociopolitical interpretations. Future research should consider extending the instructional timeline to support more robust, holistic development of literary competence.

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Appendix A: Prompts Used for the Reader-Response Journals

Entry	Picturebook	Prompt
1	<i>We Are Water Protectors</i>	What do you think the black snake means? What role does it play in the story?
2	<i>Rose Blanche</i>	Describe how the setting (space and time) affects the main character and how she acts. What details of the setting let you know this?
3	<i>The Cat Man of Aleppo</i>	What values do you think the protagonist embodies? How does the setting affect him? Refer to how both text and illustrations contribute to the character's portrayal.
4	<i>A River of Words</i>	What do we learn about William Carlos Williams's artistic development through the narrator? How does the narrator's story complement the illustration in the portrayal of William's artistic profile?
5	<i>A Place Inside of Me</i>	By looking at the narration and the illustrations, what can you say about the context of the story? How does it relate to our world? To what extent has the setting of the story caused the emotions of the protagonist?
6	<i>Fox</i>	What are your first impressions of the book and the main character?
7	<i>Red Tree</i>	Discuss how the images and the narration interplay in the depiction of the protagonist. What do we learn about the protagonist in this story? Explain how the symbols and metaphors help us understand her.
8	<i>Outside in</i>	In the story, the protagonist ponders the inside-versus-outside dichotomy. What does this story tell us about this contrast? What can you say about the protagonist, the aesthetics, and the setting? How do they relate to the philosophical question of inside vs. outside?
9	<i>Radiant Child</i>	What do you think is most interesting about the story? What would you like your future students to focus on in this story?

Appendix B: Types of Literary Competences

Categories (literary competences)	Codes (sub-competences)	Entries									Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
Plot and character analysis competence	Descriptions of the events	6	23	12	7	16	6	6	6	2	84
	Setting/events affect characters	0	15	20	19	16)	0	1	0	2	73
	Character description	15	5	11	9	4	15	9	4	1	73
	Setting description	0	5	0	1	1	0	4	1	1	13
	Total	21	48	43	35	37	21	20	11	6	243
Thematic and symbolic competence	Theme and topics	1	1	2	0	1	8	7	21	12	53
	Symbols and metaphors	24	13	9	1	3	0	22	7	0	79
	Total	25	14	11	1	4	8	29	28	12	132
Aesthetic and stylistic competence	Evaluative comments on the whole composition	5	5	3	3	3	11	1	4	5	40
	Evaluative comments on the illustrations	5	8	9	7	7	10	9	9	4	68
	Evaluative comments on the text/language	0	1	0	2	1	8	4	0	1	17
	Interplay between text and illustrations	0	0	4	1	0	0	4	0	0	9
	Total	10	14	16	13	11	29	18	13	10	134
Subjective and emotional competence	Empathy for characters	1	0	0	0	1	7	1	0	0	10
	Appreciation or preference	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	1	7	12
	Connections between story and personal experiences/ Opinions	1	0	4	0	1	5	8	1	8	28
	Moral message/lesson	1	0	2	0	3	3	3	3	8	23
	Total	2	0	4	0	7	14	9	5	15	76
Cultural and intertextual competence	Intertextuality and comparison	8	1	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	13
	The story is linked to political/social/historical events in the real world	18	2	0	0	16	0	0	7	5	48
	Total	26	3	0	0	16	4	0	6	5	61

Note. The numbers reported in the entries represent the frequency with which meaning units were coded under each category for each entry. 1 = *We Are Water Protectors*; 2 = *Rose Blanche*; 3 = *The Cat Man of Aleppo*; 4 = *A River of Words*; 5 = *A Place Inside of Me*; 6 = *Red Tree*; 7 = *Fox*; 8 = *Outside In*; 9 = *Radiant Child*.