
Reading beyond language: Young adult fiction, perspective-taking, and theory of mind in the EFL classroom

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Abstract. This study explores the potential of young adult fiction addressing controversial topics to support theory of mind in EFL contexts. It examines how engagement with emotionally and socially complex literary narratives may foster perspective-taking, empathy, intrinsic motivation, and language learning among adolescent readers. The research employed a mixed-methods design. Initial quantitative data were collected via an online questionnaire administered to 169 young adults aged 18 to 30 to investigate reading motivation, engagement, and format preferences. The main phase consisted of a five-week extensive reading intervention conducted with ten female bilingual secondary school students, aged 17-18, in Slovakia. Data were gathered through reflective written responses posted on Padlet and semi-structured interviews, enabling examination of both cognitive and affective dimensions of literary engagement. The findings indicate that sustained engagement with young adult fiction addressing controversial topics encouraged students to engage in deeper perspective-taking, mental state attribution, and empathetic reasoning. Students demonstrated an increasing ability to interpret characters' motivations, emotions, and decisions, suggesting theory-of-mind-related skills. Emotional engagement emerged as an important mediating factor, while intrinsic motivation and guided reflection further supported students' involvement in the reading process. The findings suggest that young adult fiction with controversial topics can serve as a valuable pedagogical resource in EFL classrooms by supporting linguistic development, empathy, critical reflection, and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: *theory of mind, EFL, young adult fiction, empathy, perspective-taking, controversial topics, literary reading.*

Девечкова Катаріна. Читання за межами мови: художня література для підлітків, перспектива та теорія розуму на заняттях з англійської мови як іноземної.

Анотація. У цьому дослідженні вивчається потенціал художньої літератури для підлітків, що порушує суперечливі теми, у розвитку теорії розуму в контексті вивчення англійської мови як іноземної. У ньому аналізується, як взаємодія з емоційно та соці-

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ально складними літературними наративами може сприяти розвитку вміння бачити світ з іншої точки зору, емпатії, внутрішньої мотивації та вивченню мови серед читачів-підлітків. У дослідженні було застосовано змішаний метод. Початкові кількісні дані було зібрано за допомогою онлайн-опитування, в якому взяли участь 169 підлітків, з метою вивчення мотивації до читання, залученості та переваг щодо формату. Основний етап складався з п'ятитижневої інтервенції з інтенсивного читання, проведеної з десятима двомовними учнями середньої школи у Словаччині. Дані збиралися за допомогою рефлексивних письмових відповідей, опублікованих на платформі Padlet, та напівструктурованих інтерв'ю, що дало змогу дослідити когнітивні й афективні аспекти взаємодії з літературою. Результати свідчать, що тривале спілкування з художньою підлітковою літературою, присвяченою суперечливим темам, спонукала учнів до глибшого прийняття інших поглядів, атрибуції психічного стану та емпатичного міркування. Учні продемонстрували зростання здатності інтерпретувати мотивації, емоції та рішення персонажів, що вказує на розвиток навичок, пов'язаних із теорією розуму. Емоційна залученість виявилася важливим посередницьким чинником, тоді як внутрішня мотивація та керована рефлексія додатково сприяли залученню учнів до процесу читання. Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що художня література для підлітків, яка порушує суперечливі теми, може слугувати цінним педагогічним ресурсом на заняттях з англійської мови як іноземної, сприяючи мовному розвитку, формуванню емпатії, критичному осмисленню та міжкультурному взаєморозумінню.

Ключові слова: теорія розуму, вивчення англійської мови як іноземної, художня література для підлітків, емпатія, обрання перспективи, суперечливі теми, читання літератури.

Introduction

Recent research suggests that reading literary fiction can play a significant role in fostering theory of mind – the ability to understand and interpret the mental states, emotions and intentions of others (Kidd & Castano, 2013; see also Fekete et al., 2023; Takahashi et al., 2023). By engaging with fictional characters and narratives, readers learn to consider different perspectives, understand motivations, and reflect on complex emotional and moral cognitive processes through which readers interpret and simulate the minds of others (Oatley, 2016, p.625). This approach is particularly relevant in language acquisition contexts, which is closely connected to intercultural communication and the ability to interpret meaning beyond literal expression (Kramsch, 1993). Enhancing perspective-taking skills and theory of mind is therefore not only a cognitive benefit but also a communicative necessity. However, despite these connections, the role of literary reading in the theory of mind-related engagement in language acquisition contexts remains underexplored, while the selection of literary texts in the classrooms is often based primarily on their linguistic accessibility rather than their emotional or psychological depth. Young adult fiction with controversial topics offers a promising avenue for addressing this

gap. Characterised by its thematic relevance, emotional intensity, and focus on identity formation, young adult fiction is particularly suited for young adults, who are themselves navigating complex “social and familial norms” (Nussbaum, 2012, p.34; see also Price, 2023). Moreover, texts that focus on controversial and socially sensitive themes – such as mental health, trauma, or social injustice – may further enhance readers’ intrinsic motivation and engagement by challenging assumptions and prompting deeper reflection and empathy.

Based on previous research linking literary fiction with perspective-taking and social-cognitive engagement, this study explores whether sustained engagement with young adult fiction addressing controversial topics may encourage theory of mind-related processes, including mental-state attribution, perspective-taking, and empathic reasoning, while supporting students’ motivation and engagement in EFL reading. To explore this relationship, the study was conducted in a Slovak bilingual high school and combined extensive reading intervention with reflective written responses and semi-structured interviews. Through sustained engagement with literary narratives and guided classroom reflection, the research aimed to examine how emotionally, and psychologically complex fiction influences students’ perspective-taking, emotional involvement, and engagement with the second language. The study therefore seeks to contribute to current discussions on literary reading in language acquisition by positioning fiction not only as a linguistic resource, but also as a means of social-cognitive and affective development.

Theory of Mind and Language Acquisition

Theory of mind is a very complex term, which is generally defined as the ability to attribute mental states – such as beliefs, intentions, desires, and emotions – to oneself and to others, and to understand that these mental states may differ from one’s own (Wellman, 2014, p.2; see also Premack & Woodruff, 1978; Kidd & Castano, 2013). Theory of mind is therefore a fundamental component of human social cognition, enabling people to interpret, predict, and respond to the behaviour of others in socially appropriate ways (Wellman, 2014, p.160). People with developed theory of mind are able to understand other people’s thoughts, emotions, and intentions, which helps them navigate complex social interactions. This is particularly relevant in communication, which requires more than linguistic accuracy. Theory of mind involves the ability to interpret implied meaning, recognize speakers’ intentions, and adjust language use according to context (Wellman, 2014, p.220). In this sense, Apperly (2011, p. 27) suggests that theory of mind is closely linked to pragmatic competence, including skills like understanding irony, indirect speech acts, and conversational implicature. Without the ability to consider another person’s

perspective, communication may remain restricted to literal interpretation, reducing its effectiveness in real-world interaction. Theory of mind is closely associated with the comprehension and production of mental-state language, including expressions referring to thoughts, beliefs, intentions, desires, and emotions. Engagement with literary fiction frequently requires readers to interpret such language and use it when explaining characters' behaviour and motivations. In this sense, literary reading provides opportunities to practise both the linguistic representation of mental states and the inferential processes necessary for understanding them. These processes are particularly relevant in second-language contexts, where successful comprehension often depends on interpreting implied meanings and psychological states that are not explicitly stated in the text. Theory of mind is also important in the context of intercultural competence (Kramsch, 1997, p.27) because it enables individuals to engage with perspectives shaped by different cultural backgrounds. In the communicative interactions, it is important to understand not only linguistic forms, but also interpret culturally embedded meanings, values, and communicative norms. This is especially important when individuals communicate in a different language than their native one. The ability to recognize that others may hold different beliefs, assumptions, and worldviews is essential for avoiding misinterpretation and fostering meaningful cross-cultural dialogue (Wellman, 2014, p.31).

These definitions suggest that theory of mind functions as an important connection between language, cognitive processes, and social interaction. Its development is relevant not only to psychological research but also to language acquisition that prepares students for meaningful communication in diverse contexts. Therefore, the relationship between theory of mind and language acquisition is complex and reciprocal. On the one hand, language acquisition supports the theory of mind-related engagement by providing tools that are necessary to represent and discuss mental states (Wellman, 2014, p.249). On the other hand, theory of mind facilitates language use by enabling students to interpret meaning beyond the literal level and to engage effectively in socially situated communication (Apperly, 2011, p.86). It is closely related to pragmatic competence because successful communication requires speakers and listeners to infer intentions, recognise implied meanings, interpret indirect speech acts, and adapt language use to social context. Readers engaging with literary narratives must similarly reconstruct communicative intentions and evaluate characters' beliefs, thereby exercising processes relevant to pragmatic interpretation in a second language.

This relationship is particularly important in foreign language acquisition. Using mostly authentic materials, students of language are frequently required to interpret language that reflects cultural context and hidden implied

meanings. Understanding meaning in such situations often depends on the ability to infer the speaker's intentions, beliefs, and emotions rather than relying solely on lexical and grammatical knowledge. In this sense, theory of mind helps students to develop pragmatic competence (Apperly, 2011, p.27), which is the ability to use language appropriately in different social contexts. This approach goes hand-in-hand with a sociocultural perspective in which language learning is understood as a process of meaning-making that occurs through interaction and engagement with others (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p.4). In this sense, theory of mind supports students in negotiating meaning, interpreting perspectives, and participating in socially mediated learning processes. The ability to recognize that other people may think, feel, or understand situations differently enables students to adapt their language use and respond appropriately in social interactions.

Considering reading in a second language acquisition context, theory of mind is also important in comprehension and engagement. Reading comprehension requires readers to generate inferences about characters' intentions, beliefs, emotions, and interpersonal relationships. Such inferential processing enables readers to construct coherent mental representations of narratives and move beyond the literal information provided in the text. From a psycholinguistic perspective, literary reading involves complex narrative processing, during which readers continuously integrate linguistic information with background knowledge, emotional cues, and contextual information in order to construct coherent representations of characters and events. This is especially evident in narrative texts, where understanding the plot often depends on the ability to infer why characters act in certain ways or how they interpret events. As Kintsch (1998, p.96) suggests, comprehension involves the construction of a coherent mental representation of a text, which includes both explicit information and inferred meaning. This applies to reading comprehension as well. Since students are reading texts with complex psychological and social dynamics which requires deep reading abilities (Wolf, 2018, p. 36-37), theory of mind is also a crucial component.

These perspectives show that theory of mind is a central component of communicative competence. It enables students to move beyond the surface-level understanding and engage with language as a tool for perspective-taking and interpretation.

Before examining the role of young adult fiction in supporting theory of mind-related engagement, it is important to distinguish several closely related concepts that are often used interchangeably in discussions of literary reading and social cognition. Although theory of mind, perspective-taking, empathy, and literary engagement are closely related, they represent distinct constructs. Theory of mind refers to the ability to infer and understand the beliefs,

intentions, desires, and emotions of others (Wellman, 2014, p.220). Perspective-taking may be understood as one process through which theory of mind operates, involving the adoption of another person's viewpoint and consideration of how a situation may appear from that individual's perspective (Apperly, 2011, p.54). Empathy, by contrast, refers primarily to emotional responsiveness to another person's experiences and may involve both affective and cognitive dimensions (Decety & Jackson, 2004, p.71). Literary engagement encompasses readers' cognitive, emotional, and motivational involvement with a text, including immersion, emotional investment, reflection, and interpretation. While literary engagement may create opportunities for perspective-taking and empathic responses, it should not be equated with theory of mind itself. Rather, engagement with literary narratives may provide conditions in which theory of mind-related processes, perspective-taking, and empathy can be exercised and explored.

The use of young adult fiction with controversial topics to foster perspective-taking and mental-state attribution in language acquisition.

Literary fiction has recently been recognized as a valuable tool for the engagement with theory of mind-related skills (Kidd & Castano, 2013). It is so because it provides readers with sustained opportunities to engage with complex representations of human thoughts, emotions, and social interactions. Literary fiction invites readers to enter imagined worlds populated by characters whose internal states are not always explicitly stated but must be interpreted and evaluated. This process is similar to real-life social situations, in which individuals must continuously make sense of others' beliefs, intentions, and emotions.

In this sense, literary fiction supports theory of mind-related processes in different ways. Firstly, it provides exposure to multiple perspectives. Literary narratives often present events from different viewpoints, which requires readers to shift between perspectives and reconcile potentially conflicting interpretations of the same situation. This allows readers to move beyond their own interpretations and consider how different characters perceive and experience events. From a psycholinguistic perspective, perspective-taking can be understood as a comprehension process through which readers temporarily adopt a character's viewpoint and interpret events from within that character's cognitive and emotional framework (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar et al., 2009; Oatley, 2016). Such processing requires readers to coordinate multiple perspectives, evaluate competing interpretations, and integrate information about characters' beliefs, intentions, and emotions while constructing meaning from the text. In this way, literary reading engages cognitive processes that extend beyond linguistic decoding and contribute to deeper narrative understanding. As Oatley (2016) argues, literary fiction can be understood as a

form of simulation of social worlds (see also Mar et al., 2009; Martinez & Rubenstein, 2016), allowing readers to practice understanding other minds in a safe and reflective environment. These studies are based on Bruner's (1996) findings, who emphasizes that narrative plays a central role in shaping how individuals construct meaning and interpret human action (Bruner, 1996, p.139), highlighting the cognitive importance of storytelling. Secondly, literary fiction also enhances the emotional engagement of the reader. Literary fiction evokes strong emotional responses by placing readers in situations involving conflict, moral dilemmas, and interpersonal relationships (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 377; see also Mar et al., 2011). This emotional involvement can deepen readers' connection to characters and enhance their ability to engage in both cognitive and affective empathy. Nussbaum (2012, p.106) argues that literature has the capacity to cultivate empathy by encouraging readers to imaginatively enter the lives of others, particularly those whose experiences differ from their own. Through such engagement, readers not only understand characters' thoughts but also responding to their emotional experiences, which is closely aligned with the process of developing theory of mind (Alatawi & Harshman, 2023).

Empirical research provides growing support for the relationship between literary fiction and social-cognitive development, although findings remain complex and context-dependent (see Denham, 2024; Hakemulder, 2000). Kidd and Castano (2013) found that reading literary fiction was associated with improved performance on theory of mind tasks, suggesting that engagement with complex characters can enhance mental state attribution (Kidd & Castano, 2013, p. 380). Subsequent studies have both supported and nuanced these findings. For example, Djikic et al. (2013) demonstrated that reading fiction can lead to measurable changes in readers' self-perception and empathy, while Lenhart et al. (2022) found that lifetime exposure to fiction is positively related to empathy, particularly when readers experience strong narrative transportation. More recent research continues to explore this relationship, indicating that fiction reading is associated with enhanced perspective-taking and mind-reading abilities, although the strength of this effect may depend on factors such as reader engagement and text characteristics (see Fekete et al., 2023; Takahashi et al., 2023; Rezende & Shigaef, 2023). At the same time, the relationship between fiction and theory of mind is not without debate. Replication studies (e.g. Panero et al., 2016; Samur et al., 2017) have questioned the consistency of short-term effects, suggesting that brief exposure to literary texts may not be sufficient to produce measurable changes in social cognition. This has led to a more nuanced understanding that sustained engagement, rather than one-time reading, may be necessary for meaningful development.

Based on these findings, it is important to understand why to use literary fiction with controversial topics to enhance theory of mind in EFL young adult

students. While literary fiction generally offers opportunities for perspective-taking, empathy, and mental state attribution (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Oatley, 2016), young adult fiction appears particularly well positioned to support these processes among adolescent EFL students. Its combination of linguistic accessibility, thematic relevance, and emotional engagement creates favourable conditions for both language acquisition and theory of mind development.

In this sense, using young adult fiction with controversial topics in EFL classrooms has multiple advantages. The primary and probably the most important advantage is its accessibility for EFL students. Compared to canonical literary works, young adult fiction typically employs contemporary language, clearer narrative structures, and vocabulary that is more closely aligned with the linguistic competence of intermediate and upper-intermediate students. These characteristics facilitate comprehension while still exposing students to authentic language use and opportunities for vocabulary development (Grabe, 2008, p.104; see also Krashen, 2004). Importantly, linguistic accessibility does not equate to conceptual simplicity. Many young adult novels engage with complex psychological, social, and ethical issues, allowing students to focus not only on decoding language but also on interpreting characters' motivations, emotions, and relationships. The relevance of young adult fiction with controversial topics to adolescent EFL students further strengthens its educational potential. Themes such as identity formation, interpersonal relationships, belonging, social pressure, and moral conflict are central concerns within young adult fiction (Gee, 2015) and closely reflect the developmental experiences of adolescent readers. According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) students are more likely to engage deeply with texts that they perceive as personally meaningful (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.71; see also Ryan & Deci, 2018; Renninger & Hidi, 2017). This relevance can enhance both motivation and emotional investment in reading. Moreover, because adolescence is a period marked by increased self-reflection and exploration of personal values, narratives depicting similar struggles may function as a form of guided identity exploration. As Nussbaum (2012, p. 72) argues, literature enables readers to imaginatively inhabit the lives of others, thereby broadening their understanding of both themselves and the social world around them. One more significant advantage of young adult fiction is its emotional intensity. Contemporary young adult novels frequently address emotionally charged topics and place characters in situations involving difficult decisions, interpersonal conflict, or psychological challenges. Such narratives often promote narrative transportation and emotional engagement (Djikic & Oatley, 2014, p.31; see also Koopman, 2016; Rampelli, 2023), factors that have been associated with deeper literary experiences and increased empathic involvement. Emotional engagement is particularly relevant to theory of mind

because understanding emotionally complex narratives requires readers to infer subtle mental states, interpret conflicting motivations, and evaluate relationships from multiple perspectives. In this way, young adult fiction may strengthen the same cognitive and affective processes that underlie social understanding.

The potential of young adult fiction to support theory of mind-related engagement becomes particularly evident when such texts engage with controversial topics. The defining feature of much contemporary young adult fiction is its engagement with socially sensitive issues, including mental health, trauma, abuse, discrimination, identity struggles, and systemic inequity (Gee, 2015; Trites, 2000). Such topics often challenge readers' assumptions and require them to engage with perspectives that differ substantially from their own (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012). Rather than simply following a narrative, readers must consider how characters' beliefs, emotions, and actions are shaped by personal experiences and broader social circumstances. This process closely mirrors the mental state attribution central to theory of mind (Kidd & Castano, 2013). Furthermore, narratives that depict complex social and moral situations require readers to navigate multiple viewpoints and interpret nuanced psychological states (Koopman, 2016, p. 85; Mar et al., 2009), thereby creating opportunities for perspective-taking and empathic engagement. Controversial topics may also encourage deeper levels of reflection and critical engagement. Narratives dealing with injustice, marginalisation, or ethical dilemmas frequently present situations that resist simple moral judgments. Readers are therefore invited to evaluate competing perspectives, consider contextual influences on behaviour and reflect upon their own values and assumptions (Gee, 2015). Such engagement extends reading beyond literal comprehension towards interpretation and evaluation, both of which are essential components of higher-order thinking. In this regard, Freire's (2014) concept of critical consciousness is particularly relevant, as literary encounters with complex social issues can encourage learners to question established assumptions and develop more nuanced understandings of society (Freire, 2014, p. 23).

From the perspective of language acquisition, these characteristics are particularly valuable. Reading in a foreign language involves more than processing vocabulary and grammar. It also requires students to interpret intentions, negotiate meaning, and engage with culturally situated perspectives (Grabe, 2008; Kern, 2000). Young adult fiction that addresses controversial topics therefore offers a dual pedagogical benefit. It provides meaningful linguistic input while simultaneously creating opportunities for perspective-taking, empathy, and critical reflection (Krashen, 2004; Hall, 2005). As students engage with complex characters and socially relevant issues, they practice both language skills and social-cognitive abilities within an integrated learning

experience (Byram, 1997), fostering not only linguistic competence but also intercultural understanding and the ability to interpret diverse perspectives.

The accessibility, thematic relevance, and emotional depth of young adult fiction make it a particularly powerful resource for fostering theory of mind in EFL classroom. When combined with controversial topics that challenge assumptions and encourage engagement with diverse perspectives, young adult fiction can create rich opportunities for both language development and social-cognitive growth. Rather than representing a pedagogical risk, controversial young adult fiction may therefore be viewed as a valuable means of preparing students to navigate the linguistic, social, and intercultural complexities of contemporary society.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to explore how young adult EFL students cope with controversial topics while reading in a foreign language. The preliminary data collection tool was a self-developed online questionnaire designed to measure not only the affective engagement and experiential aspects of reading, but also the motivational factors and format preferences. A total of 169 valid responses were collected between April and May 2025. Participants were young adults aged 18 to 30, primarily high school and university students, recent graduates, and early career professionals. The questionnaire was provided through university mailing lists, academic forums, and social media platforms. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The main phase of the research was designed as a school-based extensive reading intervention, involving a small group of 10 bilingual students aged 17-18 ($M = 17.90$; $SD = .32$). All participants were females and studied English as a foreign language. Prior to participation, all students (or their legal guardians) provided informed consent. The intervention took place over a five-week period in October and November 2025. The reflective element took place online through the Padlet platform, where students consistently posted their reflections and interacted with one another in open discussions about their reading. Immediately after this intervention, semi-structured interviews were held face-to-face with each student individually. This study therefore adopted a mixed-method case study approach, combining written reflections and semi-structured interviews, through which it was possible to examine both cognitive and affective dimensions of reading engagement.

Reading Materials

The reading intervention was based on a curated reading list of contemporary young adult fiction and selected crossover texts addressing socially and emotionally complex topics. The reading list was developed specifically for the purpose of the study and was organized into two proficiency levels: a core tier (B1-B2) and a stretch tier (B2-C1), corresponding broadly to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020). The complete reading list is provided in Appendix A. Text selection was guided by three principal criteria. First, the book needed to be linguistically accessible to upper-secondary EFL students while still providing authentic language input. Second, the texts had to contain emotionally and psychologically complex characters whose motivations, beliefs, and emotional states required interpretation and inference. Third, the novels addressed controversial or socially significant topics likely to encourage reflection, discussion, and perspective-taking. The selected texts explored a wide range of themes, including trauma, mental health, abuse, grief, identity formation, racism, social inequality, migration, war, discrimination, surveillance, ethical dilemmas, and cultural conflict. Examples included: *Speak* (Anderson, 2008), *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2018), *Refugee* (Gratz, 2017), *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky, 2009), *Klara and the Sun* (Ishiguro, 2022). These texts were chosen because they present situations that frequently require readers to infer characters' intentions, emotions, and beliefs, thereby creating opportunities for perspective-taking and mental-state attribution associated with theory of mind. The two-tier structure allowed students to select texts that matched their linguistic proficiency and personal interests, thereby supporting autonomy and intrinsic motivation. In addition to the researcher-selected reading list, students were permitted to propose alternative titles, provided that the texts met the general criteria of linguistic appropriateness, thematic relevance, and potential for reflective engagement. This approach was consistent with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which emphasizes the importance of learner autonomy and personal relevance in fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement. Particular attention was paid to selecting texts that offered multiple perspectives, morally complex situations, and emotionally charged narratives. Such characteristics have been identified in previous research as conducive to empathic engagement, narrative transportation, and social-cognitive reflection. The reading materials therefore served not only as sources of linguistic input but also as stimuli for guided discussion, reflective writing, and exploration of characters' mental states throughout the intervention.

Reflective Prompts

To support active engagement with reading materials and facilitate reflection on characters' mental states, students responded to a series of structured reflective prompts throughout the five-week intervention. The prompts were posted on the Padlet platform and completed asynchronously after designated reading sections. Their primary purpose was to encourage students to move beyond plot-level comprehension and engage in perspective-taking, emotional interpretation, and critical reflection. The design of the prompts was informed by research on theory of mind (Wellman, 2014), reader-response approaches to literature (Rosenblatt, 1994), and sociocultural perspectives on language learning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Particular emphasis was placed on mental-state attribution, defined as the ability to infer and interpret the beliefs, intentions, emotions, and motivations of others (Wellman, 2014). The prompts therefore encouraged students to consider characters' internal experiences, evaluate decisions from multiple perspectives, and relate fictional situations to broader social and personal contexts. The prompts combined cognitive, affective, and interpretive dimensions of literary engagement. Examples of the reflective prompts are stated in Table 1. Students were also encouraged to connect the themes of the novels to contemporary social issues and to reflect on how the narratives challenged or confirmed their own assumptions and beliefs. The prompts were intentionally open-ended in order to allow for diverse interpretations and encourage extended written responses. Rather than assessing factual recall, they focused on inferencing, perspective-taking, emotional reasoning, and evaluation. This approach was consistent with the aims of the study, which sought to explore how engagement with emotionally and socially complex narratives may encourage theory of mind-related processes in EFL learners.

Table 1

Examples of Reflective Prompts and Targeted Theory of Mind Processes

Prompt	Targeted processes	Theoretical dimension
<i>What do you think the character was feeling at this point of the story?</i>	Emotional inference	Theory of mind – emotional attribution
<i>Why do you think the character made this decision?</i>	Mental-state reasoning	Theory of mind – perspective-taking
<i>Would you have acted differently in the same situation? Why?</i>	Comparative perspective-taking	Theory of mind – reflective distancing

<i>Do you agree with the character's actions? Explain your reasoning.</i>	Moral evaluation	Theory of mind – moral reasoning
<i>How might another character interpret this situation differently?</i>	Multiple-perspective reasoning	Theory of mind – perspective-taking
<i>Which scene affected you most emotionally and why?</i>	Emotional engagement	Relatedness / affective engagement
<i>Did this week's reading change your opinion about a character?</i>	Revision of social judgments	Theory of mind – mental-state attribution
<i>What new vocabulary or expressions did you notice this week?</i>	Language awareness	Competence

In addition to generating qualitative research data, the reflective prompts functioned as a form of pedagogical scaffolding. By directing students' attention to characters' thoughts, emotions, and motivations, the prompts supported deeper literary engagement and encouraged students to articulate complex interpretations in the target language.

These prompts were designed to elicit evidence of perspective-taking, emotional attribution, moral reasoning, and empathic engagement, while also encouraging students to reflect on motivational factors and language development. In this way, the prompts served both as pedagogical scaffolding and as a source of qualitative data for subsequent thematic analysis.

This approach was explicitly grounded in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and theory of mind (Premack & Woodruff, 1978), which allowed for the examination of how perspective-taking processes interact with motivational factors such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). It is important to note here, that theory of mind was not approached as an abstract construct but was instead put into practice through structured classroom activities. Students were prompted to reflect and interpret characters' emotions or reflect on moral dilemmas, which means that they were actively engaging in mental state attribution (Wellman, 2014, p. 80), a core component of theory of mind.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data generated through weekly reflective prompts and semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013). The method was selected

because of its flexibility and suitability for identifying recurring patterns of meaning across participants while remaining sensitive to individual variation. The analysis sought to examine how students described their reading experiences, motivational regulation, emotional engagement, and perspective-taking processes while interacting with young adult fiction in an EFL context.

In the first phase, familiarisation with the data, all Padlet reflections and interview transcripts were read repeatedly to gain overall understanding of the dataset and to identify recurring patterns related to literary engagement, emotional responses, and interpretation of characters. Initial notes and analytical observations were recorded throughout this process. The second phase involved generating initial codes. A hybrid coding strategy was employed combining deductive and inductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 83). Deductive codes were informed by the study's theoretical frameworks, namely self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and theory of mind (Wellman, 2014). These included categories such as autonomy, competence, relatedness, emotional attribution, perspective-taking, moral reasoning, and empathic engagement. At the same time, additional inductive codes were developed directly from the data to capture unexpected patterns and participant-specific experiences. During the third phase, codes were grouped into broader candidate themes. Related codes were organised into thematic clusters reflecting key dimensions of students' reading experiences, including emotional engagement with literary characters, perspective-taking and mental-state attribution, intrinsic motivation for reading, reflective evaluation of moral dilemmas, and perceptions of reading in English. In the fourth phase, reviewing themes, the preliminary thematic structure was compared against the original data to ensure that the themes accurately represented participants' responses. Themes were refined, merged, or separated where necessary, and inconsistencies were examined through repeated reference to the complete dataset. The fifth phase involved defining and naming themes. Each theme was clearly delineated and accompanied by a detailed description of its central meaning and relationship to the research questions. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which students interpreted characters' emotions, motivations, and decisions, as these processes were closely related to the study's focus on theory of mind-related engagement. Finally, in the reporting phase, representative excerpts from reflections and interviews were selected to illustrate each theme and to provide evidence for the interpretations presented in the Results section. The findings were interpreted in relation to existing research on literary reading, theory of mind, and language acquisition.

To enhance analytical rigour, data triangulation was employed through the comparison of multiple sources of evidence, including questionnaire findings, weekly reflective responses, and interview transcripts. This process enabled the

identification of converging and diverging patterns across datasets and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of students' reading experiences. The analytical procedure therefore combined theoretical sensitivity with openness to emergent patterns, allowing both anticipated and unexpected aspects of literary engagement to be explored.

Results

The study is based on the hypothesis that reading young adult fiction addressing controversial topics in the EFL classroom may enhance students' theory of mind abilities, which in turn can foster intrinsic motivation and contribute to language development. The analysis showed several key findings indicating that emotionally and morally complex narratives encouraged deeper perspective-taking, greater personal involvement in reading, and more meaningful engagement with the language.

Firstly, the findings suggest increasing evidence of perspective-taking in participants' written reflections and interviews. Early reflections were mostly descriptive and focused on plot-level comprehension. However, as the reading process unfolded, students increasingly engaged in interpretive reasoning, particularly in relation to characters' internal states. This development is reflected in the shift from basic emotional labelling to more complex causal explanations. For example, while initial responses included statements such as *"she felt sad,"* later reflections demonstrated inferential reasoning, as in one of the participants' observations that *"she pushed people away because she expected them to leave anyway,"* or *"At first I thought she was selfish, but later I understood that she was afraid of being hurt again,"* or *"I disagreed with him, but I could see why he believed it was the right thing to do."* Responses like these indicate an emerging capacity for mental state attribution (Wellman, 2014, p.160).

This was further supported by interview data, which revealed a growing ability to reconstruct characters' intentions and evaluate their decisions within broader psychological contexts. Students frequently engaged in comparative reasoning, contrasting their own potential reactions with those of fictional characters. For example, one of the participants noted: *"I didn't agree with his decision, but I understood why he thought it was the only option."* This form of reflection demonstrates not only perspective-taking but also reflective distancing, where students simultaneously engage with and critically evaluate a characters' viewpoints.

Emotional engagement emerged as a crucial mediating factor in this process. It was strengthened by the use of fiction addressing complex and

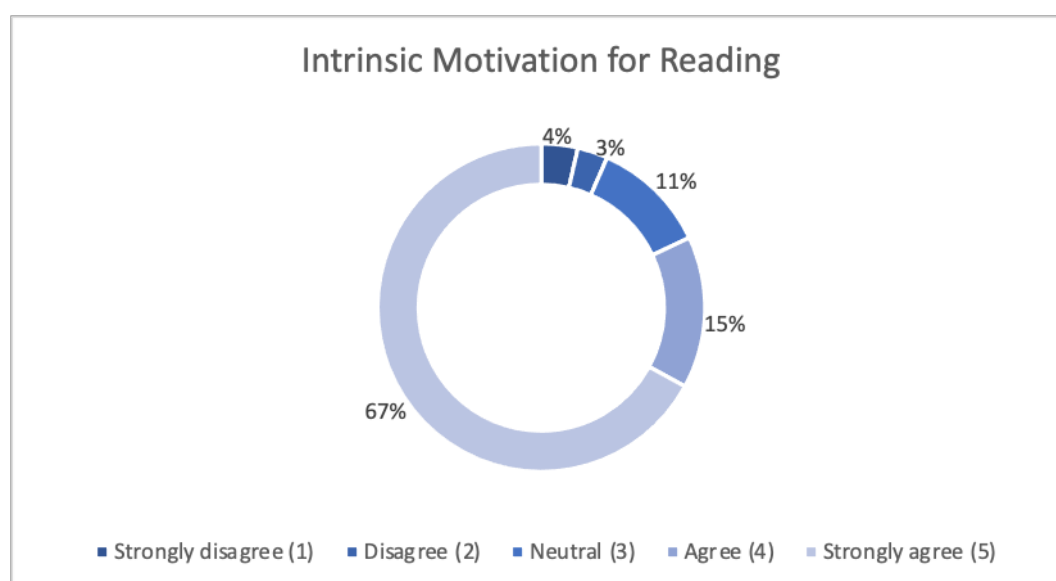
controversial themes, which led to strong affective responses, and in the end facilitated deeper cognitive processing. Students frequently reported emotional involvement, as is reflected in statements like this: *“I felt really frustrated for him because no one understood what he was going through.”*, or another participant said: *“I was angry at what happened to her because nobody seemed willing to listen.”* Responses like this illustrate the interaction between affective and cognitive empathy, suggesting that emotional investment supports the activation of perspective-taking mechanisms. From a psycholinguistic perspective, these responses suggest active narrative processing, during which students integrated textual information with inferential reasoning about characters’ beliefs, intentions, and emotional states. Such processing required readers to move beyond literal comprehension and construct coherent mental representations of fictional minds.

These quantitative findings are supported by the initial questionnaire responses, evaluated in a Likert scale (N = 169). Intrinsic motivation was strongly represented in the sample with 67.1% of respondents strongly agreeing that they read because they enjoy it (see Figure 1).

This high level of intrinsic motivation for reading indicates, that the engagement in reading among young adults is mostly self-determined and therefore is creating favourable conditions for sustained attention and narrative immersion.

Figure 1

Intrinsic Motivation for Reading “I read because I enjoy it.”

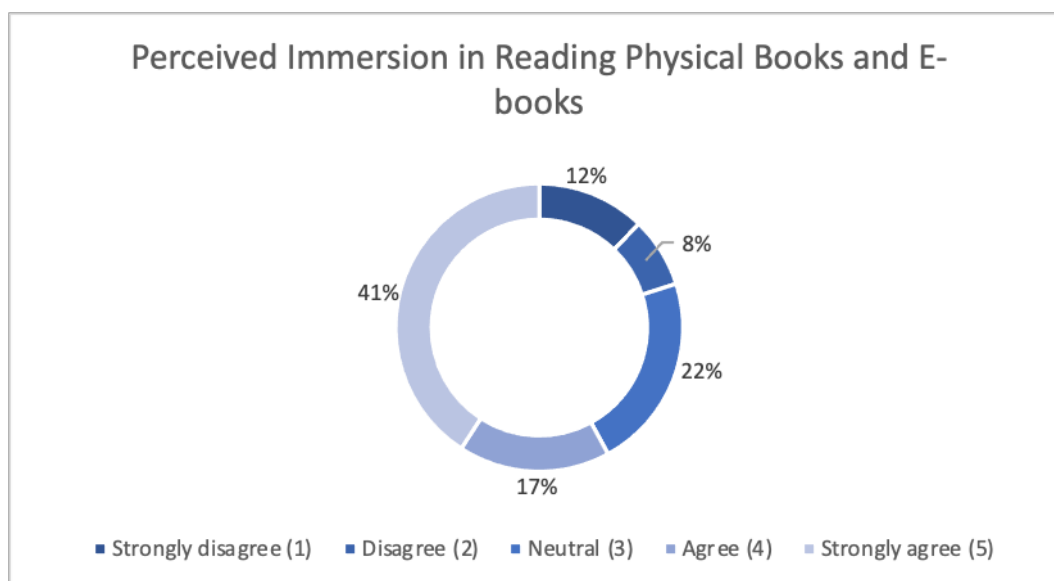


Finally, the initial questionnaire also focused on reading physical and digital books, which led to the conclusion that theory of mind-related engagement may

also be influenced by the reading medium. As it is illustrated in Figure 2, 40.9 % of respondents reported stronger immersion when reading physical books compared to e-books. This finding is particularly relevant in relation to theory of mind, as deeper immersion may enhance readers' engagement with characters' internal states and emotional experiences.

Figure 2

Perceived Immersion in Reading Physical Books and E-Books "I feel more immersed in a physical book compared to reading on a Kindle."



Taken together, these findings suggest a dynamic relationship between motivation, immersion, and social-cognitive engagement. Higher levels of intrinsic motivation support emotional involvement, which then facilitates perspective-taking and mental state attribution (Wellman, 2014, p.160). In this sense, theory of mind-related engagement appears to be closely connected to affective and motivational dimensions of reading. Increased emotional and interpretive engagement also encouraged students to use the target language more actively and reflectively during discussions and written responses. These data also highlight the role of pedagogical scaffolding. Theory of mind engagement did not emerge spontaneously; rather, it was prompted through structured reflective prompts that required students to interpret characters' thoughts, evaluate decisions, and related fictional experiences to their own. As one of the participants observed, *"the questions made me think more about why the characters acted the way they did,"* which indicates that guided reflection played a crucial role in deepening interpretive engagement. Another answer from participants included: *"The book made me think differently about people struggling with mental health."*, *"I realised that I had judged similar situations too*

quickly before reading this story.” Finally, these findings also reinforce the central argument of this article: that literary reading in EFL contexts can function as a meaningful site of social-cognitive development. Through sustained engagement with narrative fiction, students demonstrated an increasing capacity for perspective-taking, empathic reasoning, and interpretation of complex mental states, thereby supporting theory of mind-related engagement alongside linguistic competence. They increasingly employed mental-state vocabulary when discussing characters’ beliefs, motivations, and emotional experiences.

Discussion

The findings of this research support the central assumption that young adult fiction addressing controversial topics contributes to the engagement with theory of mind in EFL classroom by encouraging perspective-taking, emotional engagement, and reflective interpretation. While the present study does not claim a direct causal relationship between literary reading and theory of mind development, the results suggest that sustained engagement with emotionally and morally complex narratives creates conditions that are conducive to social-cognitive growth. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of literary fiction in fostering mental state attribution and empathy (see Kidd & Castano, 2013; Oatley, 2016; Mar et al., 2009).

One of the most significant findings concerns the gradual perspective-taking attribution observed in students’ written reflections and interview responses. Over the course of the intervention, students moved from predominantly descriptive responses toward more interpretive and inferential forms of reasoning. Rather than merely identifying emotions, they increasingly attempted to explain characters’ motivations, intentions, and psychological states. This progression reflects the core processes associated with theory of mind, namely the ability to attribute beliefs, desires, and emotions to others and to recognize that these mental states may differ from one’s own (Wellman, 2014, p.6; see also Oatley, 2016; Martinez & Rubenstein, 2016). The findings therefore support previous studies suggesting that engagement with literary narratives provides readers with opportunities to practice understanding other minds through simulated social experiences.

The findings may also be interpreted from a psycholinguistic perspective. Students’ reflections demonstrated frequent inferencing about characters’ intentions, beliefs, and emotions, suggesting active engagement in mental-state reasoning during reading. Such processes are closely related to pragmatic competence, as readers must move beyond literal textual information and reconstruct implied meanings and communicative intentions. The findings

further indicate that engagement with literary narratives encouraged the use of mental-state language and supported perspective-taking during comprehension. Rather than functioning solely as a literary or affective activity, reading therefore appears to involve complex narrative-processing mechanisms that integrate linguistic, cognitive, and social-cognitive dimensions of meaning-making. The results also highlight the importance of emotional engagement as a mediating factor in theory of mind development. Students frequently reported strong emotional reactions to characters and situations, particularly when narratives addressed controversial topics such as trauma, social exclusion, or psychological struggles. These findings align with research suggesting that emotional involvement facilitates deeper cognitive processing and enhances empathic engagement with fictional characters (Djikic & Oatley, 2014; Koopman, 2016). The interaction between affective and cognitive empathy was particularly evident in students' attempts to understand characters whose decisions they did not necessarily approve of. Such responses suggest that emotionally engaging narratives may encourage readers to separate moral judgment from understanding, a process closely associated with advanced perspective-taking abilities.

The study further supports the argument that controversial topics play a particularly important role in stimulating social-cognitive engagement. Narratives addressing morally ambiguous situations and socially sensitive issues appeared to encourage students to move beyond surface-level comprehension and engage in critical reflection. This finding may also be interpreted in terms of inferential processing, as students were required to evaluate competing perspectives, infer unstated motivations, and reconcile multiple interpretations of characters' actions and experiences. Rather than seeking simple solutions, students frequently considered multiple perspectives and contextual influences on characters' behaviour. This finding is consistent with Freire's (2014, p. 23) concept of critical consciousness, which emphasizes the importance of questioning assumptions and engaging critically with social realities. It also supports Johnson and Vasudevan's (2012, p. 36) argument that encounters with complex and challenging narratives can encourage students to reconsider previously held beliefs and develop greater awareness of alternative perspectives.

From a language acquisition perspective, the findings suggest that theory of mind-related engagement and language learning may reinforce one another. Students were not only interpreting linguistic meaning but also engaging with culturally situated experiences, interpersonal relationships, and implied intentions. Such processes reflect broader conceptions of communicative competence, which extend beyond grammatical accuracy to include pragmatic and intercultural understanding (Kramsch, 1993; Byram, 1997). The findings therefore support sociocultural approaches to language learning, which view

language acquisition as a process of meaning-making that occurs through interaction with texts, people, and cultural contexts (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 4). In this sense, literary reading appears to provide an environment in which linguistic and social-cognitive skills can develop simultaneously.

Another important finding concerns the role of intrinsic motivation. The questionnaire data revealed that the majority of participants reported reading primarily because they enjoyed it, indicating high levels of intrinsic motivation. According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) intrinsically motivated activities are more likely to result in sustained engagement, deeper processing, and greater personal investment. The present findings suggest that the thematic relevance and emotional intensity of young adult fiction may contribute to such motivation by providing students with opportunities to connect literary experiences to their own lives and concerns. This supports previous research (see Renninger & Hidi, 2017) emphasizing the importance of personal relevance and interest in promoting meaningful engagement with reading. The findings related to reading format also warrant consideration. Participants generally reported stronger immersion and motivation when reading physical books than when reading digitally. Although this aspect was not the primary focus of the study, it may have implications for theory of mind development. Previous research suggests that deep reading requires sustained attention and cognitive immersion (Wolf, 2018, p.43). If physical books facilitate greater immersion, they may also support more intensive engagement with characters' mental states and emotional experiences. However, further research would be required to establish the relationship between reading medium, narrative immersion, and theory of mind development.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the intervention involved a relatively small sample of ten participants. While the small sample size was appropriate for an in-depth qualitative study and enabled detailed exploration of individual reading experiences, it limits the generalisability of the findings to broader EFL population.

Second, the study was conducted within a single bilingual upper-secondary school in Slovakia. Institutional context, student demographics, and local educational practices may have influenced participants' experiences and responses. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than representative of all EFL learning environments.

Third, the study did not employ a standardized theory of mind assessment instrument. Instead, theory of mind-related engagement was examined through

students' reflective writing and interview responses. Although these qualitative data provided valuable insight into perspective-taking, emotional attribution, and interpretation of characters' mental states, they do not permit objective measurement of changes in theory of mind abilities.

Fourth, the findings rely substantially on self-reported data, including written reflections and semi-structured interviews. Such data are inherently subjective and may be influenced by factors such as social desirability, selective recall, or participants' willingness to articulate their thoughts and emotions.

Fifth, the analysis was based primarily on qualitative interpretation. Although thematic analysis was conducted systematically and informed by established theoretical frameworks, qualitative findings inevitably involve researcher interpretation and should therefore be understood as interpretive rather than definitive accounts of participants' experiences.

Sixth, while the study discusses the potential relevance of literary reading for language acquisition, no direct measures of language development were included. Vocabulary growth, reading comprehension, pragmatic competence, and other linguistic outcomes were not systematically assessed. Consequently, conclusions regarding language acquisition remain tentative and should be interpreted with caution.

Finally, the design of the study does not permit causal conclusions. The absence of pre-testing, post-testing, control groups, and standardized theory of mind measures means that it is not possible to determine whether engagement with young adult fiction directly caused changes in perspective-taking or other social-cognitive processes. Rather, the findings suggest that sustained engagement with emotionally and socially complex narratives may create conditions conducive to perspective-taking, empathic engagement, and reflective interpretation.

Future research could address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples, incorporating standardized theory of mind instruments, directly measuring language-learning outcomes, and adopting longitudinal or experimental designs capable of examining causal relationships more rigorously.

Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between theory of mind development, literary reading, and language acquisition through the use of young adult fiction addressing controversial topics in the EFL classroom. Drawing on both theoretical perspectives and empirical data, the findings suggest that sustained engagement with emotionally and socially complex narratives can support

students' perspective-taking abilities, empathic understanding, and reflective thinking. The results indicate that young adult fiction provides more than linguistic input. It creates opportunities for students to engage with diverse perspectives, interpret complex mental states, and reflect on moral and social issues. In this sense, literary reading can contribute simultaneously to language development and social-cognitive growth. The study further demonstrated that controversial topics may play an important role in this process. By confronting students with experiences related to trauma, discrimination, identity struggles, or social injustice, such narratives encouraged deeper emotional engagement and critical reflection. These findings support previous research suggesting that literary fiction functions as a form of social simulation through which readers can practice understanding the thoughts, emotions, and motivations of others (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Oatley, 2016). The findings also highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation and pedagogical scaffolding, suggesting that meaningful literary engagement is most likely to occur when students encounter texts that are personally relevant and are provided with opportunities for guided reflection and discussion.

Although the study was conducted with a relatively small sample and therefore cannot be generalized without caution, it contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of literature in language education. The findings suggest that young adult fiction with controversial topics represents a valuable pedagogical resource capable of fostering not only linguistic competence but also empathy, intercultural understanding, and theory of mind. Future research should continue to explore this relationship in larger and more diverse educational contexts. Nevertheless, the present study argues that reading in a foreign language should be understood not merely as a linguistic activity but as an opportunity to develop the cognitive, emotional, and social capacities necessary for meaningful participation in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

Disclosure Statement

The author reported no potential conflicts of interest.

Generative AI Statement

AI tools were used solely for language editing and proofreading during manuscript preparation, while all research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation, and conclusions remained the responsibility of the author.

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Appendix A

Reading Materials

Core tier (B1-B2): language accessible, emotionally powerful but clearly told, ideal for slow, immersive reading with minimal frustration

Four students chose reading material from this tier group.

Anderson, L. H. (2008). *Speak* (B1+/B2): A girl stops speaking after traumatic event – until she finds her voice again.

- Themes: trauma, silence, recovery
- Characteristics: short, clear prose; trauma theme sensitively handled

Lowry, L. (2014). *The Giver* (B1+/B2): In a world without emotion or memory, one boy learns the truth and questions control.

- Themes: dystopia, freedom, memory
- Characteristics: simple language, rich moral depth

Gratz, A. (2017). *Refugee* (B1+/B2): Three young refugees flee danger across different eras and countries.

- Themes: war, migration, hope
- Characteristics: multiple perspectives, clear narrative voice

Pelzer, D. (1995). *A Child Called "It"* (B1+/B2): A memoir of a boy's survival through extreme parental abuse.

- Themes: abuse, trauma, resilience
- Characteristics: narrowing content but straightforward structure

Asher, J. (2009). *Thirteen Reasons Why* (B2+): A teen uncovers the reasons behind a classmate's suicide through a series of tapes.

- Themes: bullying, suicide, blame
- Characteristics: clear teen voice, manageable pace

Alexie, S. (2009). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (B2): A Native American teen leaves his reservation to attend an all-white school.

- Themes: race, poverty, humour, identity
- Characteristics: humour and cartoons support understanding

Chbosky, S. (2009). *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (B2): A shy teen navigates friendship, trauma, and emotional growth in high school.

- Themes: depression, self-discovery, abuse
- Characteristics: diary format supports gradual comprehension

Green, J. (2018). *Turtles All the Way Down* (B2): A girl with OCD searches for a missing billionaire – and stability in her own mind.

- Themes: mental illness, guilt, healing
- Characteristics: accessible but layered; good for guided slow reading

Thomas, A. (2018). *The Hate U Give* (B2): A teen girl witnesses police brutality and must navigate race, identity, and activism.

- Themes: racism, justice, voice
- Characteristics: engaging and accessible; strong discussion potential; authentic contemporary voice

Stretch tier (B2-C1): a wider vocabulary range, more inferencing and abstract thinking, higher reading stamina – but reward deeper engagement

Five students chose material from this tier group.

Kuang, R. F. (2024). *Yellowface* (B2+/C1): A writer steals her dead friend's novel and identity, raising questions of race and authorship.

- Themes: cultural appropriation, ambition
- Characteristics: satirical and dense; culturally sharp

Ishiguro, K. (2022). *Klara and the Sun* (C1): A solar-powered robot observes human love, illness, and belief from the outside.

- Themes: AI, empathy, belonging
- Characteristics: subtle, poetic language; theory of mind rich

Eggers, D. (2014). *The Circle* (C1): A young woman joins a powerful tech company – and discovers its dark side.

- Themes: surveillance, ethics, tech
- Characteristics: long, conceptual, ideal for tech-critical readers

Green, J. (2013). *Looking for Alaska* (B2): A quiet boy's life is changed by a girl full of mystery, loss, and rebellion.

- Themes: grief, friendship, existentialism
- Characteristics: philosophical and emotional complexity

Shusterman, N. (2020). *Challenger Deep* (B2+): A teen battles mental illness as two realities – read and imagined – collide.

- Themes: schizophrenia, identity

- Characteristics: dual narrative structure; requires focus

Haddon. M. (2004). *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (B2): A neurodivergent boy investigates a mystery – and reveals his view of the world.

- Themes: neurodivergence, family, logic vs. emotion
- Characteristics: unique voice, logical structure with emotional undertones

Mawer, S. (2013). *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (B2+/C1): A WWII spy operates behind enemy lines while grappling with identity and loyalty.

- Themes: war, identity, female agency
- Characteristics: historical narrative; layered identity themes

Evans, N. (2020). *The Horse Whisperer* (B2): A girl and her horse are injured in an accident; healing begins in the wild.

- Themes: trauma, nature, love
- Characteristics: descriptive, emotionally subtle

Vizzini, N. (2007). *It's Kind of a Funny Story* (B2): A depressed teen checks into a mental health facility and starts to recover.

- Themes: depression, self-worth, healing
- Characteristics: realistic and reflective with moments of humour and depth

One student chose their own reading material.

Orwell, G. (2018). *1984* (B2): A man struggles to keep his individuality under a government that watches and controls everything.

- Themes: surveillance, totalitarianism, truth vs. propaganda
- Characteristics: dystopian, thought-provoking, political.