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## DOTTORATO DI RICERCA IN
## SCIENZE UMANE

CICLO XXXIII

COORDINATORE Prof. Paolo Trovato

# 20TH-CENTURY FANTASY LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

# LANGUAGE TEACHING.

# A Focus on University Curricula in Vietnam

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| | |
|---|---|
| ESL | English as a second language |
| HANU | Hanoi University |
| UniFe | The University of Ferrara |

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**INTRODUCTION**

**(Personal) inclinations and (social) requirements**

The fact that literature plays an important part in education has long been a topic of discussion (Streven, 1986; Paran, 2000, 2006; Hall, 2015). A literary work teaches the language, the culture, and the history that lie in the story. It has become more than a means of art to look up and enjoy, but one useful source of reference and a tool to connect readers with other life issues. The role of literature in contemporary education might be the next solution to many social problems. It has the power to generate connections between individual readers and the story being told, it opens them up to a part of themselves they see reflected in the text, it allows them to find sympathy, and sometimes offers a way out of a turmoil they find themselves in.

Normally one may not think the literature discourse can bring many practical benefits to readers. This bias is even more easily seen in developing countries, where economic development is the focus. In those countries, there is a tendency to study majors that are closely related to social development as young people see and want a promising future ahead. In Vietnam in particular, as the country opened its market to foreign investors, its GDP growth rate has stayed high for over a decade, at 6.5% to 7% (Bùi & Bùi, 2017). The life quality of the people here increases much more in comparison to when Vietnam was an agricultural nation, and there seems to be a need to keep the wheel turning. The fields open to foreign investors include:

- Engineering
- Natural sciences
- Technology
- Business administration and business science
- Economics
- Accounting
- International law
- Language training (Phạm & Lê, 2017, para. 8)

Young people are therefore inclined to find job opportunities which offer them chances to be promoted and earn a good salary. They tend to search for jobs that are related to the above-mentioned fields. The following chart reports the result of Cunningham and Pimhidzai's World Bank report on Vietnam's job in the period of 2013 to 2015 (2018, p. 17).

**FIGURE 1.16:** Growth in Employment by Occupation, 2013-2015

| Occupation | Growth |
| --- | --- |
| Assemblers | 32% |
| Food Preparation Assistants | 18% |
| Stationary Plant and Machine Operators | 15% |
| Business and Administration Professionals | 12% |
| Electrical and Electronic Trade Workers | 10% |
| Health Professional | 10% |
| Cleaners and Helpers | 8% |
| Science and Engineering Professionals | 7% |
| Numerical and Material Recording Clerks | 7% |
| Metal, Machinery and Related Trades Workers | 6% |
| Refuse Workers and Other Elementary Workers | 6% |
| Customer Service Clerks | 5% |
| Prsonal Services Workers | 4% |
| Handicraft and Printing Workers | 4% |
| Teaching Pofessionals | 4% |
| Other Clerical Supprt Workers | 3% |
| Protective Services Workers | 3% |
| Drivers and Mobile Plant Operators | 3% |
| Business and Administration Associate Professionals | 2% |
| Sales Workers | 0% |
| Legal, Social, and Cultural Pofessions | -2% |
| Agricultural, Forestry, and Fishery Labourers | -2% |
| Food Professing, Wood Working, Garment and Other Craft and Related Trades... | -3% |
| Teaching Associate Professionals | -8% |
| Subsistence Farmers, Fishers, Hunters and Gatherers | -8% |
| Oriented-Market Skilled Agricultural, Forestry, and Fishery Workers | -10% |
| Street and Related Sales and Service Workers | -14% |

*Source:* Authors calculations from LFS, 2013, 2015; Notes: Showing two-digit occupation classification level for occupations with an absolute change of more than 25 000 workers

*Figure 1* World Bank's report on Vietnam's future job, from 2013 to 2015.

The research shows that professions in the fields of business and services were in high demand, while those in social and humanities experienced a reversed trend. The report also shows that jobs which contribute directly to the fast-paced development of Vietnam were the priority of job seekers. Although governments all around the world advocate the enhancement of the "individual's social and economic prospects" (Zajda, 2015, p. 4), evidence shows that Vietnam is strongly focused on the latter.

In what ways should literature be relevant? Literature plays the role of more than a form of art. It has been involved in many other studies and works, such as the case in which storytelling was used in treating patients (Elstein, Shulman, & Sparfka, 1978) or in language teaching (Cook, 2000; Dörnyei, 2010; Lamb, 2004). In fact, seeing the gap between young students' interest and the promising role of literature, the Vietnamese government has made some efforts to incorporate the subject more effectively into the curriculum using some new teaching methods (Ngô, 2018). Teachers try to involve students in the lesson by reducing the lecture time in the classroom and encourage them to do group works or take them on

field trips. These teaching methods are scarcely adopted in less developed areas because of the lack of facilities, but when they are employed effectively, students become more interactive, confident, and knowledgeable.

Phan's (2018) suggestion of teaching more than one humanities or social science subject is an example of the effort. Through the combination of history, geography, and literature, she wants to improve the quality of the lesson and attract students, as well as encourage them to self-study more about the topic. She proposes the example of *Sơn Tinh, Thủy Tinh*, a Vietnamese myth that originated in 2000s BCE which explains the causes of floods. The story can be taught in accordance with information about the life of Vietnamese primitive people and the geography of the country, and proverbs about nature can also be added. Still, this type of initiatives is spotted more frequently in individual proposals than in regional or national projects. Therefore, the problem of competent engagement of literature with education remains.

**My background as a reader and an educator**

My interest and concern about literature started in 1997 when Trẻ Publishing House acquired the copyright of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* to publish in Vietnam. I was fascinated by the strange world that *Harry Potter* discloses to readers, but it was not until many years later that I learnt about the fantasy genre, the very one that I have been acquainted with since childhood. One fantasy story unfolds differently in the eyes of different readers, for each person may form their own interpretation of a text. To children, it opens worlds of magic in which they can believe and see how the good defeats the evil. To grown-ups, it offers a sense of escapism from reality, not terminally, but to find a way back to their own world. Although I was young, and, in many senses, not in need of an escape from the real world, the fantasy genre and its power has left a strong impression on me. Never before had one genre triggered my curiosity and imagination the way the fantasy genre did.

As I grew up and became a student of English language and then a teacher, I realised that literature has great potential in language teaching. The young are often overwhelmed in front of career choices and opportunities. While getting into the university is one clear and important goal in life, most young Vietnamese students have little idea of what they want to do after graduation and how to achieve their goals if they have been set. Studying became a pattern after twelve years of primary and secondary education and Vietnamese students have been used to the style of teachers in these two levels. The fact that students receive more often than create knowledge ensures an adequate training for the high school graduation

exams but does not prepare them for the university. The switch between high school and university usually puzzles students as university lecturers have more autonomy in designing the classroom and the learning style. Moving from an environment in which they listen and take note most of the time to one in which they have to take lead and propose initiatives, students can only adjust little by little. That being said, Vietnamese students still experiences a much different learning environment from those in many Western countries. In Vietnam, subjects are taught as separated strings of knowledge. The education system also focuses more on the delivery of knowledge itself and less on soft skills which will be helpful to students. Consequently, there is a gap that needs to be filled so as to help them develop comprehensively.

There is more than one way to enhance students' creativity and critical thinking. English language majored students often learn other subjects that facilitate the study of language. At HANU, those subjects are Comparative Studies of English and Vietnamese, Culture and Civilization of English-Speaking Countries, and English Literature. They are supposed to enhance their knowledge of the language but have seemed to receive limited attention from students. What they do not see is the indirect development which can be gained from the above-mentioned subjects. They provide an insight into the English language and allow students to approach it from many angles. Particularly, English Literature may help to enhance their critical thinking most effectively as it provides opportunities for them to read and interpret the text. One obstacle which emerges from the teaching of this subject is whether the choices of texts and the delivery of the lesson might be of interest to students.

For several years now, the literary texts in the course of English Literature at HANU have been Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* (1905). Students often thinks that both texts express sentimentalism and thus have certain similarities. Other genres, especially the fantasy genre, have not been analysed, but only mentioned in the lessons on the history of English literature. In fact, the fantasy genre has great potential in the improvement of language competence, creativity, and critical thinking because it offers a wide range of vocabulary and contexts in which readers are encouraged to use their imagination.

In his book *Fantastic Literature: A Critical Reader*, David Sandner (2004, p. 1) poses the question of what exactly the fantastic is, and how its power affects readers:

> Is the fantastic primarily a literature of fragmentation, a subversive literature that reveals our desires in a fun-house mirror, opening an abyss of meaning, questioning the limits of self

and society? Or is the fantastic primarily a literature of belatedness, unmoored from reality, innocent, the repository of exploded supernatural beliefs, expressing a yearning for a lost wholeness, promising transcendence?

The answer is yes.

[…]

The fantastic opens spaces for interpretation. And it is the tension between its potential fullness and its surprising emptiness that propels its "sense of wonder," to use Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous phrase.

The first thought in Sandner's (2004) book also speaks the concern of many readers on fantasy as merely a banal and disconcerting, if not to say, ridiculous, genre full of imaginary creatures and lands. Nonetheless, Vietnamese students, and students in every country alike, are exposed to similar stories since childhood. Each country has its own collection of folklores and fairy tales, some of which are likely to have been in the primary and secondary education curricula. The study of the fantasy genre in another language, however, has not been offered to Vietnamese students.

Having seen this gap and the promising role of the fantasy genre, I have chosen to explore the use of the genre in an English literature course taught in the English language. With such a goal, I started my project at two universities, HANU and UniFe, in order to scrutinize the students' perspective on the role of 20$^{th}$-century British fantasy literature in enhancing their language competence, critical skills and creative thinking.

**Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into seven parts, including the Introduction and the Conclusion.

The **Introduction** gives an overview of the social and educational background and explains what each chapter focuses on.

**Chapter I: Theories and Methodologies of Literature in Language Teaching** reviews some notable studies on the topic of literature in language teaching. In this chapter, Geoff Hall's (2005) book on literature and second language teaching is analysed as a theoretical framework that sheds light on my study. Four other studies on the similar topic are also taken into consideration for the insight they bring into my study.

**Chapter II: Fantasy Literature as a Way of Representing and Understanding Reality in Vietnamese Culture** provides an anatomy of the fantasy genre with a focus on estrangement, the element which decides the power of the genre. The chapter also looks at literature and the fantasy genre in Vietnam, especially in its education system.

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**Chapter III: J. R. R. Tolkien and Roald Dahl as Significant Twentieth-Century Writers of Fantasy** focuses on the two authors whose works are used in this research project. It justifies how their works are relevant and useful.

**Chapter IV: Methodology and Methods for Data Collection on Fantasy in Language Teaching** describes the data collection tools, the participants, and the procedure of data analysis.

**Chapter V: Results and Discussion** is the presentation of the data, which in turn, answers the research question of the study. The chapter also points out some limitations to the study in the hope of suggesting improvement for further research projects of the same topic.

The **Conclusion** wraps up the entire study and confirms the result on the research project.

# CHAPTER I

# THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES OF LITERATURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

## I.1. Literature and education

Literature has always been a fundamental subject for students and almost anyone can list some of its advantages to the society. Literature contributes to different fields in life. From a text, readers can understand more about the nature of various phenomena, build their own point of view and form their critical thinking. Reading literature has become more than a means of entertainment and pastime activity for it creates the world that we know. It plays a part in many aspects of our life, even in those seemingly more technical. Storytelling, for example, has been used as a means of diagnosis to help therapists understand and communicate with their patients more efficiently (Elstein, Shulman & Sparfka, 1978). Another example is Orr's (1987) investigation of the story of technicians who work with complex machines. For both of the groups, the role of storytelling is to help them harvest important details that contribute to the treatment. Stories, as we can see, play their part not only in the classroom. People from "the full range of human professions and activities, have come to see the importance of narrative understanding to what they do" (Hall, 2005, p. 31).

In education, literature is highly recognised and valued. From the early ages in history, many generations of students have been engaged in the analysis of great literary works of various forms including epic poetry and the Bible, chronicles and riddles, dramas, novels and short stories. It could not be absent from the education of a young person, shaping personality and attitude towards the world. It is the core of our life, or as Chambers and Gregory (2006, p. 2) put it, the place from where we can "try to 'move' out and make fruitful connections to current educational thinking". Literature opens doors and creates dimensions. Life becomes more sophisticated, switching from a flat world to a new world with great width and depth, shedding light on everything that we see and making us crave knowledge.

However, literature is far from reaching its full potential. Firstly, the root of literature, according to Chambers and Gregory (2006), is in the ancient pedagogy of language. Creativity was not important at the time of Latin and Greek. Students who learnt these languages and their literature had to follow the grammatical rules involving syntax, tenses, and the likes. Their independent opinions would be limited as "mimicking and parroting their teachers' knowledge and injunctions" were encouraged in the classroom (Chambers & Gregory, 2006, p. 10). Pointing to how Roman culture elaborated the Greek one, Wheeler's (2010) study on Roman education reveals that the reason behind this focus on imitation is

that teachers wanted to elude any risk that pupils might be unwilling to learn. Wheelers' (2010, p. 22) description of the occupation draws a gloomy picture of a classroom in the main square, with the teacher whose qualification was still in question. He was lowly paid and thus was not at all happy with his job or students, whose "motivation was provided mainly by the threat of physical punishment". At the primary level of education, the beating was popular not only because it was favoured but also because most of the time students were too young to understand the meaning of what they were being taught. At the secondary level, they started learning the art of public speaking from teachers and books. Their sources of reference did not vary, and thus they reproduced more or less the same idea. The manner of speaking was regarded as the most significant element that differentiates one style from others. Conforming to the norm was obvious, considering all the violence associated with training.

In the same study Wheeler (2010) describes language teaching in the Middle Ages as being not too much different from the Greek and Roman times. Latin became the most widely learnt language and was associated with religious study in church schools. Because it was education from the early years in life, the method applied was "translation, repetition, and memorization" (Wheeler, 2010, p. 28). The learning style was also dull, for it involved the repetition of words in both oral and written form.

Later on, when literature evolved and became an independent subject, the new prospect became more vivid and promising. Kerwin (2009) claims that the Renaissance is the greatest age of literature in history. He calls this period an "epoch" (2009, p. 24) in which the "polyphony" (2009, p. 24) of historical movements created outstanding literature. With inspiration coming from the medical field, poetry and theatre thrived in this long period. First of all, the concept of sickness caused by the imbalance of four humours in the human body triggered authors to write about how they, or others, went through the illness. After that, anatomy became popular and sketches of human organs were published, leading the way for "the imagination and conception of what it means to be human" (Kerwin, 2009, p. 26). Anatomy and the rise of medical knowledge brought more creativity into literature and teaching. Having originated in the Middle Ages, the Great Chain of Being shed light on the position of humans in a hierarchical system with God at the top and angels, humans, animals, plants, and minerals followed. Humans were considered as impermanent beings whose bodies consisted of both spirit and matter. This theory falls in line with the principle of macrocosm and microcosm, which points to a connection between individual bodies and the cosmos. During the Renaissance, this theory re-emerged and received attention of scholars like Leonardo da Vinci. It provided knowledge on the human body, including the organs, as

related to the universe. Kerwin (2009, p. 27) also mentions Latin education-based classroom, grammar school, and "the birth of a reading culture that often invoked the values of the classical world" that emphasizes the grace and epic of language.

New genres always emerged in accordance with the changes in society, especially during the Industrial Revolution. Creativity was still a value in literature, especially when it was considered as a means to express either gratefulness to the advancements in the present or regret and nostalgia for the past. Genres which are associated with science emerged, and at the same time, the sense of nostalgia was found in a great number of texts by Romantic and Victorian authors, longing for the nature that was being lost. However, Sanderson (1999) noticed how the appearance of public schools and the popular Christian civil servant image emphasised the role of the person in the community. Pupils would not be assessed on the basis of distinctive personality, and creativity and imagination were not regarded as key to education. The "getting it right" pedagogy still existed, which means that what was right should come from a teacher or an instructor, not from students (Sanderson, 1999, p. 11).

A crucial issue regarding literature is its relationship with education. Literature has often been taught independently and for the sake of itself. In other words, when students work with a literary text, they examine and analyse it in order to perceive the message that it is delivering. Literature as a tool that helps students achieve another goal invites thorough investigation. In a language classroom, for instance, the non-literary materials are usually more favoured than literary texts. Various reasons can be mentioned: teachers view non-literary materials as simpler to read and understand or as more up-to-date and accessible to learners, but they have become rather popular in second language teaching. For instance, Aebersold & Field's (1997, p. 13) short analysis of reading in the language classroom depicts different sources of text as following:

> The newspaper sentence contains more clauses or reduced clauses (two complete, three reduced) than any of the others. The sentence from the personal note has two clauses; the short story has three clauses (two complete, one reduced). The academic sentence contains two clauses, but its WH-clause, occupying the subject position of the other clause, is quite complex grammatically. […] Thus sentence length and complexity are text features that can influence comprehension and can signal the type of text.

Comparing all types of text, perhaps what teachers favour in the second language classroom at the lower levels is less academic or non-literary. Authors do not make this point in their book, yet suggest teachers should consider complexity when choosing a suitable text

for learners. Concern about the complexity of the text is always in teachers' mind, leading to the fact that they are less likely to go for texts that are not effective for learners. Whatever the case is, Takahashi (2015) points out that many learners have been working with articles from printed and online newspapers, magazines, transcription of daily news, advertisements, and so on. Some claim that these non-literary materials are informative and useful; some others say they are rather dry. Unquestionably, they bring knowledge, but they cannot stimulate readers' minds in the same ways as literature can do.

In fact, literature can be an aid for many other subjects, but the bond between it and language is ever stronger because they integrate and co-exist in the same text. Language forms the sentence and literature encapsulates the meaning. Language is the body and literature is the soul. As a result, students may benefit in many ways when they work with a literature text. The Japanese history of education, for example, contains stories of those who successfully used literature to learn a second language. In her chapter on the role of literature in language teaching, Nasu (2015) listed some famous Japanese scholars who read to learn the English language. Inazo Nitobe, a representative of the League of Nations "read extensively" (Nasu, 2015, p. 230) when he was young and later was able to write books in English in a short period of time; Tenshin Okakura, author of *The Book of Tea* (1906) summarised an English book in Japanese to read to his children as a bedtime story; Hidesaburo Saito, who edited several English-Japanese dictionaries, "read with such fervour that he had read every book in the library's English section in just three years" (Nasu, 2015, p. 230).

In recent years, many researchers have supported the idea of using literature in teaching a second language (Gilroy & Parkinson, 1997; Hall, 2005; Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000). Puebla (2012, p. 6) calls it "an integrated tool for a better comprehensive acknowledgment of the English language". Likewise, a number of international research projects on language teaching focus on the introduction of literature into the classroom as a more dynamic tool (Cook, 2000; Dörnyei, 2010; Lamb, 2004). In Hall's (2015) article, he points out that more groups of interest in the role of literature in language teaching are forming. To name but a few, IATEFL Literature, Media and Cultural Studies Group, Global Issues Group, The C Group, and so on. There are also journals on the topic, for example, *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching, Language and Literature, Modern Language Journal*, and the likes. Several other involvements of literature have been seen, such as the teaching of literature with the attainment of the second language's vocabulary (Hudson, 2007, as cited in Hall, 2015), and a link between language competence and adequate reading in a Singaporean primary school (Zhang et al., 2008, as cited in Hall, 2015).

The new generation of teachers realises that they should stop treating literature as something impractical and see it under the light of "a way to explore similarities and negotiate differences between cultures" (Haseltine, 2016, p. 2). Indeed, literature can be a bridge that connects cultures. Common knowledge of one culture can be learnt from literature because, fundamentally, it reflects our own world. At times, the significance of literature is reduced to its escapist characteristics, which to some people are not conducive to practical language learning. Thus, literature was marginalized in the language classroom and it is high time its strength is fully revealed.

Among its many advantages in second language learning, the biggest significance of literature is perhaps the enhancement of students' critical thinking. Most people would agree that critical thinking is the result of second language learning. When we learn a new language, we acquire and strengthen our basic skills, critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving ability, intercultural understanding, etc. (Oktay et al., 2006; Finch, 2012; Michońska-Stadnik, 2016). However, it can work the other way around, which means critical thinking can help us achieve higher goals when learning a new language. I will come back to this issue when I examine the critical thinking skills of Vietnamese students. It is a fruitful path leading the "fundamental thinking skills to establish a foundation for liberal arts" (Miyahara, 2015, p. 53). It helps learners develop questions, brainstorm, search for answers, and from there develop new ideas of their own. Since no process of learning exists without wondering and realizing, critical thinking is an inevitable step to achieve the final goal.

The link between the literature and critical thinking, according to Hakes (2008, p. xi), is supposed to be "a journey between what appeared to be two islands, but which, it transpires, are simply different coastlines of the same one". Not many learners of a second language can understand that it is just one island. For most of them, reading a text in the target language does not necessarily mean catching its message, but understanding each individual word in the text. They cannot see the "irony", or "the significance of point of view" in the text (Hall, 2015, p. 15).

Similarly, Takahashi (2015) argues that several Asian countries do not consider literature as an important training method for creative thinking. Disconcertingly, in China, there are authors such as Qiping and Shubo (2002, p. 318) who suggest that the nature of English language training are "ingesting information, […] mastering techniques, […] acquiring facts and know-how", while literature is, above all, "a mere trimming to decorate the hard center of the market-oriented syllabus". Indeed, societies in China are market-oriented, yet their cultural backgrounds which date back to thousands of years and are valued in their education make it difficult to understand why literature is so unpopular in the

language classroom. There are also arguments like the one by Teranishi (2015, p. 167), who points to literature as "irrelevant" to the enhancement of communication skills. Such worrying thoughts bring scholars like Takahashi (2015, p. 27) to expose the threat that "literary works have been marginalized".

Similar to the above issue, in Vietnam, most of the courses of language teacher-training focus on teaching methods instead of analytical methods that use literature as both a tool and a material (Trương, 2009). According to Bodewig and Badiani-Magnusson (2014), although Vietnam too has chosen the path that other Asian countries are trying to follow, that is to head toward soft skills training such as problem-solving skills, group-working skills, and creative thinking skills, there is still a lot of work to do. In a classroom without creativity and independent viewpoint, what students do is always follow what teachers say, repeat what they have heard from teachers in essay after essay, and parrot the analysis that teachers provide because it is the 'right' answer. Vietnamese students have been learning that way for so many years now that they might not even ever stop and question what they are doing and why they are doing it.

Nguyễn and Trần (2016) believe that the lag behind and low quality of the Vietnamese labour force, when compared with other countries, is due to the students' passive attitude on which learning is based. Welch (2010, as cited in Nguyễn & Trần) expresses concern that young Vietnamese people appear to be "bookworms" who lack critical thinking skill. Trần (2010) criticises the poor and outmoded curriculum that focuses on theory instead of practical knowledge and skills. Sometimes, because the ultimate goal of teaching literature is to encourage students to become good critics, teachers go a bit too far and try to impose their ideal viewpoint, taking creativity and perception away from them (Fortune, 1990). Vietnamese students become shallow, or worse, hollow shells and have no independent point of view. What they present is only words their teachers have mentioned, which the teachers previously learnt from their own teachers, and the circle goes on and on.

My belief is that this unproductive method can be changed over time. The young generation can greatly benefit from literature when we use it to enhance their critical thinking skill. In fact, there is a number of researchers all over the world who have encountered the same problem and some others have tried to address it achieving positive results. Their studies address the issue of literature teaching in the classroom and suggest ways to improve it. In the next part of the chapter, I will describe their research and explain why they can be the helpful to my study. While Geoff Hall's (2005) research on literature in second language learning serves as my theoretical framework, the four others provide references to the engagement of literature in language studies.

**I.1.1. Geoff Hall's theory of literature in language teaching**

Geoff Hall's (2005) book involves the nature, the research, and the teaching of literature, and its role in education. To him, literature is difficult to define, and similarly, many other researchers had tried to acquire its nature without much success. The reason for this obstacle is the seemingly vague boundaries of literary languages. People often deem literature as abstract, transcendental, and not simple to discern. Describing a typical opinion on the language of literature, Hall (2005, p. 10) writes:

> Common sense nevertheless traditionally opposes a stereotype of 'literary' language to ordinary language. Literary language in this view is flowery (or, more positively, 'elevated'), unusually figurative, often old-fashioned and difficult to understand, and indirect (for example, 'symbolic'); all in all totally unlike the language we use and encounter in everyday life.

Having said so, he also points out that literature is "made of, from and with ordinary language, which is itself already surprisingly literary" (Hall, 2005, p. 10). Indeed, if we do not consider the languages used in the early works of literature, the languages found in poems and novels from the past three or four decades is not too dissimilar from the ones we use today. Conversations in 18th and 19th-century novels used sentence structures that are not encountered in our daily talks, but they are completely understandable to modern readers. For Hall, what creates the gap between literary language and everyday life language is its variety and "representative" function (Hall, 2005, p. 11).

Then why are literary language considered as clichés? We should not forget that literature consists of many genres, in which poetry is perhaps more distinguishable than others. In some countries, the production of prose is greater than verse, while in others it is the other way around. For instance, in Vietnam, where many famous poets represent the whole period of the Vietnam War, poetry leaves a strong impression on readers. In poems, readers often notice rhythmic verses, along with plentiful figures of speech and wordplays. However, since free verse poems became popular, there has been a big difference between past and contemporary poetry. More traditional poems are rhythmic and musical but can be incomprehensible to many contemporary readers.

Focusing on English literature, the gap between languages belonging to different ages is particularly strong. One such example can be found in William Morris' poem *The Lapse of the Year* in his collection *A Book of Verse*, written in 1870:

Summer looked for long am I

Much shall change or ere I die

Prithee take it not amiss

Though I weary thee with bliss! (1980, p. XX)


Borrowing the voice of four seasons in a year, Morris (1870) portrays the beauty of each season through its story. Contemporary readers may well catch the general idea of the poem, but cannot tell exactly what Morris is saying in each stanza. The long-awaited summer with its strong characteristics is asking everyone to not take it for granted, but in fact how many people can hear it pleading if they do not understand? If this poem is to be used in a second language classroom of a lower level, the summer's beauty will not be easily perceived, and learners will not be able to learn anything. This is where poetry from previous centuries meets its obstacle in delivering something to language learners.

On the other hand, though contemporary free verse poems use the languages that we use on a daily basis, their meanings might be deeply hidden and in some cases require background knowledge, not to mention the possible risk of sounding like clumsy prose with the skin of a poem. Tiempo (2007, p. 3) even goes as far as pointing out that this tendency provokes the thought that verse "is insidiously losing its territory to prose, that it could be confronting obliteration as a distinct art genre and end up as a new and precious form of prose, poetry-sounding but nonetheless prose".

On the contrary, according to Shklovsky (1917), genres such as realism do not bear this characteristic. One thing that we can assume is, because of this belief, more readers would prefer realistic literature because of its familiarity. Yet, probably because of that very reason, Shklovsky (1917) did not mention much about that genre. To him, the role of literature is to allow readers to enter another reality. Moreover, Cook (1994, as cited in Hall, 2005) thinks that readers should also be allowed to have doubts about the language they read in literary texts. This comes with the fact that second language readers "pause longer over words and remember surface forms better than 'ordinary' readers of other kinds of writing", which also proves the special role of the literary text in language education (Cook, 1994, as cited in Hall, 2005, p. 15). Usually, when native language readers read a text, the content is what catches their attention and the rest just falls flat. On the contrary, second language readers may notice something new or interesting to them, such as a word or a sentence structure. In some cases, more advanced learners might be interested in figures of speech in

the text. In their research, Day and Bamford (1998, pp. 13-14) list the following advantages of extensive reading in the second language classroom, among others:

- Automatic recognition of a word allows lexical access.
- The phonological representations of the words in a sentence hold the words in working memory long enough for comprehension to occur.
- Comprehension draws on the reader's prior knowledge of the language, of the world, of the text types, and of the topic.

This has suggested that to second language learners, the benefits of a literary text is recognised, though still questioned by many researchers. The dilemma to them is what kind of language should be focused on, the "interesting", or the "comprehensible" (Attridge, 1988, as cited in Hall, 2005, p. 19). For Hall (2005), enriching the vocabulary is often one's goal when learning a second language, but does not necessarily receive the right amount of consideration. At this point, the conundrum is whether literature is the ultimate source of enhancing one's vocabulary. As mentioned above, non-literary materials are popular in second language learning because these sources bring more hand-on words and sentence structure that might be helpful to learners' work and study. The vocabulary in literary texts is rich and original, but that in the non-literary text is practical. If we consider them as two separated sides of language, this argument might be never-ending. On the other hand, if we see them under the light of two integrated parts of the same body, we can use them both in learning a new language. Hall (2005) supports the idea suggested by Tannen (1989, p. 1), that "ordinary conversation is made up of linguistic strategies that have been thought quintessentially literary". Non-literary and literary reading materials both play significant roles in language learning, but the problem is that the former is widely recognised, while the latter is not.

Discussing literature in education, Hall (2005) uses Cox's five reasons for teaching English (1991, as cited in DES/WO, 1989, p. 21). The "Famous Five" reasons include:

- A 'personal growth' view focuses on the child: it emphasises the relationship between language and learning in the individual child, and the role of literature in developing children's imaginative and aesthetic lives.
- A 'cross-curricular' view focuses on the school: it emphasises that all teachers have a responsibility to help children with the language demands of different subjects on the school curriculum.

- An 'adult needs' view focuses on communication outside the school: it emphasises the responsibility of English teachers to prepare children for the language demands of adult life, including the workplace, in a fast-changing world
- A 'cultural heritage' view emphasises the responsibility of schools to lead children to an appreciation of those works of literature that have been widely regarded as amongst the finest in the language.
- A 'cultural analysis' view emphasises the role of English in helping children towards a critical understanding of the world and cultural environment in which they live. Children should know about the processes by which meanings are conveyed, and about the ways in which print and other media carry values.

Hall (2005) states that Goodwyn's (1992, as cited in Hall, 2005) survey of UK English teachers reveals that the first reason ranks first in popularity, while the fifth comes second and the rest three are not popular choices. Hall (2005) then focuses on the first (personal growth), the fourth (cultural heritage) and the fifth (cultural analysis), claiming that besides the obvious advantage that involves personal development of a learner, the learning of language and literature can enhance one's cultural understanding. It is because language "reveals much about its users and the societies they interact with, and can also be used to prompt learners' growing awareness of their own individual and cultural identities, beliefs and values" (Hall, 2005, p. 41). A personal goal is of course an important, if not to say the ultimate, goal that every country aims for in the education of a child. However, owing to that reason, other aims of teaching are sometimes unconsciously neglected. Many students at later stages of life, find themselves lacking background knowledge because what they learnt from school may help them achieve a good academic result, but cannot give them constructive insights into the world. Hence, in higher education levels, they are not able to learn to appreciate subtler facets of culture, those that could have been learnt through literature. Their critical understanding is not developed enough because it has not been focused on. The cultural ideas and concepts that might have been achieved in literature remain undervalued. This is also a problem that Vietnamese students of different levels are facing. They learn theory very well but can only keep it in their head without being able to use or apply it precisely because they treat theory and knowledge as independent items. There are no links between whatever they learn and make use of, thus everything becomes chaotic. To be able to draw the link between different items, they need to make connections and see how abstract principles become relevant in common use. In order to achieve this, background knowledge is required.

More specifically, in second language classrooms, teachers often treat literary texts as tools to help students enhance their language competence, without assessing "what is going on when a student reads (or fails to read) literature" (Hall, 2005, p. 47). The power of literature on first language readers is clear and, as Hall finds in the following data, it should be clear that second language readers greatly benefit from it too. Literature improves their ability to produce:

- affective arguments (pleasurable, motivating, personalising);
- cultural arguments (cultural knowledge, intercultural experience);
- psycholinguistic arguments ('focus on form', discourse processing skills – inferencing, processing of non-literal language, tolerance of ambiguity and others).
  More miscellaneously literature:
- expands vocabulary;
- aids language acquisition in unspecified but general ways;
- 'gives a feel for' the language;
- develops more fluent reading skills;
- promotes interpretative and inferential skills;
- contributes to cultural and inter-cultural understanding;
- is linguistically memorable (especially poems);
- is claimed to be pleasurable (Hall, 2005, p. 48).

Though Hall (2005) claims this data set to be too much relied on without deep investigation, probably the three first values of literature in second language learning on the list are really the shortfalls of learners. Often absent from their list of fundamental achievements when learning another language, these values represent the indirect accomplishment when working with literary texts. As a matter of fact, in Vietnam, for example, learners of English language rarely learn English literature in the classroom. Tô (2007, as cited in Nguyễn, 2016) explains that the popular way of learning here is listening to the audiotapes and repeating what they hear, only making some changes to fit the new context, which is also known as the parroting method that I have mentioned above. This method has been so widely used and favoured by Vietnamese teachers in the last few decades that they have ended up covering only superficial aspects of the English language. Its core, that is its cultural components, is taken for granted. Keeping the learning of language that

way, second language learners can only speak a soulless language which limits them in communication with other speakers.

Then what makes literature unwelcome among second language learners? First of all, readers are not habitually allowed to act upon their preference for literary texts. Teachers would think that canonical texts are useful for their students owing to their great values. Yet it is not necessarily the case. Many texts chosen by teachers are deemed to be difficult, which, as Hall (2005) points out, can involve many aspects of the work. Some have a complex plot that makes readers distance themselves. There are many times I have heard from my own students that they have to pause and think hard about where the story is going. Cultural background can be another limitation in understanding the text. Obviously, in almost every literary text, we can see cultural related details that readers of another culture cannot follow if they are not already familiar with them. All the same, if they are second language readers, the obstacle can also be linguistic. Interestingly, the prose is more rarely used than verse as reading text in the second language classroom, perhaps because it adds even more linguistic aspects for learners to consider. Insufficient language competence hinders readers of the second language and makes them give up on the literary text, interested or not as they may be. This leads to another fact Hall (2005, p. 52) mentions, that many studies show that the classrooms which use literature "put off at least as many students as they encourage". Thus, the point of selecting the reading material in a second language classroom is knowing what might trigger students' enthusiasm.

Among the three methods Hall (2005) suggests for second language learners in his study, i.e. Foregrounding, Corpus stylistics, and Simplification, the first came to me as the most appropriate for my project. Corpus stylistics is rather a technical approach toward reading. It focuses on the data that readers can base on when they need a source of consultation, a tool to stir up aspects of a literary text which cannot be noticed by any other means (Louw, as cited in Hall, 2005). The second approach, Simplification, is widely used but is nonetheless controversial because Hall (2005, p. 138) thinks "'easiness' and difficulty, and simplification, are notoriously not simple matters". Given his belief that simplification occasionally makes the text even more difficult to read and comprehend, using this method is like using a double-edged sword. Notwithstanding, Foregrounding catches the attention of readers by some abnormality in order to attract them to read more. Making readers ask questions about the text and provoking their curiosity seems to be a better tactic.

Hall demonstrates this method with Van Peer's (1986 and after, as cited in Hall, 2005) series of research projects involving the influence of some literary texts' linguistic features. He had different groups of readers comment on the same unpopular 19th-century

poems and found that certain parts of the text provoked uncertainty or further questions from readers. This series of studies also suggested that the academic background of readers always affects their opinion, that is to say, more or less the same questions emerged in every group of participants. He also points out that "the language was largely being taken by these readers as a signal of meaning or content significance" (Van Peer, 1986, as cited in Hall, 2005, p. 132). This suggests that it is not their competence in their own major, but fluency is important in Foregrounding. Even though this is a significant point in Van Peer's study, it left me wondering if other studies of the same topic and method would achieve the same result. His participants were all university students in the UK, including those that knew of Foregrounding, those who study literature and those who study science. Apparently, they had different majors but still ended up posing the same questions about the text. What invites further attention is whether university students in other countries, with cultural and social background knowledge different from those in the UK, would be able to come up with such questions when they read. Again, participants need a critical mind to process reading materials in such a way.

A crucial point that Hall (2005) mentions is the assessment of students' reading of literary texts. He explains that students are not aware of the progress they make while learning, perhaps because the achievement is not as obvious as other learning methods. The audiotapes parroting method, for instance, can give learners a sense of immediate triumph when they are able to repeat the model sentence structures in a new conversation. This fact leads to the issue of finding the ultimate way to judge students' development when using literary texts. Previously, in the 19th century, learners of literature were assessed with questions that "look distinctly odd and inappropriate" (Hall, 2005, p. 60). Such questions in that period of time did not focus on the perception of learners, but rather checked facts whose accuracy examiners can be sure of. Though providing obvious evidence of learners' reading progress, these factual related questioned did not show their perspective on what they have read. Also, learners can answer such questions just by reading the version that was translated into their native language, or the summary of the whole text (Carter & Long, 1990, as cited in Hall, 2005). Literature, therefore, lost its special role and became just another text used in the classroom. Fortunately, today, according to Hall (2005), more insightful educators are promoting more refined methods of assessment, some involving individual interpretation and opinion of learners, one of which I will describe in the next part of the chapter.

Hall's (2005) study thus provides a more insightful perspective on literature in education. He takes into account not only the nature of literature but also how it has been researched and used in both L1 and L2 classrooms. His evidence is taken from cases all over

the world, some of which from Asian countries, the part that we have not much knowledge of to base on. Even though the majority of the studies that were mentioned in Hall's (2005) book are in the Western world, where – I would say – the educational environment is more ideal than in other areas, it opens up new horizons to other researchers and prompts further research to address the remaining problem in itself. Literature is not an easy material to use, but once used, it changes readers and develops skills and abilities that help us achieve more than just educational success. Yet there is more than one approach to literature teaching, and the selection of the appropriate approach in each situation is one important element that decides the success. Following the wrong approach may lead not only to disappointing result but probably also to prejudice against reading literature among students.

**I.1.2. Trương Thị Mỹ Vân's study of literature reading strategies**

In *The Relevance of Literary Analysis to Teaching Literature in the EFL Classroom* (2009) Trương claims that literature receives limited attention in spite of its importance. First of all, she thoroughly explains the methods developed in New Criticism, Structuralism, Stylistics, Reader-Response, Language-Based and Critical Literacy. Along with its strengths and weaknesses, she also takes into account her colleagues' opinions on each method and describes her own experience using some of the methods with university students in Vietnam.

Each method has its advantages and has been popular in certain periods of time. For Trương (2009), New Criticism and Structuralism are approaches that are not suitable for her students. According to her, after the First World War, New Criticism emerged in the United States and became popular. This approach values the role of the text alone, not readers or even authors. When reading, readers should be objective and "discover the one correct meaning by a close reading and analysis of formal elements" (Trương, 2009, p. 3). All other background elements should not be considered important because they might disturb readers' attention to the text. However, Trương (2009, p. 3) thinks that this approach is only "an end in itself" but not a bridge that connects readers with other values of the text. Aspects like cultural or historical values are ignored, taking away from readers other achievements that they should have accomplished. In this case, these achievements are not forced but often come naturally, making ways for discussion between learners, through which they might understand the text in a deeper sense. If readers, and more particularly, learners cannot make their own sense of the text, then what makes this approach different from the parroting technique that many people oppose? Moreover, if the ideal literary texts for New Criticism are traditional and canonical ones and the "single-minded focus neglects the readers'

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experience", as Trương (2009, p. 3) says, the target of the classroom would not be texts that are more familiar to learners in the sense of language. In second language classrooms perhaps only advanced students are able to work with the language in the literary canon. For others, their proficiency should be of lower levels, and thus, the canon becomes a challenge for them in many senses, thus, both the literature-related and language-related aims are not achieved. This approach is especially disadvantageous in the Vietnamese classroom environment where teachers "monopolizes", leading to the fact that students cannot learn much (Trương, 2009, p. 4). Structuralism presents similar problems, except for its focus, which is not on the literary text, but on certain structures which all genres can follow (Dias & Hayhoe, 1988, as cited in Trương, 2009). Without scientific understandings of literature structures, learners would fail to use this approach. Such a "mechanical" method is not different from New Criticism in the sense that it locks up learners' creativity, not to mention cultural knowledge and language skills (Trương, 2009, p. 4). She, therefore, concludes it is not suitable for her use.

The two approaches which Trương (2009) does not regard as the best, but as useful in some respects are Stylistics and Critical Literacy. The former intrigues students' sense through the analysis of the language, while the latter helps them understand why the "status quo" exists (Trương, 2009, p. 8). The fact that Stylistics approach appeared in the 1970s, which is later than New Criticism and Structuralism, might be the reason for its advancement comparing to the other two. She explains that the strength of this approach lies in its ability to help learners distinguish between literary and non-literary texts, and thus, know the significance of literary language. She illustrates this point with her experience in teaching *The Red Wheelbarrow* in *Spring and All* (1923) by William Carlos Williams, a poem with special physical and rhythmic features:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Written in a haiku-like style, this poem is a representative of the free verse form that modern poets often favour. Trương (2009, p. 5) succeeded in making her students see how those feature affects their feeling towards the poem, claiming that the students were able to find "the language style and the form of the poem both entertaining and valuable". Yet she admits that without the teacher's guidance, the students could not exploit this technical method effectively. Furthermore, teachers themselves should have a thorough understanding of verse if they want to use this method in teaching, and thus, it is still challenging. Critical Literacy, on the other hand, is not only for literature but is still relevant because it shows the "interrelationship between language use and social power" (Trương, 2009, p. 7). Cummins (2000, as cited in Trương, 2009) explains that it helps students see the literary language under the light of social and political features of a society where the text is formed, and in turn, explains to them why they should choose a certain language strain. Since social features play an important role in the analysis of the literary text, this scheme can be a tool which leads the student further. Different periods of time reflect on the text and bring diverse qualities and Critical Literacy puts an emphasis on the background of the text. For Trương (2009) and her colleagues, Critical Literacy is needed if they aim to improve their students' critical thinking. However, their problem lies in selecting which text to use in the classroom, as working with genres and authors that students do not like might affect their participation in the lessons. They also feel that they have to be careful about students' openness regarding social and political issues because in Vietnam these might be sensitive matters. Hence, this approach is also not suitable in her situation, despite its benefits and impetus. Indeed, the educational environment in Vietnam needs time to adjust to new ideas like these. At the time of Trương's (2009) report, which is nearly a decade ago, the openness that they refer to was not that high. Eight years after that, Vietnamese students are more developed and willing to learn new knowledge. They have become more prepared and well-ready for this challenge. Critical Literacy, though might not be able to reach its ultimate strength, can more or less benefit Vietnamese students.

Thus, the two approaches that Trương (2009) considers suitable in the Vietnamese context are Reader-Response and Language-Based. They focus on readers and their language competence, which should be more helpful to language learners than the others. Reader-Response's core is not in the text, but in how readers perceive it on the basis of their own experience and knowledge. Unlike New Criticism's theory of only one possible interpretation, the significance of this approach lies in how it can be understood in different ways, because everybody may have their own background. This is similar to the 'envisionment' concept that will be introduced later in this chapter. Trương (2009) believes

that Reader-Response is more in favour among ESOL teachers because of its connection with individual experience and feelings, which in turn encourages learners' involvement and interest in the lessons. Trương's (2009) example of her colleague's use of Edgar Allan Poe's *Annabel Lee* poem (1849) further illustrates her point. *Annabel Lee* tells the story of how the man in the poem loses his beloved:

> For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
>     Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
> And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
>     Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
> And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
>     Of my darling – my darling – my life and my bride,
>     In her sepulchre there by the sea –
>     In her tomb by the sounding sea.

With their own memories of the time when they lost something dear, the students could relate to the text and "immediately understand its theme" (Trương, 2009, p. 6). The link between their own and the teller's experience makes the poem closer to reach and help them empathise with him. This second example of eye-sparkling, obvious-joy-revealing students, ideal as it may sound, proves that it works better and brings students a "positive attitude towards literature" (Trương, 2009, p. 6). Naturally, when a student finds connections between a text and her/himself, s/he would be more impressed and motivated than reading a literary text whose interpretation is perceived as fixed and possibly has no relation to her/his life. The problems of *Reader-Response* that she sees, however, are learners' irrelevant perception of the text, inappropriate text choice, lack of linguistic instruction, and difference in culture. The two last problems are clear to understand and easy to measure, but the first requires a thorough study because 'inappropriate' might have different meanings for different people. Perhaps she wants to say there are chances that the selected text is of a higher or lower level than the learner's.

Another student-centred approach to literature reading is Language-Based, which Trương (2009, p. 7) claims to be fundamental for learners of English as a second language. It involves various activities with instruction from teachers:

> [B]rainstorming to activate background knowledge and make predictions, rewriting the ends of stories or summarizing plots, cloze procedures to build vocabulary and comprehension,

and jigsaw readings to allow students to collaborate with others, form opinions, and engage in spirited debates.

Teachers work as vocabulary consultants and then facilitators when pair or group activities are involved. The expected outcome is that students can read different genres of literature, and relate them to their own personal experience while reading, at the same time making them less dependent on teachers. Even though this language-centred approach is more technical than Reader-Response, Trương's students still made progress in both their group working skill and activeness. They feel satisfied because it involves their language competence and literature, not to mention their autonomy in the classroom. Given this popular goal in the Vietnamese context, Reader-Response and Language-Based are the most applicable, not only for teachers but also for learners, and will need more examples to illustrate its strength.

In short, Trương's (2009) study provides a view on Vietnamese teachers' attitude towards six literary reading approaches, and more importantly, its success in the Vietnam environment. It also takes into account the important feature of each approach and suggests careful research before using any in a certain context. In the next part of the chapter, specific research on the use of literature in enhancing students' critical thinking will be discussed for clearer evidences of Reader-Response reading strategy.

### I.1.3. Judith Langer's method of 'envisionment'

One of the significant research projects on literature use in classroom is Judith Langer's (199) study, a series of work taking place in several literature lessons with students in middle and high schools. She describes it as following:

> The study reported here involved a school and university collaboration. It sought to understand the types of principles underlying effective literature instruction that emphasizes the development of students' reasoning abilities in the context of their understanding of literature (Langer, 1991, p. 1).

Her research project is rooted in the belief that there is a social base for learning, and our viewpoint is formed through the acquisition of social experiences. According to Langer (1987b), through communication, children learn what is necessary and what is not in order to achieve success, and thus decide what they should practice. Linking it with children's way of thinking and with the values held in literature lessons, she points out that many

innovations in teaching English language only focus on how literature is written. The teaching focuses on "text-based approaches" that presuppose "'right' answers and predetermined interpretations" (Applebee, 1989, as cited in Langer, 1991, p. 2). This is similar to the realisation of many other scholars that I have mentioned above. The problem always lies in the way teachers try to guide students to the best analyses of texts without much consideration of how they are unconsciously limiting their students' critical thinking and creativity. Moreover, a number of teachers consider literary texts unsuitable to be used in a classroom, arguing that they have no feasible use because of their unfamiliarity in terms of vocabulary and context. They argue that the language used in literary texts is too complex, and if the texts were written in previous centuries, the language is not even what we are using nowadays. However, Bruner claims that the mind of a learner should be a combination of a scientist's and a storyteller's (1986, as cited in Langer, 1991). The former is pragmatic, while the latter is rich and prolific. In this sense, literature is still crucial in education in general and in enhancing critical thinking skill in particular, for its "most natural and productive ways in which we make sense of and share our understandings of the world" (Langer, 1991, p. 6).

Although many research projects provide a start to the understanding of literature's role, Langer thinks they are not enough to "drive new conceptualizations" (Langer, 1991, p. 7). The projects address the issue without demonstrating a way in which it can be used in the classroom. As a result, she carried out a number of studies involving the new method of teaching literary texts to investigate its effectiveness when used in other coursework of science and social studies. She focused on the way her participants approached and understood the texts that were used in the lessons: students formed a better connection with the text, which helped them see it in more depth. Moreover, these understandings were "recursive rather than linear" (Langer, 1991, p. 8). They do not start from zero and grow deeper from the beginning to the end, but at times, the process repeated itself until, at the end of the project, the students acquired "different kinds of knowledge" (Langer, 1991, p. 8).

Significantly, the core of Langer's (1991, p. 7) research is "envisionment", or in other words, "an act of becoming – where questions, insights, and understanding develop as the reading progresses". Envisionment starts with learners' interpretation of a text and the questions that arise in accordance with their reading progress. These questions might unfold the story in many dimensions and thus help readers perceive the text more effectively. The perspective of readers, in this sense, may change as they continue reading. Some details become more important while others are less so. Once they have finished, students find what

they understand and what they do not, along with questions that connect with these unsolved problems. In this case, not only the outcome but also the reading process itself is important. For this reason, Langer divided the process of understanding into four stances as followed:

| Stances in the Process of Understanding (Langer, 1991, p. 10) | |
|---|---|
| **Stance** | **Strategies** |
| Being out and Stepping into an Envisionment | forms tentative questions and associations in attempt to build text world |
| Being in and Moving through an Envisionment | uses local envisionments and personal knowledge to build and elaborate understandings. |
| Stepping back and Rethinking What One Knows | uses growing understandings to rethink previously held ideas, beliefs, or feelings |
| Stepping out and Objectifying the Experience | distances self from text to examine, evaluate, or analyze the reading experience or aspects of the text |

From Langer's (1991) table, we can see that the stances move from low to high reading levels, with the first stance the lowest and the fourth the highest. She found that learners who read less efficiently would be blocked at lower stances, while those who read more effectively could go up to the higher stances. From this first part of the research, she was able to determine what method should be used to help learners read more productively, depending on their level. This is a necessary step to take before any further step in finding a way to intensify students' reading ability. Without such classification, the following stages might not bring a promising result, as what she plans to do might be too high or too low compared to the level of students. The expectation is not enough, and teachers often take students' abilities for granted. Normally the step of measuring the student's ability is often skipped because teachers or institutions may assume that being at a certain level means students must be able to understand what is being taught. Not knowing the level of students is where the project might go wrong.

Focusing on 'envisionment', Langer proposes that, as it unravels, it creates "a constantly moving horizon of possibilities" (Langer, 1991, p. 11). The ideas that readers see from the text and the horizon, as she says, exist in parallel and correlate with one another. Both of these are not fixed, because one changes when the other changes. In that manner, we see layers after layers of meaning when reading a text. Though the general sense might be unmodified, the layers wrapping around this core form one's own interpretation of the text. With this method, readers are able to, firstly, seize the "slant" of the author, and then, control their own personal horizon (Langer, 1991, p. 11). She then argues that although both goals of getting information and having our own reading experience are important, one is always stronger than the other. Basing on our reading purpose, either of them will come forth

and take an important position. If readers' orientation is *literary*, when stepping into the text world, they use both their own progressing viewpoint and the general sense to explore it. If, on the other hand, it is *informative*, the readers compare what they read with their own knowledge of the topic with the purpose of shaping their text world.

With the two ideas above that shape her theoretical framework, Langer designed a research program with the aim of helping young learners develop their own critical thinking, and therefore be more confident in expressing their own arguments and their points of view when working with the literary text. She also expected that she had to restructure students' language use and interaction between students and teachers in the classroom. The study revolves around the question: "How can we best shape instruction in order to attain these goals for student performance?" (Langer, 1991, p. 13). Langer recruited both teachers and students of middle and high school in the urban and suburban areas with different social and minority backgrounds to be her participants. They work with various texts in their curriculum while being observed in daily activities in the classroom, then they had group discussions, and some of the average students, on a voluntary basis, were interviewed for a more thorough comprehension of the situation. During each lesson, the students worked under the teacher's instruction instead of independently without guidance. The reading materials used in the lessons are not specially chosen for the project, but the same in their usual curricular.

After two years of research, Langer was able to conclude that, though the students had different backgrounds and characteristics, some common features still emerged at the end of the project. The first and foremost goal of this project was better envisionment. As a result, the teachers treated the students as "thinkers" (Langer, 1991, p. 18), expecting that they could themselves form an interesting opinion about the text. To encourage their students' envisionment, the teachers organised class discussion and then group discussion. The questions they used in the discussion did not focus on the content of the text, but rather on how the students perceived and interpreted the ideas. Such questions that were asked in the discussions are as followed:

- What did you think about when you finished reading the story?
- What does it mean to you?
- What do you make of it?
- Do you have something you want to talk about today?
- So? (Langer, 1991, p. 19).

Using these questions, the teachers could not only investigate the students' understanding but also create a mood for the whole class, encouraging them to raise their voice, enable them to hear other students' opinions and compare them with their own. When a student's answer was different from the one that appeared in the textbook or the teacher's own answer, it became the beginning of a new discussion. Yet it did not mean they would accept anything that the students offered. When the student's response went too irrelevant, the teacher would not give answers immediately, but guided the student back to the track. The students then developed their own group discussion, and whether consciously or unconsciously, they asked each other the same type of questions that their teacher asked them. They were able to copy the process and helped each other express individual interpretations of the text. Hunches that one had might have been solved by another, which could not have been done if one have read alone. The students were also asked to write about their experience, and the questions left unanswered up in the diaries that they kept could be useful in the next discussion. Langer also claims that students might normally avoid asking questions in other situations, as it implies that they do not contend with the teacher's or the book's answers. However, in these classrooms, questions were encouraged. She emphasises that teachers' role was to scaffold, push, and inspire students. With this method, the students were able to "try out, come to understand and eventually internalize the ways of talking and thinking about literature" (Langer, 1991, p. 37).

This study of Langer (1991) shows that students are able to develop their own critical thinking when working with literature, provided that they receive instruction from their teachers. The significance of her research project is that she was able to test students' ability on a regular scale. When she describes the findings, she states that she is discussing the classes that work, so we can imply that there were classes that did not. The reason, as she suggests, might lie in the material, the students, or the teachers. Too straightforward texts cannot elicit deeper thoughts from the students, as the meaning is obvious. For students, sometimes they did not speak out their own opinion, which does not mean they did not have anything to say, but they just did not want to say it. For the teachers, the problem was that they might end the discussion after the first response from the student. Because encouragement and suggestions were not given, "potentially "teachable" moments are lost (Langer, 1991, p. 41).

However, in this report of hers, Langer (1991) does not mention the literature background that the student-participants had. If they had been studying in an environment where literary text analysis was a frequent task, their critical thinking might have already been more or less developed. In that case, this research environment is more ideal than some

others that might take place in countries without the same educational environment. Nonetheless, her project suggests a promising method to improve students' critical thinking. The participants' involvement in the discussions proves that, with the scaffolding method, teachers are able to support the student in the path of discovering their independent understanding

### I.1.4. Lothar Bredella's theory on aesthetic reading

I have mentioned earlier that many teachers chose non-literary material for their syllabus because of its advantage in practical use over literary texts. What triggered Lothar Bredella's (1996) article on aesthetic reading is Willis Edmonson's opinion raised in his presentation at a conference on the controversies on foreign language research that teaching does not require the use of literary texts. His opinion is not unprecedented, but his explanation is new associated with other pedagogical scholars. He claims that the purpose of literary texts can be satisfied if we use other texts because it is the readers, not the text itself, who make their own sense of what they are reading. Bredella (1996, p.1) does not oppose this idea, but he also puts an emphasis on the role of literary texts in teaching, for they are "organized in such a way that the reader will greatly profit from reading them aesthetically".

Bredella (1996) presents several illustrations of the term *aesthetic reading*. He first mentions Rosenblatt's (1981, as cited in Bredella, 1996) classification of efferent reading, which emphasizes the information in the text, and aesthetic reading, which emphasizes the influences of the text on readers. In other words, "in order to read aesthetically, the reader has to bring his or her own experiences to the text" (Bredella, 1996, p. 3). He also claims that readers become less "narrow-minded" when their view changes during the period they spend reading, and a good way to do it is to think as the creator of the text (1996, p. 4). This may also put readers in a situation that requires them to question their own values as it explains that literature can deeply penetrate the mind of those who interact with it (Mukařovský, 1978, as cited in Bredella, 1996). Indeed, reading can be a powerful tool because there is a special connection between authors, or a certain character in the text, and readers. Especially when readers can find an intimate connection or a similarity between himself or herself and the character, this bond is even stronger. From that point on, what characters think and say may slowly become the voice of readers. They change as the character changes. The experiences of readers are involved, "not to confirm them but instead to challenge them" (Bredella, 1996, p. 4), "not to convey […] the correct interpretation", but to urge students to "develop their own interpretation" (Bredella, 1996, p. 5).

This may pose more benefits than threats to readers, especially for young undergraduates who need to consider various viewpoints on different aspects. Their experiences are less flourished, and some need more than one practice to thrive and developed. To put the knowledge in a new situation, question it, and let it collide with other viewpoints is to make it stronger. Bredella (1996) also suggests that teachers should avoid requiring their students to summarise the literary text as it can be an obstacle that takes away the sensitivity toward what they are reading. In other words, readers should make simple what is complex, but nonetheless, doubt the very process to make sure no stone is left unturned. Blakemore explains that if what readers see is simpler than the text, it does not mean that the idea is presented in a more euphemistic way, but that the impression of readers is different (1992, as cited in Bredella, 1996).

Another controversial issue that Bredella (1996) poses is the presence of two attitudes on how a text is interpreted. According to Bleich (1978, as cited in Bredella, 1996), readers' personality can influence how the text is made sense of. On the other hand, Fish (1981, as cited in Bredella, 1996) argues that the meaning depends on the strategies readers use to interpret the text. Moreover, Bredella (1996) mentions Fish's suggestion that there are no texts used in the classroom, but only texts that we create through the interpretation. This leads to the new perspective that the text holds no power, and this power instead lies in the hand of readers. If this is the case, the teaching strategy that leads to "true interpretation" is rather forceful. The so-called ideal analysis then comes from a certain critique or teacher. Because it sounds convincing, it starts to exist as a standard that everyone should look at, or more seriously, look up to, and follow. However, even Fish can recognise the hole in his own theory because "there is nothing to be interpreted. There is only invention" (Bredella, 1996, p. 9). With this theory, Fish takes away the author's voice and intention in any text and leave the whole for readers to decide. However, does this really happen in daily life? Just recently, Schaub (2018) reports that Ian McEwan, the author of the novel *Enduring Love* (1997), gave suggestions to his son about the analysis of the very novel. His son then came home with a C+, explaining that his teacher disagreed with his interpretation. Such a case may sound unbelievable but it has also been reported in Vietnam. Nguyễn (2015) mentions the story of novelist Nguyễn Khải, a famous author who often writes about rural life and army officers' lives during the Vietnam – America war. His son received a 2 out of 10 for his analysis of his father's work. The teacher claimed that he did not understand the author's idea even though he consulted his father when having written the assignment.

Bredella (1996, p. 9) agrees with Fish that it is inevitable that we project our experience, but we also have to consider other insights in the process, in order to "broaden

our experience" and "replace them with others". Readers do not enjoy being told how to think; nevertheless, the issue of having complete authority over a text remains a question.

Among the aspects of aesthetic reading that Bredella (1996, p. 18) lists, the following are much related to the development of critical thinking skill and foreign language learning:

- Aesthetic reading broadens the reader's horizons by encouraging them to put themselves into situations they have not yet experience or may never experience.
- Aesthetic reading is less concerned with the conveying of information than with the creation of complex impressions within the reader.
- Aesthetic reading promotes intercultural understanding because it encourages us to see the world from different perspectives and because it explores our images of foreigners and foreign cultures.

Learning a language includes building learners' independent point of view on different phenomena. The theory of aesthetic reading's influences on foreign language learning suggests that we should not form an ideal interpretation for a literary text, for it restrains our critical thinking in the classroom. It is a two-way influence because text meaning might change as we grow more experienced, and when we find new perspectives of a text, we gain more insight. Working with non-literary texts allows learners to gain access to practical knowledge, but are there more? The strength of literary texts lies in the way it can affect readers differently. They help them produce their own interpretation and argument to defend their point of view, not feeding them with the same old perspective that might have been used for years. They allow learners to doubt and question and then oppose what argument they are against. Though Bredella's (1996) article was written in the 1990s, its applicability remains valid in today's classroom. Learners' authority is never an old topic of research, in the same way as critical thinking in the classroom is a crucial issue. The goal of enhancing learners' critical thinking can be achieved through the elimination of an ideal interpretation of literary texts. If we let learners think freely, they may come up with surprisingly good ideas that teachers might have never thought of before.

### I.1.5. Jean Marie Schultz's study of a literature-based language classroom
I have mentioned Judith Langer's 'envisionment' research on high school students earlier in this study. She is not the only one who comes up with such a project. Tracing back several years, Jean Marie Schultz (2001) has done her own project on the same topic at the University of Berkeley. The idea that started her research was the fact that literary texts lost

their popularity in the language classroom due to the rise of the need to acquire spoken language proficiency. Real-life conversation requires second language speakers to use more practical language, while literary language, with its complicated and abstract nature, is not for lower-level learners. When students reach a higher level and are found to not have the language competence when working with literary texts, language trainers realised the importance of using literature in the language classroom. This fact calls for a change in reading texts. Such a complicated task it is, for teachers need to consider "readable" text and "writable" text before deciding what to include in the syllabus (Barthes, 1970, as cited in Schultz, 2001). The former refers to those which follow a formula and does not require creativity, making the reader "a passive consumer of literature" (Schultz, 2001, p. 7). On the other hand, the latter is more open to readers, giving him/her the authority to think as "an active producer" (Schultz, 2001, p. 7). With the purpose of helping students enhance both language competence and critical thinking ability, Schultz selected some "writerly" text for her project.

Developed from Byrnes's (1998) list of disadvantages coming from the lack of literature in college courses, Schultz (2001, p. 17) designed a French-language course whose core was literary texts, which is described as follow:

> First, other than a reference grammar, textbooks were eliminated and replaced with course readers containing pedagogical materials specifically designed to target the language, critical thinking and writing goals necessary for students' success in upper division courses at Berkeley. Second, the curriculum was based on a language-through-literature approach designed to provide students experience in dealing with texts such as they would be asked to do in upper-division courses. Third, intermediate program text selection was made both with the students' level of French and with the third-year advanced reading and composition course curriculum in mind. Forth, a rigorous composition component was designed to target students' writing skills.

According to Schultz's (2001) description, the students in this context read one short literary text per week for the first seven weeks, and then in the last six weeks proceeded to longer texts, each of which divided into two parts for two weeks. The students met five days a week, in which the first day was for grammar review and the rest for other activities. The course was flexible because it could be reviewed and adjusted according to the needs of students, as long as all the activities satisfied the final aim of the course, which is the enhancement of linguistic and interpretation skill. Schultz (2001, p. 19) also encouraged the

students to develop their "'reflective skepticism' in regards to their own culture and the target culture, and in the process, they begin to define themselves differently".

Similar to the point made by Bredella (1996) and Langer's (1991) *Reader-Response* reading approach in the previous parts, Schultz's (2001) requirement involves students' former experience. She wants them to view the text with objective eyes, that is to say, eyes that are not influenced by the context in which the text is written. To support this goal, the pre-reading activities that Schultz designed were related to the students' background knowledge. Her "quick-write" involved groups of students writing short texts whose theme was similar to that of the literary text they would read (Schultz, 2001, p. 20). They then gave a presentation, and the rest of the class would try to find a link between their work and the issues that may come up when they read.

One of the literary texts that Schultz (2001) introduced was *The Attack on the Mill* (1892) by Emile Zola, which tells the love story between the daughter of the mill owner and a Belgian young man who lives next door. One new aspect that could be seen in her classroom is the use of different senses in the activities. The students did not sit and read, but also discussed and sometimes drew and imagined. While reading, they were asked to visualise the setting of the story, and after reading, they had to put themselves in the shoes of movie directors to write the screenplay for the characters in the story. According to Schultz, American students were more interested when it comes to cinema, and they enjoyed the activity and their "'writerly' role" (Schultz, 2001, p. 20).

Even though the strength of the previously mentioned method lies in the objective eyes of the readers, Schultz (2001) feels that it is still a subjective approach because it highlights personal experience in the course of reading. Furthermore, students may misunderstand the meaning of the text. Thus, she proposed a close reading technique, in which students read carefully and analysed the vocabulary for both "denotative and connotative meanings and grammatical structures, not only as exemplars of linguistic rules but also as vehicles of unique significance" (Schultz, 2001, p. 22). The second type of activity in this phase involved a set of questions for each passage. The students answered the questions in the group and then presented the summary of their answers while the rest of the class took note of the presentation. This, as stated by Schultz (2001), can enhance not only their critical thinking skill but also their oral skill.

Seeing those strengths of close reading, Schultz (2001) also realises its inappropriateness while applied into a longer text, as it may not be able to interest students in a longer period of the lesson. Moreover, she points out that no text is absolutely similar to another, which makes a literary template impossible. If it is possible, it will only "violate"

the text, turning the "writable" into the "readable" (Schultz, 2001, p. 23). Specifically, in *The Attack on the Mill*, the theme of cultural stereotype is Zola's focus. He creates characters with what seems to be stereotyped personality, and then slowly peels off that core, revealing their true form. Schultz's participating students were required to discuss that issue using the exact perceived concept they had on other cultures. Her aim was to "integrate potentially disruptive material into their knowledge loops and, therefore, to restructure their experience" (Schultz, 2001, p. 24). This thematic analysis brought students a wider look at the text, which the previously mentioned activities were lacking. Together with it, the final wrap-up activity which grouped students according to different discussion themes they had chosen before reading the text completed the whole experience.

Schultz (2001) herself judges that those activities help students learn to be creative. She had a clear and thorough plan for the project and most importantly, she had expected the disadvantages of each activity and tried to come up with another which can fit in that plot hole. Generally speaking, the project's strength is that it addresses students' creativity and critical thinking ability. Her research did not force the participants to think in unison. On the contrary, it opened up a new threshold that suited the characteristics of young students, urging them to apply their experience on the text so as to not be influenced by the setting of the text, yet then making them consider it when going into details. From something abstract that was only used as a reference, literature in this study was shaped into a comprehensible and friendly tool to be used in the language classroom. In Schultz's (2001) words, it also helped students understand themselves in the sense of their interests and identity. Rarely can other reading texts show us as clearly who we are as an individual as literature. The way we choose what genre to read and the way we see and analyse each text defines ourselves and reflects our idealism in life. The 'writerly' approach that is mentioned in this research is truly a means to develop student-readers.

### I.2. Research rationale

The rationale of this research is based on the lack of critical thinking, autonomy, and creativity in Vietnamese classrooms. For a long time, both Vietnamese teachers and students have unconsciously compressed students' ability to think out of the box. Aiming for a high standard meant that, rather than encourage independent points of view, teachers have produced what are thought to be 'ideal and common' ways of thinking, assuming that what students write should somehow clone their 'ideal version'. "'Outdated' teacher-centered pedagogical practices" are often seen (OECD, The World Bank, 2014, p. 152) in Vietnam. Lei & Zhang (2010) explain that this method of teaching can be traced back to the Confucian

belief which honours the role of teachers in the classroom and limits students' risk-taking as well as their habit to come up with new ideas. They also state that these students should follow a social norm of knowledge and adjust to it. This is completely opposed to Hall's (2005, p. 39) idea that literature "broadens our notions of what it means to be human, and how we could live better as human beings".

When teaching a second language, Vietnamese teachers even further ignore literary texts if they do not teach the subject of literature. Non-literary texts are frequently seen in the second language classroom in Vietnam. Literature is only used as "finished products, […] or they are used to illustrate grammatical rules and enrich the reader's vocabulary" (Kramsch, 1985, p. 356). As a means to learn a language, it is not favoured probably because of its complex language, not to mention the unfamiliar setting of another culture. Other literary canons might become unappealing to Vietnamese students, not because they are boring, but because they are not the kind of texts that can be easily comprehended, both grammatically and thematically. Perhaps many Vietnamese students will agree with Hall's suggestion that they hold negative experience of being required to read literary texts they do not like. When it comes to learning literature, Sarland (1991) observes that teachers are more eager and exuberant than their students. Seven years of reading compulsory Vietnamese and international literary texts in the classroom is a great predicament for students. Not all of them find joy in that subject, so why should they suffer from more, not to mention in their second language?

Yet the power of literature is so great it should not be ignored. If it is not fully developed, the blame should be on those who cannot see the way to utilise it. Perhaps many teachers ignore its strength, not because they cannot see the potential, but because making changes is a great task to complete. Nonetheless, if we keep denying the needs to change, it would be a waste for both teachers and students. With the presence of fantasy literature in the language classroom, students' critical thinking skill has a chance to thrive, helping them to sharpen all their faculties in language learning. When they acquire this new way of learning, they will do so more effectively.

## I.3. British literature course at the English Department, Hanoi University and aims of the research project

At the English Department of Hanoi University – HANU, teachers and students see the importance of English literature in terms of vocabulary development, speaking and writing skill enhancement, and natural communication. This point of view is expressed in department meetings, unofficial discussion between teachers of the English Literature

division, or in conversation between students. Having heard their opinions, I also realised that the number of credits for the English literature is rather modest compared to other courses in the English language studies program of the department. I wanted to know whether the teachers and students in the department thought the same, and what exactly their perceptions of English literature are. Therefore, I felt the urge to conduct this study.

This research therefore aims to delve into the study of fantasy literature in HANU's English language studies degree programs. The emphasis is to what extent the 20th-century British fantasy literature can improve the language competence, creative and critical skills of undergraduate students in the English language studies program.

It is hoped that the research can:

- Help teachers in departments of language consolidate their lessons and develop their own skill if there are any opportunities. This research can also help them see the strength and weakness of students while working with a literary text, thus adjusting its use in the future.

- Help students enhance their language competence, creative and critical skills through literary texts. Students who participate in this research can study literature using English as the medium of instruction and simultaneously learn English language. Moreover, it can help students learn about themselves, not only as students but also as human beings.

- Encourage researchers in the English Department at HANU in particular, and in Vietnam in general, to be aware of such a relation between literature and language learning. From this study, they may draw the inspiration to conduct similar, and perhaps, further research on the same issue.

## I.4. Research questions

In order to identify the extent to which the 20th-century British fantasy literature affects the language competence and thinking skills of the students in the English language studies program at HANU English Department and UniFe, I seek the answers for the following questions:

(1) What is the link between literature and language as perceived by HANU and UniFe students involved in the 20th-century British fantasy literature courses?

(2) How does the introduction of the 20th century British fantasy literature into the English Literature curriculum in the English Department, HANU, affects the student's language competence?

(3) How does the introduction of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century British fantasy literature into the English Literature curriculum in the English Department, HANU, affects the students' creative and critical thinking?

**CHAPTER II**

**FANTASY LITERATURE AS A WAY OF REPRESENTING AND UNDERSTANDING REALITY IN VIETNAMESE CULTURE**

## II.1. Introduction

To attain a thorough understanding of the current viewpoint on fantasy literature in Vietnam, I trace back the history to search for its starting point. Similar to perhaps every country all over the world, Vietnam has a rich and flourishing resource of legends, myths, and fairy tales. Having particular historical and ethnical features, the literature of the early ages formed characteristics that are still seen and affect contemporary literature. While responding to thousand years of Chinese invasion, Vietnamese cultures and ideologies also receive significant influence from Confucianism. The Kinh, the largest ethnic group in Vietnam, used to hold similar values to those in China. These values and codes of conduct took a part in shaping the literature of the time. Other ethnic groups who live in closed groups were not much altered, leading to their specific literature, very different from the Kinh's.

In the modern period, when Vietnam escaped from the Chinese frying pan just to fall into the French and American's fire, literature took the war as its centre. Every single piece of literature focused on encouraging people to join the glorious battle to win independence. They were mostly realistic, without any sense of personal romance or fantastic features. Trần's (2011) research of fantasy literature in Vietnam explains that, prior to 1975, fantasy literature did not receive much attention for this reason. Later on, at the end of the 20th century, more Vietnamese scholars started to mention it in debates and research papers. Those first scholars' studies mainly involve ghostly figures and events in foreign fantasy literature. Moving to the 21st century, Lê (2006, p. 37, as cited in Trần, 2011) provided a definition that is much closer to the nature of fantasy literature:

the world of fantasy literature is the world of imagination, where the strangeness, the unconventionality, the magic… always rule. At times, it calms and sooth readers; while at other times, it makes them bewildered, terrified, and sometimes skeptical and confused… [thế giới của văn học huyễn ảo là thế giới của trí tưởng tượng, nơi sự khác lạ, hoang đường, thần diệu… luôn ngự trị. Có lúc nó giúp người đọc bình tâm, tự tại; có lúc nó khiến họ hoang mang, khiếp đảm và có lúc khiến họ hoài nghi, bối rối…]

History thus explains why fantasy literature, after first successfully blossoming in Vietnam, was rather foreign for a long time and then it started thriving once more. The end

of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century mark a change in its reputation and influence on the daily life of Vietnamese people. In the next parts of the chapter, I will explain in more detail how it became popular and how it plays a role in Vietnamese social culture, education, and especially language education.

In part II.2, the fantasy genre is thoroughly analysed with the aim of providing an insight into the genre as background knowledge for the context of the study. In this part, different components of the fantasy genre are scrutinized. Part II.2.1 explains the quest, the ultimate goal of each fantasy story that decides what happens when the protagonist enters her/his journey. Part II.2.2 lists the stages in the adventure of the protagonist, from the call to the adventure, though the challenges and aids along the way, to the final episode, when s/he completes the tasks successfully and comes back to the normal life as a different, sometimes better version of himself/herself. Part II.2.3 focuses on the ordeal, or the series of trials the hero/ine must withstand along the way, and part II.2.4 portrays the hero/ine, who is occasionally a cunning trickster with native wit that helps him/her win all the challenges. Most importantly, part II.2.5 visualize the core of the fantasy genre: familiarity versus estrangement. This part of the chapter justifies that once readers accept estrangement, it can take them a long way, letting them escape from reality and helping them find the way back.

Part II.3 of the chapter specifically examines the fantasy genre in Vietnam. Part II.3.1 sums up notable features of the genre in Vietnamese literature before the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It regards fantasy as a prominent element in relation to old literature in Vietnam, mostly in the form of fairy tales and folk tales. Metamorphosis is also mentioned in this part of the chapter as a frequent material for these tales. Part II.3.2 covers fantasy in the Vietnamese contemporary society, in which period it has different roles based on the social and political situations. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, fantasy gave way to realistic literature when the war was the centre of attention. After the war, fantastic elements were observed in several short stories and novels, and since the country has opened to the world, young fantasy authors have endeavoured to bring it to the public. Following this issue, part II.3.3 addresses the promising role of the fantasy genre in Vietnamese higher education. The application of the fantasy genre and its effective role in teaching is debated and a vision of a more student-centred classroom in the future is also brought about in this discussion. Finally, part II.4 summaries and concludes the chapter.

## II.2. Fantasy as a genre and its structural components
### II.2.1. The quest

Fantasy is a new genre for many Vietnamese readers. Before the bloom of fantasy when *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) by J. K. Rowling was translated and published in Vietnam, it was not widely known. Many readers in Vietnam still have difficulties pointing out the difference between fantasy and fairy tales, or science fiction. Fairy tales are only too familiar in Vietnamese culture, but because they share the similarity of magic with fantasy, readers often think of them as one genre. Science fiction, on the other hand, introduces the idea of futuristic technologies, but is linked with fantasy through the sense of estrangement.

The task of finding a definition for the fantasy genre, thus, depends on its distinctive features which, together, create a secondary world through which readers can escape from reality: the quest, the ordeal, and the adventure. Every story of the fantasy genre revolves around a quest for the protagonist, which Senior (2012, p. 190) describes as followed:

> The structuring characteristic of quest fantasy is the stepped journey: a series of adventures experienced by the hero and his or her companions that begins with the simplest confrontation and dangers and escalates through more threatening and perilous encounters. The narrative begins as a single thread but often becomes polysemous, as individuals or small groups pursue minor quests within the overall framework.

This structure can be found in famous high as well as low fantasy novels like *Harry Potter, The Hobbit* (1937) by J. R. R. Tolkien, or *Coraline* (2002) by Neil Gaiman. *The Hobbit* introduces Bilbo Baggin's journey to help the dwarves find their treasure taken away by a dragon. Each chapter of the novel is a smaller quest on its own, introducing different creatures in the world of Tolkien. *Harry Potter*'s quest is to defeat the Dark Lord Voldermort, but each book in the series is a task for him to complete, from saving a sorcerer's stone and winning a wizard tournament to exploring a prophecy about the fate of Voldermort. In *Coraline*, the heroine must save herself, her parents and the stolen souls from a beldam. To complete this task, she overcomes the traps set by the evil Other Mother, the beldam herself. Significantly, the quest is a path leading the protagonist to her/his maturity, not necessarily physical growth only, but also mental. Different stories have different quests, but in most high fantasy as well as low fantasy storylines, the quest is a battle between good and evil.

In fact, high and low fantasy are just relative concepts used by a number of researchers. What is often referred to as high fantasy, or epic fantasy, can be understood in many different ways. First mentioned by Lloyd Alexander (1971, n.p.), high fantasy is considered a heroic romance, a form of novel "using epic, saga, and *chanson de geste* as

some of its raw materials". Sullivan III's (2004, p. 436) opinion is that it can "refer to style, subject matter, theme or tone", and he further explains:

> [H]igh fantasy contains a great deal of material which is not a part of contemporary consensus reality. […] high fantasy departs from contemporary consensus reality by creating a separate world in which the action takes place. In Critical Terms for Science Fiction and Fantasy: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship, Gary K. Wolfe defines high fantasy as that fantasy 'set in a secondary world […] as opposed to Low Fantasy which contains supernatural intrusions into the "real" world' (1986: 52).

In the following analysis, the term high fantasy is used with the above meaning: a story set in the secondary world. Again, this relative understanding of the term is applied to draw a line between novels that contain only one realm, and those with more than one, because both of which follows the following structure.

## II.2.2. The adventure

In order to complete the quest, the protagonist must go on an adventure, sometimes on her/his own, and sometimes with a group of companions. For different fantasy stories, various types of adventure are involved, but most of them share a common structure that Campbell (2004) identifies in his study:

- The Call to Adventure
- Refusal of the Call
- Supernatural Aid
- The Crossing of the First Threshold
- The Belly of the Whale
- The Roads of Trials
- The Meeting with the Goddess
- Woman as the Temptress
- Atonement with the Father
- Apotheosis
- The Ultimate Boon
- Refusal of the Return
- The Magic Flight
- Rescue from Without
- The Crossing of the Return Threshold

- Master of the Two World
- Freedom to Live

The adventure might be a trip to a certain destination or the period of time from the beginning of the story to a special event. It often starts with a call addressed to the protagonist, sometimes purposefully and sometimes accidentally. Often seen in such adventures is the chosen one, a person who is selected by some wise characters, or a mysterious force, to be the deciding factor of the journey. Gandalf chooses Bilbo to be the thief for the dwarves' quest because he thinks this hobbit is more than meets the eyes, and at the end of the story Bilbo exceeds his expectation. On the other hand, stories like *Coraline* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (1950) by C. S. Lewis feature the start of an adventure in the form of what Campbell calls a blunder. He argues that even though the blunder looks like some random situation that may happen to anyone because it "reveals an unsuspected world, and the individual is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (Campbell, 2004, p. 46), it is actually "the result of suppressed desire and conflicts" (p. 46). If Coraline is happy with her life, the beldam cannot lure her to the Other World with all the false wonders she creates. Similarly, the Pevensies in *The Chronicles of Narnia* also possess qualities of rulers to the kingdom. When they accidentally find the threshold and step into Narnia, they are responding to a call from the mysterious force, the one that has somehow chosen them to rescue their kingdom from the evil.

Also in this study, Campbell mentions the role of the caller, or the "herald" (Campbell, 2004, p. 47) who awakes the hero. The caller might only be the awakener, or later also be the wise advisor to the hero. Sometimes this force may even lead the hero to death, sometimes to be reborn, some other times not. Whatever the case is, it "rings up a curtain, always, on a mystery off transfiguration […] which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth" (Campbell, 2004, p. 47). In Indick's (2014) study, he mentions Lord Raglan's concept of the hero's adventure. Even though it appears as a mortal's main path to divinity through sacrifice and great heroism, it is actually the tale of real people. They neither become immortals nor are crowned king after the journey, but they are praised for their heroic acts in a narrower sense. The hero's adventure thus symbolizes both the journey in high and low fantasy stories.

The Supernatural Aid that Campbell (2004) mentions is present in many fantasy stories. In *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) by J. R. R. Tolkien, the aid is Gandalf the Grey. In *Harry Potter*, it is Professor Dumbledore, the headmaster of the wizards' school. It

is important to note here that this aid can be an object, as in Indick's (2014) example of the magic wand as the force which helps Harry in the secondary world. For Coraline, the aid comes from the black cat which suddenly has a voice when entering the Other World. Though he shows a certain degree of irony towards Coraline, he proves to be a great mental support and later catches the mouse that runs away with Coraline's stone with a hole. It is this very stone which is also a supernatural aid, as she sees the Other World differently through this hole and finds the hidden souls of the lost children with it.

The Crossing of the First Threshold happens when the protagonist leaves her/his world behind to enter the fantastic world "where reside the gods and monsters that he must encounter in order to become a hero" (Indick, 2014, p. 50). Again, this can be a symbolic departure that does not necessarily take place when the protagonist goes on a journey. For example, the little boy in Roald Dahl's *The Witches* (1983) steps through the first threshold when he first listens to his grandmother's tale. As a witchophile, she is an expert on witches, and sometimes hunts witches as well. She tells the boy about the stories she has got to know about witches trying to make children disappear, and about the appearance of witches. When he learns about people and phenomenon that he thought were unreal, he is no longer in the safe world, but has been moved into a whole new world where witches hunt children down. It has been there the whole time, but only comes to exist through the boy's acknowledgment.

In the journey, the hero may encounter one phase that Campbell (2004) calls The Belly of the Whale. Figuratively, it signifies the rebirth of the hero when s/he escapes from a certain beast, "dies in spirit, only to be reborn as a man" (Indick, 2014, p. 51). This plot can be found in various stories from all over the world. For example, Little Red Riding Hood is saved when the hunter tears open the wolf's belly. Pinocchio and his father Geppetto find their own way out of the dogfish's belly after both are swallowed. In Chinese culture, the famous *Journey to the West* (16th century) written by Wu Cheng'en, translated into *Monkey: A Folk Tale of China* by Arthur Waley (1942), depicts the great adventure of monk Tang Sanzang from China to India in order to obtain the Buddhist scriptures. He travels with Sun Wukong, a monkey born from a stone with seventy-two polymorphic transformations. Once in their journey, Wukong shrinks and sneaks inside Tie shan gong zhu to threaten her, because she is trying to stop the group from passing her land. Of course, then he escapes and they continue their journey. Long before this adventure starts, the great Shakyamuni is swallowed by a peafowl. He cuts open the peafowl's belly and is about to kill him when other gods stop him, saying that this action is not different from killing his own mother. Symbolically, getting out of the beast's belly represents courage because the hero must face

her/his fear and try to find a way out, and thus, in a broader sense, make sense of her/his own identity.

The Road of Trials in the journey of a hero starts from the moment s/he steps through the threshold. To prove him/herself worthwhile, s/he must face and succeed in a series of trials. Such well-known examples are the twelve labours given to Hercules by Eurystheus, or the difficulties that Bilbo Baggins overcomes in his quest of being a thief. These tasks help the hero prove her/his strength and also show how they mature along the road. They must face grave danger, be seriously injured and death may come at any second. The ordeal may reveal itself to the hero in this stage, but will be mentioned in the next part of this chapter.

When the hero is fragile and needs help the most, s/he encounters an important character in a situation called The Meeting with the Goddess, which is most likely to happen after the ordeal. The Goddess figure is portrayed as a "healing, forgiving, nurturing and embracing mother" (Indick, 2014, p. 53). He cites the example of Galadriel the Elven Queen in *The Lord of the Rings*, who consoles Frodo after he thinks he has lost Gandalf.

However, not only is the woman figure a goddess, but she is also a temptation to the hero. The stage when the hero meets the Woman as the Temptress stops him from achieving a certain goal. Characters like Edmund Pevensies in *The Chronicles of Narnia* are lured by evil women. He is taken advantage of by the White Witch, who wants to capture sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, the Pevensies themselves, to diminish the threat to her ruling Narnia. After she knows that Edmund cannot bring his siblings to her, she turns cold toward Edmund and throws him into her prison. He is then rescued and realises that she is only tempting him. Seduction in this stage of the journey is based mostly on love, lust, and power. Young Edmund is trying to please the White Witch probably as he feels being treated as a special person. He is promised power from the witch as well. In the above example of the Chinese classic *Journey to the West*, Tan Sanzang is seduced countless times by evil females who often want him as a husband or want to devour him because his flesh can make them immortal. These evil females are often animals living long enough to shape-shift into human form, but need Tan's flesh to remain so. Because Tan believes in the goodness in humans, he is often tricked, but is always rescued by Wukong.

The Atonement with the Father reveals the stage when the protagonist is at her/his best, and it is at this stage that the hero faces the father figure to diagnose the true obstacle and recognise her/his own identity. This father figure is not necessarily a real father, but can be the very antagonist of the story, because Campbell (2004) explains that "the father is the archetypal enemy; hence, throughout life all enemies are symbolical (to the unconscious) of

the father" (Campbell, 2004, p. 143). Thus, redemption is likely to be a revenge for the dead father as in the case of Hamlet, or a more complex situation as Indick's (2014) description of Harry Potter's atonement. The Dark Lord Voldermort accidentally sends one piece of his soul into Harry when he tries to kill him, establishing a spiritual link between them, which can be figuratively considered a father and son relation. When Harry allows Voldermort to kill him, he faces his Self, death and the fear of Voldermort. Harry killing Voldermort later is the atonement with the father in literal sense, as he avenges his deceased father.

The Apotheosis depicts the transformation from a weaker, mortal self to a more sacred self:

> We are taken from the mother, chewed into fragments and assimilated to the world annihilating body of the ogre for whom all the precious forms and beings are only the courses of a feast; but then, miraculously reborn, we are more than we were. If the God is a tribal, racial, national, or sectarian archetype, we are the warriors of his cause; but if he is a lord of the universe itself, we then go forth as knowers to whom all men are brothers. And in either case, the childhood parent images and ideas of "good" and "evil" have been surpassed. We no longer desire and fear; we are what was desired and feared (Campbell, 2004, pp. 149-150)

Also, according to Indick (2014), the one who often turns mighty is not the hero but the wise man, like Gandalf the Grey in *The Lord of the Rings,* who then turns into Gandalf the White after his near-death, or Dumbledore in *Harry Potter*, who actually dies but comes back in Harry's mind when he is unconscious after the Dark Lord put a deathly spell on him. As a result, in the journey of a hero, the protagonist may not experience the revelation alone. Some other characters with an important role in the story can also go through the stages.

The Ultimate Boon is something physical other than just a spiritual achievement of the hero's journey. It brings benefit to the hero and also to the whole world that she lives in. *The Lord of the Rings* shows us an obvious boon: the one ring that rules other rings, the ring that brings definite power to the bearer. *Journey to the West*'s boon is what Tang Sanzang aims at in the whole journey: the sacred texts (sutras). The hero must find it, and sometimes destroy it for the sake of her/his people, as in the case of the seven hocruxes in the *Harry Potter* series.

Unlike the Refusal of the Call, the Refusal of the Return happens in a totally opposite situation. If the hero is doubtful of her/his ability to go on a journey at the former stage, s/he does not want to go back now as the primary realm may no longer fit him/her. Indick's (2014) example of Jesus's return to a world where he is humiliated, tortured to death only to

save those people illustrates the exact situation of this stage. Jesus Christ is willing to come back, and similar cases can be observed in other stories, when the hero senses her/his responsibility. Harry Potter could have gone on to the afterlife, but he chooses to come back and kill Voldermort once and for all.

When the hero makes up the mind to return to her/his old life, the Magic Flight takes him/her back to the primary world. This trip might be easier for the now mighty hero than it was before, as s/he is more powerful, and may also receive aid from a supernatural being. An example of this magical flight can be found at the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), with Fawkes the phoenix taking the heroes from the hidden underground chamber to the ground. This is also the Rescue from Without, because the phoenix does not only come to take them back, but also saving them from a near-death experience. As a new and better version of him/herself, the hero now goes through the Crossing of the Return Threshold to come back and become the Master of the Two Worlds, the primary and the secondary world. Even though Coraline comes back just as a normal girl, she is the master because she has overcome all her trials in the Other world and returns with more responsibility, more sense of value of her own life and her parents. From this moment on, the hero has the Freedom to Live, which is also the final stage of Campbell's (2004) journey of a hero. The hero is the new generation, "the quintessential rebel, forever shaking up the status quo, never allowing the seat of tyranny to rest easy on its throne, forever making uneasy the head that wears the crown" (Indick, 2014, p. 62)

### II.2.3. The ordeal

Closely related to the quest is the ordeals that the protagonist must face, along what Indick (2014, p. 52) calls "The Roads of Trials":

> This stage of the hero's adventure recapitulates the ordeal aspect of the initiation ritual, in which the pubescent boy must demonstrate his masculinity and strength by withstanding some type of painful or injurious physical trial without fleeing or crying or otherwise betraying fear and weakness.

What is more, according to Laszkiewicz (2018), it is the willingness to endure and the hope to overcome the ordeal that makes the boy mature, and probably this is the deciding moment for him to complete his quest. Even though an ordeal may seem similar to a quest, it is more of a component, one principal step in the process, a key that helps the protagonist open the door to the final chapter of the journey. On the other hand, this ordeal might be the

temptation that the hero must overcome. Often in the form of power temptation, this mental ordeal appears when the object of great sovereignty or the dark side tries to lure the protagonist. Bilbo Baggins, for example, hides his discovery of the ring from the dwarves when he escapes from the Misty Mountains. Later on, when Frodo bears the ring and tries to destroy it, at the deciding moment when he is supposed to throw the ring down the Crack of Doom, he claims it as his possession. The temptation may also hit the characters' weaknesses and urge them to quit the journey. Ron Weasley in *Harry Potter* is one example of such a case. When he is trying to destroy one evil object, it shows him the image of his companions calling him the useless extra and discouraging him to finish the task. Unlike Bilbo and Frodo, who manage to resist the temptation with the help of others, Ron gets through it by himself. The ordeal surely brings a certain realization to the characters. For some, it might be grand, and for others subtler, but it plays an important role in the adventure.

### II.2.4. The hero/ine and the trickster

The one who goes on the journey, matures, saves himself/herself, and perhaps the whole world is the hero or the heroine. Josh Campbell's (2004, p. 28) theory of a monomyth in literature draws a pattern for every hero's journey:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

In a sense, the hero must leave his usual world to go on a journey and s/he may remain, but the environment is altered for some reasons, and this change creates a chance for the ordinary protagonist to become a hero.

The hero often starts with a humdrum life, then is called for, goes on a great journey, and comes back as a mighty person (Campbell, 2004; Indick, 2014; Webb, 2014). Campbell (2004, p. 31) defines the journey of the hero as "separation – initiation – return". This heroic figure reoccurs in fantasy stories all over the world, not just in British literature. Tobie Lolness (2006) in the French novel with the same name, written by Timothée de Fombelle, is a miniature person who travels the whole oak tree to save his parents from being wrongly accused of treachery. Dế Mèn in the Vietnamese *Dế Mèn Phiêu Lưu Ký* (*Diary of a Cricket*) (1941) by author Tô Hoài goes on a great journey, first to see the world, then to save his friend. Little Cass in *The Secret Series* (2007-2011) by Pseudonymous Bosch, real name Raphael Simon, overcomes different trials to find the secret in which the erudition of

humankind lies. The prevailing feature of these characters, as well as many other fantasy heroes, is the growth of a common person into someone great. Stereotypically, through a journey of several trials, some deadly, the protagonist explores her/his inner strength and use it to conquer the goal and mature. This hero is the one who represents the whole group, and although s/he is often forlorn, Timmerman (1983, p. 72) warns us not to mistake a lonesome hero for the "self-imposed exile of the existential anti-hero". Desolated as a hero might be, s/he gets help occasionally from the Wise and other supernatural beings.

Along with such prototypical characteristics, a hero sometimes shows traits of the trickster: "mischief-making, cleverness, and shape-shifting" (Mikkelsen, 2000, p. 25). Indeed, a trickster works with a quick mind, changes the appearance, and dares to gamble her/his own safety to achieve a bigger goal (McElmeel, 1995 & Hyde, 2010). In dangerous situations, trickery is the key to help the protagonists save themselves. The escape of Bilbo Baggins from Gollum succeeds thanks to his clever mind. First, he asks himself a question but then acts as if it is for Gollum, and in so doing wins the riddle as well as his liberation from the cave, of course with another trick with the ring he has just found. In the same manner, Coraline talks the evil beldam into believing that she guesses her parent's whereabouts wrongly. When the beldam is busy showing Coraline that she is wrong, Coraline takes the snowball in which her parents are locked and succeeds in running away. In the form of a mouse, the little boy in Roald Dahl's *The Witches* secretly pours the witches' formula which turns human into mice into the soup pot for the witches, thus, makes them fall into their own trap. Without sleights of hand, these protagonists may never win against their enemy. On the other hand, it raises a question of whether these tricks make them any different from the villains. Any typical fantasy story illustrates an evil character full of deception and cruelty who is willing to do just anything to achieve what s/he wants. Yet, it is the final goal that makes the difference. The hero, at some moment, might be caught with a glimpse of cunning, but s/he is not treacherous by nature and acts for the common good.


**II.2.5. Familiarity versus Estrangement**
The two inextricable elements in fantasy literature are familiarity and estrangement. According to Sandner (2004, p. 308), the term estrangement originates from the word *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) initiated by Viktor Shklovsky, and *Verfremdung* (alienation) from Bertolt Brecht:

> Shklovsky saw estrangement as the essential operation of all literature: through the formal manipulation of their linguistic representatives we are made to see familiar objects and

experience as strange, distant from ourselves. Ultimately, then, literature draws us away from the world we live in – or think we live in, for in Shklovsky and Brecht's Marxist view, the initial familiarity was an illusion produced by estrangement as a preliminary step toward social revolution.

How estrangement and familiarity work as triggers of social revolution exceeds the scope of my inquiry. What I would like to explore is how these two elements are the core that ushers readers into fantasy literature. For Tolkien as well, "such illusion was not politico-economic in origin but was produced by boredom, habit, false sophistication, and loss of faith" (Sandner, 2004, p. 308). Because the world is such a monotonous place, we need to let imagination come alive and hope it can live up to our ambition. We need to forget reality for a while, but in so doing, we do not ignore it. On the contrary, we recover, as Tolkien points out: "a regaining – regaining as a clear view" (Tolkien, 1964, p. 19)

Supernatural elements, as describes by Timmerman (1983, p. 72), are "the driving force in the story and take a central role in the development and shaping of characters as well as plot". Not only so, he argues that this supernatural aspect creates the good and the evil, and agrees with Attebery (1980) that it constructs the archetypal moral of society. This is the point where familiarity meets estrangement, where readers can find their daily values and perspective in a strange form and in a strange realm. As put by Stableford (2009, p. vii), "the reader's fantasy is their normality, the reader's secondary world their primary". Even the races in fantasy literature can be associated with our world. Nazgul and Sauron in *The Lord of the Rings* are compared to the Nazi Germany (Filmer, 1992). Analogously, a group of pure-blooded witches and wizards under the lead of the demagogic Grindelwald and then Lord Voldermort wants to eliminate the half-blooded and the non-magic from the wizarding world. Perhaps any reader may link this to xenophobic fascism in the Second World War. That is to say, even though readers can find all the estrangement in the fantasy world, in the end they will see the familiarity with what they know.

Because all the uncanny beings and happenings in fantasy literature may make readers feel uncomfortable, readers can be divided into those who love the genre and those who cannot read it. In his essay *On Fairy Stories*, Tolkien (1964, p. 3) declares that "Faërie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold". It is hardly somewhere between the two, as after some hesitation and consideration hither and thither, readers know what way they go. If they cannot adapt in the first place, they see the plot as bizarre, the hero's deed as outlandish, and the races as nonsensical. To them, fantasy literature, especially high fantasy, challenges every normality that they know, and they

refuse to go through the threshold with the hero. On the other hand, agreeing to open the book, they step into a realm of unusual events and creatures, find their escape from real life just to find themselves as a part of that strange world. This sense of escapism is a recurrent theme in fantasy literature, and Stableford (2009, p. 136) explains that a great number of critics "do not, in any case, think that a contemporary escape from the burdens of social responsibility is an inherently bad thing". As readers, we find ourselves empathetic to the escape that our heroes experience. They also flee from their prison in a supposedly real world and enter a new world with their freedom and might. We find comfort in seeing those ordinary people becoming great, because we are longing for the same thing. We see strange things that are likely the reflection of reality in the secondary world and we escape, but only to come back and recover. These two elements in fantasy literature are inseparable. When one happens, the other inevitably continues, creating a circle.

**II.3. The role of literature and fantasy literature in Vietnam**

**II.3.1. Fantastic elements in Vietnamese literature before the 20th century**

Fantastic elements are not uncommon in the life of the Vietnamese people. In fact, for a long time now, fantasy has held a firm and important position in every-day life. The very beginning of the Vietnamese people as an ethnic group is already fantastic. As scripted in *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (*Complete Annals of Đại Việt*, 1993) by Ngô Sĩ Liên, legend has it that Vietnamese are descendants of Lạc Long Quân, a metamorphosed dragon, and Âu Cơ, a fairy. After their marriage, Âu Cơ gave birth to a hundred eggs which hatched into a hundred men. Because the couple is of two different races, they could not live together in the same habitat. Fifty of their sons thus followed Lạc Long Quân to settle down near the sea, and fifty followed Âu Cơ to live in mountainous areas. These sons scattered around the land, creating the country today known as Vietnam. The eldest son then claimed the throne and became the first king of the country. Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ are not the Adam and Eve created by God to establish the land, as they appear when humankind already existed. They are in fact the fore-parents with supernatural traits. Lạc Long Quân can walk underwater as he can do on land, while Âu Cơ, even though in the story she does not seem to possess any special ability, is the descendant of Shennong, a Chinese mythical figure also known as the Agriculture God (Đặng, 2010). Vietnamese people grow up with such legend, and like in every country in the world, the people of Vietnam have become acquainted with tales of supernatural or magical forces since their childhood.

Following that legend, other fantastic stories from the very early ages of Vietnamese culture were, and are still now, told to children as bedtime stories. Few people wonder about

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the genre of these stories because they only care that they bring pure recreation, and sometimes also moral lessons to both tellers and listeners. For many of us Vietnamese, fantasy as a genre was so unheard of that any story involving magic would be called a fairy tale. Every night when tucking children into bed, what else do adults tell to lull them into a good sleep? For years I thought every story that my grandmothers told during my childhood were fairy tales, until the literature lessons in junior high school proved there was much more than fairy tales. There were myths, legends, non-fictional historical tales, and there were fantastic tales. In Stableford's (2009) opinion, all the oral stories that exist even before the invention of written texts, and create the basis for literature, are often fantastic. If it were not for all those lessons in Vietnamese literature, I would not have realised that fantastic short stories and novels were written and later taught in Vietnam. We were so unaccustomed to the genre that it first sounded obscure to me that fantasy literature exists in our culture.

For a long time, the way in which Vietnamese readers perceive literature in general and fantasy literature in specific received heavy influence from Chinese culture. Because of this, their preferences nowadays follow certain trends that I will mention in part two of this chapter. However, to explain how it all started, Bùi's (2012) research on subjectivity and ethnicity in Vietnamese folktales reveals the historical root of such preference. She studies a number of tales to answer the question of how the metamorphosed heroic figure is often ethnic. Originating from China's domination lasting almost a thousand years, there are many imported beliefs, customs and values of Confucianism. Since Emperor Wu of Han invaded Nanyue, a country which, at the time, covered the land of what is now Northern Vietnam and the Chinese province of Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan, until Khúc Thừa Dụ won the country back from the hand of the Tang Dynasty, Vietnam was under the influence of China. They sent groups of Chinese people down south with a scheme of social and cultural assimilation. The heaviest influence of the time was Confucianism, which has produced a long-lasting effect. However, Bùi (2012) claims that these influences were felt mainly among the Kinh ethnic group, which makes up ninety percent of the population in Vietnam. During the time Vietnam was dominated by China, "some ancient beliefs which have been very fruitful and common in Kinh social life and Kinh mythology" disappeared (Bùi, 2012, p.153). The "unceasing and unconscious process of abolishing fabulous and miraculous factors" results in the considerable rationality and philosophy in Kinh folktales (Nguyễn, 1993, as cited in Bùi, 2012). In other words, Confucianism does not encourage supernatural beings and phenomena. Paradoxically, magic and supernatural forces still appear in Kinh tales as a result of the existence of Buddhism. The belief in the next life, or lives, serves as an encouragement for people to dream of a nirvana where they can finally live in happiness

(Bùi, 2014). On the other hand, each of fifty-three other ethnic minorities has the tendency to live as small, closed groups in either remote or mountainous areas, so they have been able to preserve their own culture. Their folktales involve more or less mythical and magical events or figures, as their societies already value such beliefs. The uncanny metamorphosed heroic figure, hence, is rather popular in their tales.

In Bùi's (2009) research, even though the changes of main characters in Vietnamese tales with fantastic elements are both mental and physical, the latter is more emphasised. What she finds in many tales is the link between a character's appearance and her/his personality. Beautiful traits are often associated with good characteristics and ugliness with bad ones. However, this very tendency is often challenged in the first half of tales with metamorphosed characters, as they more likely have the appearance of an animal or even an object. Certainly, these identities are not qualified as beautiful. Yet she explains that it is these shapes that represent the beliefs of a community, as one would likely choose a sacred figure to be the non-human form of the protagonist "at a level that expresses the culture's deepest roots" (Bùi, 2009, p. 156). Nevertheless, these non-human forms never last until the end of the story because there will be a character that challenges the protagonist to accomplish arduous tasks before marrying the lover of her/his dream. After completing all of those tasks, on the first night of the marriage, the protagonist turns into a young and good-looking person, discarding the ugly skin, along with all the taunts and sneers that s/he had to bear for a long time. Also, according to Bùi (2009, p. 159), this motif "expresses the concept of change and otherness, representing maturation as a process of becoming someone other (and superior to what existed before)". Thus ugliness is no longer evil because it is only the temporary bodily figure of these characters. They are all along people of good nature but proving that they are so takes time. This also suggests that Vietnamese people do not like horrid appearance. Even though before the metamorphosis these protagonists do no harm to other people, they are still not welcome. The appreciation only comes after they gain the form of a human, and if better, a good-looking human.

Many versions of the same metamorphosis plot can be found in Vietnamese as well as foreign cultures. The first shape of the protagonist may vary from a coconut skull to a toad, a goat, or a monkey. Nguyễn's (2000) anthology of Vietnamese fairy tales listed several variants of the story *Sọ Dừa* (*Coconut Skull*). The tales' protagonist is a young man in the shape of a coconut without any limbs, who possesses magical power. He has servants who appear out of thin air, providing him with wedding offerings demanded by the wealthy villager. With those offerings, he is able to marry his daughter. On the nuptial night, he turns into a handsome man. Later on, his wife burns the coconut skin, so he lives as a human from

then on. *Sọ Dừa*, even though originating from Kinh ethnic group, creates an uncanny and disturbing figure that is rarely seen in Kinh culture. The idea of a person in the shape of only a coconut skull is disquieting not only to children but perhaps many adults. Most of the protagonists in other Kinh fairy tales are charming maidens and appealing young men, not some unsettling characters like Sọ Dừa.

Around the 15th and 16th-century in Vietnam, fantastic elements are copious in literature. Authors rewrite oral legends, folklores, fairy tales and myths and published as collections of tales. These tales are of a different genre, but they all contain fantastic elements and never use science as an explanation for supernatural phenomena. To name but a few, *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* (*Compilation of the Potent Spirits in the Việt Realm*, 1329) by Lý Tế Xuyên, *Lĩnh Nam Chích Quái* (*Selection of Strange Tales in Lĩnh Nam*, 1492) by Trần Thế Pháp, *Truyền Kỳ Mạn Lục* (*Collection of Strange Tales*, 16th century) by Nguyễn Dữ. These collections originated from oral tales which might have come from Vietnam or China. The Chinese-originated tales were rewritten with Vietnamese locations and characters to fit Vietnamese culture. It is important to note that this action was not considered as plagiarism at the time. Stories with the same plot could appear in more than one country because they have the same origin. The specialty of these tales may trouble researchers even more, because on the one hand, they are scientifically irrational, but on the other hand, they try to turn the fantastic tales into real history (Bùi, 2014). This make-believe showed readers the so-called truth in strangeness. In fact, Bùi (2014) points out that authors of the period all claimed those 'truths' as witnessed and heard, but the 'heard' is ever more frequent than the 'witnessed', not to mention more attractive to readers. The typical motive in such stories often involves a human marrying a ghost, ghosts taking revenge, ghosts informing humans about upcoming good or bad luck, and so on.

One particular story which has had a great impression on me since my childhood belongs to the book *Truyền Kỳ Mạn Lục*, a collection of Vietnamese legends and folklores collected and transcribed by a 16th-century author named Nguyễn Dữ. The name *Từ Thức Lấy Vợ Tiên* (*Từ Thức Marries a Fairy*) describes exactly what happens in the tale. Từ Thức, a young retired mandarin, when joining a spring festival, rescues one beautiful maiden from being punished for picking a peony from the pagoda's garden. She is deeply grateful to him and promises she will someday express her gratitude. One time, when exploring a cave on the beach, Từ Thức accidentally steps into the fairy world and then gets married to the fairy princess, who turns out to be the maiden he met at the festival. One year passes by and Từ Thức misses his hometown. He asks his wife to let him visit his home, but the fairy wife sadly lets him know that once he steps out of the cave, he can never come back. He bids her

goodbye and goes back to where he parted, but a year in the fairyland is a hundred years in the mortal world. No one recognises him and neither can he come back to his wife. Disappointed, Từ Thức walks away, never to be seen again.

Various sources classify the story of *Từ Thức Lấy Vợ Tiên* into different genres. Many Vietnamese people believe that it is a fairy tale. Stories with a similar motif can be found in other cultures, for example, *Urashima Taro*, a Japanese fairy tale of a fisherman who rescues a small turtle and gets invited to the Dragon Palace under the sea. He receives from the princess a reward for his good deed, but once he returns home, 300 years have passed. He opens the gift box from the princess and turnes into an old man. Though the plot is more or less the same, the Japanese version is a fairy tale, while Vietnamese readers seem to be unsure about the genre *Từ Thức Lấy Vợ Tiên* belongs to. That is to say, paradoxically, while fantasy in Vietnam seemed to be a new and unexplored genre, it actually is what Vietnamese people grow up with. As I have mentioned before, for many readers, a tale with magical or supernatural phenomena involved is very likely a fairy tale. Perhaps *Từ Thức Lấy Vợ Tiên* is more like a fairy tale, because even though he enters another realm, there is no quest for him to complete. The tale also happens in a rather small space, that is, it only affects Từ Thức. The fate of no other person depends on the incidents that he encounters. On the other hand, what we see from fantasy as a genre is a quest that changes the destiny of a community or even a world. After all, the story of Từ Thức had existed as oral tales before Nguyễn Dữ wrote his book, and fantasy is a much newer generation of written literature. With all those factors, fantastic elements become familiar in Vietnamese culture. Being the fabric for legends, myths, and fairy tales, they are hardly questioned. Everybody accepts the strangeness of the tales as it is the reminder of a "rustic, primary, harsh but also legendary and poetically calm" [chất phác, cổ sơ, khắc nghiệt nhưng cũng đầy huyền thoại và yên tĩnh nên thơ] (Vũ, 1999, p. 654, as cited in Đặng, 2006).

Interestingly, as explained by Ostrowski (2010), in the 17th-century, when Geronimo Maiorica, an Italian missionary from the Society of Jesus came to Vietnam and learnt Nôm, a former Vietnamese letter system, he composed several volumes of religious literature. With the involvement of Maiorica in many religious communities in Vietnam at the time, his work became well-known in the country. His saint stories include, among others, "supernatural occurrences to encourage virtue and discourage vice" (Ostrowski, 2010, p. 29). Ostrowski notes that some of his saint stories bear similarities to the tales in *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*. Along with the existence of Chinese originated values Vietnamese held at the time, the "Nôm hagiography also introduced the history of a foreign Western land" (Ostrowski, 2010, p. 30). Thus, we can see that Western culture in general and fantastic tales

in specific were imported into Vietnam not as late as the French invasion, but since the 17<sup>th</sup>-century, with the arrival of the missionaries.

## II.3.2. On contemporary society through mass media

As mentioned, fantastic tales were popular among the Vietnamese in the form of both oral and written stories. For a long period of time, there were no new fantastic works. The arrival of the French and the American brought the war and caused a reduction of fantastic elements in literature. Novels, short stories, and poems focused on either the war tragedy or the encouragement to the whole nation to fight bravely. However, several fantasy novels for children became popular, among which the most classical is Tô Hoài's *Dế Mèn Phiêu Lưu Ký* (*Diary of Cricket*) written in 1941. Following the adventure of Cricket, the book tells a story of how he grows up both physically and mentally. From a young naughty cricket, he finds a way to become a decent grown-up through an adventure around the big world. It is perhaps the most phenomenal fantasy for children of the time. More than 70 years after it was written, *Dế Mèn Phiêu Lưu Ký* still holds its position as one of the most read Vietnamese fantastic stories.

Rarely can Vietnamese fantastic novels and short stories be found. Literary works with fantastic elements are more popular. Đặng's (2006) study on the subject finds a lack of fantasy in the period between the 1940s and 1980s, when the reality of socialism stepped in. At the end of the 1980s, the fantastic wave rose one more time but only as a complementary element for readers. Among the authors of this period, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is one who uses fantastic materials for his short stories and novels most frequently. To Đặng, the attraction of his work lies in stories which seem to have no association with fantasy. It is in these stories that the border between the real world and a different realm blurs away, creating an eerie atmosphere for the whole plot. Such details can be found most easily in Nguyễn's *Tướng Về Hưu* (*The Retired Soldier*, 1988), a short story about the difficult life of a former Vietnamese army soldier. During one year of his retirement, many incidents happen, pointing to the fact that his family's material lifestyle does not suit him. After his wife's death, he returns to the battlefield and is killed in action. What seems to be a totally realistic story troubles Đặng (2006) as uncanny details emerge. For instance, the retired soldier's daughter-in-law feeds the pet dog with the dead foetus she brings home from the hospital where she works, or his ill wife gets better after a serious sickness, but then immediately passes away when the daughter-in-law buys a shroud and prepares wood to make a coffin. Similar details can be found in stories of other writers of the same period. For example, *Người Sót Lại Của Rừng Cười* (*The Last Girl of the Laughing Forest*, 1991) is a short story in a collection of author

Võ Thị Hảo. The Laughing Forest is the location of the army of Vietnam's arm warehouse. The five young women in charge of the warehouse live in isolation and have nothing but the love story of one lady in the group to be their strength. The encounter between the Vietnamese soldiers who come to retrieve more weapons with the women seems unsettling and, in a sense, unreal. They first hear a ghostly laugh and then see creatures that look like white gibbons. They later realise that what they see are not gibbons but in fact, naked girls who have gone mad because of the segregated life in the deep forest. These details are all reality in the stories, yet they are almost absurd and leave a disturbing sensation.

Also according to Đặng (2006), young authors who prefer fantastic elements use them as a means to show viewpoints that they cannot express directly. She also claims that fantasy elements in Vietnamese literature have a legendary, mythical tendency, which focuses more on the outer world, not the inner self of characters. These elements serve as a means to make readers unsettled and confused rather than help them escape from reality. Curiously, even though Western fantasy authors also write to express ideas, Ursula Le Guin (1979, p. 48) says that what they express is not often the outer world, but themselves, because they are introverts with a way of communication that is "curious, not wholly satisfactory, but interesting". Usually, Vietnamese fantasy authors show the viewpoints they cannot speak into words rather than the persons that they are. However, this difference seems to be only at the surface because the writing style of an author always expresses them. Le Guin's (1979) explanation is that she could never write what a character does without knowing well how s/he looks like. She has to know her characters well, as if they were herself. Consciously, or more often than not, unconsciously, authors inject something of themselves into characters, who speak what authors think and act the way they would.

Bùi (2014), on the other hand, considers fantastic elements as metaphors which use strangeness to show reality to readers. To him, they are an expression of creativity, an artistic way of thinking about daily-life phenomena. Their presence in literature is inevitable because it helps writers express what they cannot through normal stories. This is where I do not agree with Bùi (2014), because fantasy elements are more than a metaphor or a tool to help writers achieve their goals. It is not only used as a cover when writers are afraid to raise their voice about sensitive topics. By creating a fantastic world, writers intentionally lead their readers into another world, either to be distracted and forget real life or to be so bewildered and unsettled that the sense of estrangement and otherness they experience stimulates them to question that world and, by comparison, their own. Bùi (2014) also defines literature with fantastic details as fantasy literature, which again is unlikely. Fantasy itself is already a genre which is hard to define, which makes it difficult for us to say if very

subtle details in the life of some characters in a novel can be called fantasy, or if it needs to involve a whole new and strange world. Perhaps more people would refer to "high fantasy", or "sword and sorcery", as Mandala (2010, p. 2) puts it. However, the purpose of fantasy literature as a genre is different from other genres with only one or two fantastic details. Also, most Vietnamese writers use fantastic material with a ghostly or eerie tendency. Bùi's (2014) explanation shows a human faith in supernatural forces, one that can wake a person from whatever blindness they have and is so powerful that is able to solve most problems.

Looking back to the end of the 20th century, Phùng (2006) is able to list a number of short story authors that became well-known. He calls it the age of short stories as many were written in this period and received positive feedback from readers. After 1986, short stories with fantastic elements surged in a wave that was stronger than ever. Many of these stories are much similar to *Cien años de soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, 1967) by Gabriel Garcia Márquez, with features that fit within the magical realism genre. They contain details that reflect people's mysterious innermost feelings, and it is these feelings that are fantastic. He also stresses that in this period fantastic elements are not at all like those of traditional literature, as they incorporate contemporary social viewpoints. During the war, literature was a common voice of people, a propaganda for the great mission. Characters were representatives of a whole generation, fighting and contributing to a better future of a whole nation. When the war ended, literature left more space for individual lives. It portrays the inner world of the characters, especially those who struggle with the aftermath of the war, or even with the new life like the two stories that I have mentioned above. The concept of good and evil becomes more complex. Characters become less ideal and more real when their thoughts and dreams are exposed. The fantastic touch which was once discouraged because people thought it was linked to outdated, anti-science viewpoints (Nguyễn, 2013) now helps to enhance the strength of this uncanny inner world.

The end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century brings more attention to the fantasy genre in Vietnam. There were research and discussions on the topic, but no novel or short story of the genre by Vietnamese authors appeared. Seemingly, while according to Mandala (2010, p. 9), fantasy in the West is considered as "a province of the 'geek' fringe", many Vietnamese readers assume that with all those make-beliefs, fantasy is an immature genre for children. The definition of fantasy as a popular and culturally rooted genre was not accepted. Le Guin's (1979, p. 40) book also starts with the same thought, that "almost all very highly technological peoples are more or less antifantasy". She suggests that some people may say that they dislike fantasy novels because they are tall tales for children, and that the only people who read them are English teachers because they earn money from

reading them. Similarly, Crossley (1975, p. 283) argues that there is a fear that restrains readers from fantasy. It is the fear that

> the readers have lost control of themselves, have surrendered themselves to the fiction, that the loss of control is exhilarating, but that the surrender is potentially embarrassing because those on "the outside" may find their reactions incomprehensible, unsophisticated, or socially unacceptable. These readers fear, in short, that they are not "acting their age," and so describe their responses in stubborn or polemical or whimsical or cunningly vague terms which will shield them from charges of immaturity – shield them, in fact, from the repulsion and coldness which Freud saw as the dominant culture's rejection of public expression of fantasies by adults.

Even until now, books with fantastic elements are still categorised as children literature, creating a misconception for the masses. In Vietnam, a big company with a good reputation in the publishing field has published many Vietnamese and Western canonical books, as well as other well-known books. In their bookstore, *Utopia* by Thomas More (1516) and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865) are placed in the children section, perhaps because they involve other worlds, strangeness and magic. Stockwell states that fantasy and science fiction were once "laughable non-subjects", but he also believes that now they are "at the centre of a thriving arena of academic debate" (2000, as cited in Mandala, 2010, p. 8). Fantasy has been recognised, slowly, but undeniably, as a valuable genre in our real world. Those who read it are no longer childish, because, as Le Guin (1979, p. 44) argues, "that maturity is not outgrowing, but a growing up: that an adult is not a dead child, but a child who survived".

At the beginning of the new century *Harry Potter* was translated and published in Vietnam. It was perhaps the first and most influential fantasy novel of the time as it mesmerised a large number of young adult readers. The new element of magic and adventure that was missing in Vietnamese young adult literature certainly contributed to the Harry Potter frenzy. It created a wave involving thousands of readers, a whole community of fanatics who would discuss the series wholeheartedly. The popularity of the Internet also played a role in spreading *Harry Potter*'s fame and bringing its fans together. From that moment on, a considerable number of fantastic series from other foreign countries followed and were welcomed by young readers. The *Children of the Red King* series by Jenny Nimmo (2002-2010), *The Inheritance Cycle* series by Christopher Paolini (2003-2011), the

*Animorphs* series by Katherine A. Applegate and Michael Grant (1996-2001) exemplify the contemporary fantasy trend.

Even though they receive strong support, a group of Vietnamese readers has not accepted it for the very strangeness that makes the genre. The bizarre appearance of the characters and the outlandish world they are from trouble these readers. This might be traced back to the absence of many metamorphosed characters in the early literature in Kinh culture. Also, because Vietnam has been through great wars, reality always strikes in the viewpoint of those who lived through the wars. Make-believe stories appear more absurd to this older generation than to the younger generation who grows up under the influence of Western culture.

The Western, especially American influence is also an important fact shaping reading preference in Vietnam. When the country started to open for integration after the wars, Western trends flocked in, generating a change in society and of course, in culture. Scholars have even considered the end of the 20$^{th}$ century as a period of Westernization, in which "Vietnam is presumed to be the 'receiver' of modernity and technology, and the West to be the provider" (Wilcox, 2010, p. 2). Wilcox (2010) also explains that one possible reason for what seems to be Western influences is in fact an approach to modernity. The intellectuals started to perceive traditional values as "obsolete" and tried to embrace ideas that they think more dynamic, which happen to come from the West (Wilcox, 2010, p. 6). New literature preference is perhaps one of the results of this post-colonialism period in Vietnam.

It is, however, not easy to find references to Western fantasy literature and its impacts on Vietnam. Books on the topic are rare, and articles are often online, re-published, and thus, original versions are hard to trace. Most of these articles focus on the Western fantasy wave and the lack of fantasy literary work in Vietnam. Fantasy literature in Vietnam is still considered a genre for children and young adults, the concept of fantasy is still vague, and Vietnamese readers are struggling hard to define the genre (Mai, 2015). Mai's (2015) article quoted Phan Hồn Nhiên, a famous young Vietnamese author who has published several fantasy short stories and novels. Her definition includes two realms, one being the reflection of the other and both of them exist at the same time. What is more, the characters move between two realms via a threshold that connects them. Apparently, this concept is correct but incomplete. Many famous fantasy stories do allow two worlds to co-exist. For instance, Lucy Pevensie opens the wardrobe in the attic of the house to find it is a portal to Narnia, and Harry Potter receives a visit on his eleventh birthday and is told he is a wizard. These are two famous fantasy novels among Vietnamese readers so it is likely that they give them the impression that fantasy novels should always include more than one world. However, if

we think of Bilbo Baggins and Middle-earth in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, we find no other world than his own. The story starts in Middle-earth without Bilbo being tossed to a strange land he has never known. With this example, I want to emphasise that Vietnamese readers know fantasy literature only through contemporary works, which limits them to a narrow understanding that may create stereotypes and biases.

Because fantasy literature is new in Vietnam, most people know it after they have watched the movie made from the book. Some have no idea about the existence of the book version. *Harry Potter* is famous enough to make readers curious about the novels and look for them. Other fantasy books like *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) by C.S. Lewis, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) by L. Frank Baum*, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) by Roald Dahl, are less fortunate because they have not been widely read in Vietnam. Grown-ups, like my parents' generation, may dislike fantasy for its unfamiliarity. Young readers are more open, but their reading culture is different, if not to say weak. Movies are always preferred because they are easier to digest and more entertaining. Of course, books are entertaining, but young people like my students say they cannot read a thick book because whenever they open the book, they feel discouraged. Considered merely as an entertaining genre, fantasy is sadly often looked down on as immature and vain, and only young dreamers would choose such a genre to read. Paradoxically, while realistic novels and short stories with fantastic elements are welcome and praised as a reflection of a better life, as a way to escape harshness, fantasy has not claimed its rightful position in Vietnam. Young readers search for an alternative realm to escape, but older readers try to bring out the cruel reality even though unconsciously they may still want to be rescued.

Fantasy literature written by Vietnamese authors is even harder to find. Phan Hồn Nhiên is one of the few authors who write fantasy and become well-known as a writer of the genre. Publishers often organise fantasy novel-writing competition for young authors, but no particular work has been successful enough to create a wave in Vietnam, not even of the famous Phan Hồn Nhiên. What is more, Mai (2015) points out that most of the fantasy works in Vietnam use Western culture as their source material. The Western influence is ever so strong in Vietnamese fantasy literature because the combination of the West and fantasy sounds more familiar than Oriental or Vietnamese culture and fantasy. With a wealthy past of legends, myths and fairy tales, why have not any Vietnamese authors realised they can compose new stories out of them? Vy (2015) quotes two young authors' answers to this question in her interview. The first one gives an example of the obstacles in describing a Vietnamese sacred animal in the story, either because he does not know which one to choose

or because of the lack of reference. The other considers using Vietnamese culture materials as unfair for young writers when compared to Western authors who know their culture very well. This viewpoint entails that the training of Vietnamese culture is taken for granted in education, hence, requiring it amounts to putting more burden on young fantasy authors already under heavy pressure. These come to me as clumsy excuses for the lack of knowledge and understanding. Creativity can fill the gaps when there are few sources of reference. The burden for young writers sounds even more nonsensical, for every young writer, West or East, has to overcome this difficulty.

There is an author who has made an exception with his series *Chuyện Xứ Lang Biang* (*The Tale of Lang Biang*, 2004-2006). Born in 1955, author Nguyễn Nhật Ánh has been renowned since the end of the 20$^{th}$ century for his romantic novellas for young adults. In 2004, several years after *Harry Potter* was introduced in Vietnam, he published his own fantasy series that follows an adventure of two boys living in Đà Lạt Plateau, Vietnam. In the story, Nguyên and Kăply, fascinated by a rumour about wizards and witches appearing on a mountain near their village, climb the mountain to search for the truth. They are transported to a parallel universe after the appearance of two young orphan wizards who are destined to defeat the Dark Lord. Often mentioned as the Vietnamese version of *Harry Potter*, *Chuyện Xứ Lang Biang* successfully weaves a magical world out of material from Vietnam's Central Highland culture. It is important to note that the majority of residents on the Central Highland area of Jrai and Êđê ethnic groups with connection to the Chams ethnic group, who inhabit many other Southeast Asian countries. Of the two protagonists of the series, Kăply, is a Chams, so Nguyễn Nhật Ánh is able to integrate the Chams culture into his work. Being put onto a scale for comparison, at one point, *Chuyện Xứ Lang Biang* is said to be an imitation of *Harry Potter*. It is true that the two plots share some similarities, but the specialty of *Chuyện Xứ Lang Biang* lies in the way the author is able to engage with Vietnamese culture. With a lighter plot and fun voice, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's series draws the attention of a considerable number of young readers. This is perhaps the brightest star on the Vietnamese fantasy sky up to now.

## II.3.3. On higher education, language learning, and critical thinking through fantasy literature

What can best stimulate readers' critical mind if not fantasy literature? The strangeness of the text is a big question mark that remains in our mind and insists that we keep imagining until something is enlightened. That 'something' is never easy to define, but vagueness makes it even more captivating. As mentioned, fantasy has not been considered serious, in

the past more frequently than now. It has been treated merely as a means of entertainment, and when it comes to more academic purposes, many people who remain skeptical do not think that fantasy can inspire critical thinking. Mandala (2010, p. 12) opposes that, in fact, fantasy "strips away or warps what we have come to take for granted as real, reveals far more profound and fundamental truths (thus allowing us to 'recover' them)". Prior to that, Le Guin (1974, p. 44) claims that fantasy does not push its readers into acknowledging it, but they themselves know fantasy is true:

> For fantasy is true, of course. It isn't factual, but it is true. Children know that. Adults know it too, and that is precisely why many of them are afraid of fantasy. They know that its truth challenges, even threatens, all this false, all that is phony, unnecessary, and trivial in the life they have let themselves be forced into living. They are afraid of dragons because they are afraid of freedom.

In her book, Mandala (2010) also touches on many aspects of life where fantasy is related to the real world. She associates supernatural beings with topics like religion, race, sexuality, fear, or even politics. Indeed, these themes are often found in fantasy literature. For example, 'the greater good' in the *Harry Potter* series is an ideology that bears a sense of racism because it encourages the killing of non-pure blood wizards. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum is controlled by greed and then the fear of losing his treasure. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, the children represent gluttony, vanity, greed, and other deadly sins, and the book also emphasises the difference between the rich and the poor, along with the fact that goodness comes from very insignificant persons.

However, it takes time to understand the nature of fantasy as it likely comes with a sense of vagueness. In fact, this ambiguity is not rare at all, for it was Carroll and Tolkien who started their fantastic journeys with two sentences that they themselves claimed to be hard to comprehend (Sandner, 2004). "For the Snark *was* a Boojum, you see" (Carroll, 1976) and "In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit" (Tolkien, 1937) are mentioned by Sandner (2004) as two most iconic sentences in fantasy literature, displaying ambiguity. Readers cannot know what a Snark, a Boojum, or a hobbit are until they read the whole work. He claims that the sentences do not have any meaning, that "perhaps it never means anything, at least not what we intend it to mean" (Sandner, 2004, p. 4). The significance of fantasy literature lies in its ability to urge the reader to think in order to decipher the intention of the author. Yet in the end, whether the author has intentionally started with a meaning is difficult to establish. Sandner (2004) says that while Carroll does not explain his nonsensical lines in

the story, Tolkien tries to give us answers as if the Middle-Earth really existed, yet leaves us puzzled. In her book, Mandala (2010) illustrates this point with examples from some fantasy novels. The fact that a king bears a child in his body in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), or that the firemen's job in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) is not putting out but starting fire, are bizarre enough to trigger readers' minds. When they think of these forms of estrangement, new ideas about the world they know arise. She explains that the old is highlighted and becomes the new, and even the comparison between the two can produce a worthwhile result. Reading closely indeed provokes questions which, in turn, generate streams of thought that help us find our own explanation of what we read. We also tend to share our views with other readers, and thus debates often emerge during such conversations:

> Fantasy has a way of offering everything and nothing, new worlds and old, openings and closings, glimpses beyond the world and only the abyss. And this is not a binary, but a tension at the core of the fantastic that is productive for the literature, and, importantly here, for its criticism, provoking debates about the function of the form that bring us to the edge of meaning itself (Sandner, 2004, p. 5).

Whether the debate brings an answer or not, it leaves readers with many things to think of. Because other realms are different from our own world, we cannot easily compare them with what we know. It is not so much experience, but imagination that counts while reading. An adult reader might struggle even more than a child, because s/he knows many things and might think that imagination cannot work. With a fresh mind, a child approaches the other realm and is open to see what authors offers. It is at this point that fantasy literature is able to stir something in readers' mind. As Simone (2016, p. 158) describes:

> Fantasy literature goes a step further, though. By creating worlds in which the unexpected, the surprising, or the unanticipated change places with the "normal," fantasy literature turns readers' expectation on their heads. By doing so, they make uncomfortable realities visible.

Perhaps the two sentences which started Carroll's and Tolkien's stories were written out of the blue. They might not have had any intention at the time they appeared in the authors' heads. Their strength is the ability to lead a way for imagination. That is also the reason why for many readers the movie version of a book is always less interesting, not because it does not fully exploit the plot, but because it leaves no room for imagination.

However, when literature is taught in Vietnam, fantasy is rarely included. In about six to seven first years of compulsory education, students learn Vietnamese folklore, legends, myths and fairy tales. From the eighth grade, other genres are introduced to students. Foreign literary works are also taught, but Vietnamese literature is of course the focus of the curriculum. Students learn poetry, short stories and excerpts from famous novels, which are mostly realistic. I have mentioned in the previous chapter that learners' autonomy and creativity are not the focus of many Vietnamese teachers. As the focus is laid on the acquisition of notions, students' freedom to think is often neglected. At the tertiary level, if students' major is not literature, literary texts in general are even more rarely seen. In the English literature course at the English Department of Hanoi University, fantasy literature excerpts are not included. Of course, owing to time constraints the syllabus designer cannot introduce every genre, but fantasy does not seem to be a priority.

Nonetheless, the absence of fantasy as a genre in the Vietnamese education system might also be because it is never thought of. Other genres have been taught, even what is often considered childish like fairy tales. Strangely enough, although fairy tales are 'for children', they are important for being the nation's cultural heritage. Because most people would categorise all genres with mythical and magical elements into one same group which they call fairy tales, fantasy is marginalised and never exists as an independent genre. It is neglected and forgotten, almost never to appear in the tertiary education level in Vietnam. This unfortunate fate of fantasy creates a disadvantage for those who want to enhance critical thinking. It is not because other genres cannot do so; as Zipes (2009, p. 83) explains, fantasy can empower "the reader/viewer to see and grasp the social and political mediations that produce the spectacular". Whether readers are children or adults, he claims, illustration in a fantasy, if it exists, can never succeed if it is "merely descriptive, complimentary, decorative, or titillating" (Zipes, 2009, p. 83). It can only work when readers take a step back and think of it. One cannot get to know something if it is too clearly shown. It should be like a fox hiding away from human eyes but nevertheless letting them see a hint of its tail, just enough to make them think. Curiosity triggers their desire to know more, read behind the lines of an ambiguous text, and make sense of it.

As children, we read fantasy differently from adults. Crossley (1975, p. 184) explores this difference through the experiences of one of his students as a reader of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*:

> I think the inconsistencies bothered me more as a child (I was a very logical child) but now
> I just took them for what they were: the magic of Wonderland. When I read the story or it

was read to me as a child I, like Alice, was constantly interrupting to find out what everything was about. But now as I read it, I got perturbed at Alice's inability to just relax and enjoy what was happening to her and accept her fantasy on its own grounds. But I'm sure this is too much to ask of little children.

Children's nature is to always ask questions if they do not understand what is happening in the story. As an adult reader, learners may pose the same number of questions, but because they have no one to ask, they must search for the answers on their own. Moreover, the questions raised by children, as Crossley (1975) explains in this case based on *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, are about the spurious version of our world, so children ask to know about the world they are living in. On the other hand, adults relate to their childhoods and try to revive their imagination, fearing that adulthood stops them from having the same attitude they had as children, and they keep the questions for themselves. They are the ones who have to solve the mystery alone, without any help from others. With this idea of fantasy, Crossley (1975, p. 288) argues that "recovery and renewal" strength "may become a pedagogical trick which teachers can safely employ to engage students in a process which will not undermine rational modes of thought and discourse". As facilitators, teachers starts by listening to all the ideas from students, and if these ideas are simple, teachers can add questions which touch deeper layers of the text. By doing so, the barrier created by what he calls "conventional and obstructive categories of thought" is slowly removed (Crossley, 1975, p. 288).

This method sounds ideal, but we cannot easily testify its positive result in Vietnam, if it has been used at all. Firstly, in the secondary education level, all genres are approached in the same way. What I have described in the first part of the Introduction shows an archetype of a Vietnamese literature lesson. Discussions about a text are rare because students are not particularly interested, and Hoàng Thùy (2014) and Thanh An (2017) point out that this indifference is caused by uninteresting lessons that they have experienced. Thanh An (2017) further comments that Vietnamese students only study literature because it is a mandatory part of any exam. These two tendencies draw a circle that cannot be broken. Furthermore, since literature is a compulsory and important subject in the curriculum, preciseness is what teachers head toward. They have to race against time in order to fully deliver the analysis of the literary text in a certain number of lessons. To make sure everything fits into the timeline, they tend to avoid time-consuming and unnecessary discussions because they might not bring any result. Even if students are allowed to discuss, the first few sessions take more time because they are not used to this approach, and this

creates a fault in the whole learning process. What they are familiar with is a teacher-centred lesson. Teachers deliver lectures, and students listen and take note. These notes will be used when they study for the exam and are often learnt by heart because they do not want to run any risk of giving an inappropriate analysis of the text. Inappropriateness would be attributed to analyses that are too dissimilar from teachers' versions. Only those who tend to like this subject add more of their own insights into the analysis. Besides teachers' versions, students can also find more in reference books. This kind of book, which includes a collection of 'exemplary' analyses of all literary text in the textbook, has been popular among Vietnamese students. It is of no disapproval of teachers, as long as students do not copy one hundred percent of the book, but this is also hard to testify as teachers surely have not read all such books. Secondly, in the higher education environment, although students have more autonomy in the classroom, fantasy is not widely taught. Each institution designs its own syllabus, and normally, despite not being confidential, the syllabus is kept for internal use only. Thus, the syllabi are not easily accessed. What is more, studies on fantasy literature in general and on the role of fantasy in tertiary education are scarce. As a result, we have got few sources to justify and make any easy conclusion about fantasy in Vietnamese higher education.

More effectively, Crossley (1975) encourages learners not to suspend their disbelief, but to expand their belief, as one of his students suggests. He argues that when learners step out of the fantasy world, all the estrangements stop and "it is just a matter of shifting stance to return to disbelief" (Crossley, 1975, p. 288). If they instead expand belief, the sense of magic remains and the border between the two worlds is erased. This expectation of his students helps them embrace the idea of fantasy as a way to gain more experience, "not a strategy for containing or rationalizing experience" (Crossley, 1975, p. 288-289). They are unhappy at the discovery of Wonderland being only Alice's dream. At first, this approach sounds abstract and seems to be useless for learners who are not familiar with such autonomy in the classroom. Would Vietnamese students be able to do something so complex as expanding their belief when their habit is one of learning text analyses that are already available? Nonetheless, though it sounds challenging, the example of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* proves that this is what we unconsciously do every time we read fantasy. In *Từ Thức Cưới Vợ Tiên*, if the end of the story is that Từ Thức wakes up finding that he has fallen asleep in the cave and comes back home seeing no changes, students' disbelief will emerge. Knowing that the protagonist has really visited the fairy realm confirms the secondary world and strengthens students' belief in this estrangement. At their age, it is possible to convince themselves that there are other realms and believe in them.

At Hanoi University, sometimes there are extensive reading activities in language studies courses that allow students to choose their own book. When being able to choose what to read, my students mostly select Romantic or coming-of-age fiction, but not fantasy. When they choose fantasy, *Harry Potter* or *Coraline* are more frequently read because they are well known in Vietnam. Sometimes other fantasy novels are also read, but students do not realise they are reading fantasy. For example, they often think that *Le Petit Prince* by Saint-Exupéry (1943) is a normal children story with some philosophical reasoning, because the prince is in his magical world all the time. Because it is an individual extensive reading activity, we cannot discuss thoroughly the fantasy books, as well as other genres that the rest of the class select. This hinders students' opportunity to explore their critical thinking and they are confused if asked questions starting with 'How?' or 'Why?'. They get perplexed if they have to deal with such a task when they read alone at home, because they would not be inclined to count exclusively on their own imagination to embark upon what Crossley (1975, p. 292) calls "a personal voyage of self-discovery and self-definition".

Approaching fantasy literature from the perspective of language, a big question for readers is whether there exists a totally independent fantasy language. What we often find in contemporary fantasy novels might seem to be similar to 'our world', but does it not sometimes puzzle us? The other world brings estrangement which cannot be understood if readers do not want to accept and escape. Sandner (2004, p. 136) describes the journey of a protagonist in the fantasy world as follows:

> The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination—and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality—but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings—with this reservation, that we encounter him infrequently.

Literature in general already contains deep layers of meaning. It is something that Sandner (2004, p. 137) even goes as far as to define as "a kind of murderous weapon by which language commits suicide". What we read can direct us to many possible paths, and the way we make sense of the text may as well depend on our personal experience. Readers with a higher language proficiency read more fluently because they tend to pause less for new words or structures, thus enhancing the flow of the text. On the other hand, those whose language proficiency is lower keep coming across obstacles blocking their way to the

understanding and enjoyment of reading. This problem results from the fact that vocabulary in fantasy literature is somewhat different from that in other genres. In her book on fantasy translation in Taiwan, Chung (2013) implies that fantasy is more difficult to translate, and thus, translators of this genre are more recognised. Indeed, many words in fantasy novels and short stories are not seen elsewhere. For example, when *Harry Potter* was published in Vietnam, it must have taken a long time for readers to get acquainted with the wizarding world. There is only one popular Vietnamese equivalence for both 'wizard' and 'witch', which means that these two kinds of people are not considered different from one another. Yet there are many more words to imply that a person can perform magic, from more popular ones like a sorcerer, warlock or enchantress, to infrequent ones like druid, mage, shaman, or a wicca. Expressions like 'Merlin's beard!' or 'Merlin's pants!' are also very unfamiliar to those who do not read fantasy. Such readers cannot know that these exclamations are statements of surprise, or that Merlin is a famous wizard figure. There are many other words in *Harry Potter* and other fantasy novels which can only be understood by frequent fantasy readers. To name but a few, 'dementor', the prison guard of the wizarding world, 'horcrux', an evil object that contains a piece of a wizard' soul, 'goblin', a short creature which is often evil. Interestingly, an 'elf' is illustrated in various ways in different novels. Sometimes its appearance can be similar to a goblin's, like in the *Harry Potter* series, and some other time it can be a beautiful human-shaped creature like in *The Hobbit*. Most elves are good-hearted creatures and are often on the good side. That is to say, the fantasy world is a world full of new things, not only regarding the incidents that happen there but also in the way it is described. The language of other worlds may create bewilderment for those who refuse to enter. However, the big question is whether the language in fantasy is helpful to language learners.

Perhaps because of the deemed triviality, there has been hesitation to use it in language classrooms. Mandala (2010) blames this on the era of pulp fiction, gaining momentum in American magazines between the 1920s and 1950s. As the facile effects of the pulp style aroused "near-universal derision" (Mandala, 2010, p. 16), it also cast a shadow on fantasy as a genre, perceived as far from 'real' literature and affected by a clumsy and naive writing style. However, she also points out that many researchers who disapprove of fantasy cannot explain exactly why they do. Perhaps it is because of the estrangement in all the new words they may come across while reading. Comparing fantasy with other genres, we can see that the sentence structure in each bears similar features, and it is the vocabulary that draws the gap.

On the other hand, fantasy language can be a rich source of new words that learners of language can use in other than just fantasy-related situations. Myhrvang (2015) tells his story of how a student surprised him with what he learnt from fantasy. At the mention of the treasure in *The Merry Adventure of Robin Hood* (Howard Pyle, 1883), Myhrvang (2015) expects that students mention gold or money, but one lists many names of different gems, which he learns from fantasy games. More often than not, when one engages in what s/he is reading, watching or playing, learning becomes an unconscious process. Because the person pays attention to the content and has an interest in it, s/he memorises the information, which can also be new words or sentence structures other than the plot. Sometimes the language of fantasy is different to the point that it creates a gap between itself and the language of our world, but in other contexts it sounds familiar, so readers do not feel lost in a whole new world. In this case of Myhvrang's student, even though the gems exist in real life, normally he would not pay attention to them unless they are useful to his future career. While the student is playing, however, these gems are a part of the fantasy world, and at this point, the two worlds sync, and so do estrangement and familiarity. This approach of the student, even though unintentionally, successfully helps him learn through implanting the vocabulary into his mind. The strength of literature is just the same. Reading not only nurtures the interest in literature and language, but also teaches outside the classroom.

This approach to language learning becomes possible upon noticing that my students' choices of book include fantasy novels. Of course they read the novels in an extensive reading activity and not specifically for language learning purposes, but it proves that fantasy is still a choice when they have the freedom to choose. After reading the novels, the students are able to use words from fantasy in our discussions about the book because they have memorised them while reading. However, fantasy is an unexplored land in the world of language, and it needs some pilgrims to come and help it reveal its richness and fertility. It is less used than other genres, not only in the second language but also in the native language classrooms because teachers and curriculum designers may think it is childish and far from reality, and it requires more time and effort to change this stereotypical classification. Nonetheless, when done right, the use of fantasy literature can be a new solution for learners of language, just as what we learn from the above examples. Vietnamese students are already familiar with many fantasy worlds from both traditional Vietnamese literature they learn from school and Western literature that they sometimes read for leisure. If fantasy is to be added to language learning, its unrevealed power will be a mighty tool for teachers.

**II.4. Conclusion**

In a nutshell, fantasy literature is a mirror that reflects specific aspects of Vietnamese culture. From the time it was orally delivered to Vietnamese children as bedtime stories until now, the shape of fantasy has gradually changed. The social influences of each period require it to shape-shift so as to match the taste of readers and the historical situation of the country. However, what remains constant is the essence of fantasy, which always contains the estrangement that awes those who accept the magic and are willing to step into another world.

With a heavy influence from Western cultures, especially Anglo-American, young readers in Vietnam are more aware of the fantasy genre. They gain access to Western fantasy novels, some of which are powerful enough to create a global wave that opens the door for fantasy to be recognised where it was not. Despite that fact, the fantasy genre still has a long way to go until it can reach prosperity in Vietnam. The number of fantasy authors is not large, and those who commit to it are still struggling to find their identity. They need to fully understand the core of the genre because what they see now is still its surface.

For the same reason, the absence of studies on fantasy literature and education restrains the genre's potential in learning. At higher education level, fantasy is only used in literature classrooms. Language learners are often assigned non-literary texts to read, and when teachers select literary texts, fantasy is not the priority. This may result from the impression that literature requires higher language competence, and it is not helpful to second language learning. Nonetheless, if teachers never try using it, they would never know how it influences their students. The peculiarity of fantasy is that it can evoke creativity and enhance critical thinking, which is a substantial advantage in second language learning, as well as in any other field. Language is another aspect that can be improved through the reading of fantasy and the ways in which improvement can be stimulated deserve further study. Thus, fantasy should be put into practice in Vietnamese second-language classrooms, not only for the sake of those who are in the programs, but also for researchers and curriculum designers to gain an insight and have more reference when they consider the use of fantasy in a wider scope. When this prospect becomes an action, fantasy can be more than a means of entertainment. It fosters an effective approach to second language learning in specific, and to education in general.

**CHAPTER III**

**J. R. R. TOLKIEN AND ROALD DAHL AS SIGNIFICANT TWENTIETH-CENTURY WRITERS OF FANTASY**

**III.1. Introduction**

At the mention of the fantasy genre, many would think of magic. It actually consists of many elements other than magic, and it has existed for as long as human beings exist. Timmerman's (1983, p. 2) concept brings us a clear definition of the genre: "Fantasy is nothing new under the sun, after all. Its legitimate forebears include the fairy tale, the Romance, and the fable". Fantasy can be an aristocratic pastime, and at the same time, a means of entertainment for peasants. It is delivered to the audience as both oral tales and written stories, and in the modern time, even as blockbuster movies. A part of the readership still expresses a concern that fantasy is only for children, and indeed some are written specifically for children and young adults. Outstanding examples include *The Hobbit* (1937), *The Wind in the Willow* (1908), *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956), and more recently, *Coraline* (2002), as well as the renowned *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007). Nonetheless, despite the thought that fantasy is for children and realism is for adults, the majority of young-adult fantasy stories are for both age groups. In fact, the problems in the children's book can be expanded to become a version that fits the adult world. Armitt (2005, p. 3) explains that the questions at the core of more mature fantasy novels like *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), *Frankenstein: or, Prometheus Unbound* (1818), and *Animal Farm* (1945) are those which readers "perhaps *as* children" can raise and they "loom largest, and when we are most receptive to them". The same questions emerge, but children only ask because they want to know, while adults ask "to have a collective social and cultural significance" (Armiit, 2005, p. 4). Fantasy literature does not simply tell a story of an adventure to another world but also represents the real world we live in, with different ethnic groups and social structures but the same problems as ours.

Therefore, defining fantasy is not as easy as what Timmerman (1983, p. 3) initially says, as he later points out that "form is something intensely individual for the creative artist; no less so than his idea". The significance that fantasy acquires for each artist is the key to our understanding of her/his world. Even though every fantasy novel revolves around a quest, and perhaps most so-called high fantasy novels depict the war between the good and the evil, it is the uniqueness of each world that interests readers.

In fact, many authors have become known all over the world through their fantasy novels or series. However, in this chapter, I am going to discuss two significant authors of

the fantasy genre: J. R. R. Tolkien, and Roald Dahl. The creator of Middle-earth, Tolkien, leads readers from an adventure in pursuit of a lost kingdom of the dwarves to a quest to destroy one powerful ring and save the world from evil. From these two stories that he tells, readers start a journey of their own. Roald Dahl, on the other hand, opens up many strange worlds in which children are the hero/ine. There might or might not be magic in his realm, yet readers encounters peculiar characters and events that are sometimes disturbing, but no less captivating and thrilling, making him later known as one of the greatest storytellers for children in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The contribution of these two authors to fantasy makes me believe that their works can attract students to the world of the fantastic, in which they can enjoy the storylines while enhancing their knowledge of English language.

### III.2. J. R. R. Tolkien as The Wise

Tolkien is not the inventor of fantasy. In a collection of fantasy stories before Tolkien, Anderson, Tieck, MacDonald, Nesbit, and Garnett (2003) trace the origins of the genre back to texts like *Iliad and Odyssey*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Kight*, and *Beowulf*. These works have one thing in common, that is the fantasy elements. When Tolkien started to write, especially with *The Lord of the Rings*, he took into account these elements and considered his trilogy as a romance rather than a novel. Also in this study, it is mentioned that between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, oral stories started to be transcribed into *kunstmärchen*, which are fairy tales written by one author rather than told by many. From this point in history, significant authors like Tolkien started to make their mark.

Hart (2007) explains that as a child, Tolkien read a lot as a result of his mother's influence. He read many authors but found Andrew Lang's *Red Fairy Book* (1890) the most captivating. It is also from here that he started to visualise his dragons with the materials form the illustration by Lancelot Speed: "'creeping' and 'winged' but, in general, large, deadly, coiling serpent-creatures", as described by Hammond and Scull (1995, p. 53).

Duriez (2007, p. 17) finely describes Tolkien's description of fantasy makers:

These storytellers, writes Tolkien, are blessed as they speak of things outside of recorded time; though they have looked at death and even ultimate defeat, they have not flinched and retreated in despair. Instead, they have often sung of victory, and the fire in their voices, caught from legend, has kindled the hearts of their listeners. In so doing, they have lit up the darkness of both the past and the present day with the brightness of suns "as yet by no man seen." Tolkien also writes of the human heart not being composed of falsehood, but having nourishment of knowledge from the Wise One and still remembering him. For Tolkien,

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though the estrangement is ancient, human beings are neither completely abandoned by God nor totally corrupted. Though we are disgraced, we still retain vestiges of our mandate to rule; we continue to create according to the "law in which we're made".

When Tolkien lost his mother to diabetes, he attended King Edward's School and met the friends with whom he later formed the Tea Club and Barrovian Society (T. C. B. S.) Young but not reckless, they did not spend their money on alcohol and women but enjoyed studying literature. Tolkien was especially dedicated as he had limited means and had to focus on his studies (Parsons, 2007).

Tolkien is also a man of strong belief. In the article on the influence of World War I on his grandfather, Simon Tolkien (2017) mentions how he remembers him praying, or kneeling down at the church while everyone was standing, or used Latin instead of English. Brown (2012, p. 22) also stresses that for Tolkien it was fundamental to strengthen the knowledge of God and to support the belief that "as Legolas tells Gimli in The Return of the King, [God] is born when all is forlorn". He adds later that Tolkien confirms the Catholic nature of *The Lord of the Rings* in his letter to Robert Murray, indicating that he did not write the novels with such purpose, but then made it so in his revision. Paradoxically, as Brown (2012) points out, *The Lord of the Rings* is set in a world before Christianity and there is no mention of any religious elements in the trilogy, including prayers. To explain this, Brown (2012, p. 26) mentions Tolkien's interview with Clyde Kilby: "'I am a Christian and of course what I write will be from that essential viewpoint' ("Mythic", 141). […] *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* – are [Christian] in their essence, at their core". Seeman (1996, p. 82) notes that Tolkien's belief is different from most Romantic christologies in which Christ is identified as the prototype of artistic creation alone: "Tolkien focuses not on the mediator aspect of the person of Christ, but on the fact of incarnation itself – that desire has in fact been fulfilled in the primary world and, hence, becomes the prototype not of creation but of future fulfillment".

In fact, there is a debate on the link between the two World Wars and Tolkien's novels among those who study Tolkien, because he never admits that *The Lord of the Rings* is an allegory (Westfahl, 2005). However, there is much evidence that show the influences of both World Wars on Tolkien's writing. First of all, to explain the origin of the name Bilbo, there is more than one theory. In "Wyke-Smith, E.A. and *The Marvelous Land of Snergs*", published in *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment* (2007), Bradford Lee Eden (2007) suggests that the character of Bilbo is strongly influenced by a character named Gorbo in *The Marvelous Land of Snergs* (1927), a fantasy story written by

Edward Augustine Wyke-Smith. According to Eden, the Hobbit resembles the Snergs in their appearance and life habits. Similarities can be found in characters from the two novels and Tolkien himself points to *The Marvelous Land of Snergs* as "an unconscious source for the hobbits" (Eden, 2007, p. 717). The cover of the 2012 edition also quotes Tolkien: "I should like to record my own love and my children's love of E. A. Wyke-Smith's *The Marvelous Land of Snergs*". The second suggestion can be found in Deke Parson's (2014) study. Here the author mentions P.G. Wodehouse as Tolkien's inspiration:

> [T]he name "Bilbo" is reminiscent of the names of characters in the books of P.G. Wodehouse like "Bingo (Richard) Miller and Pongo (Reginald) Twistleton (Rateliff 47). Wodehouse (1881-1975) and Tolkien (1882-1973) were almost exact contemporaries. "Bingo" was actually Tolkien's original name for the character of "Frodo" in what Christopher Tolkien calls (in his multi-volume study of his father's manuscripts) the first version of the first phase of the drafts of *The Lord of the Rings* (December 17-19 of 1937) (C. Tolkien 11) (Parson, 2014, p. 44).

Tolkien started to write *The Hobbit* as a bedtime story for his child, and then continued with *The Lord of the Rings* "as a mere 'sequel' to *The Hobbit*, at the instigation of his publisher" (Carpenter, 2002, p. 255). However, Parsons's (2014) study shows that *The Hobbit*, with its jolliness and humour, much resembles Tolkien's and other T.C.B.S. member's characteristics before World War I. After Tolkien's experience in the war and the death of half of T.C.B.S., a change can be seen in his novel:

> He found he could no longer send Bilbo's successor "Bingo" (by any name) off on another jolly children's adventure – even a thoughtful one like *The Hobbit*. Tolkien had to reconcile the levity of *The Hobbit* and his childhood friendships with the world he was living in, and the war he had endured (Parson, 2014, p. 44).

However, Michael Livingston (2006) mentions a letter that Tolkien sent to Professor L. W. Forster, insisting that the two World Wars have no connection to all the novels that he had written. Despite all the contrasting opinions that there must be resemblance between the wars of the humans and in Middle-earth, Tolkien only admitted that the geographical features of Somme where he had fought might be seen in the battle scenes in Middle-earth. The latest movie about his life, *Tolkien* (2019), also features a scene of a merge of two battles when Tolkien is searching for his T. C. B. S. friend Geoffrey on the battlefield. In the movie shadows of riders bearing swords lurk among modern figures of soldiers, guns, and bombs

as if they were there in Somme, suggesting the influence of the two World Wars on *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Also in this article, Livingston (2006) provides the number of 57,470 casualties (with 19,420 death) for the British army on the opening day alone, comparing to approximately 60,000 death among the United States' army in the entire Vietnam War. Fallen soldiers were not buried but piled up and left to rot on the battlefield. The gruesome and terrifying sight of the battle and the war in general meant that Tolkien "survived the war, but he had not left it" (p. 81). Livingston (2006) believes that Frodo is also a representative of a veteran who has shell-shock, or post-traumatic stress disorder, and experiences a change in personality, just like Tolkien himself. In the article on how World War I influences *The Lord of the Rings*, Simon Tolkien (2017, para. 9-11) recalls:

> And as the chapters unfolded, I thought more and more of my grandfather, who had also fought in the Battle of the Somme. I had a photograph of him too: handsome and resolute in his officer's uniform, with an unfamiliar moustache. If he hadn't survived I wouldn't exist. I wished that I had known him for longer so that I might have asked him about his experience. He had left no written record and, like many veterans, he had apparently rarely spoken of his ordeal. […] And then, when the war is over, Frodo shares the fate of so many veterans who remain scarred by invisible wounds when they return home, pale shadows of the people that they once were.

The one thing that Tolkien acknowledges is Samwise Gamgee's likeness to a World War I soldier. Day (2019) mentions a 1956 personal letter in which Tolkien talks about the experience of a signal officer which he represented in the character of Sam, a typical young man from the countryside. Bloom (2008) describes such types of soldiers as enthusiastic men who, only at the battlefield, realise how terrible war can be, just like the jolly Sam who is punished for eavesdropping and has to follow Frodo on his quest. Day (2019) also points to the relationship between Sam and Frodo as typical in Edwardian society. In such time, British soldiers were often from the upper-middle class and the privates from the working class. They would be paired as Frodo and Sam, the master and the servant.

Tolkien also contributed studies on the subject of fairy tales, folklore, and fantasy. In the fantasy literature community, Tolkien is widely known for his influential work and remarkable and detailed research on Faërie, delivered as an Andrew Lang lecture at the University of Oxford in 1939. According to Hart (2007), that period of time was also when Tolkien had already finished writing *The Hobbit* and just begun *The Lord of the Rings*, and the lecture became a prominent and leading study. With this lecture, later named *On Fairy*

*Stories*, Tolkien "is reassuring himself that he has taken the right turn, that he will not be wasting his life if he devotes his best years to expanding the world of *The Hobbit*", as Green (1995, p. 21) explains. Rosebury (1992, p. 5) praises *On Fairy Stories* as a complex essay in implicit self-analysis and self-exhortation from the most fruitful phase of his career". Focusing on the fantasy genre, in *On Fairy Stories*, Tolkien (1947) searches for the answer to three questions on its definition, origin, and role. His well-known view is that the fantasy genre has three main functions: Recovery, Escape, and Consolation. Those who read fantasy are likely to find an escape from reality with the purpose of recovery. According to Tolkien (1947, p. 22), escapism takes readers not only from the hustle and bustle world but from "hunger, thirst, poverty, pain, sorrow, injustice, death". They might not know that they are seeking an escape. The retreat that the fantasy genre can offer allows readers to find "a regaining of a clear view", to "'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them' – as things apart from ourselves" (Tolkien, 1947, p. 19). Finally, the fantasy genre awards readers with consolation, a happy ending that can be described with a good catastrophe, or as in Tolkien's (1947, p. 23) own invention, "Eucatastrophe":

> It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the "turn" comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.

This important essay soon became a theoretical framework for many other studies on the fantasy genre, such as Bettelheim (1976), Zipes (1979), Chance (2001), Parsons (2014). It is because of his ground-breaking work in the field of fantasy literature that I decided to choose Tolkien's *The Hobbit* for this study. With this novel, the characteristics of the genre would be most clearly unfolded to the students. It is expected that they would be interested in and then have an insight into the fantasy genre through the quest of Bilbo Baggins to find the dwarves' kingdom and treasure. Furthermore, Tolkien's brilliant uses of words and grammar would help students improve their language competence. As Sandner (2004, p. 4) has described, "Tolkien also offers nothing in the language itself: but he hints that, read aright, it will awaken a meaning (as McDonald would put it) that lies beyond language, too full for mere words and their proscribed meanings".

**III.3. Roald Dahl from trauma to dark humour**

Unlike J. R. R. Tolkien, Roald Dahl is not famous for one epic fantastic realm where many events happen. Many of his stories take place in the world we live in. Perhaps because of his unhappy memories at school as a child, Dahl's stories often involve adult villains against whom the children hero/ine must stand. He attended The Cathedral School, Llandaff, St. Peter's Preparatory School Weston-super-Mare, and later, Repton school, all of which were not at all enjoyable. The letters he sent his mother from the boarding school St. Peter's were later published as a book named *Boy: Tales of Childhood* (1984). Although his time there was not too happy, it was not until he went to Repton school that he felt disturbed by the harsh education which involves corporal punishment from the teaching staff and senior students (Treglown, 1994; Sturrock, 2010). In his biography of Roald Dahl, Sturrock (2010, p. 66) reports the viewpoint of Thomas Arnold, whose values of education was followed in the remodeling of Repton school:

> His implication, that boys were naturally wild and undisciplines and that schooling was about creating a training ground where rigorous moral values might be instilled within them, resonated at one level with Roald Dahl. He too believed that children were born savage, but he would celebrate the innocent anarchic attitudes of each "uncivilised little grub". For Arnold, however, as for many of the staff at Repton in 1930, the opposite was true. They viewed that youthful freedom of spirit as something subversive that needed to be crushed.

It would not be a hasty judgment to consider this period of time as a childhood trauma for Dahl. In fact, the headmaster's habit of caning boys at Repton left a mental wound in Dahl, up to the point that he even questioned religion because his headmaster, Geoffrey Fisher, then became the Archbishop of Canterbury. He writes in *Boy: Tales of Childhood*:

> All through my school life I was appalled by the fact that masters and senior boys were allowed literally to wound other boys, and sometimes quite severely. I couldn't get over it. I never have got over it.
> […]
> It was all this, I think, that made me begin to have doubts about religion and even about God. If this person, I kept telling myself, was one of God's chosen salesmen on earth, then there must be something very wrong about the whole business. (Dahl, 1984, pp. 102-105)

Although Treglown (1994) later suggests that the one who beat the student was actually not Fisher, but his successor John Christie, and the boy who received the caning was an eighteen-year-old who abused smaller boys, this event becomes a sort of inspiration and

appears in many books that Dahl writes. The most significant example of a scary headmaster is perhaps the Trunchbull in *Matilda* (1988). The Trunchbull is the headmistress at Matilda's school. Not only does she look terrifying but she also punishes children in such frightening manners as putting them into the Chokey, a narrow cupboard with broken glass and nails so they cannot lean against or sit down but only stand straight. There were other adult villains in other stories of his, for example, *The Twits* (1980), one hideous and hostile couple of retired circus trainers who loathe children and animals, Aunts Spiker and Sponge of the mistreated boy Henry James Trotter in *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), and *The Witches* (1983) with one burning desire of making all children disappear. All of them, whether with magical power or not, are often liars who abuse children, but they will receive their judgment at the end of the story when justice is served. On the other hand, the figure of a good adult is also portrayed in many of his novels. They are the warm-hearted ones who give support to the young and fragile children, more frequently mental than physical. They are the Big Friendly Giant in *The BFG* (1982), Grandpa Joe and Willy Wonka in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1985), or the knowledgeable grandma in *The Witches*.

Roald Dahl's prolific works are famous and considered so influential that it dominated the children's book market until *Harry Potter* was published at the end of the 20th century (Valle, 2016). Also according to Valle, the number of scholarly critics of Dahl is small despite his great success. Most books written about him are biographies and the rest focus on the controversies found in his novels. Cohen (2018, p. 143) mentions that one popular issue in Roald Dahl's book is the "notoriously dark humour". This dark humour in his children's books usually involves the harsh and sometimes violent punishment that one character receives, some of which can be disturbing and obsessive. The misbehaved children in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* face their consequences which are related to their bad habits. The gluttonous Augustus Gloop gets sucked into a pipe and is almost turned into fudge, Violet turns into a giant blueberry ball like the one from chewing gums that she chews all the time, Veruca Salt is thrown into the garbage can as a 'bad nut', and Mike Teevee is stretched out into a peculiar thinly shape after he plays with the experimental television and shrinks down to fit the screen. These punishments may seem comical, but put into the context of children readers' world, they are very likely to be haunting. The same problem can be found with successful quests, such as the animals' trick to fool the Twits to stand upside-down and make them shrink because of their own weight until they disappear, or George's cranky grandma in *George's Marvellous Medicine* (1981) who also shrinks until she disappears after she drinks his medicine, much to his parents' delight. Not only so, but many characters' monstrous appearance and personalities can also be horrifying. Other accusations

of the controversies in his novels include racism, misogyny, or ageism. Despite those problems, Dahl is still a best-selling author whose books are enjoyed by both children and adults. In fact, in one interview with Mark West about book censorship, Dahl (1988, p. 113) answers: "I do include some violence in my books, but I always undercut it with humour. It's never straight violence, and it's never meant to horrify. I include it because it makes children laugh". He also says that children know quite well that violence in fantasy stories are fictional.

After thorough consideration, I decided to select Roald Dahl's *The Witches* because of the very controversy it has raised. *The Hobbit* provided the students with basic knowledge of the fantasy genre, and it was an ideal world for the students to see the concept of familiarity and estrangement in the genre. The story in *The Witches*, however, takes place in Kent, England. In such an ordinary setting, the appearance of a mythical creature conjures up a powerful threshold through which the student participants can experience estrangement. The book is also simple to read, which is an advantage for the students. Not only so, but the students would also have a chance to practice their critical thinking as they were asked to assess why *The Witches* is controversial. As mentioned earlier, there were debates on misogyny in Dahl's book. The woman figures in his stories have various problems, like the malicious and violent Miss Trunchbull, or the selfish and lazy Aunt Spiker and Aunt Sponge. Nonetheless, the portrayal of the witches, especially the Grand High Witch, had more issues to discuss. The students would have to give their own accounts of Dahl's illustration and find the reason behind the arguments. What is more, the talent of Dahl's language use in *The Witches* is quite vivid. Not only does he tell the story in a captivating style, but he also invents many words, such as phizzing, phwisst, swoops, and uses plenty of onomatopoeias, such as sizzling and whizzing. To the students of language major, this is an important additional value.

### III.4. *The Hobbit* and *The Witches* as an introduction to fantasy in HANU's literature course

The aim of the English literature course at HANU is first and foremost to equip students with enough knowledge of various genres of literature and skill to analyse them. For several years, after half of the course is spent on exploring the history of English literature, the second half is dedicated to analysing two specific literary texts: *The Gift of the Magi* and *Jane Eyre*. Fantasy literature, a distinctive genre in English literature, is not popular with students at Hanoi University. As parts of the assessment in the English literature course at HANU, a group-presentation and a group-assignment must be completed by each group of

students at the end of the course. They can choose to present and write about any genre or literary text. In the course, students do not work with the fantasy genre but can do so in their group projects if they choose to. It transpires that they have a tendency to select genres and literary texts which are more similar to the two texts they have studied in the course. As described by one of the teachers of the English Literature course, students prefer short stories or novels with sentimental elements. The fantasy genre is less likely to be selected.

My working hypothesis revolves around the choice of fantasy as the genre to be taught in the second part of the course dedicated to specific literary texts. The goal is to provide them with an opportunity to experience estrangement and otherness and see how it would assist them in enhancing their critical thinking, and language skill. J. R. R. Tolkien and Roald Dahl have been selected as significant English authors for Vietnamese students exposed to the genre for the first time.

Specifically, the study involves *Chapter I. An Unexpected Party*, *Chapter V. Riddles in the Dark*, and *Chapter XVII. The Clouds Burst*, from *The Hobbit* written by J. R. R. Tolkien, and the two chapters, *A Note about Witches* and *How to Recognise a Witch* from *The Witches* written by Roald Dahl. While *The Hobbit* opens up a secondary world that is distinctively different from our real world, *The Witches* introduces strange phenomena into the real world. The difference between the two novels created a chance for students to make comparisons and contrasts and draw conclusions about their distinctive influence on them.

*Chapter I. An Unexpected Party* introduced students to the hobbits and Bilbo Baggins, one particular hobbit who lives in Bag End. As a smaller human-figured creature, the hobbit lives in harmony and often avoids complicated events, especially adventures. However, when Gandalf the wizard knocks on Bilbo's door, he also brings a one-of-a-kind adventure to him: to be a thief and help the dwarves take back their kingdom from Smaug the dragon. A short but detailed description of the hobbit and Bilbo Baggins gave students an opportunity to form a visual representation and use this portrait as a reference for further events in the story. It also helped to prepare readers for the adventure ahead and to emphasise the estrangement of the secondary world in this fantasy novel.

In *Chapter V. Riddles in the Dark*, the group is separated after an attack of the goblins who inhabit the Misty Mountain. Bilbo falls through a tunnel and into a big cave to find Gollum, a strange creature who wants to turn him into his meal. Unknown to Bilbo, Gollum has the One Ring which will later decide the fate of Middle-earth. With his quick, bright mind and some good luck, Bilbo is able to defeat Gollum in the game of riddles, seize the ring, and free himself from Gollum. This chapter focuses on the sense of familiarity attached

to the riddles, as they are about daily objects and phenomena. It reveals to readers the true identity of Gollum and also shows Tolkien's talent with language.

*Chapter XVII. The Clouds Burst*, tells the story of The Battle of the Five Armies. It is the climax of the novel as the dwarves, elves, and humans stand together in the battle against the goblins and the wolves. In this chapter, students can find some resemblance between the fight in Middle-earth and historical fights, and form theories on the reason behind such similarities.

In *The Witches*, the first chapter, *A Note about the Witches* is Roald Dahl's description of the creature. The chapter creates the first impression of the witches to the reader and also explains why they are so fearsome.

The next chapter that the students read, *How to Recognise a Witch*, is a detailed portrayal of the witches, as presented by the hero's grandmother. He learns how to tell if the one standing in front of him is a witch or not by looking closely at their appearance, garments, and behaviours. Students must consider these points to judge whether the chapter is controversial or not, and why.


## III.5. Conclusion

The significance of Tolkien and Dahl among writers of fantasy is that they have not only created fascinating plots but also used the language creatively. As *The Hobbit* starts, readers are immediately taken into a fantasy world of mythical creatures and an epic quest that shapes a hero. It is a particular illustration of a realm so different from our world with a wide range of vocabulary that is inspiring to fantasy readers. On the other hand, the setting of *The Witches* is the familiar modern England in which the fantastic lurks around the corner, prompting readers to move in-between familiarity and estrangement as the story unfolds. Dahl's witty voice makes the disconcerting story sound humorous while suggesting that the fantastic does not necessarily happen only when characters are transferred into a secondary world but in our very daily life. The contrast between these two novels in particular and the authors in general allows the students to read and form their own interpretation of the genre without any bias and thus lay the groundwork for their perspective on the fantasy genre in the language classroom.

# CHAPTER IV

# METHODOLOGY AND METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION ON FANTASY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

## IV.1. Introduction

After delving into fantasy literature with a focus on two authors and illustrating how fantasy can enhance critical thinking in the classroom, in this chapter I am going to analyse the methodological framework as well as the specific methods adopted in the survey of this research project.

In the first part of the chapter, the research paradigm will be explored in its connection with the project. Considering the nature of the study, the constructivist approach has been adopted because it allows the research to be more comprehensive with data coming from individuals. For the same reason, the qualitative methodology used for data collection has been chosen in order to obtain more detailed data. Though not as abundant in the amount of responses as the quantitative methodology, this methodology has the advantage of providing many layers of information. The application of qualitative methodology in this project has proved effective.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the aims and objectives of the project, as well as the context in which the research is carried out. Part IV.3.1 introduces the double target of this study: the examination of the ways in which Vietnamese students understand the link between British fantasy literature of the 20th century, their language competence and critical thinking; a comparison with Italian students. Part IV.3.2 summarises the research settings of the study, including the social and cultural context of Vietnam after the great national renovation in 1986. A switch from a closed economy after the war to an open economy in the late-20th century also provides more opportunity for other sectors, especially education. This setting encourages innovations of various forms, and this research is one of them.

The final part provides a more detailed view of the reason why Observation, Interview, and Artefacts methods were employed, and how each was implemented in the data gathering process. A description of the participants in the study provides an understanding of their educational backgrounds and experiences of British literature. The different backgrounds of the Italian and Vietnamese students generate distinctive reactions to the course and opinions on the fantasy genre. In order to analyse their perspectives, the triangulation approach has been adopted for the most effective exploitation of the data. The data from the Observation method shows the setting of the classroom in which the students'

reaction and activities were recorded. The Interview method adds probably the most important set of data to the study because it is in the interviews that the participants had their chances to explain what they really thought. These sources became the most subjective data in the study. Lastly, the Artefact method is a confirmation of what the students expressed in the observations and interviews. Their diaries and the analysis of a new fantasy chapters add more evidence of what they can do during and after the course.

Following the data collection process, part IV.5 illustrates the analysis of the data. This part is a description of how the data were processed according the thematic approach. The data from all three sources were categorised according to the themes and analysed. In this procedure, each set of data from one source supports the others. Finally, part IV.6 encapsulates the data collection and analysis of the research project.

## IV.2. Research paradigm and approach

In her chapter on different research methodologies, Sara Delamont (2012) draws a comparison between the gates from Damascus and the paths a researcher may take. Damascus, as a threshold leading to different faiths, is "an ivory tower" for researchers (Delamont, 2012, p. 3). Here they are safe and receive priorities for staying inside. Sooner or later, however, a researcher must leave the safe place to face the next stage of her/his career, whether it is to raise funds by the Aleppo Gate, gain "academic immortality" by the Mecca Gate, face risks in the academic world by the Baghdad Gate, or do what most researchers desire, that is seek knowledge and enlightenment by the Lebanon Gate (Delamont, 2012, p. 2). She agrees with Bernstein that leaving Damascus is inevitable, but it is researchers' choice of the gate that counts (2012, as cited in Delamont, 2012). The Lebanon Gate is where explorers go, and researchers too, because they want discoveries.

However, the discovery of something new is not as simple to achieve as an evaluation of what has been uncovered. Each research project requires its relevant research philosophy based on its nature and purpose to make the most of the data and to come up with the best result. Intending to investigate learners' perspective on fantasy literature and critical thinking, this study proposes a methodology that promotes personal interaction and experience. As a result, I adopt the philosophy of constructivist research with qualitative methodology to achieve my goal. As Matthews (1998, p. 2) explains, it is "a psychological theory about how beliefs are developed, not what makes beliefs true or what counts as scientific knowledge". This philosophy also refers to knowledge as being various and "context-dependent" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, as cited in Fortune, Reid & Miller Jr., 2013, p. 82). Knowledge is not a general perception because each person experiences distinct

practices in social and natural life, and thus makes sense of life differently. As a result, Creswell (2007) points out that constructivist researchers have a tendency to approach individuals, look into the settings of their history and culture, and try to step into the shoes of participants so as to interpret their stories. They are not only observers, but as Morris (2006) describes, also the ones who facilitate and support participants in handling the data. They should "count their own constructions of reality as one of the data source" (Morris, 2006, p. 204). With regard to this study, it is important to discover students' perception of fantasy literature and critical thinking. My goal is to explore the extent to which fantasy literature can be of assistance in promoting students' critical thinking. The answer to this issue can be found from their practice as well as viewpoint. Therefore, constructivism is a promising method, with the advantage of bringing out details in ways that would be less effective with other methods.

Also for the same reason, constructivist researchers wield qualitative methodology to generate their data. The issue of using quantitative or qualitative methodology depends on what researchers are aiming at. As mentioned by Houser (1998), social sciences are often deemed to be 'soft' in comparison to natural sciences, and thus the qualitative methodology that is often applied in the former is considered to be "overshadowed by" (Mirhosseini, 2017, p. 1) or "secondary" to the quantitative methodology that goes with the latter, whose strength lies in "robust forms of evidence" (Boyask, 2012, p. 22). The quantitative methodology goes with the natural sciences, but is not ideal for social science researchers because human perception cannot be measured effectively with numbers and as a whole.

In their introduction to social research, Boxill, Chambers, and Wint (1997, p. 46) introduce a list of advantages of qualitative research, which:

- allows for in-depth assessment of issues being researched
- allows for investigation of highly sensitive issues
- allows for comprehensive subjective evaluation based on interpersonal interaction over an extended period
- can be moderated regarding location, schedule, content, pace and continuity, therefore allows flexibility
- can be applied to a number of fields of investigation
- can stand on its own and form complete data gathering techniques, or can be used at different phases of investigation

- allows for concurrent 'observation' by interested parties with input where applicable
- can often be implemented without multiple human resources
- can offer particularly keen insight to the single researcher since he or she can be involved in all phases of method.

Moreover, data from quantitative methodology are from a large group of participants and thus focus on the whole, while qualitative methodology seeks for individuals, including the ones whose voice is not often heard (Ragin, 1994; Humphries, 2008, as cited in Carey, 2012). Ragin (1994) further comments that qualitative methodology can develop theories through vibrant and abundant data. Also, Carey (2012, p. 6) explains that it allows researchers to "revise and reflect upon the research process or journey as it unfolds". They can always read more references and, from that basis, come back to participants to ask more questions. As a result, Houser (1998) claims that it is more specific and accurate, and Given (2008, p. 312) designates that the data is collected from "their natural settings […] in terms of the meanings people bring to them". Given (2008, p. 312) explains that qualitative research originates from the practice of objective observation and analysis of different phenomena, so researchers always make sense of the data "in terms of hopes and values, ideologies based in professional, occupational, and religious faiths". He also shares Ragin and Humphries' opinion on the groups of participants in qualitative research, that they include people of colour and from developing countries. He adds that later on researchers do not only stand from afar to look at the situation but also take part in the process. Burns and McPherson (2017, p. 106) describe the role of researchers as learnt from Guba and Lincoln's (1994) study of paradigms in qualitative research:

> Epistemologically, the relationship between the researcher and other participants is transactional and subjectivist. The investigator and others involved in the research are assumed to be interactively and intersubjectively linked, with the values of the investigator and situated others inevitably influencing the inquiry.

In fact, many sources have pointed to the weakness of the qualitative approach in doing research. According to Houser (1998), one of the biggest disadvantages of the approach is its very advantage, which is the detailed data. It might be precise in a small group, but fail to apply to the whole world. Researchers probably lose "a broader perspective that can be applied to the population of interest" (Houser, 1998, p. 64). Qualitative research

also puts an emphasis on subjectivity, and Maykut and Morehouse's (2002, p. 19) opinion is that "subjective has come to mean partially true, tentative and less-than-real". Boxill, Chambers and Wint (1997, p. 46) consider misunderstanding of the data resulting from "relative naturalness of methods" as one drawback among others. One more problem with the approach is the possible bias of data "produced through fictions and fantasies", because participants may not answer truthfully (Walkerdine et al, 2002, p. 179). For those reasons, the qualitative methodology can be marginalised if researchers want a result which is applicable more extensively. However, it outshines the quantitative approach when researchers look for individual stories, as Speziale, Streubert, and Carpenter (2011, p. 13) explain: "Humanistic scientists value the subjective component of the quest for knowledge. They embrace the idea of subjectivity, recognizing that humans are incapable of total objectivity because they have been situated in a reality constructed by subjective experiences". Genesee (2006) and Erikson (2011) argue that the quantitative approach provides data from a large number of studies, but may fail to address basic problems that emerge in real situations. The strength of the qualitative approach is its ability to shed light on specific settings; therefore, the qualitative methodology "should be not only acknowledged, but also viewed in a positive light" (Hays & Singh, 2011, p. 145).

To bring out the best of the methodology, social scientists should make an effort to discover the result through large patterns, but also need details of the story. Delamont (2012) claims that they usually struggle between familiar and strange phenomena while doing research. Her example shows the failure of a group of British educationists who study the UK's schooling system, and another group of American educationists who study the US's schooling system. They fail because they take what they see every day for granted. Thus, she concludes that social researchers should make use of more than one qualitative method in their study. As the qualitative approach is a subjective lens itself, data from different sources will be of much help to researchers.

In the field of language study and teaching, the role of qualitative research has been proven to be valuable. According to Mirhosseini (2017, p. 4), a "wider perspective of qualitative research […] can be meaningfully expected to contribute to research in the field of language education". Qualitative research, with the exceptional power of words, "continues to mediate" people with the world without them realizing it (Doecke, Anwar & Illesca, 2017, p. 32). They argue that language exists before we do. It defines us and help us express our opinion, as well as comprehend others' through their stories. Unlike the width of data that numbers are able to bring, words have a certain depth which allows us to get to the root. At the end of the 20th century, when teachers were required by the educational and

social settings to be more deliberate and creative, they saw the need to reflect on their own work and were urged to conduct research (Bailey, Curtis, & Nunan, 1998; Burton, 1997). Specifically, doing qualitative research on education in the institution of researchers can be convenient. Ruecker (2017) says that researchers must go through fewer procedures than they must face if the project is carried out outside. What is more, they waste less time building links with the participants, as they might be students and colleagues of their own. This task can be especially effort- and time-consuming in the context of a qualitative approach, as it requires researchers to approach the participants for very detailed stories. This privilege brings great advantages to such researchers, and worth choosing when they are considering between the quantitative or the qualitative approach.

## IV.3. Research designs and methods

### IV.3.1. Aims and objectives

The aims of this research is to evaluate the perception of English language majored students at the English Department, Hanoi University (HANU) and the University of Ferrara (UniFe) in the 20th-century British fantasy literature' influences on language competence and critical thinking. In order to achieve that aim, the objectives of this research are to:

> (1) Discover the link between literature and language as perceived by HANU and UniFe students involved in the 20th-century British fantasy literature course;
>
> (2) Explore the perceived influences of the 20th-century British fantasy literature on the students' language competence;
>
> (3) Explore the perceived influences of the 20th-century British fantasy literature on the students' critical thinking.

### IV.3.2. Research settings

For a long time since the big Đổi Mới renovation in 1986, Vietnam has been focusing on the market economy with the hope to catch up with developed countries in Asia. This fact imposes a heavy influence not only on one generation of Vietnamese, as until now it has been the deciding factor for choosing the educational path. Parents advise their children to study what ensures well-paid jobs and chances of promotion. In fact, a study by Phạm and Lê (2017) well illustrates the goal of the Vietnamese government. According to what they study, in the year 2017, Vietnam opens the following fields for overseas investment:

- Engineering
- Natural sciences

- Technology
- Business administration and business science
- Economics
- Accounting
- International law
- Language training (Phạm & Lê, 2017, para. 8).

Language training is one of the priorities probably because it is a bridge that connects Vietnam with foreign businesses. Other fields clearly depict the trend and the interest of the country. The humanities and the social sciences do not make it to the list because it is not the first concern in this race. For this reason, the weakness of unbalanced training is demonstrated in the young generation. Having no interest in humanities and social science subjects, a number of students nowadays care about the future and what the promising economy brings to them. Moreover, those who want to learn about such subjects have limited sources to refer to. At school, students learn about the social sciences and humanities from textbooks and teachers. Information comes from numbers and dates but rarely from captivating stories. Years of going through the same materials result in a loss of spirit in teachers and, in turn, in students.

The heavy influence of Confucianism also contributes to low learning spirit. Students often have nothing to ask teachers, and when they do, they do not want to. Teachers are givers of knowledge and students are receivers. For that reason, students obtain what they can from teachers in the class and pose no question. This results in the lack of critical thinking, not only in the sense of ability but also the frequency.

In such a situation, I have seen the need to examine a different approach toward the critical thinking skill in the English language classroom. If the traditional giving-receiving classroom and scientific articles that are often recommended by teachers can no longer benefit students, another approach should be introduced. This project aims at exploring the perception of students at English Department, Hanoi University - HANU, toward the use of British fantasy literature of the 20th century in enhancing their language competence and critical thinking skill. The project is also a comparison between the University of Ferrara - UniFe, a medium-sized public Italian university, and HANU, a medium-sized public Vietnamese university in terms of perceived influences of the genre on language competence and critical thinking. The UniFe students are English language majors in their second year while the HANU students are all English language majors in their third year. The UniFe

students experienced a course of sixteen two-hour lessons of British fantasy literature in their second year, while the Vietnamese students attended three three-hour lessons of British fantasy literature as a part of the English literature course in their third year.

During the course at UniFe, the Italian students approached the fantastic in theory and fiction, with a focus on William Morris' *The Hollow Land* (1856), Margaret Oliphant's *A Beleaguered City* (1880), Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1888), and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937). The course explored the historical and cultural context of the stories, the authors' lives, and the themes. The objective of this course was to enhance students' understanding of British literature and culture, diachronically and synchronically. The Italian students had had one course of British literature of different genres in their first year, so it was not their first experience with English literature. I was the observer and at the beginning of the course I introduced myself as a PhD student conducting my research and inviting them to be part of my survey. On the other hand, the Vietnamese students' course at HANU lasted eighteen lessons, but consisted of both an introduction to the history of English literature, and the analysis of O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* (1905) and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937). I was the teacher in charge of the three three-hour lessons on *The Hobbit*. The objective of this course is for students to be able to analyse different genres of English literature. Before this course, they had not studied the subject so everything was new to them. English was the language used in both courses. At the beginning of the first lesson, I gave a presentation to the students about my research project and asked them to join the project.

## IV.4. Data collection

The validity of a study requires data from more than one method, so triangulation is necessary. The reason behind this is the validity of the data can be confirmed by attaining them in different ways (Taylor, Kermode, & Roberts, 2006; Pine, 2008). In a new perspective, as proposed by Stake (2010, p. 123), triangulation is "a form of differentiation" that either confirms the truth from the data or if it points out that the data do not match, there is a high possibility that more layers of meaning will be revealed. Flick (2004, p. 180) calls this "an extension of the possibilities of discovery about the aspect of life under investigation".

In this study, I employed three methods of data collection, namely, Observation, Student interview, and Artefacts. If these data are presented as individual sets, they might not serve as strong evidence to the points which will be made in the next chapter. Data from one source can be limited or biased. The core of my study is the personal viewpoint and

experience of the participants, and the triangulation of three methods brings advantages towards reaching such a goal.

### IV.4.1. Observation

In qualitative research, observation can bring great advantages to researchers, as Walshe (2012, p. 1049) et al. describe, it is a tool which "can be employed in 'natural' settings, rather than those set up for research purposes". According to Jorgensen (1989, p. 7), observation emphasises the distinction of human beings and "constitutes a humanistic methodology". He justifies that the success of observation also depends on observers themselves, as they have better interaction with the participants than others. The point is to be creative and less mechanical during the process:

> Direct involvement in the here and now of people's daily lives provides both a point of reference for the logic and process of participant observational inquiry and a strategy for gaining access to phenomena that commonly are obscured from the standpoint of a nonparticipant (Jorgensen, 1989, p. 9).

Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2013) explain that observation provides 'live' and natural data, or in other words, direct information that does not come from a secondary source, because observers notice and take note of everything at the moment of the observation. It can also help researchers notice what is often taken for granted, especially non-verbal clues, and cover not only one setting of the situation, but:

- the *physical setting* (e.g. the physical environment and its organization);
- the *human setting* (e.g. the organization of people, the characteristic and make-up of the groups of individuals being observed, for instance, gender, class);
- the *interactional setting* (e.g. the interactions that are taking place, formal, informal, planned, unplanned, verbal, non-verbal, etc.);
- the *programme setting* (e.g. the resources and their organization, pedagogic styles, curricular and their organization) (Cohen et al., 2013, p. 457).

In the case of observation in the classroom, the data can be more exuberant than other environments. One should consider teachers, students, materials, and the atmosphere in the class (Wragg, 2011). His viewpoint also concerns teachers' background because their power in the classroom does affect how the lessons go on, as well as the behaviour of students. Students' characteristics, moreover, decide the interaction during the lesson.

In this project, the observations were carried out at both UniFe and HANU. The students at UniFe had spent their first year studying different genres of British literature. In their second year, which was the eight-week course I observed, they learnt how to analyse the literary texts of British fantasy literature in the class, and did self-research of British literature at home with materials which the professor provided. They had two lessons every week, each of which lasted one hour and forty-five minutes. Four lessons were dedicated to *The Hobbit*. At the end of the course, they took one written exam concerning the content of the literary texts, and one oral exam of British literature history and the literary texts. The number of students in the course fluctuates through the years as students can choose whether they want to study British or Anglo-American literature in their second year. The class I observed consisted of approximately fifty students. With regard to this UniFe course, I was an observer-as-participant, a role that is mentioned in Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2013) study. In so being, I joined in some activities in the classroom without telling the students that I was observing them. During the observations, I prepared sheets of paper to take note of the professor's and the students' activities. I noted down every observable details in the lesson, including the atmosphere, the instruction from the professor, and the students' reactions and behaviours. When a lesson finished, I read the notes one more time and highlighted important details which might be prominent for my study. At the same time, I reflected on possible drawbacks and tried to improve them in the next observation.

At HANU, the English literature course lasted eighteen weeks, with only one three-hour lesson each week. It was divided into two phases, in which Phase 1 involved the history of English literature and Phase 2 was devoted to the analysis of literary texts. Phase 1 of the course lasted 8 weeks, including 4 weeks of lecture, 2 weeks of self-research and group tutorial, and 2 weeks of group-presentation. The presentations were one among three themes: one period in the history of English literature, one genre of English literature, or one particular author or literary text. The teacher in charge of each class decided which theme students must follow. Phase 2 of the course, which was literary text analysis, started from week 9. Before my project, the same for every year, students are introduced to *The Gift of the Magi*, and *Jane Eyre*. Each text is analysed in three weeks. Week 15 and 16 are for the tutorial of the final assignment, which is to be submitted in week 17 and marked in week 18.

I carried out the research in two classes in the course, each of which consisted of twenty-five students. Instead of *Jane Eyre*, in my project, the two classes analysed *The Hobbit* in weeks 12, 13 and 14. As the syllabus of the course was fixed, I did not alter anything but the content of these three weeks, nor participated in the assessment of the course. It was the duty of the two teachers who were in charge of the two classes to facilitate

the rest of the course, as well as the assessment. I was the one teaching *The Hobbit* as it was not in the syllabus and the two teachers had never taught it before. Moreover, since the teaching of *The Hobbit* is part of my project, I could deliver the lessons in a way that would bring out most advantages for both the participants and myself. At the same time, I could be a participant-as-observer, whose role as an observer was revealed to the students and may have "insider knowledge" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013, p. 457). Also because of that reason, when I was teaching, if something interesting came up I only noted down the keywords. I had to store the rest of the noticeable details in my short-term memory and only noted them down when the students were reading an excerpt or working in groups. Also similar to my observations at UniFe, I revised the notes after each lesson to highlight important information and for improvement.

I also decided to conduct an unstructured observation even though I had to look at the situation before deciding what significance any details would bring to my project. This type of observation instead allows me to be more creative, with "natural open-ended" notes and themes that form after the data collection (Punch, 2009, p. 154 & Bailey, 2007). As the observation progresses, more dimensions become apparent to researchers and allow them to search for more evidence. A structured observation would not generate such a rich amount of data because it would involve expectations which I would aim to confirm. Furthermore, as the educational background of Italian and Vietnamese students are not the same, I prefer not to impose a structure that may work for one environment but not for the other. The differences in the curricula at UniFe and HANU is another important reason for this decision.

## IV.4.2. Interview

The information that cannot be extracted using the observation method can be obtained in the interview. Seidman (2006, p. 7), among others, choose to interview because he likes to listen to stories and treat it as "a way of knowing". He explains that people's stories are constructed through their experience, which they must reflect before telling. This process is already an act of making sense in order to present the story in a way that is comprehensible to listeners, and thus it provides clues to their social and educational background.

Some others adopt it because, similar to observation, the interview method can bring natural responses from participants. The atmosphere might be the same as an easy face-to-face conversation, if researchers decides to put it that way (King & Horrocks, 2010). Kvale (1996, as cited in Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2013) describes the method as "an interchange of views between two or more people on a topic of mutual interest". In an

interview, both interviewers and interviewees are able to express their points of view and interpretations of certain subjects.

One aspect of the interview method that is often categorized as a drawback is the unreliability of humans as research subjects, because, as Berteux (1981, p. 39) suggests, "If given a chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on". The risk of having too subjective data is what discourages many researchers. However, as an answer to the question of whether stories are science, Peter Reason (1981, p. 50) says:

> The best stories are those which stir in people's minds, hearts, and souls, and by so doing give them new insights into themselves, their problems and their human condition. The challenge is to develop a human science that can more fully serve this aim. The question, then, is not "Is story telling science?" but "Can science learn to tell good stories?".

The subjectivity of interview data should bring more evidence to the research, especially when the purpose of the study is to understand the human perspective, "the anonymity of a number and almost that of a pseudonym" (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Furthermore, the observation method reflects researchers' interpretations of what participants do, but the interview method is their own explanation of their actions, which Blumer (1969, p. 2) says will influence their own experience.

Considering the characteristics of the students, I decided to design a structured interview for data collection. According to Myers (2008), this method ensures the consistency of the information. A structured interview makes sure that every answer is not off track, and that all the data are of good value to interviewers. Even though the questions for all participants were the same, they are open-ended with more flexible wording, so that the desired information could be extracted without conforming the participants into norms. However, in any case that required clarification or further information, I would ask the interviewees more. It would also allow the participants to clear misunderstanding during the interview, which cannot be achieved if the research method was observation or questionnaire.

The participants for the interviews were chosen on a voluntary basis, of whom ten were from the Italian class (coded I1 – I10) and ten from the Vietnamese class (coded V1 – V10). The reason for this selection is that they had worked with the same material, which was *The Hobbit*, so I want to learn whether they have different perceptions about the role of fantasy literature on their critical thinking. The way the lessons in two institutions were organised were much the same. The students were asked to read *The Hobbit* at home, and

then would listen to lectures, as well as discuss with each other and with the teachers once they have classes.

For each interview, I employed a private room for me and one student at a time to prevent them from being influenced by each other's answer, as well as to keep the privacy of the participants. As the interviews went on, I used a mobile phone to record the response from the interviewees and then transcribed the necessary data from the audio files for analysis. The interviews were carried out in the English language because the purpose of the course, as well as my project, is for students to think, evaluate, and express themselves in this language. These responses were then kept confidential and for research use only.

The interview (see Appendix A) consists of seven questions about the learning of the English language and British literature, and the students' critical thinking. The first three questions of the interview involve English language and literature learning in general, and the last four are about the students' perspective on the relationship between fantasy literature and language, as well as the critical thinking skill.

The interviews were carried out on a small scope because of the limited number of participants. At UniFe, only a group of 50 students were studying fantasy literature, and ten representatives could be a sufficient number for understanding the situation. At HANU, with a total number of approximately three hundred students in the English literature course, 10 representatives might seem to be less effective in showing results. More participants from HANU would not be available because I taught two classes of 25 students in each class. More importantly, as I have mentioned earlier, the study aims at exploring individual points of view, so it is expected that the number of 10 participants from each university is adequate and effective in generating significant results.

## IV.4.3. Artefacts

The last method of data collection that I adopted in the project was artefacts. Aiming to gain an insight into the students' perception on the influence of the 20th-century British fantasy literature on language competence and critical thinking, I asked them to provide two artefacts, namely, their diaries and their essays. The artefacts are expected to fill the holes in the dataset generated from the observations and interviews (Given, 2008). Moreover, according to Mike Allen (2017, p. 56), artefacts are made "by humans rather than the result of natural phenomenon; therefore, they are symbolic, purposeful, and intentional".

The first type of artefact that the students provided was diaries. The participants' answer in the interview at the end of the course is a valuable source, but it is a general viewpoint of the whole process. To understand the progress of opinion during the process,

diary writing is a more effective method. Allen (2017, p. 57) thinks that artefacts are always "in the process of meaning making and remaking", and the diaries that the students kept truly fit this description.

Because this method requires the research participants to note down their thoughts after every event, the data become a string from which I can find an explanation for changes, if there are, in the participants' perspective in a time frame. According to Hyers (2018, p. 9):

> Once written in a diary, our thoughts become a mirror, allowing for reflection and self-objectification. In the hands of others, the written diary becomes a window into a psychological moment, an opportunity to understand another's perspective and to reflect on our common humanity.

He provides the history of diary writing, which started as an observation of life and a means of expressing personal feelings, became literature, then contributed to human inquiry, and finally was recognised as a research method. Diaries became an illustration for psychological cases and examples for readers who dealt with the same situations. In other fields of study, diaries have been adopted to head toward "methodological openness and gathering holistic data" (Hyers, 2018, p. 13). In all cases, diaries "generally need to be contemporaneous, personal, and kept regularly and also must feature entries that include emotions, beliefs, interpretations, interactions, events, and activities" (Given, 2008, p. 764). Bartlett and Milligan (2015) argue that after the invention of digital technologies the diary method has become even more convenient and helpful to researchers. Indeed, instead of a face-to-face meeting every day or after every session, researchers can communicate with participants via the Internet. The data from diaries can also show whether participants' points of view are homogenous, or change from the beginning to the end. Most important is the fact that diaries allow participants to transcribe their experience at or near the moment of occurrence, instead of recounting them after a long while.

For the above reasons, the diary method is a strong support for my set of data. When in use with the observation and interview method, students' diaries generate strong evidence for the study. The observation method provides data from researchers, while the interview method adds details of students' general conclusion, and their diaries document changes in their points of view throughout a period of time.

At HANU, ten interviewees were also those who wrote diaries after every fantasy literature lesson. With the purpose of giving autonomy to the participants, I did not provide them with a structure, but let them write freely. Every week after the lesson, I allowed my

participants to work on their diaries for two days and then asked them to send their entries to my email address. The two-day periods ensured that they could not forget the experience, yet leave them enough time to think and write, as they also need to work on other courses at the university. The information was thus fresh, and the progress of the students' points of view can be seen more clearly. Their drafts are then kept confidential and only used for this project.

Owing to the timetable and period in which the British fantasy literature course was taught at UniFe, and the early stage of my research, the ten students who volunteered to take part in this project were interviewed but did not write the diary. On the other hand, the timetable and period in which the British fantasy literature classes were taught at HANU and the more advanced stage of my research allowed for the introduction of diary writing. Firstly, my data collection process started with the Italian students in 2017, at which period I had not envisaged the use of diary writing as a method. Only when I went back to Vietnam in 2018 and worked with the Vietnamese students did I try it as a pilot method for the production of artefacts, and then made the decision of keeping the results. Secondly, the curricula in the two universities show significant differences. The topic of a British literature course at UniFe changes every year, while at HANU it stays the same. In late 2018, when I returned to UniFe, the topic of the course had changed.

The data collection method has thus been shaped by the comparative nature of my research, involving the study of literature courses taught at a European and an Asian university, and by the span of time needed to accomplish the survey in Italy and Vietnam. The way in which specific features of my research intertwined with specific time aspects deserves thorough attention. The contents of the literature courses at UniFe and HANU as well as the periods in which they were taught required adjusting but also offered opportunities for refining my method. Carrying out my field research in Italy in 2017 and in Vietnam in 2018 allowed me to gain experience and introduce innovations aimed at generating more artefacts to assess. A survey which includes the production of diaries and a written literary analysis can be identified as substantial structural components of my future comparative research.

The second type of artefact I collected from the students was their essays. After the English literature course at HANU, I decided that my research would gain further depth by including a study of how the students would respond to the reading of another fantasy text at the end of the course. Its purpose is to determine how well students can perform when they analyse a chosen text without teachers' involvement. Because a period of three weeks for three lessons is rather short for measuring the students' development in terms of language

competence and critical thinking, I can gain further insight by assessing their own awareness of what they have gained, as expressed through the diaries, and try to evaluate how effectively the lessons work through the essays they provided at the end of the process.

Before the interview with the Vietnamese students, I required them to write an analysis of two chapters from *The Witches* by Roald Dahl and to answer a number of suggested questions (see Appendix C). The two chapters they had to read were *A Note about Witches*, and *How to Recognise a Witch*, amounting to 2,888 words. The first chapter presents witches from Dahl's point of view, while the second is the protagonist's narration of his grandmother's instruction on identifying a witch. The ten Vietnamese students sat together in a classroom and were allowed to read the chapters and write their essays in one hour. *The Witches* is written for children, so the language is not too complicated. However, it contains degrees of complexity that require a good critical mind. Thus, it was expected that the chapters would be either too easy or too difficult for the Vietnamese students. The questions I designed for this essay involve the description of the witches, both literally and figuratively. The first question requires the students to recall Dahl's portrait of witches, with the purpose of helping them represent their looks and personalities. The second question goes into deeper layers of meaning, looking for any hints that might lead the students to capturing the value of metaphors or metonymies. To answer this question, they need more than reading comprehension skills because the answers do not come straight from the text. Different students would be able to produce different interpretations of what they have read, which helps me to learn more about their critical thinking. The last question goes even further as it does not ask about the text itself but inquiries into what suggestions it brings to the reader. The difficulty of the questions increases from the first to the last, so they allow me to know how much they learn from the analyses of *The Hobbit*.

The essay writing was not carried out at UniFe, as the essays were introduced in the project after the 2018 English literature course, at which time the Italian students had already finished the course and taken the exam.

## IV.5. Data analysis

The rich amount of data from the observations, the interviews, and the artefacts require a systematic method of analysis that can both simplify and enrich the study. As a result, thematic analysis is chosen for the project.

Seeing the vast data as one system with pieces of information that repeat themselves, I have envisaged the possibility to pick them out and form different themes. These themes are generated from the research questions of the study. I can then find the supporting

evidence for them in the data, and analyse them once they are organised. This thematic method can be effectively understood through Boyatzis' (1998, p. 4) description:

> If sensing a pattern or "occurrence" can be called *seeing*, then the encoding of it can be called *seeing as*. That is, you first make the observation that something important or notable is occurring, and then you classify or describe it. In the way that Wittgenstein (Creegan, 1989) described the process by which we classify experiences in our lives, the *seeing as* provides us with a link between a new or emergent pattern and any and all patterns that we have observed and considered previously. It also provides a link to any and all patterns that others have observed and considered previously through reading.

He states that it is this function that helps the research to connect to its themes, and then can recognise them from information that seems random. To do so, researchers must firstly be open and flexible when working with the data. Secondly, they must follow a discipline to keep everything on track. Thirdly, they generate a code to analyse what has been gained. Lastly, they use the interpretation of the information from the themes to support the study. The thematic analysis "works both to reflect reality and unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Moreover, Dawson states that with this method "the themes emerge from the data and are not imposed upon it by the researchers" (2002, p. 115).

Following this thematic approach, in my project I have developed the themes after I read the students' responses based on the research questions stated in Chapter I of the study. Aiming to detect the similarities and differences in the Italian and Vietnamese students' points of view, I have grouped the data into the four following themes:

- A comparison between the Italian and Vietnamese students' perspective on the link between foreign language and literature.
- A comparison between the Italian and Vietnamese students' obstacles in learning literature in English language.
- A comparison between the Italian and Vietnamese students' perspective on the role of the 20th century British fantasy literature in developing English language competence.
- A comparison between the Italian and Vietnamese students' perspective on the role of the 20th century British fantasy literature in developing critical thinking.

I then support each theme with evidence from the observation notes and the interview responses from both UniFe and HANU students, and the diaries that were written by students at HANU. The essays also play an important role in the study because they provide evidence of the students' performance without the teacher's instruction. This method brings the information to readers in a more effective and organised way and also highlights the similarities and differences between two groups of participants.

## IV.6. Conclusion

This chapter provides a thorough look at the methodology, as well as the data collection tools adopted in the project. Even though the data collection process presents some limitations, the methods applied to both Italian and Vietnamese students have proved efficient and effective. While the study includes a comparison between the two fantasy literature courses at UniFe and HANU, the target of the research is the latter. While UniFe was my first research field, HANU was where I applied what I had experienced at UniFe to improve the quality of the study. The development contributed to my final goal, which is the proposal for innovations to the fantasy course at HANU. With the combination of observation, interview, and artefacts method as triangulation, information from each source I collected at HANU confirms the others' and sheds more light on the study.

**CHAPTER V**

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**V.1. Introduction**

In this chapter, I am going to discuss the participants' perception of the influence of literature in general and of $20^{th}$-century British fantasy literature in particular on their language competence and thinking skills. Evidence is provided through the analysis of my classroom observations, the students' interviews, and their artefacts. In each section of this chapter, a comparison between the Italian and the Vietnamese students is also made to understand the similarities and differences between each learning environment. However, as explained in Chapter IV, as only Vietnamese artefacts are available, no comparison is made.

This chapter analyses the data collected from ten UniFe and ten HANU students. They were coded I1 to I10, and V1 to V10 for the purpose of confidentiality. All the direct quotes from my observation notes and from the student interviews are given in italics. Although the students' answers are sometimes grammatically incorrect, I have decided to quote them verbatim to preserve their authenticity.

The first part of the chapter presents the information from the observations in the fantasy literature classrooms at UniFe and HANU. The observations offer an insight into the class atmosphere and the students' behaviours which serve as a background for a better understanding of the data extracted from other data collection processes. In the second part of the chapter, the students' perspective on British fantasy literature of the $20^{th}$ century and the English language becomes clearer as the answers from the interviews with the participants are taken into account. In this part of the chapter, a more detailed source of data collected from the weekly diary entries of the Vietnamese students is also presented. This set of data illustrates what they gained after each lesson, while the answers from the interview display their viewpoints at the end of the course, after they had finished studying the fantasy genre. Finally, the analysis of the Vietnamese students' performance in the reading of another fantasy text, Roald Dahl's *The Witches*, serves as a confirmation of their achievement after the course.

**V.2. The fantasy literature classes at UniFe**

To get to know the Italian and Vietnamese students in their learning environments, I firstly approached them by implementing the observation method in each course. The description of the courses in Chapter IV has explained the syllabus and the physical environment of the classrooms. The number of participants in the fantasy literature course at UniFe almost

doubled that at HANU. The delivery of lessons in both courses were more or less alike, with the same literary text, which was *The Hobbit* written by J. R. R. Tolkien. The chapters of the book were shown on a wide screen so the whole class could study it together, but some of the students had their own printed copies or soft copies of the book on smart devices.

At UniFe, there was one group of students in the course of the fantasy genre. Unlike the English Literature course at HANU, this course at UniFe was dedicated to fantasy only and *The Hobbit* was the last literary text to be taught in the course. The students had studied British literature prior to the fantasy course and they had to self-study the history of British Literature so they had a certain amount of knowledge on the subject. I joined the fantasy course with the students and studied all the texts mentioned in Chapter IV. I delivered a short presentation on the main character of the novel, Bilbo Baggins, in the second lesson on *The Hobbit* and the rest were operated by the professor who taught the course from the beginning.

The first lesson on *The Hobbit* was devoted to the author, J. R. R. Tolkien, and how his life influenced his writing. The introduction to the genre was delivered at the beginning of the course, so the professor focused on the analysis of *The Hobbit* and how it represented the genre. The number of students in the classroom was approximately fifty. They were those who could participate regularly. The one hour and forty-five minutes lesson went smoothly and the students were paying great attention. A projector was used to show the students the information about the author. Also because the computer was connected to the Internet, the professor could search for references at any occasion. This was an advantage of UniFe over HANU because at the time of the research project, the HANU classrooms were not Wi-Fi-connected.

Most of the students used notebooks to take note of the lesson, while some of them used laptops. Those who had devices of any sort also opened the soft copy of the novel to follow the lesson, while the rest either looked at the wide screen or used a hard copy. As the professor talked about Tolkien, sometimes she stopped and asked questions. At such occasions, there was always hesitation at first but then at least one student would answer. There were also circumstances in which a student asked the professor for more information or to clarify something she said earlier. Also, about two thirds of the class raised their hands when the professor asked if they knew or had read any book written by Tolkien. This was a difference between the Italian and the Vietnamese students, because a very small number of Vietnamese students answered yes when being asked the same question. It can be inferred from this fact that the Italian students had a better background of the topic than their Vietnamese counterparts and thus could take part in the lesson more effectively.

Nonetheless, because the first lesson mostly involved the information about Tolkien, the students did not discussed much.

In the second lesson, the students were expected to have read the text, if not the entire novel, at least about one forth. I was assigned to give a presentation on Bilbo Baggins, the main character. Even though the students were quite fluent in English, I maintained a slow pace so as not to make them confused about the content of the presentation. As I spoke, I also noticed that *the students listen attentively. Some nod their heads and some take note, perhaps because they may want to ask me something*. Although the previous lesson covered the life and work of Tolkien, some details about *The Hobbit* were revealed to the student. Furthermore, they were expected to have read some chapters so the content of my presentation stretched from the beginning to the end of the novel. I only picked important details and analysed them accordingly, but I did not go too far into the plot because of time limitation. After the presentation ended, the professor asked if anyone wanted to make comments or ask questions but no student did so. It was the first lesson on *The Hobbit* and I expected that the students wanted to listen well before asking about anything. The professor then started from Chapter I. *She opens the novel on the screen and reads aloud paragraphs, not the whole chapter*. However the first half of the chapter was almost fully covered because it was the introduction of the hobbit people and Bilbo Baggins. The professor occasionally stopped and asked questions about implications of the description and the estrangement of the chapter. *Some students at the front and the middle of the classroom enthusiastically take part in the discussion on familiarity versus estrangement*. With the suggestions from the professor, they were able to conclude that one special feature in *The Hobbit* was that readers were not taken from a normal world to a strange world, but they were in the strange world from the start. This realisation is rather important as estrangement and familiarity are two vital components of the fantasy genre. Had they not remembered this information, they could not be aware of such a fact. The students at the back seemed to make an effort to focus on the lesson, but at times they were distracted by their mobile phones. However, nothing interrupted the lesson, just like the previous one.

The third and fourth lessons were taught in the same manner. In these two lessons, the class went through the whole novel but did not read every chapter. The professor selected important parts for the students to read and analyse. There were more interactions in these two lessons than the two previous as the students got more familiar with the plot. The discussions included Bilbo Baggins' resilience, which helped him overcome challenges in the journey, the common traits of each creature in the novel, and the Battle of the Five Armies. *Chapter V. Riddles in the Dark* was thoroughly discussed as it explained the

discovery of the One Ring, an item that is not central in *The Hobbit* but will acquire a crucial role in its sequel, *The Lord of the Rings*. This chapter also explained how Bilbo Baggins escaped from a near-death experience by playing a game of riddles with a creature named Gollum. The Italian students were non-native speakers so they reflected that they could not come up with the answers to the riddles. For the implication of the riddles and the whole chapter, they had to rely on the professor's suggestions, but even then only about one or two students could see what the author wanted to show. After that, the Battle of the Five Armies also triggered a discussion on its relation with World War I among the students. Compared to the same discussion that later happened at HANU, this discussion of the Italian students involved more arguments because they could draw upon deeper prior knowledge on World War I. They could provide more arguments to support or to refute the idea that the Battle of the Five Armies was inspired by battles of World War I. In general, the Italian students' critical thinking were adequate. However, the question was whether it was so even before the course or it was enhanced throughout the process.

## V.3. The fantasy literature classes at HANU

At HANU, the ten student participants were from two classes of students, with five students in each class. For a more effective presentation of data, the two classes are now named class E1 and E2. The two classes had two different teachers who had worked with each for 11 weeks prior to the data collection period. During those 11 weeks, each class had learnt a brief history of English Literature and had carried out group-presentation activities as described in Chapter IV. I started working with both classes from week 12 to week 14 of the course and used the same literary text for both, which was *The Hobbit*. I had previously taught English academic listening skills in class E2, but not in class E1. This difference created a gap in the atmosphere in the two classrooms. Unlike the classrooms at UniFe, those at HANU at that time were not fully equipped and the students did not have Wi-Fi connection. As a result, I prepared the materials at home and had downloaded what I needed for the lessons to avoid any interruptions during the lesson caused by a lack of the Internet. I would have to ask the students to search for information on their devices if something unexpected came up and I needed them to learn about it, but not all students had Internet-connected devices. Because I could not take note at the same time of my teaching, I did so at any occasion during which the students were asked to read a piece of text or discuss.

Besides making observation notes of each class throughout the three weeks, I also asked the research participants to keep a diary. To suggest what the students could write, I gave them four questions concerning what they learnt, how they felt about their progress in

critical thinking, whether they thought the lesson could be employed for further purposes, and what their obstacles in the lesson were. This set of data has served as evidence to support the data from their performances in the classroom and their arguments, extracted from the interviews.

### V.3.1. The first class on fantasy

In the first lesson in week 12, my task was to introduce the students to the fantasy genre, J. R. R. Tolkien, and *The Hobbit*. They might have come across the fantasy genre when studying the history of English Literature but week 12 was the first time both classes analysed a fantasy novel. As mentioned earlier, class E2's experience with me created a slight difference in the first lesson. In both classes, I started by asking the students about the previous lessons in the course and received similar answers regarding their study of the history of English Literature, *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry, and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. The difference, however, could be felt in the atmosphere in each class, which I noted down as I taught the lesson. In class E1, *the atmosphere is not lively because they know I only teach them the 3 last lessons, so they are unsure of what comes next*. In contrast, class E2 *is livelier, perhaps because I have taught them before and they know my teaching style*. Although I tried to follow the same steps and create the same atmosphere, this difference resulted in the fact that more students in class E2 than class E1 paid close attention to the lesson. This tendency was shown even more clearly as the lessons progressed. After the explanation of my research project, about which no student had any questions, I recruited ten research participants. The students in both classes were uncertain as to whether they should take part in the project as they were afraid it would take much of their time while they still had other classes to attend. It took me at least ten minutes in each class to recruit ten students for the research survey.

The main part of the lesson began with a presentation on the fantasy genre, including its characteristics, its purposes, and some famous authors and novels of the genre. Besides the presentation, I showed the students a TED-Ed video clip on YouTube named *What Makes a Hero* (2012), which summarises the book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004), written by Joseph Campbell. The students' task was to listen and take notes if they wanted to, as I pointed out from the beginning of the presentation. After about fifteen minutes, those in class E1 *who sit at the back began to lose attention, while those who are recruited as participants listen attentively*. At the same time, the attentive students and some others were taking notes of some keywords of the fantasy genre, which were mostly emphasised when I repeated and drew their attention to them. The situation in class E2 was somewhat better because most

students paid attention to the lesson, and they also noted down keywords. Despite the fact that the two classes' experiences with me were different, probably there were two factors related to their level of attention. Firstly, the presentations were quite long. For the first twenty minutes or so, I required no interaction from the students so as to let them listen and absorb all the information. It was difficult to conclude if this lack of attention was their habit in the literature course or if it happened only in my classroom because I had not observed the two classes in their previous weeks of the course. However, a brief narration from both teachers allowed me to learn that my teaching style resembled theirs to a certain extent. Secondly, as I tried to get to know class E1 before the course, other teachers who had taught them before recalled that they might have been more silent than other classes, and that some students in class E1 were more active than others during the lessons. What is more, I had not taught class E1 but had facilitated one orientation session of theirs in their first year. At that time, I could say that they were not eager to speak out and preferred to listen. From this picture, I could assume the more laid-back personality of class E1. Class E2 had been more interactive in the previous course I taught, and I experienced the same tendency in the literature course. Though there were students spacing out, about two thirds attended with concentration.

I asked the students to interact after the presentation on the fantasy genre. The questions I asked them were on the level of familiarity with the genre and examples of some authors or novels of the genre. Several students in class E1 responded that they knew about magical creatures like dragons and witches, but not about J. R. R. Tolkien or *The Lord of the Rings*. Class E2 provided more examples of fantasy novels, most of which were the *Harry Potter* series. The rest talked about the *Narnia* series and *Coraline*, but could not say who the authors were. At the mention of J. R. R. Tolkien, they said they knew that he was the author of *The Lord of the Rings* but nothing else about him. I could then conclude that the knowledge of the fantasy genre in class E2 was better than that of class E1. All the aforementioned series and novels were translated into Vietnamese and had movies adapted from the books, which might have also helped them be known more widely among the students. The fact that the *Harry Potter* series was more familiar to the students partly proved the point I made in Chapter II, that its success set the beginning of an awareness of the fantasy genre in Vietnam. When the students answered the questions about the fantasy genre, more of them were captivated by the topic and more paid attention to the lesson. Not only the participants but also many others remembered some details of my presentation when I asked them to reflect on it at the end.

The lesson provided enough time to allow us to study *Chapter I: An Unexpected Party*. The students had a soft copy of the novel because I had emailed it to them earlier, but could also follow the story as shown on screen. At this point I tried to carry out the lesson the way I had attained from the course at UniFe to keep most similarities between the courses at the two universities. Specifically, I read the text out loud and paused after each paragraph or when I wanted to ask a question to provoke the students' critical thinking. For example, after the description of Bilbo Baggins, the main character of the novel, I asked them to tell me what type of person he was. At this point, in both classes, *about one or two students simply recite the text*. Student V7 in class E2 *wants to examine a theory about Bilbo Baggins and gives me the answer that in this novel Bilbo will turn from a completely normal hobbit to one who loves adventure*. This was a good prediction of the student because it was true that Bilbo Baggins did as she expected. In class E1, students V1 and V2 formed a traditional description of the hobbit and the dwarf: *They guess that the hobbit prefers stress and scandal-free life and wants to live at home in peace, surrounded by nature, while the dwarf leads a rougher life under the mountain and sometimes faces wars*. These were also precise predictions about the two kinds of creatures in the novel. The participants of the research often joined the discussions and they could sometimes perform the critical thinking quite successfully. Then, as I wrapped up the lesson and told the students to read at least 5 following chapters of *The Hobbit*, the students in both class took note of the task and seemed to follow the storyline quite well. As they left the classroom I could hear them discuss about the plot.

When the students submitted their diaries, it could be seen that they gathered more or less the same information from the lesson. All of them stated that they learnt more about the fantasy genre, ranging from its structural and thematic features to the popular type of characters and the sense of escapism in fantasy literature. Students V1, V3, and V10 mentioned that they learnt about the different types of fantasy. For instance, student V3 recalled that the lesson changed her experience with the fantasy genre:

> *Before this lesson, in my mind, the fantasy world just looks like the things such as the wizards with the magical wands and brooms and the spell. Actually, on reading and watching that serious of books and films, I did not have any definition about the genre of the fantasy world. Now I acknowledge that there are two types of fantasy literature: high fantasy (epic fantasy) and low fantasy.*

Not only so, students V1 and V6 could acknowledge the differences between fantasy and other genres, especially sci-fi, which student V1 used to think that it overlapped the fantasy genre. Many of them could also understand more about the hero/ine figure in the fantasy genre. Students V3, V4, V7, and V10 all mentioned their impression with the TED-Ed video, which generates the figure of a hero. Student V7 commented:

> *By going from what is general and typical to what is more specific and detailed, once again, our mindset and my critical thinking have been greatly improved. Instead of going immediately into analyzing the character for us, the teacher gave us an overview from which we are able to discover, research or judge the character on our own.*

This video is a synthetic version of *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* so it might have benefited the students more than a reading. Students V1, V4, V7, V9, and V10 affirmed that after the video and the lesson on the fantasy genre they could analyse *The Hobbit* better. Student V4 learnt that *contrasting and comparing are good methods […] to approach fantasy literature* because they learnt from the first lesson that the real world and the fantasy world present similarities and differences. This comparison showed how the characters might have *different mindset, behaviours, and habitat from human being*, as put by student V9, and thus they signify familiarity and estrangement. Besides all that they have learnt, student V10 wanted to know more about the stylistic devices that were used in *The Hobbit*. The stylistic devices had been mentioned quite frequently in the course of English literature, making the students accustomed to it and raising concerns when they were not mentioned.

The second issue I asked the participants to mention in their diary was their perceived improvement after each lesson. Because it was the first lesson, a majority of the students reflected that they had not noticed much progress in the reading and analysis of literature. In fact, six of them felt that way and one claimed that she could not judge whether there was any improvement after only one lesson. They had not got used to the fantasy genre, and according to student V3, because the previous literary text she analysed was of a different genre, she needed more time to be accustomed to fantasy. However, there were promising feedbacks like student V4's:

> *I felt much more confident and the time required for analyzing a certain detail in the story is definitely shorter. My flow of thought is also smoother when there is no confusion. The teacher also gave us some specific questions to understand deeply the story, guide us to compare and contrast the details or the characters, etc.*

The other three students disclosed that they had certain developments. Student V5 relied on the 'Why?' and 'How?' questions *to synthesizing evidences, analyzing events, drawing inferences, initiate and sum up ideas, evaluate literary texts*. Student V10 also use these questions to read the text more critically. Finally, a more specific explanation of the improvement was given by student V7:

> *Previously, when approaching a piece of literature, I often felt confused like trying to find a needle in a haystack. I did not know where and how to start. I did not know which detail is important to focus on and which one is not. I just tried to understand and analyzed it instinctively and that made my ideas quite messed up. Then, when learning with the teacher today, I have been given some instructions in advanced, I felt much more confident and the time required for analyzing a certain detail in the story is definitely shorter. My flow of thought is also smoother when there is no confusion.*

The guidance, as student V7 said, prevented distraction and at the same time allowed the student to see the plot from different angles instead of approaching the literal meaning of the text. These positive responses suggested that the changes may occur, probably not immediately but after a period of time.

Thirdly, the students were supposed to reflect on what they gained after the lesson. All of the students responded that their vocabulary range related to the fantasy genre became wider. They learnt words that were completely new and never heard of before, or encountered words which they could understand literally but not in terms of symbolic value. Completely new words include 'antagonist/protagonist', 'uncanny', 'quest', 'realm', etc., while words with unknown symbolic connotations were quaint ones such as 'prosperous', 'threshold', and also 'quest'. Nonetheless, most of the students felt like they could not use these words outside the context of fantasy literature. Only student V5 assumed that the words could be used in other situations: *when I had an opportunity to express my own ideas about relationships, values and beliefs, it forces me to use and learn a more complex set of structures and a more "advanced" range of vocabulary*. Student V8 proposed that the words 'threshold' might be used to express t*he level at which something starts to happen or have an effect*, for example in the sentence 'He has a low boredom threshold'. Among the diaries, only that of student V9 mentioned something else besides the vocabulary. She explained that the video on the portrait of a hero would be useful when reading other fantasy novels. It could become a useful reference for gaining a better insight of any hero. This was rather an

important awareness and it showed that student V9 started to develop the critical thinking skill while others stopped at the surface of the lesson. Yet there were two more lessons in the project and the final result was yet to come.

Finally, the students discussed the obstacles in the lesson. Half of the students found the vocabulary in *The Hobbit* unusual. They read more slowly because they had to stop and look up the dictionary and then could not express their ideas because of the lack of words related to the fantasy genre. Another problem that they had was a weak historical, geographical, and cultural background. Student V4 expressed her opinion that a strong background was *of great importance to learning and analyzing a work of literature* and student V7 regretted not having read more about World War I, which was a good source of reference to understand Tolkien's life and writing style. Some other problems included difficulties in following the story, either because they had not read it before the lesson or the fantasy world was unfamiliar to them, and the weak critical thinking which prevented them from reading between the lines. These challenges kept resurfacing in the next two lessons and were mentioned as a common obstacle to reading and analysing the fantasy genre.

### V.3.2. The second class on fantasy

In the second week, fewer students presented in both classes. Those who did not pay attention in the first lesson were absent but also some who took part enthusiastically did not attend. It was difficult to determine the reason behind this absence because I could not approach those students after the course. Those whom I could approach in the interview were my designated participants and they attended all lessons. Therefore, I could only guess that the absent students either had some important matter to attend to so they had to quit the class, or that they considered the three fantasy lectures less important. Because I was not the teacher who was in charge of the course, they might have assumed that the three lessons would not affect the result of the whole course and their absence would not be relevant. This is an inference rather than a fact drawn from the investigation. The two thirds of students in each class were more familiar with the content of the course and the teaching style of mine. I started in both classes by asking them whether they had read more chapters in *The Hobbit*. There were fewer students in class E1 who confidently responded to the question: *Some of them nod or say yes, while some stay silent*. On the other hand, in class E2, *most of the students say they have finished Chapter 6 and about 2 to 3 students do not say anything*. They did not read beyond Chapter 6 because I informed them that it would be the focus of the second lesson. Again, the participants sat nearer to the front and tended to be more enthusiastic about the plot than others. If there were any pieces of information I wanted them

to remember or focus on, I would ask them to note them down, while on other occasions, they took note without my instruction. In this lesson I also showed the text on the screen so those without a soft or hard copy could follow the lesson.

*Chapter 6. Riddles in the Dark* reached a point where Bilbo Baggins's adventure gets more dangerous. As the journey goes on, the group faces dangers when they accidentally bump into two trolls and escape from the threat of being roasted by a hair's width. However it is not until the group is attacked by goblins that Bilbo finds himself all alone and at risk. He falls into the cave where Gollum, a strange creature, resides and is determined to eat Bilbo. The narration of the chapter follows a game of riddles which Gollum challenges Bilbo to play in order to buy more time until it is sure that Bilbo is alone and cannot defend himself. All the riddles in the game are about guessing mundane objects and familiar phenomena of life, such as the mountain, the egg, the fish, etc. and it is no hard work for both characters to find the answer. Riddles are a common motif in folklore and they are often shaped by history and culture. In this case, it takes effort for unaccustomed non-native English speakers to solve the riddles as they are from another culture. The same thing happened in both classrooms when we studied the chapter. *As I pause and ask for the answers, they* (those who read it prior to the lesson) *can provide them before we reach the answers in the text*. Again, these were often the research participants. Others were less likely to speak and some even seemed to be in a daze. I was not sure they could follow the storyline at all for the same reason I mentioned earlier, that they might have thought this part of the course was optional and would not affect the final result.

At this point, I was trying to form a habit for the students to read between the lines. Many questions I asked were not fact-related, but required critical thinking or imagination. The students were advised to always ask questions about the text and try to see if the author implied anything, or wanted readers to notice subtle details. It was undoubtedly challenging if the students had to do so on their own, so I kept asking so as to encourage them. My aim was to help them practice raising key questions so that they could do so spontaneously later. Nevertheless, it was still early times and most of the students were still acquiring the critical skills. The game of riddles, besides being the event that leads to Bilbo's discovery of the Ring, a life-changing fact that also seals the fate of Middle-earth, emphasises the normal life of a hobbit, and thus, offers readers some clues to the origin of Gollum. As the riddles refer to objects in daily life, readers might be directed to the fact that Gollum once lived outside the cave. Most students could not go this far in the analysis of the chapter and stopped at the conclusion that *it shows that Bilbo is smart* (class E1) *and how intelligently Bilbo manages to escape death* (class E2). This interpretation of theirs stayed at the surface level of meaning

so I tried to drive them to the direction of the racial origin. I ask the students to think of the reason why Gollum lived in the cave yet could easily answer the riddles. *Some students look as if they start to have theories but after a while they could not refer to anything, and they show surprise when I suggest the implication about Gollum's human origins*. Some students then said that the implication was not impossible to think of, but without any suggestions, they could not come to such conclusion.

In their weekly diary, the students also took note of what they acquired about the fantasy genre. The most notable fact about the diary is that it illuminates how the lesson helped them analyse characters and the plot. Most frequently mentioned was the analysis of the characters in *The Hobbit*: the students realised that the nature of the characters would not only reflect in what they do but also in many other factors. Student V5 established that to understand a character, *we need to pay attention to their appearance and language, to how their attitudes and characteristics change during the story and compare them with others.* Students V7 and V10 had the same opinion as student V5, and students V6 and V9 also counted on the personalities of each creature to understand them. Interestingly, student V3 did not only compare different kinds of creatures in *The Hobbit*, but also contrast the goblins in this novel with those in the *Harry Potter* series. She explained that the latter were more civilised and had a neutral attitude instead of being foolish and wicked as the former. This insight also helped her understand the fantasy world in *The Hobbit* better and saw how Tolkien's point of view was distinctive. These realisations altogether build a reference for the students to draw upon and apply to the rest of the novel. Students V1 and V2 wrote that they gained the habit of reading between the lines and paying close attention to details because as student V2 pointed out, *maybe a simple word can reveal an interesting fact in the next chapter of the story.*

In the second week, the students' critical thinking and argument were perceived to be better than in the previous week. They all reflected on having developed in various ways because they were more familiar with the genre and had read the book before the lesson. Having been well prepared, they were no longer bewildered by the content of the lesson. Most commonly, they claimed that the frequent questions related to the plot helped them be more aware of what they needed to do while reading and analysing a text. In fact, all the ten participants declared that their critical thinking had improved through the act of answering the questions I had given them. Students V6 and V8 wrote about their experience as following:

*The teacher's questions gave me a hint to understand more about several details in the story, which I might not have noticed. By thinking of the answers to her questions, I had chances to dig deeper into the story and find out what the author really wanted to deliver to the readers. The characters' situation and development of mentality were also more vividly illustrated with the help of the questions* (Student V6).

*My critical thinking did develop better than the previous lesson. I could connect details together and figured out the meaning that author implied. For example, via the name of chapter* Out of the frying pan, into the fire*, I could guess that in this chapter Bilbo and the company would escape successfully from goblins and they would be into another trouble* (Student V8).

Student V1 even did the same when she read alone, stating that she would ask herself whether a certain detail had only literal or also figurative meaning. The fact that the students were always asked about the plot also build up their confidence, as indicated by students V3, V4, and V5. Student V3 was encouraged to raise her voice instead of *sitting quietly as in the previous lesson*. Student V4 also claimed to be more confident and it took less time for her to realise what the author really wanted to express. After that, some of them discuss the plot of *The Hobbit*. For instance, student V2 discuss with the classmates about the part that they had read and found out that they understood the chapters the same way. During the discussion, student V2 came up with new ideas and concluded that *this kind of activities can heat up the class* (atmosphere) *and energize our brain*. This process of reading as a preparation before the lessons, then always asking themselves questions about the plot, and finally discussing it, became a pattern that the students could follow. Even though there were not many participants in the study, the fact that they experienced more or less the same proves that this learning style was quite promising. Student V7 recalled what she picked up from the second week:

*I have known how to make questions before going into details. I have known how to connect one detail with others in order to find the underlying meaning. It is not just about understanding the words or the sentences by their surface meanings anymore. I have to dig more deeply. For example when answering the question about Gollum's identity, I had to view him not only through the lens of present but also by the lens of the past. I had to observe him not only as a dark creature or a monster but also as a human with memories, with families and with good relationships with the nature.*

Nonetheless, it would take more time for them to get used to this way of learning, as student V4 reported that it was still difficult to do so independently without suggestions from the teacher.

As for the vocabulary in the lesson, seven students wrote that they learnt some new words, and three of them did not for various reasons. Students V4 and V6 did not pay attention to the vocabulary of the chapters because they got carried away by the plot, while student V9 seemed to know all the important words in the lesson. Furthermore, both students V6 and V9 learnt something else related to the vocabulary. They noticed the connection between words in *Chapter 5. Riddles in the Dark*. More specifically, the riddles in the chapter used figurative description to give hints of an object or phenomenon. According to student V6, *this is a very interesting way of using language in form of riddles to assist the readers in imagining what the author wanted to illustrated*. Student V9 also realised that the language used by one kind of creatures could reveal its personalities. On the other hand, the second group did learn some words and had different opinions on the application of what they learnt. Students V1 and V7's viewpoint was that the words could not be used in many contexts. While student V1 learnt the name of some items, student V7 focused on the word 'metamorphosis', which, according to her, were not popular in daily life. On the other hand, students V3, V5, V8, and V10 were specific on what they have learnt. They listed the following words: 'lad', 'elvish', 'paradox', 'shape-shifter/shape-shifting', 'metamorphosis', 'necromancer', 'stray', 'look-out man', 'uncanny', and 'dungeon'. Student V3 suggested that *'lad' can be used to talk about the little boys and the word 'elvish' can be used to talk about the children who are mischievous*. Other words were strongly related to the fantasy genre and some of them were said to be applicable in various contexts. However, at this stage, she did not go further into the different situations in which she could use those words.

As mentioned before, the students were better prepared in the second week. Students V1 and V8 claimed to have had no obstacles in the lesson, and student V1 added that *it* (the lesson) *was enjoyable and the story was interesting. I could freely raise my ideas and learn others' ideas*. Students V2, V6, and V10 had some problem keeping up with the long chapters. In the previous week, the lesson contained both the overview of the fantasy genre, J. R. R Tolkien and *The Hobbit* so there were changes of topics. On the other hand, the second week focused on the analysis of the novel and this was a hindrance to them, especially if they, for example student V10, had not read certain parts that were mentioned. The most popular challenge was still the unfamiliar vocabulary they encountered in the novel. Half of the students found the words strange because they had not seen or used them before. Student V3 believed they were older English words which were now less frequently used and student

V4 thought they required some imagination. Along with this problem, a lack of historical background discouraged students V4 and V9 to express their ideas of the subjects of discussion. Student V9 wrote: *I knew the story to a certain point and I want to share it with everybody but I always messed up the ideas and failed at giving the details to prove my point in English*. Having had the same problem, student V7 also found it challenging to *summarize every detail that we have read and analysed in order to find the most important message behind the words*. She seemed to have been overwhelmed and was still struggling to effectively generate and express ideas. Finally, students V5 and V10 suggested they should have more chances for pair or group discussions to share what they thought, as student V5 explained: *I also found my classmates had a good ability of drawing inferences from texts when dealing with teacher's questions.* The shortage of time did not allow me to include discussions to the lessons, but I found this idea particularly promising. Being given a chance to share ideas, the students would probably come up with interesting interpretations of the literary text.

### V.3.3. The last class on fantasy

In the third and final week, I noticed a difference in the number of students in each class. As I noted down, class E1 had *only one third of students even though it is the last session*, while class E2 had *more students than week 2 but fewer than week one*. All the participants presented during the last lesson. Prior to the day I had expected that the number of absent students would be higher than the two previous weeks because it was not only the last session of the fantasy genre but also the last face-to-face lesson of the course. The next two weeks would be dedicated to a tutorial of the assignment, during which the whole class would not meet the teacher at the same time but in smaller groups. The last two weeks would be dedicated to the final assignment that the students had to write at home. They might have decided to skip the last lesson of the fantasy genre, having expected that its content would not be an important part of the assignment. It was true to some extent because the final assignment would not be about any literary text they studied in the course. Because the aim of the course was for the students to be able to analyse different genres, they would be given a new literary text of another genre to analyse and then submit to the teacher. What is more, a different text, probably belonging to a different genre, would be assigned to each group. As a matter of fact, the fantasy genre lessons still fulfilled the aim of the course and was not less constructive to the students than the rest of the course, but they might have seen it as inessential because it was an experiment being carried out as part of a research project.

In this last lesson, the students were used to my teaching style because I had been following the same pattern. I had asked them to read the rest of the book and pay special attention to the Battle of the Five Armies in *Chapter XVII. The Clouds Burst*. The participants in class E1 *have read until the final chapter but they seem to have scanned only because when I asked about details, they can't answer some*. The rest did not respond when I asked about the progress so I assumed they had not read the book. Class E2 had only about three or four students who had finished the book, and there were some who had not shown up in the previous week so they did not seem to follow the discussion. There were also some who came to the last lesson but still sat at the back and did not pay attention. Although the situation in this class was less favourable than that in class E1 in the first lesson, in this last lesson, a smaller gap between the participants and the rest of the students in class E1 could be observed. It was an unexpected event because at the beginning, class E2 seemed to be more responsive as a whole, also owing to their familiarity with me as a teacher.

The Battle of the Five Armies was the biggest and final battle involving the goblins and wolves on the one side, and the elves, humans and dwarves on the other. With the help from the wolves, the goblins want to avenge their king who was killed earlier by Thorin Oakenshield, the dwarf prince. The three other races stand together in the fight against their common enemies. There were a number of studies which compare this battle to World War I which Tolkien himself underwent as a lieutenant (Green, 1995; Moss & Wilson, 1997; Berberich, 2014). They propose that he could not forget what he had seen in the war and the battle in *The Hobbit* reflects his experience. It is very likely that the students read about this in some sources of reference while they self-studied, so both classes brought up the discussion. Student V6 of class E1 asked *whether the battle is inspired by World War II, so I ask the class to discuss this but they can't produce an answer with a lack of background information*. Student V7 of class E1 was less specific because her question was *whether this battle is similar to anything in the real world*. I inquired about the two world wars but they did not know much about them, and no student knew that Tolkien did not participate in World War II. As a result, I mentioned the theory that the Battle of the Five Armies was in fact related to World War I and that Tolkien might have suffered the most from the battle of Somme. Due to time limitation, I asked them to search more articles about Tolkien's life during World War I and how it affected him and his works at home.

Before I wrapped up the lesson, the students were asked to discuss several issues in groups. Pair or group discussions were suggested by the students in their diaries of week 1 and 2, so I decided to let them talk about the figures of Bilbo, Gandalf, and *The Hobbit* novel. The participants were still the most enthusiastic members in each group and I heard them

express a number of relevant ideas. As I concluded the lesson, I asked whether the students had any questions or comments. Student V9 of class E1 said that *she enjoys the fantasy genre much more than other genres but she has never seen it taught in any classes at HANU. She stays until after class to share what she thinks about fantasy literature and she has a positive attitude towards it*. While some showed that they were not much interested in the fantasy literature, others liked it.

In this last week, the students' diaries reflected a more general sense of what they have obtained. Most commonly, they wrote that they learnt to connect the story to real life to understand it better. Student V1 drew a conclusion of the events and characters in *The Hobbit* as following:

> [M]*any events in real life can be the materials for the authors to create and build their own stories. Finally, I realised that although the characters are imaginary, they bear many similarities to human. They are not perfect but have limitations and there is something really human in these fictional characters.*

Student V5 wanted to compare and contrast the Battle of the Five Armies with World War I because she saw a possibility that Tolkien might have been inspired by the event. To student V6, the fantasy genre was even a reflection of the real world. This student also connected this to the theme of the fantasy genre: *most of fantasy literature is about escapism, which can be understood that the content of the story, the way that the characters faced their tasks, and the ending of the story could carry the author's hope for a better world and bring it to the readers.* This insight to the genre was the most specific and significant that the participants of the research provided. Although I have mentioned the theme of escapism once or twice in the first lesson, all of them but student V6 remembered it. Beside this sense of escapism, student V7 added that the fantasy genre also brought moral lessons and values to readers, such as *bravery, kindness, wisdom, or peace to apply into their daily life*.

Another point raised by several students is the process of slowly developing critical thinking through frequent questions and the effort to *think out of the box*, as student V4 wrote. Students V5 and V10 had the same opinion, stating that the reason behind a character's action, or the relationship between characters would reveal many things about the plot and its meaning. One question that occurred to students V5 and V7 were on readers of *The Hobbit*. The question they raised in the diaries was whether children were the intended audience of the novel. Student V7's point of view was that *The Hobbit* would be appropriate for all ages: *People often think that fantasy literature is the genre of children only because*

*of its magical and unreal features but in fact, many fantasy novels are more likely to aim at adults (including The Hobbit).*

All of these notes that they wrote in their diaries showed a difference between the first and the final week. The ideas in this last note were much profound than when they started. Significantly, student V2 were able to do the same process of thinking and analysis when reading the novel for the final assignment of the course, showing that the students more or less gained some result after the three lessons.

In fact, all ten students claimed to have improved their sense of critical thinking, though two of them thought they needed more than three weeks to see a more vivid development. As the students frequently answered questions on the plot of the novel, their ability to *synthesise evidences, analyse events, draw inferences, and evaluate texts* were enhanced, according to student V5. She grew more confident in expressing the opinions and illustrate them with examples from the text. Although the changes happened slowly, student V7 could feel the differences when she reflected on the experience:

> *At the first lesson, I cannot answer correctly any question from the teacher. The second lesson was much better when I could find all information that I needed to support my arguments. But these answers were quite short and often in the form of chunks. But in the third lesson, finally I was able to form a full and complete answer which can express fully my thought and my perspective about the story.*

What they lacked before was a guidance to read and analyse a literary text, so they were puzzled when doing so without suggestions from the teacher. In this last lesson, the big questions about Bilbo Baggins' pure heart and *The Hobbit* novel provided them with a chance to practice what they had learnt in the past three weeks. Most of them had thought *The Hobbit* was a children book, but then could argue against this opinion and provided arguments to prove this point of view. The issue of whether Bilbo had a pure heart triggered a debate among the students. Student V10 recalled the stream of thought as following:

> *To me, this is really a vague question because Bilbo will have a pure heart although there was a time when he wants to own the stone for himself but after he still decided to give stone for Bard and the king of elves. But my friend shared that Bilbo doesn't have a pure heart and he presents for human's character in real life.*

Even though her entry was not well organised, from this description it could be seen that she was able to prove her point with details from the novel. This was of course the first step, but it proves the potential of the course to the students.

Regarding vocabulary, all ten students obtained new words from the last lesson. The words can be divided into two groups, the ones which are closely related to the fantasy genre and the ones which are not. In the first group, student V1, V6, V8, and V9 listed 'shape-shifter', 'skin-changer' and 'metamorphosis'. They all claimed that these words had similar meaning and were applicable in different contexts. However the way they understood the words might not have been exact, because student V6 wanted to use the words to address changes in the mentality and student V8 wanted to describe the revolution of animals. Most commonly, these words describe the changes in the appearance of one creature. The students might have not had enough experience with the words to come to such a conclusion. Other words connected to the genre were 'spearman' and 'bowman', which were mentioned by student V3, V4, and V10; 'dragon-slayer', 'guard-chamber', 'raven-messengers' by student V5; 'dungeon', 'siege', 'ere' by student V7; and 'kinsfolk' by student V10. According to student V7, *Some of the aforementioned words are fantasy exclusive while some are old English; therefore, the usage of those words is very limited.* The second group of words was smaller but nevertheless left quite an impression on those who picked them up from the novel. Those words were 'mingle' and 'pure-hearted' (student V1), 'undersize' and 'aloft' (student V2), 'decrepit' and 'splash' (student V5). They all stated that the words could be used in various contexts. Student V5 explained her intention to use the words as following:

> *The first word 'decrepit' (an adjective) which means be weak because of the age. The second word "splash" is a verb meaning to move in water so that drops of it go in all directions. These words can be applied in other situations. For example, about 'splash', if a liquid splashes or if you splash a liquid, it falls on or hits something or someone. 'Decrepit' is also used to describe things which are in poor condition because of having been used a lot.*

The obstacles that the students encountered in the last lesson were mainly related to the range of information they had to cover. Because of time limitation, I had requested the students to finish reading *The Hobbit* before the last lesson. However, not many of them could accomplish the task and it caused difficulties to them as I had to occasionally skip some parts to focus on the main events. Accordingly, six out of ten students claimed that the great number of characters distracted them from the plot as they had to recall who they were when coming across the names. Student V7 mistook one character for another and thought

that *because the events in the novel happen quite fast, it is hard to catch up with the change or the development in each character's emotion.* Similarly, student V9 *struggled with learning all of the names and also their traits.* She explained: T*his is very important because if I cannot distinguish who is who so it will mess up the whole story and the process of analysis.* Student V10 even felt overwhelmed after the lesson ended. Their experiences were rather telling as they provided reasonable explanation for their difficulties. Nevertheless, with a larger amount of time and good preparation, this problem could be solved.

The second challenge for the students was the language barrier and lack of historical background. Students V3, V4, and V5 all described that Tolkien wrote with a language significantly different from what they often used, and student V5 added that *a poor knowledge about the world's history* disrupted the analysis of the novel. As mentioned before, the Battle of the Five Armies tends to be compared to World War I so the students would greatly profit from background knowledge to understand the comparison and contrast.

Lastly, and more related to critical thinking, there was the difficulty of an effective analysis of the text. Although the students grew more familiar with the process, they still needed much help to interpret the text. It took students V1 and V2 quite an amount of time to think of the answers to questions related to the plot and student V3 quite an effort to *perceive which details are important and how to connect them to other details to make the best analysis.* There were in fact no correct answers but the students attempted to understand the text most thoroughly and if possible, most closely to my suggestions. Because of the great amount and interconnection of ideas, student V9 proposed drawing a mind map for a more general view of the novel. This recommendation came after the end of the course so I could not test it on any lesson but it is a promising idea to use in future courses.


**V.4. Literature in ESL learning**

**V.4.1. A comparison between the views of Italian and Vietnamese students on the relationships between foreign language and literature**

Because both groups of students were not native speaker of English language, they had certain similar experiences in learning English literature in English language. Moreover, the cultural and educational backgrounds of the two groups of students brought about differences in their perceptions.

Particularly, the two groups of students provided various reasons for their decision to study English language and literature. The bar charts below illustrate their choices in the respective fields. Each group of students might have provided more than one reason for learning a foreign language.
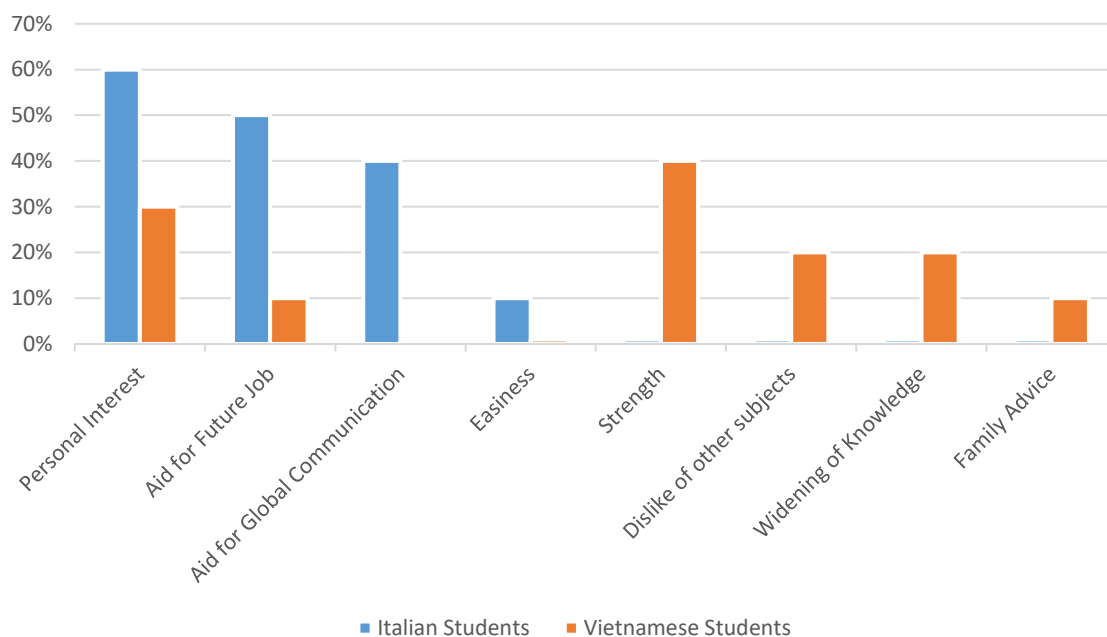
*Figure 2* A comparison between the Italian students' and the Vietnamese students'
reason(s) for learning a foreign language.


As can be seen from Figure 2, the two common reasons for both groups of students are Personal Interest and Aid for Future Job. This tendency, however, is stronger among the Italian students, with 6 and 5 Italian students, respectively. Some of those who chose the second reason clarified their choices as following: *I can find my ideal job with languages* (I1); *I think that languages are very important and even to get a job actually* (I3); *I studied foreign languages because I think they are very useful in our work* (I4). On the other hand, only 3 Vietnamese students studied foreign language because they like to do so, and 1 studied it for their career in the future. Student V8 explained the importance of a foreign language in her future in terms of *job opportunities because language, especially English, nowadays is very popular*.

The other two considerations for foreign language learning among the Italian students are Aid for Global Communication and Easiness. Students I2, I6, I9, and I10 justified that they went to some foreign countries and learning the foreign languages was the best way to communicate with people there. For the second reason, student I3 explained her past experience with foreign language in the secondary education level, which made her regard it as an easy subject.

In contrast, a larger group of Vietnamese student did not say foreign language was easy, but selected it to be their major at the university because it was their strength. For

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example, student V1 admitted that she *studied well in foreign language* so that she *decided to continue to study it*, and student V9 said she did not *have to think a lot* when learning a foreign language. For both students V2 and V9, the choice of foreign language resulted from the fact that they dislike all other subjects, especially mathematics and the natural sciences. Another 2 in the group expressed their inclination towards widening knowledge when learning a foreign language. Student V7 pointed out that *learning a language is not like learning a grammar, the vocab, the structure, and the word they use to express their idea and thought, but it is also a way to learn about their culture, their perspective about life*. Particularly, 1 Vietnamese student proceeded learning a foreign language at the higher education level because of their mother's advice. This is the only passive reason among all, but it can partly reflect an inclination of Vietnamese students to consider their parents' advice on higher education choices, which has been discussed in some previous studies (Trần, 2013; Mai & Thorpe, 2015).

This pattern points to the fact that the Italian students' reasons for studying a foreign language is motivated by personal enrichment, while the Vietnamese students also considered their strength, lack of interest for other subjects, and family influences. During the 12 years of primary and secondary education, Vietnamese students cannot choose what subjects they want to study because the curriculum is fixed. They however have the freedom to select which foreign language to learn, and the majority chooses English. Their first great decision in life is probably which major to choose once they graduate from high school. These Vietnamese students more or less instinctively choose what they think would be less challenging, besides it being what they like. Their families also has a voice on the decision and their advices are often based on their own or past experience of some relatives and acquaintances.
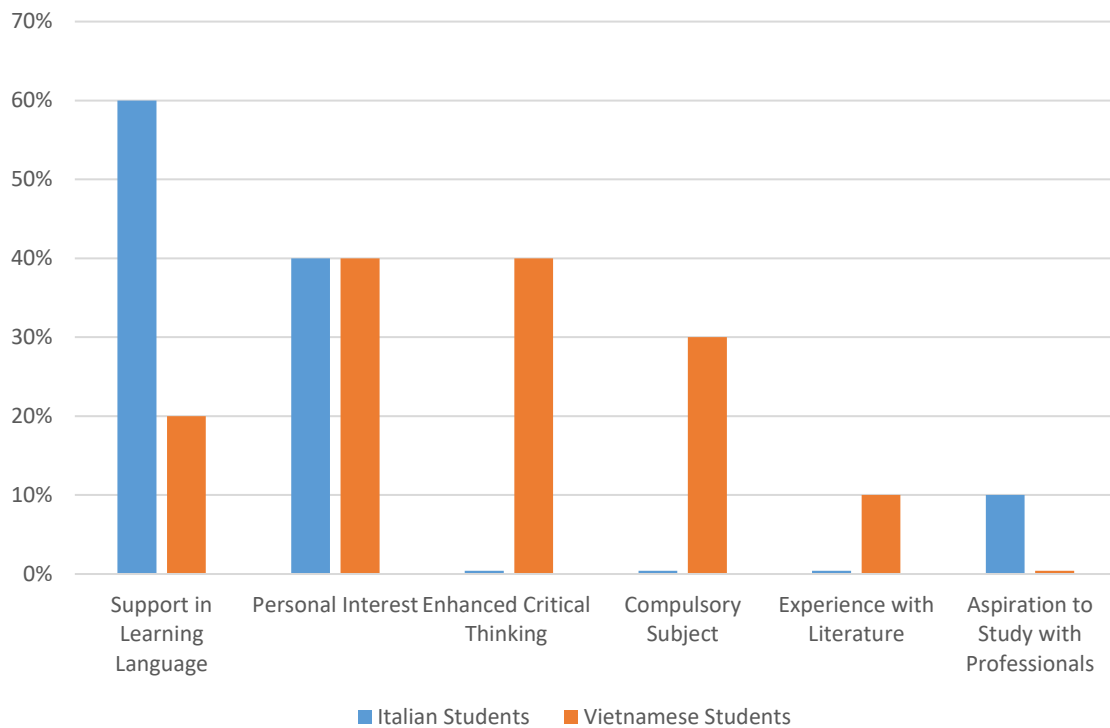
*Figure 3* A comparison between the Italian students' and the Vietnamese students' reason(s) for learning foreign literature.

Regarding the reasons for learning foreign literature, the Italian students provided fewer motivations than their Vietnamese counterparts. The two similar explanations in both groups are Support in Learning Language, coming from 6 Italian students and 2 Vietnamese students, and Personal Interest, from 4 students in both groups. With regard to the first reason, Support in Learning Language, the Italian students specified that literature helped them learn more about the foreign language and culture. For instance, student I1 said that *the foreign literature were not always in the language of today […] historical language […] and you can learn some new words of the language that maybe you couldn't have the opportunity to learn them just with the […] grammar*. Student I8 had the same argument, but for a more particular goal as a future interpreter, that *may be I have some help to work better, […] basis to work well with […] some cultures*. Similarly, students V1 and V10 who had the same choice pointed to the support of literature in understanding the background of the language they learnt. As for Personal Interest, the second reason shared by both groups of students, further explanations were also given. Student I2 wanted to learn foreign literature because she said *I love poetry*. Student I5 were *fascinated* by the knowledge of foreign culture that can be obtained through literature and student I6 by the knowledge of foreign history. Student V7 saw literature as a mirror that reflected real life, *portrayed* the

people, and sometimes *magnified* them to some specific purposes, helping her *adopt more values*.

The last reason given by the Italian students was the Aspiration to Study with Professionals. Student I6 mentioned her wish to see the professors' point of view on literary texts that she had and had not read before the courses of literature. However this was not a motivation for the Vietnamese students. The second most popular motivation for them was to enhance their critical thinking. Having explained the answer, student V9 said she did not only want to read the literary text on the surface level, but understand the work of art at a deeper level. The last reason from the Vietnamese students was the Experience with Literature, specifically Vietnamese literature. The experience encouraged them to study foreign literature as they believe they would work well with it.

To understand the students' perspective on the link between learning foreign languages and learning foreign literature, a question on whether they can study one without the other was given. The following pie charts illustrate the difference between the two groups of students' answers.

Italian Students        Vietnamese Students

- Language without Literature
- Language with Literature
- Neutral

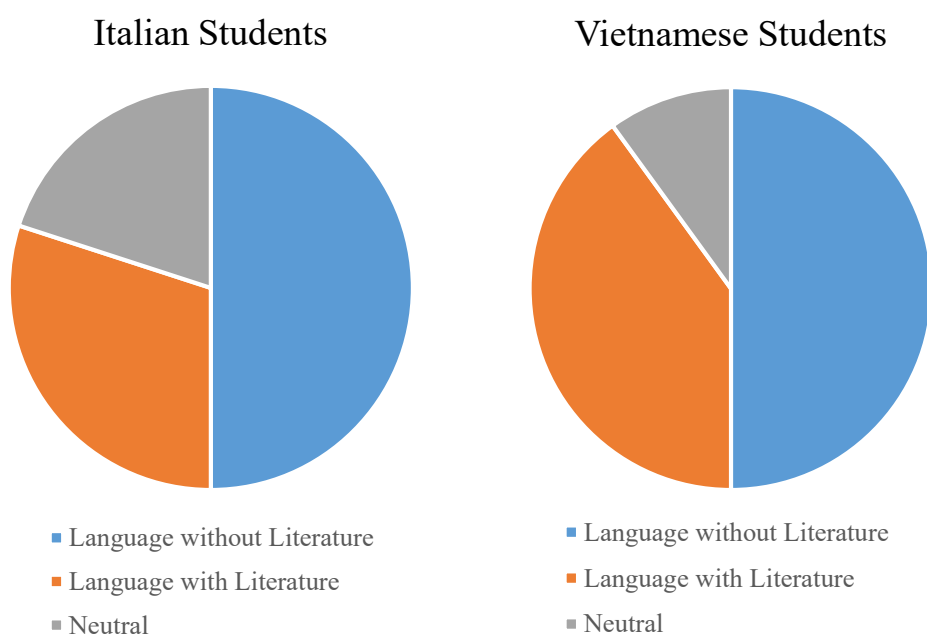*Figure 4* A comparison between the Italian students' and the Vietnamese students' perspective on the role of literature in learning a foreign language.

A similar percentage of Italian and Vietnamese students thought they could study a language without studying its literature. Several explanations were provided by them: *today we don't use so much literature in work* […] *I think literature is important, but not after*

*university* (student I1); *you can always go to a language course, but literature is not a must actually* (student I3); *I think I can understand the languages even without the literature* (student I5); *I think the main purpose of studying foreign language is to communicate [...] so I think literature is one of my hobbies but it is not necessarily important* (student V1); *I think you do not need to read the literature of the language in order to speak the language* (student V9).

These students either thought that foreign literature is not applicable in the future or that they can speak a foreign language without reading the literature. They seemed to have thought of learning a foreign language in the sense of communication, which appeared to involve grammatical rules and vocabulary. Once these are learnt, they can use the foreign language. Interestingly, when having compared the students' motivation for learning foreign literature to the issue of studying literature with the language, I have found that only 20% of the Vietnamese students who learnt foreign literature because it was mandatory also declared that language should be learnt with literature.

The second most popular answer to the question was that the students could not study a foreign language without its literature, with a higher percentage from the Vietnamese students than from the Italian students. The reason for this answer is that *it* (literature) *allows you to understand a lot of the culture you are learning the language* (student I4); *the minimum basis* (of literature) *is necessary* (student I8); *language alone is only a lot of words put there without a connection, and I think that literature is the connection [...], is story [...], and the culture of these words* (student I9); *it* (literature) *can boost my imagination, also help me understand the stylistic device of the author* (student V4).

Specifically, for student V7, *any piece of work that in written form is considered literature [...] an in learning language you need to read a lot of paper [...] so there is no way that you were not approach literature when learning a language*. Her point of view is unique among the others because they thought of any written form of language as literature. The others' arguments, however, ranged from literature being an added but vital value to language learning, to literature being the core and the soul of the language. All of those reasons helped them decide that they needed the literature to master the foreign language.

A minority of the students did not classify themselves into any of the two groups above because they thought one could study a foreign language with or without literature, depending on their goal. These 20% of Italian students and 10% of Vietnamese students agreed that it depended on the level of language one wanted to achieve. Student I2 indicated that *if you just want to achieve elementary knowledge of the language then you can do that* (not studying literature) *[...] literature helps you out to see how native speakers would write,*

and student V2 suggested that *if you want to have an insight or a deeper knowledge of a language, you would have needed to study the literature*. Even though this point of view matched the explanation of some students who thought literature is unnecessary, those who had this answer kept a neutral attitude towards the issue.



Italian Students          Vietnamese Students

■ Literature with Language          ■ Literature with Language

■ Literature with Language          ■ Literature without Language
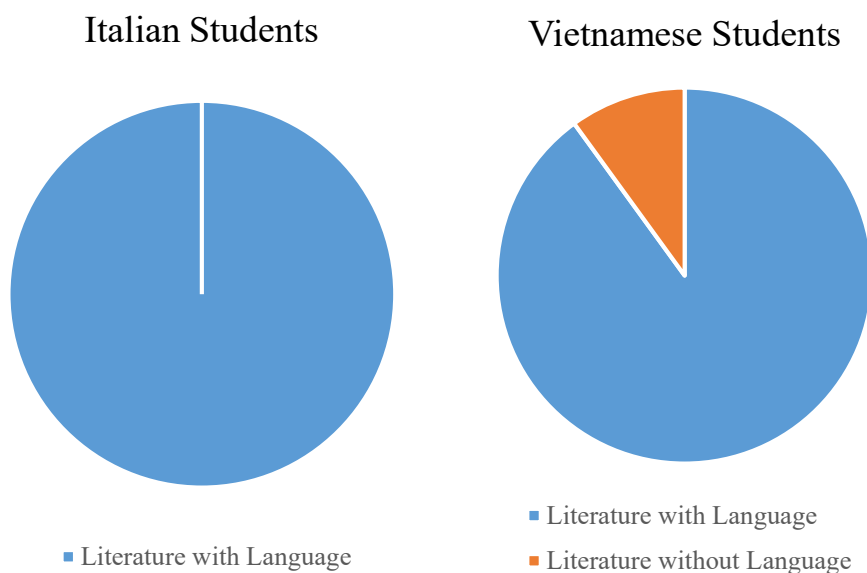
*Figure 5* A comparison between the Italian students' and the Vietnamese students' perspective on the role of a foreign language in learning its literature.

When asked whether one could study foreign literature without studying the language, all Italian students rejected the idea. They were positive that one needed to know a foreign language before learning about the literature of that language. Student I8 said *a minimum basis is necessary*, and student I9 said that language and literature were connected, so she *did not believe literature can stand alone or language can stand alone*.

Among the Vietnamese students, 90% said that foreign literature could not be learnt without the language because as student V1 defined, language is *a tool for literature to build up*. Moreover, according to student V5, *without it* (language)*, the learner could not understand their writing style, their content, and the intention of the author*. Student V2 recalled her experience in high school, when she studied British and American literary texts but could not understand much because she did not study the English language so well.

On the contrary, 10% of the Vietnamese students expressed their viewpoint that literature could be learnt without the foreign language. They referred to the translated version of the literary text, which did not require the learner to speak the original language. There is a conflict between this viewpoint with that of student V2 because both of them mentioned

the translation of the foreign literature. In fact, the translation might be less challenging for non-native speakers, but it may limit the learners or deter them from reading between the lines. These difficulties were acknowledge by student V7 when she mentioned her prior experience with translated foreign literary texts: *I have learnt a lot of novels in translation, but when I compare it with the original version, I see a lot of differences. And I see that I have many different implications and different ways of translating that passage or that piece of literature. But just reading the translation, we can't see that. We just have only one way of thinking.* Apparently there is still controversy over the issue of translated literary texts and their effects on the reader. In this study I can conclude that different readers may have different attitudes, depending on how they perceive the translation.

### V.4.2. A comparison between the views of Italian and Vietnamese students on learning literature in a foreign language

The second issue of the study is the difficulties that both groups of students had when learning literature in a foreign language. Some of the obstacles were listed by both groups of students, while some only in one group. The following bar chart clarifies all the obstacles mentioned by the students. Some of the students had more than one obstacle.
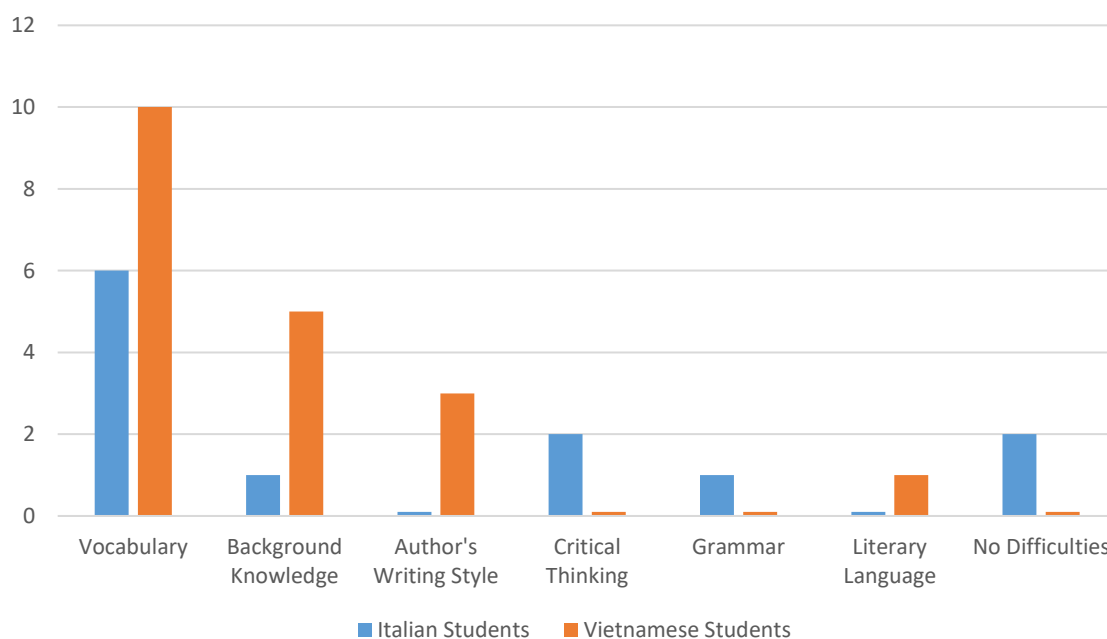


*Figure 6* The Italian students' and the Vietnamese students' obstacles in learning literature in a foreign language.

The most dominant difficulty among the students were the Vocabulary, with 6 Italian students and 10 Vietnamese students, which is 100% percent of the group, admitted having had this problem. Besides encountering new words, the students also had several other problems concerning the vocabulary.

*Table 1* Specific vocabulary obstacles of the Italian and Vietnamese students when learning literature in a foreign language.

| Problems with Vocabulary | Italian Students | Vietnamese Students |
| --- | --- | --- |
| New words | 4 | 9 |
| Academic words | 1 | 0 |
| Misunderstanding of words similar to native language | 1 | 0 |
| Polysemy | 0 | 1 |

Among those who encountered problems with the vocabulary, a majority of the students found it challenging to read and study a literary text when they see new words. The number of Vietnamese students who experienced this problem almost doubled their Italian peers, claiming that they often found words they had never met before. In such situations, they had to stop and look for the meaning of the word in the dictionary, or use a search engine on the Internet to understand the word properly like students I1 and I8 did. The new words slowed down their pace and might have been a discouragement to their progress, as put by student V1.

Academic words were also named as an obstacle by student I6, who sometimes noticed words that she might have understood, but they were *complicated, complex words* (being used) *to not repeat the same words that people use in everyday life*. Another problem with the vocabulary of the text were stated by student I5, who, unlike others, misunderstood the meaning of several words similar to Italian language. The reason why the Vietnamese students did not experience this is that they do not have to cope with the Latin roots from which words in different neo-Latin and Germanic languages derive. Words in English, Italian, French, or Spanish, may look related but they are not necessarily the translation of one another. Although the Vietnamese language uses alphabetical order, its words are completely distinct and the students would not experience the same misunderstanding. However, one Vietnamese students struggled with the polysemy of the words, saying that *some words have different meanings which we do not really know about*. She could not

decide which meaning of a word she should have perceived, especially when this decision affected the meaning of the whole text.

Background knowledge was the second popular obstacle among the Vietnamese students, but it caused problems to only one Italian student. Student I9 stated that the differences between Italy and other countries were shown through their way of thinking, *how to talk, also the way in which they see the world, so it is a different point of view*. Another type of background knowledge that affected student V3 was the authors' tendency to use Latinate words in some of their works. Student V3 referred to the hint about the secret identity of one werewolf given by author J. K. Rowling in the *Harry Potter* series via the name of the character, Lupin, which resembles the word 'lupus', meaning 'wolf' in Latin. Without specific linguistic knowledge, she could not realise the author's intention. This was one among some similar experiences of hers while reading foreign literature. Students V7, V8, and V10 also mentioned a lack of background knowledge on culture as a hindrance in their learning.

While the group of Vietnamese students mentioned Author's Writing Style and Literary Language as their last two obstacles, the Italian students found problems with Critical Thinking and Grammar. Regarding the style of writing of foreign authors, their choices of sentence and paragraph structures would at times require a longer time to get used to, as suggested by students V2, V3 and V5. The narrative style affected their process of learning the literary text. Similarly, the Literary Language required student V9 to adjust while reading *because the style of literature is not like the style of scientific article.* This student also expressed her concern that grammatical rules might be looser in literary texts in order to serve the author's intention. Nonetheless, these difficulties were not listed by the Italian students.

Students I1 and I8 mentioned Critical Thinking as one of their problems and specified that *some meaning behind some sentences* demanded that they should be *open-minded to understand the meaning* and *interpret it in different ways*. Without the ability to read between the lines, they could only reach the surface of the text, while many of them contain deeper layers of meaning. Critical thinking is essential to the comprehension of the meaning in such situations. Probably the Vietnamese students did not mention this problem because the lack of vocabulary was too prevalent to allow them to see the deeper layers. As discussed in previous chapters, learning literature in Vietnam has mostly entailed parroting teachers' arguments because it was an easy way to get good results. The habit made the Vietnamese students rely on an available analysis, disregard their individual critical thinking and blind them to the fact that they would have the ability to read between the lines.

There were only two Italian students who declared they had no obstacles in learning foreign literature. Both of them claimed that the level of the foreign language use would decide whether one had difficulties or not. For them, their levels were efficient enough to learn literature with ease.

**V.5. Fantasy literature in ESL learning**

**V.5.1. The students' attention to language when reading 20th-century British fantasy literature**

The result came out as follows:

*Table 2* The students' attention to language when reading 20th-century British fantasy literature.

| Group of student | Yes | It depends | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | on the purpose of reading | on the occasion of reading | on the type of fantasy |
| Italian | 8 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Vietnamese | 6 | 1 | 2 | 1 |

No student in either group could disregard the language when they read a fantasy text. Most of them pointed to vocabulary and grammar as notable elements of language in the text and others also mentioned their awareness of figures of speech. Student I3 unconsciously learnt new words in the process of reading, explaining that *what you are reading can stick to your mind, so it is very easy to remember*. Students I4 and I5 simply paid attention because they enjoyed the beauty of language through words. Student I5 expressed his opinion that *modern fantasy use sometimes a very retro way to describe* (the story). Student I6, on the other hand, picked up puns and riddles in fantasy literature. Students V1 and V7 said that the language in fantasy literature triggered their imagination since the words and sentence structures *are not the ones that we use on a daily basis but they are something* (from) *fantasy and fairy tales, magical thing that we don't see in the real life*. The rest of those who answered yes paid attention to the language because they could not fully comprehend the text without understanding the words, the structures, and the figures of speech.

The other students in the survey felt that their attention to the language in fantasy literature was connected to other factors. There was one in each group of Italian and

Vietnamese students who relied on the purpose of reading to decide whether they should consider the language or not. When reading for leisure, they often paid less attention to the language and more to the plot. Student I2 claimed to be a fantasy reader and that for the aim of recreation she would only read the fantasy genre. She *concentrates on the whole*, was often *taken away by the wonder of fantasy* and did not think about anything but the storyline. A similar explanation was given by student V9, who stated that *if you read that literature in order to analyse* (it)*, you will have to pay attention to the details and you will become meticulous*, aspects which were not necessary when reading for recreation.

Regarding the occasion of reading the literary text, one Italian and two Vietnamese students had different approaches each time they read. They would focus on the plot during the first reading, while from the second time onwards they would notice the language. The words and figures of speech that were not understood during the first time of reading could be guessed based on the context, or ignored if they did not influence the storyline. Regarding this way of reading, student V6 mentioned how she could understand metaphors in the literary text: *I believe that the author will give us some hints when they use a word or a metaphor for example. And when I read the first time I may not notice it. And then I know the ending of the story, and I remember about the words that he used. Then I will know that he used it for his own purpose. But for the 1st time when I read that paragraph or that part of the story, I think it's hard to notice.*

The last account was proposed by student V2, who thought of different types of fantasy literature when reading. When she read children fantasy, she found it easier to follow the story without having had to mind the language. On the other hand, adult fantasy required more attention to the language because it was more complex and might have been more challenging to understand.

**V.5.2. A comparison between the perspective of Italian and Vietnamese students on the role of 20th-century British fantasy literature in developing English language competence**

The participants in the study were also asked to reflect upon their language competence after the courses of British fantasy literature of the 20th century. Most of them agreed that it could help them improve their use of English language as can be presented in the table that follows.

*Table 3* The students' perspective on their English language competence after the courses.

| Group of student | Had no improvement | Had some improvement | Had improvement |
|---|---|---|---|
| Italian | 2 | 2 | 6 |
| Vietnamese | 1 | 0 | 9 |

As can be seen from Table 3, only two Italian and one Vietnamese students found insignificant changes in terms of language competence after the courses. Student I7's explanation was the most thorough among all: *I think every kind of text or book have their kinds of words. When we study a subject, we learn about that subject. Every subject have their precisely meaning. I think they are important but they are different from each other*. The point that she was trying to make concerned the application of the fantasy language in other situations. She believed that what she learnt from the fantasy course could not be used out of the context because each genre had its own specific language. Student V1, on the other hand, stated that she had not noticed any improvement in language since she studied fantasy literature. For the Vietnamese students, their exposure to fantasy literature was much more limited than their Italian counterparts. While the Italian fantasy course consisted of thirty-two hours of face-to-face lessons, the Vietnamese students only had nine hours studying the same genre (see further in Chapter IV).

Two Italians said that fantasy literature only helped them to some extent. The improvement in reading and writing skill is not sufficient enough for student I2, because *pronunciation and general knowing of the language are just linked to the whole literature*. By 'the whole literature', she might have meant all genres instead of the fantasy genre only. Also, this student preferred to practice the linguistic skills through songs or movies and books. In a different situation, student I6 assumed that the influence of the genre was not as desirable as expected: *I don't think it really help me like it helps others*. She also explained that the growth in linguistic skill did not happen *on a daily basis*. She could rarely use what she learnt from the fantasy course in other contexts, so she thought the result was not striking.

A majority of participants sensed some progress in their linguistic skill after the courses, and more Vietnamese than Italian students had this opinion. Noticeably, most of the students mentioned an enhancement of their vocabulary. For instance, student I4 learnt from the fantasy genre *a lot of words* (which) *are not common words of every day* like medieval weapons. This served her hobby because she read fantasy not only for the course but also for personal interest. Somewhat similar, student V3 acquired a better vocabulary of fantasy, which includes *the definition of the elf, the terms of the fantasy world*. Particularly, student

V3 picked up the concept of low and high fantasy, which she had not known before the course.

Unlike those students, student I8 learnt *other ways to say the same thing or new words*. From the texts, she found synonyms of several familiar words she had already known and was able to use them for variety. The same experience was described by student V10, who found that 'a quest' could roughly be understood as 'a duty', and 'realm' was 'world'. She often used the word 'world' because it is a popular word, but with the synonym, she could make the essay more diverse. When student V5 observed new words in the text, she looked them up in the dictionary to be sure of their uses and be able to apply them in different contexts. Student V6 would do the same but still prefers other genres which use *the context of the real life, real situations*. The idea of estrangement in the fantasy genre perhaps affected this student more strongly, made her feel a disconnection from reality, and discouraged her to use it in 'real situation', as she put.

Regarding this issue, the participants were also asked to give their accounts of the use of the fantasy vocabulary in other situations. Most of them could not be decisive on the matter of using the fantasy language in various contexts.

*Table 4* The students' frequency in using the fantasy language in other situations.

| Group of students | No | Not always | Yes |
|---|---|---|---|
| Italian | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| Vietnamese | 2 | 7 | 1 |

The result shows that in general, there were more students who answered 'No' and 'Not always' than those who answered 'Yes'. The ones who could not apply what they learnt from the fantasy courses tended to think that the fantasy genre had a certain range of vocabulary which could not fit within any other contexts. According to student I6, these words are often inventions of the authors, *like enchantment, or the names of some lands*. In language classes, for instance, they focused on tenses and the grammar, but in a literature class, the aim was to understand how one event was delivered as the story. This student also explained that the authors obviously wrote the story with correct grammar, but they would not analyse grammar in the literature classroom. The fantasy vocabulary thus became irrelevant in such context.

With the same opinion, student V1 stated that she learnt many new words from *The Hobbit* only to understand and recognise them the next time she would see it in another text. However, she would not deliberately use those words. Another similar opinion came from

student V8, who affirmed that the vocabulary were *imagination so sometimes the language is not familiar with the normal English that we use nowadays*. Again, she mentioned *The Hobbit* and the unique creatures like elves or goblins. Apparently she could not have thought of other circumstances to use them. Notwithstanding, though student I10's explanation of the response was that the fantasy language might have been used in discussion with other students or readers, personally he would not use the words learnt from the courses. All these students agreed on the fact that the fantasy language remained in the fantasy courses.

The second group of students, which consisted of more Italian than Vietnamese participants, was positive about the use of fantasy language outside the courses. Their opinions showed various situations in which the fantasy language could be used, and most of which were not for educational purposes. Student I3 believed that the fantasy language were *eccentric* and could be a strong asset in creative writing. One can indeed think of that language when a situation requires imagination, especially when one thinks about writing a fantasy story or even a review or analysis of such a genre.

Another use of the fantasy language was listed by student I5, who more than often used the language in role-play games or in the post-game discussions. Apparently the players tend to go over what they have played and there are in fact many forums on the storyline or the content of games. A fantasy game discussion can be an ideal forum to use the fantasy language from the course. This student also mentioned the chance to tell someone about the town's history and legends: *I will find a lot of fantasy words, like dragons for example. We have dragons in our culture, and* (it) *may be the famous legend of my town*. Myths and legends are significant and unique parts of a town or a city, and in those tales we often see fantastic creatures and events. The fantasy language may serve as a great source of vocabulary and knowledge for this situation.

Nonetheless the language of fantasy still proved to be helpful in less particular contexts, as reported by student I9, who thought it was a symbolic language. Specifically, this student *explain the word better and [...] differently* after learning the course: *The author is talking of a completely different world but at the same time, of our world [...] In general, there's a mix of words, fantastic words and also words of everyday you can say*. In further explanation, he gave an example of the description of Bilbo Baggins' life in *The Hobbit*. Even though he is a different kind of creature from humans and lives in a strange world, he carries on his life the way we all do. As a result, the fantasy language in this case could not be categorised into groups of fantasy and of 'un-fantasy' language. However, student I9 still said at the end that there were fantastic words that were not common in life, which were perhaps the name of creatures or lands, as in the opinions of students I6 or V8 above. Student

V2 shared the same concern about the issue, saying that *there is no specific words for fantasy works only*. What they believed is *the new aspects of a word* which could be used in various contexts. Student V2's example was the word 'threshold', the one word that she knew but did not expect that *it can be used in fantasy literature like a door to switch between two worlds in fantasy literature*. These examples well demonstrated the argument of students I9 and V2 in the establishment of the fact that there was merely a thin line between the fantasy language and the rest.

For the majority of the participants, this thin line did not help them make up their minds on the use of the language they learnt from the courses. The table below demonstrates the reasons they provided for their answers:

*Table 5* The students' explanation of their indecisive attitude towards the use of fantasy language.

| Reasons for the indecisive attitude | Italian students | Vietnamese students |
|---|---|---|
| Fantasy language's use depends on the context | 4 | 5 |
| Fantasy language can be used as figures of speech | 0 | 4 |
| Fantasy language' s use depends on the level of the user | 2 | 0 |

The context of use determined most of the students' decisions towards the language in the fantasy literature. There was a total of 9 students from both groups with the same viewpoint that the fantasy language could not be used in all circumstances. They acknowledged its role in more specific situations, especially in more academic contexts, but would not be sure in which other context they could use it. Student I1 used the language in a discussion of a book with someone and found it helpful to the language competence because she could use specific terms and words that were not used every day. Student I2 could not use words describing *mythological creatures [...] in ordinary work*, nor the *poetical words [...] that describe the wonderful fantasy world*. Only as a passionate reader should one learn that kind of vocabulary, as explained by the student.

Student I5 also found the fantasy language *contained* and is *a full measure for a better understanding of the characters, of the way they live*. Outside the classroom or the reading context, he tended to not use it. As an example of the issue, student I8 talked about the word 'threshold' in the fantasy genre, which is rather popular in the genre and was also mentioned by another student earlier. After several times hearing the word in the lecture on

the fantasy genre, student I8 started to notice it every time they came across the word. Nevertheless the student decided to selectively use it: *Now I know that word and I wouldn't say that in daily life, but maybe in a situation or something more formal I would say it.*

The Vietnamese students gave the same account of the issue. Student V4's example involved the use of the words 'uncanny', 'quest', and 'threshold' in the fantasy course only. In the case of student V5, they were 'quest', 'realm', 'threshold', '(un)canny'. Students V7 and V9 both pointed out that names of creatures in the fantasy genre were difficult to use outside the courses. The students were interviewed separately but they had some similar ideas in their responses. This might suggest that the courses of fantasy literature left a certain influence on the students which formed a pattern in their point of view. On the other hand, student V6 attained the word 'drawing-room fashion' from the description of the troll's language in *The Hobbit*. Learning that it meant the troll's language was not as refined as the one used at a reception in a drawing room, she put this into use in other situations. The same experience was found in student V10's answer when she used 'quest' and 'realm' in an IELTS writing essay.

The second factor that resulted in their choices was the use of the fantasy language as figures of speech, mostly being metaphors. Noticeably, this answer was provided by 4 Vietnamese students and none Italian students. At the same time of the English Literature course, the Vietnamese students also took a course on English Lexicology and learnt about figures of speech. This course and the emphasis of the English Literature teacher on the same topic while analysing Jane Eyre created a habit of looking for figures of speech or, as the students called them, stylistic devices in other literary texts. During my lessons on *The Hobbit*, they also discussed the devices used in the chapters. Therefore, student V7 suggested using the fantasy language *to emphasize something or when we want to make our passage or our writing more special, more meaningful.* Through this, they could deliver the same idea but more figuratively, or *denote a deep meaning of something.*

Both students V7 and V9 said they could describe a traitor using the words 'shapeshifting' and 'metamorphosis'. Although these words describe the changes in appearance of a person, they proposed using it for the personality as well. With the same point of view, student V3 recommended the word 'elfen', an adjective meaning belonging or related to the elf: *in the real life you can use it to describe a very little person.* Likewise, student V6 noticed that 'monster' or 'fairy' could be used to describe human personality, namely a bad or a good nature.

The last reason was contributed by 2 Italian students. They stated that the use of the fantasy language must correspond with the language competence of users. Student I2

expressed her concern that a person with an elementary level could not use the fantasy language: *You need to have at least a middle level of the language in order to understand the literature*. Student I8 also said that there were students in the course who had just started to learn English not so long ago, so using the language in other context could be challenging for them.

**V.5.3. A comparison between the perspective of Italian and Vietnamese students on the role of 20ᵗʰ-century British fantasy literature in developing critical thinking**

As the aim of this study is to analyse the perspective of the students in the British fantasy literature of the 20ᵗʰ-century courses, they were asked to think of their enhancement in critical thinking. In each group of students, there was one who did not feel any improvement after the courses.

*Table 6* The students' perspective on their critical thinking after the courses.

| Group of students | Had no improvement | Had some improvement |
|---|---|---|
| Italian | 1 | 9 |
| Vietnamese | 1 | 9 |

Specifically, student I1 said *three years of university aren't enough to have the critical sense.* The experience from the fantasy literature course could not help this student feel confident in other situations that required her critical thinking. Besides mentioning the limited time of exposure to fantasy literature, student V10 pointed to the fact that critical thinking depended on much more than just the fantasy genre, and that when she read *The Hobbit*, they *can still understand it through the words the author use instead of the way the author describe*. Probably student V10 was trying to emphasise her own habit of following the storyline of a literary work without asking questions or reading between the lines. In so doing, she did not form that habit when reading other texts or when learning in general. However, these two students are only a minority compared to the number of students who said they had improvement after the lessons. The influence of fantasy literature, thus, is still positive.

The rest of the students revealed that fantasy literature helped them in various ways, as illustrated in the chart below. Each student might have had more than one improvement gained from the courses.
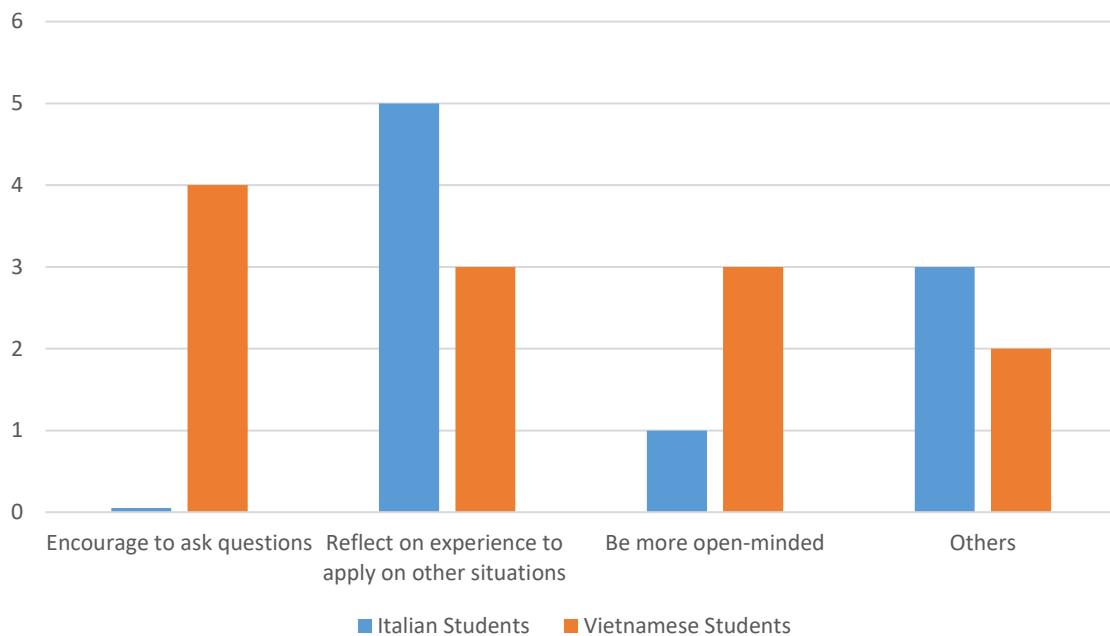
*Figure 7* The students' achievement related to their critical thinking after studying the

  fantasy literature courses.

The most popular development among the Vietnamese students was the tendency to unconsciously ask questions about what they were reading, or in a more general sense, doing. Student V1 occasionally wondered *whether it's just simply literal or do they (the text) have any further meaning*, and would find the answer to those questions in later chapters of the story. Student V2 claimed that after the course she learnt to read the synopsis of a book and form *some questions about the ending of that story, or how the story will develop, or how the character portrayed*. This habit was formed after she had experienced the same procedure, facilitated by the teacher during the course, and she adopted the method when reading to *build the whole picture of that story*. Similarly, student V5 asked *many How and Why questions* to get the underlying implications, instead of just thinking about fact-related questions. Lastly, student V7 would ask questions about the author's purpose of writing the text and seek the answers through comparing and contrasting the details of the story with real life, not just *reading and absorb the information but questioning that piece of literature*, as she explained. On the other hand, no Italian student mentioned this approach in the interview.

Another positive change in the two groups after the courses was their practice of reflecting on their experiences in the course and use them in other situations, with 6 Italian and 3 Vietnamese students who mentioned this pattern. Students I2, I9, V4 and V7 all claimed to understand more about life after they read fantasy literature. Student I2 was able

to draw a reflection on life from the fantasy texts: *the situation, the political, social situation we're living now is also in some way the political and social situation the characters are living, and I think that the last year course really helped me to develop critical skills and to understand this similarity*. Students I9 and V7, likewise, found real life in the fantastic plot, and concluded that *our goals to catch this meaning [...] can help us in our life*.

This reflection also happened in a narrower sense to student I6, I7, I10, V1, and V6. They were able to use the knowledge and skills from the course for other literary texts or in other courses. Student I6 believed that *every kind of literature has main steps that [...] an author follow, and if you know those steps and you read a book, you will find and notice them*. The same opinion was expressed by student I7, who discovered the pattern of *recovery, escape, and this kind of consolation that is the truly happy ending of a fantasy book.* Following this process and adding some imagination, she understood different characters and different texts. Student V1 also tried to find this pattern while reading other texts belonging to the same genre. The belief of students I6 and V1 that one can apply the knowledge acquired from reading one text to other texts belonging to the same genre is applicable to fantasy if we consider the journey of the hero mentioned in Chapter I. The core of every fantasy story is a protagonist having to complete several tasks to achieve the quest s/he is assigned at the beginning of the story, so if readers know this motif, they can roughly expect the same happenings in other stories of the same genre.

Unlike students I6 and V1, student V6 supposed they could use the experience from the fantasy course on other genres of literature: *I think even though each author has a different way of writing, there will be something in similar. If I can find this similarity then I can notice the hint or the message of the author the first time without needing to look back or reading it the second time*. The fantasy course opened an opportunity for student V6 to try the same reading method with other genres. At the time of speaking, she would not predict the outcomes of this application to other literary texts, but she was confident that it would work as effectively as with fantasy if she could apply the method conscientiously while reading. Lastly, student I10 reported that he could not only get some ideas when reading but also *relate some texts to the film* to reflect on the two versions and try to explain the differences between them. Even though this habit may seem out of context because it does not involve studying, it indeed is a way to enhance critical thinking.


**V.6. The performances of HANU students without instructions from the teacher**
The last set of data I collected from the HANU participants was for the confirmation of their achievements from the lessons of British fantasy literature. To show their possible progress,

the Vietnamese students were assigned two chapters of Roald Dahl's *The Witches*. In a sense, this fantasy story was not complicated both in its plot and its vocabulary. Although both were written for children, *The Hobbit*'s setting was in an imaginary world with strange creatures and many races. On the other hand, *The Witches* is set in a modern Norway and the UK, probably in the 20th century. This setting might have provided a sense of familiarity to the students and also limited the disconnection caused by formal archaic words they claimed to have encountered in *The Hobbit*. However, Roald Dahl also created words of his own and the students might have been puzzled by such words.

Because of the time limitation, it was not possible to let the students read the whole book at one sitting. What I did instead was to introduce them to the plot of the story, which involved a young boy's adventure to escape from the witches and destroy their headquarter with his grandmother. As mentioned in Chapter IV of this project, the two chapters in *The Witches* I assigned to the students were *A Note about Witches* and *How to Recognise a Witch*. Although both were written in the first person narrator, the former was Dahl's description of witches while the latter was the main character's narration. Dahl proved to be an expert on witches and he was giving readers' some warnings and precautions. On the other hand, the main character in the book was a young boy whose experience on witches was very limited and his grandmother had to teach him to identify a witch. Between those two chapters, there was one more chapter named *My Grandmother*, which explained how the boy ended up living with his grandmother and the type of bedtime stories she would tell him each night. For an effective analysis, after the introduction on *The Witches*, I briefly told the students the summary of that chapter before they started reading the two others.

The first suggested question for the students' analysis focused on Dahl's description of the witches. The answers of all ten students pointed to the ordinary appearance which contrasted with their wicked personalities. Three students also mentioned the fact that Dahl's witches were different from the idea of witches that one may have: *Unlike those witches we often see in fairy tales, witches in Dahl's story is exactly like ordinary people* (student V7); *The witches aren't portrayed in a normal way that we usually think about a witch* (student V8); *The witches are portrayed differently than former images of witches* (student V9). Although this contrast was the first thing that Dahl mentioned in the book, it was an important piece of information as it foretold the estrangement that readers would feel.

Later in *How to Recognise a Witch*, a detailed portrayal was provided and all the students used this description to support their arguments, that the witches were demons in the shape of humans. While most of the students focused on specific features of appearance,

student V1 expressed the idea more generally and addressed the personalities and point of view:

*In this story, the witches are portrayed in both conventionally and imaginatively way. As usual, all the witches happen to be women and none of them has saintly heart. More specifically, they hold a hatred feeling towards children and they find children disgusting.*

In the classroom, student V1 often responded to the questions. Some of the answers were profound, but at times not grammatically correct. Student V2 had the same tendency, which can be observed in her answer:

*Through fugitive impression, people can mistake them for ordinary human, however, they are not. Once having an insight, they can be determined by some strange features like blue spit, etc. In fact, they need to hide them at their best in order to fall in line with human's society and to seek for their prey easily.*

After having noticed the witches' apparent conformity to the society, student V2 sought for the reason. This progress was an example of her effort to think critically instead of having seen the story only on the surface level. The story also provoked student V6's completely different thought about the portrayal of the witches. She stated that *it was imaginable since the description* (of the witches) *was not really far from normal witches that I've known.* Having taken it further than the typical answers, she claimed to have been familiar with this description of witches. Probably student V6 was using a metaphor on people with a honey tongue and a heart of gall, or even witches characters that she might have seen on films or read about in books. This point of view was further developed in the second question, which led to not only student V6's but also some others' similar explanation of the figurative meaning behind the witches' portrayal.

The second question I posed to the students was not as simple as the first. Instead of sorting out details in the text, they needed to explain how the special qualities of witches functioned symbolically. To do so, they had to connect ideas and think about the message Dahl was delivering to readers. Among the ten students, only students V5, V6, and V8 did not expand on the image of witches. Their analysis was limited to an interpretation as to why witches were bad and dangerous.

Student V3's answer was an improvement of the two previously mentioned opinions since she made an effort to compare the image of Dahl's witches with some other witch

characters in literature. Specifically, she related the witches' bald head with that of *Voldermort* in Harry Potter, stating that a bald head might have been *the thing in common of the bad witches and wizards in wizarding world*. Furthermore, the witches' flexible eye colours reminded student V3 of a monster with the same ability in one fantasy film whose name she did not remember, having made this feature another quality of evil characters. Although this is a rather haste conclusion as the student only pointed out one similar case for each trait, this analysis revealed a potential of the student, which with more practice and references, could improve significantly.

Having thought of the appearance of the witches, students V1, V2, and V4 claimed that the image of the witches indirectly referred to the corrupted upper class in the society. Students V1 and V4 respectively mentioned the items that witches owned, which were likely to be upper class women's possession:

> *In the old society, only first-class women can afford luxurious gloves and first-class wigs. The author might imply that the high-class in the society are not kind and beneath the fancy appearance underlines a wicked cruelty.*

> *Even though the witches has magic in their fingers and devilry in their blood, wearing those things seem to hide their magic and make them more dangerous because it make us difficult to distinguish a witch from a real women in high class. In my opinion, Roald Dahl did it on purpose because wearing gloves or wigs is only the women in high class. It means that we can't assess one person only by their appearance, especially the high-class people in this period.*

Not having stopped there, student V2 suggested a theory about Roald Dahl's concern about the society:

> *It was hard to determine who is either good or bad by their appearance and manners. The society, through Roald Dahl's eyes, were filled with both 'gold' and 'trash'. 'Gold' can be good people and 'trash' refers to bad ones. Besides, the author wanted to raise his voice in accusing parts of higher class in society. Through the image of the witches, it can be said that some of the high-class act like respectable people, meanwhile, the inside is full with bad thoughts.*

According to this student, *The Witches* has become a tool for Roald Dahl's expression of his anxiety of a society in which people's personalities, especially those of the

upper class', were distorted. This theory was also proposed by students V9. Using the vocabulary learnt from the three lessons, she addressed the witches' disguise as a metamorphosis, which did make sense in the context of the story. Though many of them claimed there would be few contexts in which such a word would be used, the fact that one of them could actually use it suggested otherwise.

In the answer of students V7 and V10, the issue of identity was taken into account. Student V7's analysis contained two main arguments, which were the impossibility for the evil to cover their true colour, and the negative part in every person and objects. Firstly, student V7 raised the idea that the witches' effort *to conceal their 'evil side' can imply that the evil is always scared of being revealed or being brought into light*. She then related it to people's bad deeds in life and their efforts to hide them but in vain. Sooner or later, as the student suggested, the wrong doings covered with *physical materials* would uncover as they still existed. Secondly, starting from that disguise, student V7 claimed that negativity could be found at every corner. Situations that seemed normal could contain terrible secrets. The conclusion that she drew was not to judge a book by its cover.

On the other hand, student V10's analysis focused on the identity of people in general when having read about the disguise of the witches. She thought of their compulsory task to hide what they were not satisfied with, most commonly body features in order to *become an ordinary person, to have a peaceful life, and help them not to feel isolated from the society*. Student V10 quoted the question of the protagonist about the witches' comfort in hiding behind the disguise to address the problem that many have experienced: *We can easily see that people with the effort to have ordinary appearance like other people put up with many difficulties and uncomfortable things; therefore, instead of looking them with curious eyes, we should understand and share with them*. Not only did student V10 reflect on the witches' disguise but she also associated it with a problem that has existed in every age. While the other students associated the witches' devilry with the corruption of the upper class, V10 evoked the universal human desire to look normal.

The final question required that the students should look at the story in terms of its possible controversy. After having learnt about some common features of the fantasy genre, the students knew that there must be a threshold between the real world and the fantasy world. What some of them might have not realised, however, was the fact that the threshold was not necessarily a physical door. In many novels, a real door connecting the two realms could be found. Such examples of this case are the wardrobe in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, the wall leading to Platform 9 ¾ in *Harry Potter*, the small door in the sad and boring living room in *Coraline*, and so on. In some other novels,

the switch between the two worlds is invisible. For instance, the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* stepped into the fantasy world as she encountered two ghosts in the mansion; the narrator of *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013) written by Neil Gaiman simply found a dead man in his car and the world became abnormal; Richard Mayhew in *Neverwhere* (1996), another novel of Gaiman's, rescued a girl from London Above and woke up the next day having already belonged to that fantasy world. In *The Hobbit* itself, Bilbo Baggins was already in a fantasy world but as he entered the journey with the dwarves, there was a switch between his ordinary and an estranged world. A physical door leading from one realm to the other was apparently not seen. *The Witches* has the same pattern as the above mentioned novels, in which the boy suddenly knew that the witches really existed when his grandmother told him her stories. This lack of a physical door led to students V1, V2, and V4 opinion that it was unconventional and thus, controversial. There was this concern put forward by the three students that the primary and the secondary world did not seem separated and the fact that normal people cohabited with strange creatures was indeed worrisome.

Another disturbing detail in the story was pointed out by students V3, V4, and V5, which was related to the new portrayal of witches. They were used to the representation of witches in fairy tales and popular culture, where they wear black robes and hats, fly on broomsticks, and are occasionally seen with black cats or bubbling cauldrons. This was how student V3 visualised *real witches* while *Roald Dahl constructed a comprehensively distinct witches' image*. However, the three students did not comment further on this portrayal, nor explained why they thought it to be controversial. The explanation came from students V6, V7, V8, and V9, who had the same opinion with the three previous but developed their arguments more effectively. Student V6 assumed that *The Witches* was not really suitable for children as it was too scary, especially because they wanted to eliminate as many children as possible. The second point that student V6 made concerned the insecurity one child may have, having known that the witches lived among us and could even be a teacher:

> *The more they (children) love the story, the more they trust every detail in it. Also, every fantasy stories would still relate to the real world and children might not be able to tell apart the imaginary world with the real one.*

On another level, students V7, V8, and V9 expressed their anxiety on the possible threats posed to women's identity, as transpires from the following description of the witches in the book:

A witch is always a woman.

I do not wish to speak badly about women. Most women are lovely. But the fact remains that all witches are women. There is no such thing as a male witch.

On the other hand, a ghoul is always a male. So indeed is a barghest. Both are dangerous. But neither of them is half as dangerous as a REAL WITCH. (p. 9)

As the story stated that all witches were women, young readers could have a bad impression on women. A woman, especially a mother, as student V8 pointed out, loved children. Nonetheless, the student thought that *The Witches* might make the children afraid of their own mothers.

The issue of misogyny in such description deserves attention. In popular culture, the male gender is often associated with a wizard or a warlock instead of a witch. Although Dahl wrote in *The Witches* that a male witch did not exist, there have been several theories on male witches in Europe. Witches are believed to be those subservient to the Devil. In their book *Male Witches in Early Modern Europe*, Lara Apps and Andrew Gow claimed that the male witch was as emotionally and psychologically weak as the female, which made them vulnerable before the Devil (2003). From their survey involving a number of demonologists, they also established that references related to both male and female witches were mentioned but with a dominant number of the female. These references were found to be more linguistic than misogynist and supported the proposal by Stuart Clark (1999), according to whom this stereotypical portrayal was actually based on women's vulnerability when facing evil seduction without any discriminatory intention (Levack, 2013). In any cases, the belief that men are not supposed to be witches and/or that female witches are evil have been supported in many well-known fantasy novels. Although the antagonist in *Harry Potter* is a dark wizard but not a witch, J. K. Rowling differentiated the two genders by having used the term 'wizard' to address the man and 'witch' the woman. Gandalf in *The Hobbit* is a good-natured wizard, while Jadis the White Witch in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* is evil and so are the Wicked Witch of the West and the Wicked Witch of the East in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Dahl's claim in *The Witches* is perhaps based on such a deep-rooted belief, yet it made some participants feel uncomfortable.

Students V7, V8, and V9 posed the question of the gender and cruel personality of the witches. For student V7, Dahl's claim that the female witches were even more dangerous than the ghoul and the barghest, who were both male, was *harmful in many ways*. She explained that both men and women were potentially wicked and dangerous, so Dahl's detail conveyed a wrong impression on women which could affect children. Student V9 expressed

her concern that *The Witches* had the problem of misogyny, not only because the female witches were described as dangerous but also because of the disguise they wore: *the fact that the witches always attempt to look like nice ladies is a metaphor which implies that women are always in need to have the meretricious appearances to cover the inner selves*. This suggestion went further than the other two, which looked at the description only with regards to the aspect of female witches' devilry. It touched upon the issue of women's lack of confidence in their appearances and perhaps their vain effort to cover such problems. Regardless of the plausibility of their opinions, these interpretations were much fruitful than the students' performances in the first lesson of the fantasy genre. The students allowed themselves to venture out of their comfort zone and propose more opinions, some of which were rather encouraging and reasonable.

## V.7. Fantasy literature and language at a crossroads

To answer the big question of this study, I gathered the data from many sources. The use of 20th-century British fantasy literature in an English language classroom was proven to be complex because more than mere interest for the genre needed to be considered. The result of this study reflected the students' perception after their experience with the fantasy lessons, but its efficiency at HANU will have to be further tested. However, the responses show promising results.

The changes among the HANU students throughout the course were observed by me as well as noticed by the students. The interviews and their diaries revealed the students' opinions on their own performances, progress, and limitations in the three lessons of the fantasy genre and the assignments were evidence for the outcome of the course. As a whole, the students' opinions were positive. The interviews with the student participants from both countries provided an insight into their viewpoints on fantasy literature and their relation to second language learning.

Firstly, with regards to the students' reasons for learning a foreign language, the Italian and Vietnamese participants had more than one motivation. Their answers ranged from personal interest to the widening of their knowledge and the possibility to find good jobs in the future. While the Italian students were more inclined to their personal development, the Vietnamese students, although having had the same determination, seemed to lack a strong sense of purpose. Besides popular reasons such as personal interest and higher chances of good jobs, the Vietnamese students also chose the English language as their major because of their lack of interest in any other subject or their family advice. In

other words, some of them decided to study the English language because it was the most plausible subject, not the one they had wanted to study for a long time.

However, in terms of their decision to study foreign literature, the Vietnamese students' sense of purpose grew stronger. It is important to note that the backgrounds of the Italian and Vietnamese students are different. The Italian students can choose a variety of languages and literatures, such as Anglo-American, French, Spanish, German. Most of them choose to study British literature because it provides support for their English language studies and satisfies their personal interest and aspiration to study with experts. Instead, English literature is a compulsory subject for the Vietnamese once they enter the major of English language studies. Even though the study of literature is mandatory, personal interest is also an important motivation. Literary study is chosen to improve critical thinking, support language studies, and gain a better understanding of literature. It could be observed that students who study English literature are not dependent on others' opinions but find their own reasons. The reason behind this stronger sense of purpose might have been their experiences after two years in the university. While the decision to study the English language must have been made as they graduated from high school, Vietnamese students do not learn English literature until their third year. A two-year period was an opportunity for them to absorb many things related to their choice of major and their experience helped them judge what was necessary and interesting.

As regards the interdependence between a foreign language and foreign literature, both groups of students had a tendency to think that literature should be studied with language, but not vice versa. The fact that one can study foreign literature in translation does not make the study of the language unnecessary. Being familiar with original and translated versions of some literary texts, some could see the differences between the two. This difference could affect one's interpretation of the original text if one only read the translated version. On the other hand, only less than half of the students in both groups thought that literature was essential to the study of a foreign language. They seemed to focus on the language itself, not on additional values that could enrich the breadth of knowledge and experience. However, they also explained that it depended on the purpose of learners. The result showed the students' preference for practicality as they carefully considered what would be helpful for their study.

With different backgrounds, there was a gap between the Italian and the Vietnamese students' obstacles while studying literature in a foreign language. When asked, more Vietnamese than Italian students expressed their difficulties related to the vocabulary and background knowledge. The Vietnamese students had a concern about the range of their

vocabulary, especially as related to literature. While this vocabulary gap should be taken into further consideration to make a conclusion, it can be inferred that the background knowledge of Vietnamese students was not as strong as the Italian's. One example of such an issue is the knowledge on the First and Second World War in the context of the wars in Tolkien's books. While the Italian students could relate to the world wars, the Vietnamese students showed their lack of awareness about them.

They also did not have much awareness of the magical creatures in Tolkien's work in particular and in Western culture in general because they could not rely on any previous knowledge. This issue suggested that the Vietnamese students should enhance their background knowledge to increase the effectiveness of their learning. Even though it was not a focus in the curriculum, it was a powerful asset in both literature and language studies. Nonetheless, the Vietnamese students did not mention critical thinking as one of their obstacles while learning literature. This problem was mentioned by only two Italian students with the explanation that one should open their mind to read between the lines and really understand what authors would like readers to capture. In fact, through my observations in both classrooms, the difficulties in thinking critically and understanding the text existed among both groups of students, at least in the first lesson. It was not until they grew more familiar with the genre and received guidance from the teacher or professor that they gained awareness of how to process their thoughts and the texts to achieve a goal.

From the problems that the participants had, another issue to be addressed is fantasy literature in second language teaching and learning and, in this particular research, British fantasy literature of the 20$^{th}$ century. Although a majority of the students in both groups often paid attention to the language when they read British literature, some others answered that different purposes of reading decided their level of attention to the language. Most commonly, they do not pay attention to the language when they read for leisure, as entertainment, the characters and the plot are at the centre of their attention. On the other hand, in a language classroom, both the language and the literature were to be focused on.

Regarding this issue, the students expressed their points of view on the role of British fantasy literature of the 20$^{th}$ century in developing their language competence and critical thinking. In terms of the former category, 90% of the students in each group acknowledged having had improvements after the lessons on the fantasy genre. A majority of Italian students used the experiences from the course for other contexts in life such as political or social situations. A smaller number of them applied knowledge when they participated to other courses or read other books.

Some Vietnamese students had the same experiences, and most of them had gained the courage to ask questions related to the literary text they were studying and had become more open-minded. A comparison between the two groups' responses shows a possibility that the Vietnamese students' development was mainly coming out of their shells and raising their voices. The observations in the Vietnamese classroom also showed that they were shy in the first lesson, while in the second and third they showed more confidence and contributed to the lessons more enthusiastically. This tendency was supported by the students' weekly diaries, in which they described how they slowly stepped out of their shyness and showed their points of view. What is more, they seemed to be aware of higher effectiveness originating from background knowledge on the subject of the lesson. Evidence of the discussion on the two World Wars and the Battle of the Five Armies shows that they had done some background reading before attending the class. Many Italian students point to some development in their habit of reading to gain background knowledge and in their ability to share opinions when asked, but the development deriving from the course of fantasy literature should be assessed considering also the development achieved through other foreign language and literature classes.

As regards the role of 20th-century British fantasy literature in language competence, the students' opinions vary more considerably. While 90% of the Vietnamese students said their language competence improved after the lessons, only 60% of the Italians shared the same opinion. Noticeably, the group of Italian students was divided into three smaller groups: those who said they had improved, those who said they did not, and those who said they had made some progress. The students who said 'No' or 'Partly' provided various explanations, including the fact that the positive influences of the genre remained within the genre, or that they made progress through the study of literature as a whole, not necessarily through the fantasy genre. The largest group, who responded 'Yes' to the question, explained that the improvement was mainly in the vocabulary.

The next question was whether the students could use the fantasy vocabulary outside the fantasy context. In general, more students said 'No' and 'Not always' than those who said 'Yes'. The most popular opinion among the two groups was that they could not always use fantasy vocabulary in other situations. According to them, the words that fantasy authors used were either archaic or typical of the genre and it would be difficult to use them anywhere else. This opinion is to some extent reasonable as people do not often use words like 'dragon', 'goblin', or 'troll' in their conversations. Nonetheless, most words that these students mentioned belonged to the family of creatures' names. It is true that they rarely emerge in daily talks unless they are used as a metaphor, or they are involved in a legend

being told, or the topic of the conversations is the fantasy genre itself. Even so, many other words the students learnt in the lessons were said to be applicable. Terms such as 'threshold', 'quest', or 'realm' are significant examples of words carrying a literal and a symbolic meaning. These words also appeared frequently in the Vietnamese students' weekly diaries as terms that struck them in the lessons. Many were impressed and remember them well.

Besides the context of the conversations, the Italian students also pointed to the level of language skill, which determined whether to use the fantasy language or not. They thought that a language user with a low level of competence would not be able to use the fantasy language. The Vietnamese students did not worry about the speaker's competence, but expressed their viewpoint that the fantasy language can be used in figures of speech, which was one of their focus in the course of English literature. The fantasy vocabulary could make their speeches or texts more effective and diverse.

As explained, although the Italian students only gave their accounts in the individual interviews, the Vietnamese students provided one more source of data for the study when they wrote the analysis of two chapters from *The Witches*. Overall, their performances in the analysis was different from that in *The Hobbit*. Having been more familiar with the genre, they seemed to be more creative and critical. A small number of Vietnamese students stopped at the description of the witches' appearance, but most of them ventured further and associated it with the issue of social class and gender. Having put the story in a social context, the students also searched for the reason behind *The Witches*' acclaimed controversy. They came up with a number of reasons, from the story being too dark and scary for children to the possibility that it suggested that women were more wicked and evil than men. The Vietnamese students were shy at the beginning of the survey, when they just started to work with the fantasy genre. They sat in silence mostly because they were not sure if their opinions were precise. Many also claimed that their weak background knowledge prevented them from effectively approaching the literary text. In the assignment, although the students received no guidance of any sort, they performed adequately.

What is more, all students proposed interesting points of view at least once in their analyses. Some of them were able to explore the story from different angles and dimensions instead of describing or re-telling what Roald Dahl wrote. Not all the student participants reached the desirable level, but even the one who was deemed to be less promising, based on the interview and diaries, could bring forth thought-provoking concepts.

At the beginning of the project, the question on the perspective of English language majored students' on the role of 20th-century British fantasy literature in enhancing their language competence and critical thinking were posed. From the evidence collected from

two groups of English majored students, one from Italy and one from Vietnam, a positive attitude can be observed despite some slight differences in the background of the two groups.

Although most of them thought that literature could not be studied without language and only half thought that language could not be studied without literature, the students could establish a significant link between language and literature throughout the fantasy literature lessons. The positive changes shown after the lessons of fantasy literature were more vivid and trackable in the group of Vietnamese students because it was the first time they studied the genre in the English literature classroom. Their performances improved noticeably and the improvement was registered not only by themselves in the diaries and interviews, but also through the analyses of *The Witches* they wrote after the interviews. Therefore, there is a high possibility that literature in general and British fantasy literature of the 20$^{th}$ century in particular shed new light on the study of language. Given the fact that literature has not been treated as one important, if not to say major, subject of language studies at HANU, the results of this research suggest a promising step that can be taken, that is to increase the teaching of literature in the curriculum. Once the students are exposed to this approach, the improvement in their vocabulary but also their critical thinking and background knowledge will not be infeasible, and thus, a generation of more knowledgeable and well-prepared students can be expected.

## V.8. Limitations to the study

This study was conducted on a small scale, which involved only ten participants from Italy and ten from Vietnam. A larger number of student participants could provide a more general outlook and provide more precise answers to the research questions.

Secondly, the Italian and Vietnamese participants have different educational backgrounds. Having studied in different environments with different lifestyles and cultures, the two groups of students had various reactions to and opinions about the course. Two academic years, involving different beginnings and durations of terms, do not provide enough time to delve into the different backgrounds of the two groups. Such limitation would be overcome by extending the length of the research project.

The limited decisions I could make in both data collection processes at UniFe and HANU also had an impact. The fantasy literature course at UniFe provided a more favourable research context because the students had a stronger background through their first course of literature in their previous academic year. Moreover, the whole course was devoted to British fantasy literature, which means that the Italian students had many weeks to explore the genre and get to know more than one fantasy literary text. However, the period

of time I could spend in Italy somehow limited the range of activity which could serve the purpose of data collection. If the Italian students had produced the weekly diaries and then analysed *The Witches*, I could have used those artefacts in the comparison and contrast between the two groups of participants. However, as I explained in Chapter IV, the focus of this research is on the courses at HANU. The experiences I gained from the period of time spent at UniFe provided me with opportunities to propose innovations and test them during the HANU research period.

At HANU, I had more limited access to the course of English literature. The Vietnamese students only have one course of literature in their four years of university education, and during this one course, they must study the history of literature as well as two or three literary texts. The objective of the course is for the students to be able to analyse different genres of literature. After the students had finished the period of history and the first literary text, there were only three lessons left for me to teach *The Hobbit*. The students and I have made the most of the three lessons and they have provided more than one source of data for the research. The students would certainly benefit from working with the same teacher from the beginning of the course.

**CONCLUSION**

This study aims to evaluate the perspective of Vietnamese and Italian students majoring in English language on the role of 20th-century British fantasy literature in enhancing language competence and critical thinking. Through the data collected from the observation of two courses at UniFe and HANU, the interviews with both groups of students, and the artefacts provided by the Vietnamese students, it can be concluded that the students had a positive attitude towards the engagement of the fantasy genre into their language studies.

Prior to this research, many students at HANU had not been aware of the existence of fantasy as a genre. Their reflections show that they had, for many times, read books, or watched movies about a secondary realm in which a hero/ine is sent to accomplish a quest. The sense of estrangement generated by the plot in those novels or films had created different experiences, as some students were stimulated to find similar stories, while others felt upset and decided not to continue. While the students at UniFe were more familiar with the genre for they had studied it for a while, the fantasy genre had not been previously taught in language studies at HANU.

Having noticed the weaker background knowledge and critical thinking skills among the students at HANU, I decided to conduct an experimental research on the role the fantastic can play in their language studies. Through comparison and contrast between the two groups of students with different socio-cultural and educational backgrounds, a slight gap between the Italian and the Vietnamese students' perspectives was found. The former group knew rather well that the study of the English language and literature could contribute to their personal development, whereas the latter first started studying the subjects because they were advised to do so. Owing to this variation, when they started working with the fantasy genre, the two groups did not encounter the same obstacles. More Vietnamese than Italian students registered a challenge posed by the vocabulary and background knowledge as they read and analysed *The Hobbit*. However, a match in the positive attitude of the two groups towards the role of the fantasy genre shows a promising prospect for the future courses of the same kind.

The data collection methods of the research could reveal a variety of perspectives. Although there were certain restrictions related to the time limitation of the data collection process, the data sets covered all angles adequately. The students' behaviours during the course were recorded in the observations, which showed the atmosphere of the classroom and the level of their engagement in the lessons. The students from both groups were interviewed individually, which allowed them to express their points of view on the fantasy

genre and its role in the course. The Vietnamese students also had chance to reflect on their progress after each of the three lessons because they were asked to write weekly diaries. At the end of the course, they also wrote an analysis of two chapters from another fantasy text, *The Witches* by Roald Dahl. The fact that they performed well while they were reading and trying to make sense of a whole new text without any instruction serves as evidence of their improvement and demonstrates that the fantasy genre has contributed to enhancing their language competence and critical thinking.

However, because of the limitations mentioned in Chapter II, further research is needed to gain more specific understanding of the role that the fantasy genre plays in language studies. This research involved a small number of participants, so the result can be more precise if a larger number is involved in a study of the same topic. Moreover, the limitations also meant that the focus of this research is on the students. To gain a broader knowledge, it is recommended that further research provides a pre-study and a post-study test to assess the participants' competence before and after the study of the fantasy genre.

This research serves as a source of reference to the understanding of the synergy between literature and language studies. Chapter I provides an explanation as to why this topic has not received much attention in Vietnam. By exposing an existing gap, this study encourages scholars to conduct experimental research and gain specific knowledge about foreign language and literature teaching in Vietnamese universities. It is also a suggestion to teachers and university lecturers who want to find new methods to improve the students' critical thinking. They can make use of fantasy, but also of other literary genres to trigger the interest of students and encourage them to think about other subjects which can aid them in language studies. Such an interdisciplinary method will help students develop comprehensively and pursue their careers with a proactive mind.

In a broader sense, this research project has taken into account the application of a course model which has been offered to European students to an Asian context. Although the curriculum at the English Department of HANU has included courses that enhance the students' background knowledge and critical thinking, a certain gap between the Italian and Vietnamese students still exists. Each of the countries has its own preferences and priorities in education. While Italian students learning foreign languages and literatures are predominantly exposed to Western history and culture, naturally Vietnamese students learning foreign languages and literatures dedicate a substantial amount of study to Eastern history and culture. This difference is strongly suggested through the Vietnamese participants' lack of knowledge on World War I. On the other hand, it is fair to predict that Italian students would have the same problem if they were to be examined about Eastern

culture. If the Vietnamese students had a longer period of time to study Western culture before they study the fantasy genre, they might not find as many obstacles in the course. In general, the English literature courses at HANU may include examples of similarities between Vietnamese and English literary texts so that students can find related knowledge, as well as practically apply what they have learnt earlier to the study of English literature. Globalisation in education, thus, should not take local contexts for granted. Local contexts should be considered carefully before planning on the implementation of innovations in any country. Instead of globalisation, 'glocalisation' should be the answer to modern education. The integration of global developments and local contexts will be of much benefit to students embracing the diversities of other cultures, histories and literary traditions while gaining a more mature and interrelated understanding of their own.

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**APPENDIX A**

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1.  Why have you decided to study foreign language and literature at the higher education level?

2.  Do you believe you can study foreign language without studying literature and vice versa?

3.  How difficult is it for you to read and study literature in a foreign language?

4.  When reading and studying fantasy literature, do you pay attention to the language? (E.g: grammar, vocabulary, figures of speech)

5.  Does literature help you develop finer critical thinking skill? If yes, why? If no, why not?

6.  Does fantasy literature help you develop finer linguistic skill? If yes, why? If no, why not?

7.  Do you think the language in fantasy literature is usable in your English language classes? Do you find any words or terms that cannot be found anywhere else but in fantasy literature?

**APPENDIX B**

### GUIDED QUESTIONS FOR WEEKLY JOURNAL

1. Did you learn anything new about the approach to fantasy literature in today's lesson?
2. When facing the teacher's questions on a certain detail in the story, did you develop your ideas/arguments better than you did in your previous lesson?
3. Did you learn any new words on fantasy literature today? What are they? Can they be applied in other situations?
4. What was/were the obstacle(s) you encountered during this lesson?

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### THE WITCHES
### Roald Dahl

**A Note about Witches**

In fairy-tales, witches always wear silly black hats and black cloaks, and they ride on broomsticks.

But this is not a fairy-tale. This is about REAL WITCHES.

The most important thing you should know about REAL WITCHES is this. Listen very carefully. Never forget what is coming next.

REAL WITCHES dress in ordinary clothes and look very much like ordinary women. They live in ordinary houses and they work in ORDINARY JOBS.

That is why they are so hard to catch.

A REAL WITCH hates children with a red-hot sizzling hatred that is more sizzling and red-hot than any hatred you could possibly imagine.

A REAL WITCH spends all her time plotting to get rid of the children in her particular territory. Her passion is to do away with them, one by one. It is all she thinks about the whole day long. Even if she is working as a cashier in a supermarket or typing letters for a businessman or driving round in a fancy car (and she could be doing any of these things), her mind will always be plotting and scheming and churning and burning and whizzing and phizzing with murderous bloodthirsty thoughts.

"Which child," she says to herself all day long, "exactly which child shall I choose for my next squelching?"

A REAL WITCH gets the same pleasure from squelching a child as you get from eating a plateful of strawberries and thick cream.

She reckons on doing away with one child a week. Anything less than that and she becomes grumpy.

One child a week is fifty-two a year.

Squish them and squiggle them and make them disappear.

That is the motto of all witches.

Very carefully a victim is chosen. Then the witch stalks the wretched child like a hunter stalking a little bird in the forest. She treads softly. She moves quietly. She gets closer and closer. Then at last, when everything is ready...phwisst! ... and she swoops! Sparks fly. Flames leap. Oil boils. Rats howl. Skin shrivels. And the child dis-appears.

A witch, you must understand, does not knock children on the head or stick knives into them or shoot at them with a pistol. People who do those things get caught by the police.

A witch never gets caught. Don't forget that she has magic in her fingers and devilry dancing in her blood. She can make stones jump about like frogs and she can make tongues of flame go flickering across the surface of the water.

These magic powers are very frightening.

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Luckily, there are not a great number of REAL WITCHES in the world today. But there are still quite enough to make you nervous. In England, there are probably about one hundred of them altogether. Some countries have more, others have not quite so many. No country in the world is completely free from WITCHES.

A witch is always a woman.

I do not wish to speak badly about women. Most women are lovely. But the fact remains that all witches are women. There is no such thing as a male witch.

On the other hand, a ghoul is always a male. So indeed is a barghest. Both are dangerous. But neither of them is half as dangerous as a REAL WITCH.

As far as children are concerned, a REAL WITCH is easily the most dangerous of all the living creatures on earth. What makes her doubly dangerous is the fact that she doesn't look dangerous. Even when you know all the secrets (you will hear about those in a minute), you can still never be quite sure whether it is a witch you are gazing at or just a kind lady. If a tiger were able to make himself look like a large dog with a waggy tail, you would probably go up and pat him on the head. And that would be the end of you. It is the same with witches. They all look like nice ladies.

Kindly examine the picture opposite. Which lady is the witch? That is a difficult question, but it is one that every child must try to answer.

For all you know, a witch might be living next door to you right now.

Or she might be the woman with the bright eyes who sat opposite you on the bus this morning.

She might be the lady with the dazzling smile who offered you a sweet from a white paper bag in the street before lunch.

She might even--- and this will make you jump--- she might even be your lovely school-teacher who is reading these words to you at this very moment. Look carefully at that teacher. Perhaps she is smiling at the absurdity of such a suggestion. Don't let that put you off. It could be part of her cleverness.

I am not, of course, telling you for one second that your teacher actually is a witch. All I am saying is that she might be one. It is most unlikely. But--- and here comes the big "but"---it is not impossible.

Oh, if only there were a way of telling for sure whether a woman was a witch or not, then we could round them all up and put them in the meat grinder. Unhappily, there is no such way. But there are a number of little signals you can look out for, little quirky habits that all witches have in common, and if you know about these, if you remember them always, then you might just possibly manage to escape from being squelched before you are very much older.


**How to Recognise a Witch**

The next evening, after my grandmother had given me my bath, she took me once again into the living-room for another story.

"Tonight," the old woman said, "I am going to tell you how to recognise a witch when you see one."

"Can you always be sure?" I asked.

"No," she said, "you can't. And that's the trouble. But you can make a pretty good guess."

She was dropping cigar ash all over her lap, and I hoped she wasn't going to catch on fire before she'd told me how to recognise a witch.

"In the first place," she said, "a REAL WITCH is certain always to be wearing gloves when you meet her."

"Surely not always," I said. "What about in the summer when it's hot?"

"Even in the summer," my grandmother said. "She has to. Do you want to know why?"

"Why?" I said.

"Because she doesn't have finger-nails. Instead of fingernails, she has thin curvy claws, like a cat, and she wears the gloves to hide them. Mind you, lots of very respectable women wear gloves, especially in winter, so this doesn't help you very much."

"Mamma used to wear gloves," I said.

"Not in the house," my grandmother said. "Witches wear gloves even in the house. They only take them off when they go to bed."

"How do you know all this, Grandmamma?"

"Don't interrupt," she said. "Just take it all in. The second thing to remember is that a REAL WITCH is always bald."

"Bald?" I said.

"Bald as a boiled egg," my grandmother said.

I was shocked. There was something indecent about a bald woman. "Why are they bald, Grandmamma?"

"Don't ask me why," she snapped. "But you can take it from me that not a single hair grows on a witch's head."

"How horrid!"

"Disgusting," my grandmother said.

"If she's bald, she'll be easy to spot," I said.

"Not at all," my grandmother said. "A REAL WITCH always wears a wig to hide her baldness. She wears a first-class wig. And it is almost impossible to tell a really first-class wig from ordinary hair unless you give it a pull to see if it comes off."

"Then that's what I'll have to do," I said.

"Don't be foolish," my grandmother said. "You can't go round pulling at the hair of every lady you meet, even if she is wearing gloves. Just you try it and see what happens."

"So that doesn't help much either," I said.

"None of these things is any good on its own," my grandmother said. "It's only when you put them all together that they begin to make a little sense. Mind you," my grandmother went on, "these wigs do cause a rather serious problem for witches."

"What problem, Grandmamma?"

"They make the scalp itch most terribly," she said. "You see, when an actress wears a wig, or if you or I were to wear a wig, we would be putting it on over our own hair, but a witch has to put it straight on to her naked scalp. And the underneath of a wig is always very rough and scratchy. It sets up a frightful itch on the bald skin. It causes nasty sores on the head. Wig-rash, the witches call it. And it doesn't half itch."

"What other things must I look for to recognise a witch?" I asked.

"Look for the nose holes," my grandmother said. "Witches have slightly larger nose holes than ordinary people. The rim of each nose-hole is pink and curvy, like the rim of a certain kind of seashell."

"Why do they have such big nose holes?" I asked.

"For smelling with," my grandmother said. "A REAL WITCH has the most amazing powers of smell. She can actually smell out a child who is standing on the other side of the street on a pitch black night."

"She couldn't smell me," I said. "I've just had a bath."

"Oh yes she could," my grandmother said. "The cleaner you happen to be, the more smelly you are to a witch."

"That can't be true," I said.

"An absolutely clean child gives off the most ghastly stench to a witch," my grand-mother said. "The dirtier you are, the less you smell."

"But that doesn't make sense, Grandmamma."

"Oh yes it does," my grandmother said. "It isn't the dirt that the witch is smelling. It is you. The smell that drives a witch mad actually comes right out of your own skin. It comes oozing

out of your skin in waves, and these waves, stink-waves the witches call them, go floating through the air and hit the witch right smack in her nostrils. They send her reeling."

"Now wait a minute, Grandmamma..."

"Don't interrupt," she said. "The point is this. When you haven't washed for a week and your skin is all covered over with dirt, then quite obviously the stink-waves cannot come oozing out nearly so strongly."

"I shall never have a bath again," I said.

"Just don't have one too often," my grand-mother said. "Once a month is quite enough for a sensible child."

It was at moments like these that I loved my grandmother more than ever.

"Grandmamma," I said, "if it's a dark night, how can a witch smell the difference between a child and a grown-up?"

"Because grown-ups don't give out stink--waves," she said. "Only children do that."

"But I don't really give out stink-waves, do I?" I said. "I'm not giving them out at this very moment, am I?"

"Not to me you aren't," my grandmother said. "To me you are smelling like raspberries and cream. But to a witch you would be smelling absolutely disgusting."

"What would I be smelling of?" I asked.

"Dogs' droppings," my grandmother said.

I reeled. I was stunned. "Dogs' droppings!" I cried. "I am not smelling of dogs' droppings! I don't believe it! I won't believe it!"

"What's more," my grandmother said, speaking with a touch of relish, "to a witch you'd be smelling of fresh dogs' droppings."

"That simply is not true!" I cried. "I know I am not smelling of dogs' droppings, stale or fresh!"

"There's no point in arguing about it," my grandmother said. "It's a fact of life."

I was outraged. I simply couldn't bring myself to believe what my grandmother was telling me.

"So if you see a woman holding her nose as she passes you in the street," she went on, "that woman could easily be a witch."

I decided to change the subject. "Tell me what else to look for in a witch," I said.

"The eyes," my grandmother said. "Look care-fully at the eyes, because the eyes of a REAL WITCH are different from yours and mine. Look in the middle of each eye where there is normally a little black dot. If she is a witch, the black dot will keep changing colour, and you will see fire and you will see ice dancing right in the very centre of the coloured dot. It will send shivers running all over your skin."

My grandmother leant back in her chair and sucked away contentedly at her foul black cigar. I squatted on the floor, staring up at her, fascinated. She was not smiling. She looked deadly serious.

"Are there other things?" I asked her.

"Of course there are other things," my grand-mother said. "You don't seem to understand that witches are not actually women at all. They look like women. They talk like women. And they are able to act like women. But in actual fact, they are totally different animals. They are demons in human shape. That is why they have claws and bald heads and queer noses and peculiar eyes, all of which they have to conceal as best they can from the rest of the world."

"What else is different about them, Grand-mamma?"

"The feet," she said. "Witches never have toes."

"No toes!" I cried. "Then what do they have?"

"They just have feet," my grandmother said. "The feet have square ends with no toes on them at all."

"Does that make it difficult to walk?" I asked.

"Not at all," my grandmother said. "But it does give them a problem with their shoes. All ladies like to wear small rather pointed shoes, but a witch, whose feet are very wide and square at the ends, has the most awful job squeezing her feet into those neat little pointed shoes."

"Why doesn't she wear wide comfy shoes with square ends?" I asked.

"She dare not," my grandmother said. "Just as she hides her baldness with a wig, she must also hide her ugly witch's feet by squeezing them into pretty shoes."

"Isn't that terribly uncomfortable?" I said.

"Extremely uncomfortable," my grandmother said. "But she has to put up with it."

"If she's wearing ordinary shoes, it won't help me to recognise her, will it, Grandmamma?"

"I'm afraid it won't," my grandmother said. "You might possibly see her limping very slightly, but only if you were watching closely."

"Are those the only differences then, Grand-mamma?"

"There's one more," my grandmother said. "Just one more."

"What is it, Grandmamma?"

"Their spit is blue."

"Blue!" I cried. "Not blue! Their spit can't be blue !"

"Blue as a bilberry," she said.

"You don't mean it, Grandmamma! Nobody can have blue spit!"

"Witches can," she said.

"Is it like ink?" I asked.

"Exactly," she said. "They even use it to write with. They use those old-fashioned pens that have nibs and they simply lick the nib."

"Can you notice the blue spit, Grandmamma? If a witch was talking to me, would I be able to notice it?"

"Only if you looked carefully," my grandmother said.

"If you looked very carefully you would probably see a slight blueish tinge on her teeth. But it doesn't show much."

"It would if she spat," I said.

"Witches never spit," my grandmother said. "They daren't."

I couldn't believe my grandmother would be lying to me. She went to church every morning of the week and she said grace before every meal, and somebody who did that would never tell lies. I was beginning to believe every word she spoke.

"So there you are," my grandmother said. "That's about all I can tell you. None of it is very helpful. You can still never be absolutely sure whether a woman is a witch or not just by looking at her. But if she is wearing the gloves, if she has the large nose-holes, the queer eyes and the hair that looks as though it might be a wig, and if she has a blueish tinge on her teeth--- if she has all of these things, then you run like mad."

"Grandmamma," I said, "when you were a little girl, did you ever meet a witch?"

"Once," my grandmother said. "Only once."

"What happened?"

"I'm not going to tell you," she said. "It would frighten you out of your skin and give you bad dreams."

"Please tell me," I begged.

"No," she said. "Certain things are too horrible to talk about."

"Does it have something to do with your missing thumb?" I asked.

Suddenly, her old wrinkled lips shut tight as a pair of tongs and the hand that held the cigar (which had no thumb on it.) began to quiver very slightly.

I waited. She didn't look at me. She didn't speak. All of a sudden she had shut herself off completely. The conversation was finished.

"Goodnight, Grandmamma," I said, rising from the floor and kissing her on the cheek.

She didn't move. I crept out of the room and went to my bedroom.

**Suggested questions:**

- How are the witches portrayed in the two chapters?
- How do the special qualities of witches (such as needing to wear gloves and wigs) function symbolically?
- Why do you think *The Witches* is controversial?

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