

CRITERIA OF SELECTING LITERARY WORKS FOR PROMOTING THE LEARNERS' READING MOTIVATION

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Abstract. The article draws the readers' attention to the problem of the possibilities of selecting literary works as the teaching/learning content for promoting the reading motivation of the learners of Grade 9. The article reveals the criteria of selecting literary works for both selection of literary works and for facilitating the learners' interest in reading and learning the esthetical and aesthetic values. Special attention is paid to the learners' attitude to contemporary literary works, which discuss themes topical for today's young people, but the inclusion of which in the teaching/learning materials cause perplexity in some part of adults. The article emphasizes ideas of the specific character of perceiving a literary work as a work of art and presents problems connected with the vulgarization of literature. The article also reveals and analyses the learners' interests and needs for developing a relevant learning content, the learners' opinions, expressed in the interviews, their reading motivation and their preferences in reading. The study facilitates the understanding of the necessity to develop the content of teaching/learning literature corresponding to the learners' interests and needs, which in their turn motivate the learners' reading motivation.

Keywords: literary interests, motivation, attitude, teaching/learning content, perception of fiction.

Introduction

The problem of what the content of teaching/learning literature should be like has always been topical, yet it has become more acute in the society of Latvia in the year 2012, when there was going on a wide discussion, in which participated representatives of different spheres of the society: the authors of teaching aids, publishers, reviewers, teachers, psychologists, writers, parents, employees of the Ministry of Education and Sciences. The central problem moved forward was, whether it is permissible or not to include in the content of learning works, which touch upon the so-called taboo themes, as alcoholism, gambling, drug addiction, prostitution, death, etc. A part of the society express their anxiety that reading such works of art can urge the young people to make the wrong choice. Another part of the society stress that literature is a force of art inciting one think of the sense of life, promoting the comprehension of values. It is quite clear that literary works revealing the themes and solving their topical problems of the young people address them more vigorously.

The above mentioned pending matter has urged the authors of the article to continue the studies of the learners' literary interests, reading habits and motivation within the context of the learning content of literature.

An expert group of high level specially selected by the European Commission stress in their report "Teaching Reading in Europe: Contexts, Policies and Practices" that the European Union has to evaluate carefully the inhabitants' writing skills, reading skills and the possibilities of improving the perception of the written text. The results of the investigation of the international student assessment program of the learners' reading competence in 2009 (*Programme for International Student Assessment of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD PISA)) show that one fifth of the young people, age 15, of the European Union lack basic skills of reading and writing, that is the reason why it is difficult for them to find work and thus there increases the risk of the growth of poverty and social alienation (Geske, Grīnfelds, 2010). The Council of Ministers of the European Union have put forward the common aim to diminish the proportion of the youth of age 15, who have poor writing skills, reading skills, skills to perceive the written text from 20% to 15% by the year 2020. (Teaching Reading..., 2012).

In Latvia in the year 2009, as the PISA investigation testifies, there were 17,6 % of learners with poor reading skills and few learners who could cope with the reading tasks of the highest difficulty level.

(Geske, Grīnfelds, 2010). The investigation reveals also another problem, which is closely connected with the achievements of reading – a negative attitude to reading in their leisure time: “more than half of the learners of Latvia read less than half an hour per day or they do not read at all (30%).” (Geske, Grīnfelds, 2010).

The results of the investigation reveal that the question of the development of reading motivation is connected with the promotion of reading motivation in a vast context and it is done in different ways – in the family, school and society. Motivation is “motives in their entirety, which promote and substantiate the learners’ activities, action, conduct, relations” (Beļickis, Blūma, 2000). It is the key precondition of the learners’ achievements in learning: “Motivated learners make choices to stay engaged and to persist because of their interest and the expectation of outcome.” (Wiesen, 2001).

In the context of reading it is necessary to stress especially the connection of motivation, interest and attitude. If interest is defined as an active attitude to activities, objects, phenomena conditioned by need, experience and choice (Beļickis, Blūma, 2000) then interest in reading finds its expression as a positive attitude to books and promotes one’s reading experience: “In a general sense, interest is essentially synonymous with attitude. One’s interest in reading is the same as one’s attitude toward reading. In a specific sense, the term is usually expressed in the plural and refers to a topic.” (Guthrie, Wigfield, 2000). These specific interests are also called literary interests, or the readers’ interests, and they can be as multiform, as multiform people are, and at the teenagers’ age they determine to a great extent the urgencies in the society, the teenagers’ comprehension of values, advertisement and fashion.

The connection of motivation with attitude is a complex, these conceptions are difficult to separate because they usually overlap. Motivation is always connected with man’s tendency to act, to achieve one’s aim: “A positive attitude, under the right circumstances, contributes to intrinsic motivation. A negative attitude, in contrast, tends to inhibited motivation, although this tendency might be obviated through the manipulation of intrinsic factors.” (Conradi, Jang, 2012).

Within the context of the promotion of reading an appropriate place should be allotted to the context of literature learning and the criteria of its choice. The acquaintance with literature in a wider sense is involvement of the personality in the stream of culture, in which not only knowledge and skills occupy a significant place but also the revelation of the values of life and art. (Rudzītis, 2000). In a narrower sense reading fiction in the learning process is getting acquainted with books of different kinds and genres, in order to get to know literature corresponding to the compulsory components of the subject of literature: literature as an art of words, the perception of a literary work, creative activity, literature as part of culture. (Noteikumi par..., 2006).

Taking into consideration the factors mentioned before the choice of the content is determined by the following criteria:

- 1) a high artistic value of the book;
- 2) the diversity of genres, styles and themes;
- 3) the potential of the updated values;
- 4) the potential of the promotion of the dialogue of cultures and tolerance;
- 5) conformity with the topicality of the epoch;
- 6) conformity of the literary works with the peculiarities of the learners’ age groups;
- 7) conformity of the literary works with the interests and needs of the reader;
- 8) respect for the learners’ sex and their ethnical differences.

In the present situation, when in Latvia one comes across insufficient reading skills of the teenagers, and there is spreading a negative attitude to reading in general, special attention should be paid to **the conformity of the literary works with the topicality of the epoch, peculiarities of the age groups and the interests and needs of the reader**. When analyzing the content of the text books on literature the conclusion can be drawn that too little attention has been paid to the above mentioned criteria. If the learners feel that literature is useful to them and it corresponds to their needs, they are willing to consider themselves to be readers and they read. (Kasten, Wilfong, 2005).

Themes and topical problems, significant to the youth, are found both in classical and contemporary literature, yet a reasonable proportion should be observed in the choice of the content of classical

works and the latest works of literature. If not enough attention is paid to literary works on contemporary themes the learners can be disillusioned that literature is not connected with the time in which they live: “If we do not ensure the children with an environment of **truthfulness**, they will soon lose interest in our books, our arts, and learning at school [...]. Remember that the children and the teenagers react to life more truthfully than we.” (Ziedonis, 1988). The authors stress that the task of literature as an art is to speak with the help of the means of art about the values, to influence, to create emotional experience and, as a result an idea about behavior models in serious, complicated situations, besides, a work of art does not reflect life directly, but through characters of art.

Materials and Methods

The following methods were used when studying the learners’ reading habits, motives and literary interests:

- 1) analysis of theoretical literature,
- 2) an interview with casually chosen learners of Grade 9 (75 learners) of 5 Riga schools.

The interview was organized in September and October of the year 2012, and 45 girls and 30 boys participated in it.

Results and Discussion

The authors of the article have analysed the reading motives of learners of Grade 9. The learners’ answers to the question “**Why do you read or do not read books of fiction?**” confirm once again that the motivation of reading fiction is comparatively low. (Figure 1).

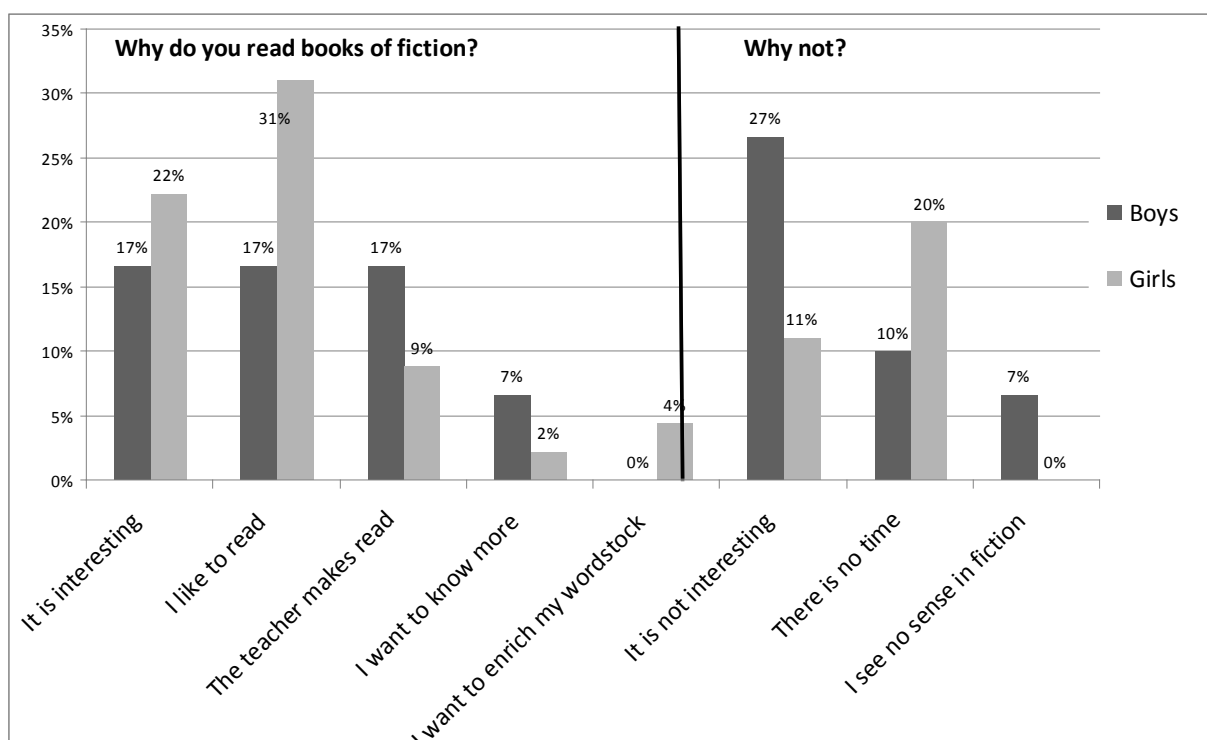


Figure 1. The learners’ answers to the question “Why do you read or do not read books of fiction?”.

The chart shows that only 69% of the girls and 57% of the boys are interested in reading. Some of the answers show a rather positive attitude to reading:

- “Books take you to another world, help you get away from everyday life” (a girl’s answer);
- “Reading is my hobby” (a girl);
- “It is a possibility to live another life in one’s own” (a girl).

The learners (31% of the girls and 43% of the boys) give many reasons why they do not read books of fiction out of school. The great number of the answers “It is not interesting”, as well as several other answers draws our attention:

- “There is no time and books are not close to my heart” (a girl),
- “There is no time and I prefer the Internet” (a girl),
- “I am short of time, because I have a great load – trainings, hobby groups, tests” (a girl),
- “Boring, fiction does not attract me” (a girl),
- “It seems to be a loss of time” (a girl),
- “I do not know yet how to find a suitable book” (a girl),
- “I do not read. To my mind one has to read serious books, from which you get knowledge, but not fairy-tales” (a boy),
- “I see no sense in fiction” (a boy),
- “I cannot summon my strength to take a book and start reading it” (a boy),
- “I do not read books, but I read comic books on the computer” (a boy),
- “Books do not seem to be as interesting as magazines/journals” (a boy),
- “I do not read fiction. I am an adherent of encyclopedias and journals of popular sciences” (a boy).

Knowing that the learners’ interest in reading fiction is developed to a great extent by learning literature at school, the fact that many learners of Grade 9 answer that they are not interested in fiction and reading it is senseless causes serious food for thought. The conclusion can be drawn that the reason is to be sought in the content of learning literature and in the methods.

The learners’ answers to the question “The fragment of which book would you like to include in the textbook of literature?” show that

- considerable part of the learners – 38% of girls and 57% of boys cannot name a single work of art, which they would like to read;
- the learners do not name a single work of art of Latvian classical literature, and they name only two books by contemporary Latvian authors – “Patricia’s diary” (“Patrīcijas dienasgrāmata”) by Anna Skaidrīte Gailīte and “Krista” by Ieva Brice;
- the learners find the contemporary fantasy and science fiction books, which are popular in the world, current, for example, the parts of “Harry Potter” by J. K. Rowling (chosen by 6 girls and 7 boys), “The Hunger Games” by Suzanne Collins (2 girls), “Twilight” by Stephanie Meyer (2 girls), “Game of Thrones” by George R.R. Martin (1 girl and 1 boy), “Erebus” by Ursula Poznanski, “The Chronicles of Narnia” by Clive Staples Lewis, “Beautiful Creatures” by Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl;
- the learners read contemporary detective stories – there are mentioned “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo” by Stieg Larson and “Kingdom Come” by Tim Green;
- the learners are attracted by real life depicting prose by modern writers – “Between Shades of Gray” by Ruta Sepetys, “One Day” by David Nicholss, “Obsession” (“Hörigen”) by Brigitte Blobel, “White Oleander” by Janet Fitch;
- there are also mentioned several classical works of world literature – books by Agatha Christie (5 girls, 1 boy), “Sherlock Holmes” by Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Children of Captain Grant” by Jules Verne, “Le Comte de Monte-Cristo” by d’Alexandre Dumas, “The Good Soldier Švejk” by Jaroslav Hašek, “The Headless Horseman” by Thomas Mayne Reid, “Robinson Crusoe” by Daniel Defoe, “Gone with the Winds” by Margaret Mitchell, “Romeo and Juliet” by William Shakespeare, “The Black Arrow” by Robert Louis Stevenson.

The learners’ answers confirm the ties among reading motivation, interest and attitudes - the learners, who admit that they do not read or read very seldom, cannot name a single particular book, which they would like to read. Here spring up a number of problems: the reader’s negative experience → unwillingness to read → inability of finding a book, which rouses interest → disengagement in reading → the conclusion that reading is senseless. There are several causes of the experience of a negative reader – the attitude to reading in the family and the surrounding society, insufficient reading skills, the content of learning does not rouse the learner’s interest and the teacher’s insufficient skills to involve the learners in reading.

The choices of the learners are indicative of the learners’ wish to read in the literature learning material principally works of fantasy and books of fantasy genres, but the readers’ experience is

sufficient, in case there is motivation, and their poor reading skills would not be an obstacle to read very bulky books. It should be stressed that in fantasy literature “the main function of the hero is the transition from ignorance to knowledge, from immaturity to maturity, simultaneously going through one’s personal initiation and the salvation of the world. [...] In the works of the fantasy genre prevail the so-called not typical character of the hero, which is not typical of a myth but of a fairy-tale – it is undistinguished and commonplace, but he is placed in the role of the hero of a myth or an epic hero, who has been trusted the hero’s functions – salvation of the world and who successfully accomplishes it, thus synthesizing the mythical and the real in the reader’s consciousness.” (Simsone, 2010). Yet, part of the teachers of literature does not consider fantasy books to be high-quality literature. However, the learners’ positive attitude and the value-guided potential of the fantasy genre make it possible to draw the conclusion that this genre should be granted a greater place in the content of learning literature.

The fact that the majority of the fragments of the before mentioned world classical literature have been included in the literature reading aids makes us draw the conclusion that learning literature has favored the acquaintance with them on a wider scale. It is clear that the books mentioned before belong to works of the genres (adventures, detectives) and the themes (people’s relations, friendship, love), which are nowadays topical among the youth.

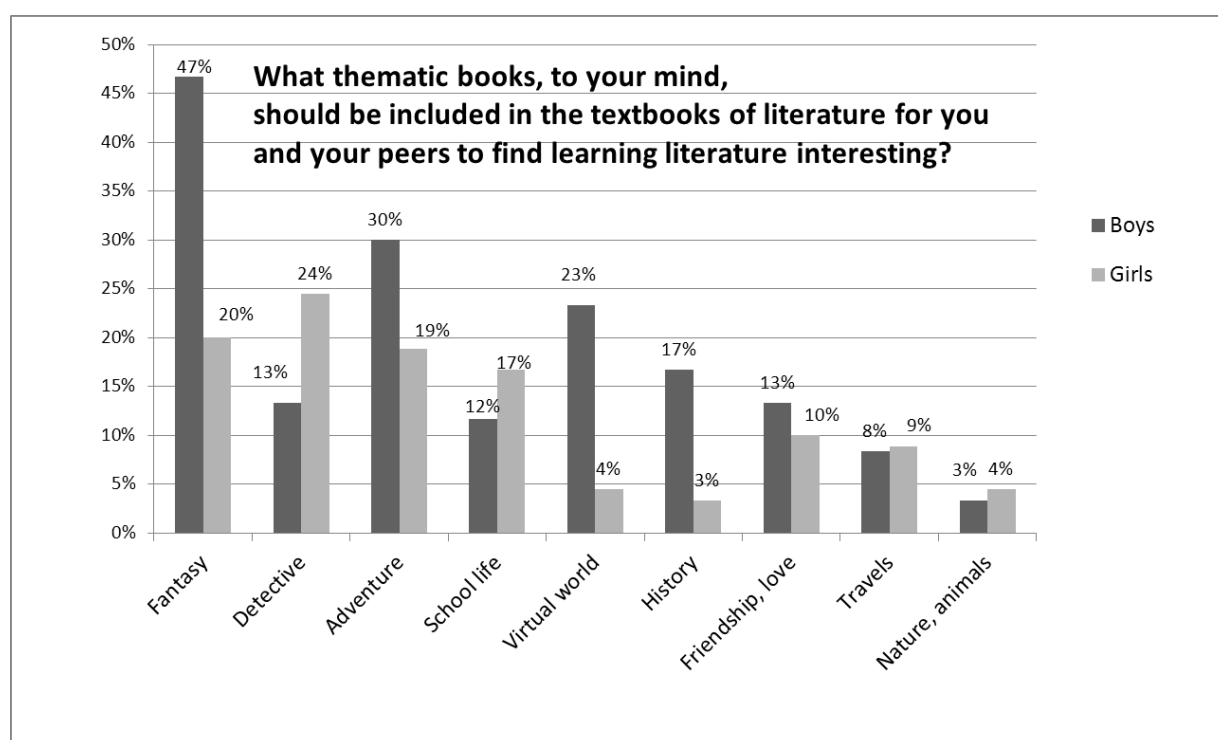


Figure 2. The themes of the books, which the learners prefer.

To a great extent the learners’ literary interests, mentioned before, are also confirmed by the learners’ answers to the question “**What thematic books, to your mind, should be included in the textbooks of literature for you and your peers to find learning literature interesting?**” with the given variants of answers – fantastic events, detectives, the virtual world, adventures, friendship, love, school life, history, travels, nature, animals, another variant. (Figure 2).

The results show that the most popular themes among the boys are fantastic events, adventures, the depiction of the virtual world and books on history. The girls in their turn would prefer reading detectives, books on fantastic events and school life. The results of the interviews break the stereotype that the girls’ favorite themes are feelings – friendship and love. This investigation proves that the fact, stated in the investigation in the year 2011, and which said that the girls’ literary interests were to a great extent connected with detective and adventure themes, is not a matter of chance. (Kalve, Stikane, 2012). The results confirm that both the girls and the boys are still interested in the depiction of

fantastic events and adventures. The interest is still kept up by vast offers of literary works – mainly translations (for example, the series of “The Mortal Instruments“ by Cassandra Clare, “Eragon” and “Eldest” by Cristopher Paolini, “The Passage” by Justin Cronin a. o.). At present there are published few books in Latvia for teenagers about travels and nature and it certainly influences the choice of the young people.

When considering the content of learning literature the following should be respected: 1) the learners’ interests taking into consideration the fact that the interests of boys and girls differ, 2) there should be offered works of art on different themes, encouraging one to get acquainted with ranges of themes, not popular among the learners. The answers to the question “**Which genre books do you read most willingly?**” show that the most popular genres for both boys and girls are stories, short stories and novels. (Figure 3).

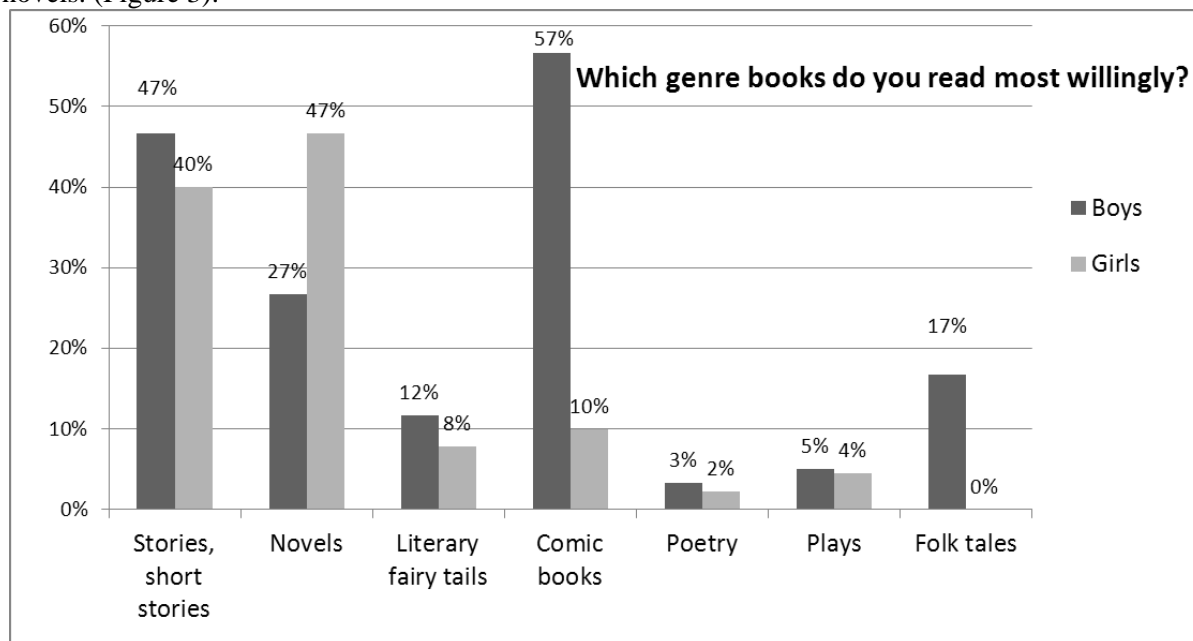


Figure 3. The learners’ answers to the question “Which genre books do you read most willingly?”.

The answers of the respondents show that comic books occupy an important place among the boys in the choice of material for reading. The fact arouses anxiety. There can be noticed a natural link among one’s reading habits, motivation and the choice of comic books – these boys admit that they read very seldom (once or twice in half a year, once in three months, etc.), that they read because the teacher makes them read or in order to get a positive assessment. For the most part these boys cannot name a single concrete book (including a book of comics), and they stress that reading does not interest them at all. It makes one think 1) that the reading skills of the boys are insufficient and 2) probably, they have not come across a book, which interests them.

This investigation also shows that there is a stable tendency among the learners of Grade 9 not to read poetry. It could be explained with the learners’ poor reading skills, inability to comprehend the versatility of the characters of poetry, to discern the subtexts, metaphors, symbols, to feel the nuances of emotional experience, etc. When choosing the content of learning literature special attention should be paid to poetry for reading, thus disclosing the thematic, emotional and artistic diversity of it. Taking into consideration the learners’ indifferent attitude to poetry, as stated in the investigation, it is desirable to include in the learning content poems of different degrees of complexity in order to develop the learners’ comprehension of what is depicted in them. It would be a step closer to rousing one’s interest in poetry.

Conclusions

- The following principles should be observed in the choice of the content of learning literature: a high artistic quality of the works of art: diversity of genres, styles, themes, the potential of the updated values in the works, the potential of a dialogue of cultures, the potential of

promoting tolerance; conformity with the topicality of the epoch; conformity of literary works with the peculiarities of the learners' age groups, conformity of literary works with the readers' interests and needs, respect for the learners' sex and ethnic differences.

- The negative attitude of the learners of Latvia to reading works of art out of school influences the choice of the content of learning literature. It is quite possible that the content of learning literature to the young people does not correspond to their interests and needs and as a result it furthers the learners' negative experience.
- The investigation confirms the coherence among reading motivation, interests and attitudes – the learners, who admit that they do not read at all or that they read very seldom, who cannot name a single concrete book and they consider that reading is senseless in general.
- The results of the investigation break the stereotype that the girls' favorite books are those describing feelings – friendship and love and confirm that it is the detectives that the girls prefer. Both boys and girls are still interested in the depiction of fantastic events and adventures in literature.
- The problem of the learners' unwillingness to read poetry is still topical, and the explanation and reason could be the learners' insufficient reading skills.

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