

Using Picture Books in EFL College Reading Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

This study examined 39 Taiwanese adult EFL learners' responses to reading children's literature in a non-major freshman English class. Exposed to authentic illustrated storybooks along with a variety of literacy practices, the students' end-of-the-semester feedback has shown that they generally enjoyed the books and felt they had made progress in their English language competence, especially in terms of confidence and motivation. The findings also revealed that the diverse activities offered the students a more meaningful learning experience. The study concluded that for beginning or struggling readers, children's literature should be utilized more often by EFL teachers as alternative reading material.

INTRODUCTION

A fond childhood memory shared by many people are the bedtime stories parents read to them. Lying down and carefully paging through picture books together, children explore a world of imagination and fascination; they identify with those characters and are eager to find out what will happen next. Story after story, night after night, such repeated practice creates a strong family bond as well as emerging concepts of print. As children grow older, they are likely to become enthusiastic readers themselves. Upon finding a book of interest, whether it is a comic book about a superhero rescuing mankind or a lengthy novel about wizards, they simply cannot wait to finish one and start another. Pleasurable reading, subsequently, about a variety of subjects has been found to greatly benefit children's overall language development and academic performance later in life.

The association of reading with fun and meaning-making is often not the case in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, such as Taiwan. Rather, many students, particularly adult learners, have a limited knowledge of English vocabulary words (Chen, 1998), read slowly (Shen, 2008), and mostly about obscure textbooks or test-preparation materials (Huang, 2006). They think of reading in English as being tedious and painful, and something they are obligated to do in order to pass an exam. Lacking a genuine motivation to read, which serves as the basis for all aspects of language development, it is not surprising that Taiwanese students have scored in the bottom half on TOEFL iBT exams, as opposed to test-takers from other Asian countries (2010 TOEFL Test and Score Data Summaries). Thus, this begs the following questions: If native speakers of a language learn to read through rich immersion in authentic literature, should local EFL educators not also use the same literature-based reading approach? Are teachers who fail to encourage voluntary reading of a wide range of materials that students personally enjoy denying those same students a fair chance to learn?

Accordingly, this paper presents a study carried out in the year 2011 with a group of Taiwanese non-English-major freshmen using authentic illustrated storybooks. Primarily, two research questions were explored: (1) How would young adult college students respond to

reading children's literature in the classroom? and (2) How would the students rate the overall effectiveness of using children's literature for fostering English competence? Drawing upon the findings of the study, this paper then discusses key considerations for successful incorporation of children's literature in EFL college reading classrooms, including material selection, time allocation, etc. The paper's conclusion is that it is imperative to create literacy programs which promote pleasure reading of comprehensible authentic texts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Socio-cultural Constructivist Reading Approach

The dated belief that reading is a passive decoding process of authors' intended meaning has been long replaced with a socio-cultural constructive perspective (Gaffney & Anderson, 2000) which acknowledges individuals' abilities to actively utilize past life experiences and cultural knowledge in making meaning of a text (Goodman, 1981). Because of readers' unique schematic backgrounds and the moment of time the reading takes place, they connect to the text differently (Rosenblatt, 1978). Each individual interpretation, consequently, needs to be respected and in fact encouraged. To do so, socio-cultural constructivist reading researchers urge that language teachers implement literacy activities using authentic texts to facilitate social interactions in the class and create a safe space for critical discussions about issues relevant to students' lives. The hope is that students would be able to recognize and eventually act against text positioning (Lewison, Leland, Flint, & Moler, 2002).

Strengths of Authentic Literature for Language Education

Literature has re-gained a prominent place in language education due to the rise of social-cultural constructivism. Numerous researchers have attested that reading authentic literature not only enriches one's imagination and cultural understanding, but it invites multiple reflections of a text which can promote a learner's interpretative skills and high emotional intelligence (Carter & Long, 1991; Collie & Slater, 1990; Ghosn, 2002; Hismanoglu, 2005; Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011; Liaw, 2001; Mckay, 1982; Stern, 2001; Takagaki, 2002; Tseng, 2010; Van, 2009). More importantly, literature is a great motivator for a person's overall language development (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and sociolinguistic/pragmatic knowledge).

Of all the forms of literature, children's literature is generally recognized as an effective teaching tool owing to a few basic characteristics (Appelt, 1985; Bradbury & Liu, 2003; Flickinger, 1984; Johnston & Frazee, 2011; Mikulecky, 2007; Morgan, 2009; Wu, 2009): (1) uses simplified natural language; (2) is widely available at schools, libraries and online; (3) contains colorful pictures, which underprivileged readers may find informative or at least enjoyable, and (4) presents appealing and sometimes mature stories that learners of all ages can appreciate. These above-mentioned strengths are found to positively enhance young learners' development of emerging literacy (Elley, 1989; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Galda, 2000; Glazer & Giorgis, 2005), oral skills (Ho, 2000; Johnston & Frazee, 2011; Zhang, 2008), social awareness (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999; Lewison et al., 2002; Stewart, 2011) as well as cross-cultural knowledge (Bishop & Hickman, 1992; Mendoza & Reese, 2001; Morgan, 2009). Ho (2000) therefore concludes that, as children's literature is "... intellectually stimulating,

encouragingly readable, linguistically challenging, literarily fulfilling and educationally rewarding” (p. 269), many literacy programs in the U.S. have vastly utilized such material to teach adults who have reading difficulties or are learning English as their second language.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were 39 students in a mandatory non-major freshman English class at a Taiwanese public university. Coming from four different fields (Chinese, Art Industry, Life Science, and Public and Cultural Affairs), they were placed in this intermediate-level course based on their English entrance exam scores (within the range of 40 to 45, on a 100-point scale). The class met once a week, two hours each time, for 18 weeks.

An entrance survey revealed that these participants fit the general profile of adult EFL learners in Taiwan. Specifically, they barely read unless required. The limited experiences they had with EFL reading mostly consisted of studying textbooks or English learning magazines. Furthermore, they appeared to lack confidence about their abilities to become fully competent in English. Yet, they indeed employed basic reading strategies for making sense of unfamiliar vocabulary, such as looking up words, consulting teachers or peers, and searching for contextual cues. Finally, they all recognized the importance of learning English and were motivated to obtain certain language certificates. At the time the study was conducted, only nine students had passed a local General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) at the beginning (67%) or intermediate level (33%), which equates to 350 and 550 on the standardized TOEIC exam respectively.

Course Structure

The class used 2 movies and 8 picture books as the main teaching materials throughout the semester. The selected books dealt primarily with self-exploration and social issues, because the researcher (the instructor of this course) believed that the target students would find them to be interesting or have relevance to their lives. For each book that was introduced, students in small groups were responsible for leading a pre-reading activity as well as bringing in one additional article that was about the same subject. Thus, students not only had to preview the selected reading of the week, but they needed to reflect on the theme of the book in order to locate appropriate articles that could successfully pique their peers’ interest in the story. This was the researcher’s effort to ensure that all of the students were active participants in the class.

After each book was read, the researcher would review key vocabulary and phrases with the class, followed by using different literacy practices in which students would engage in discussions or perform certain tasks. The end-of-the-semester project required students to put on a group performance based on the storybook “Willy the Wimp.” The following table summarizes the basic course design.

Table 1. Time Frame and Focus

Time Frame	Focus
4 weeks	2 movies + discussions
7 weeks	Standard class procedure: -- Pre-reading activity (led by students) -- Reading picture books -- Handout on words and phrases -- Post-reading activity (led by the researcher) Selected materials: Faithful Elephants, King & King & Family, The Missing Piece series (The Missing Piece and The Missing Piece Meets the Big O), Ish, The Giving Tree, The True Story of the 3 Little Pigs, Willy the Wimp
2 weeks	Mini-play: Willy the Wimp
Rest	Reviews, exams and national holidays

Data Collection

On the day of the final exam, the researcher distributed a 2-page English survey (adapted from Garcia, 2011) to the class. Students were requested to carefully think about a total number of 8 open-ended questions, and then answer the questions honestly so that this information could be used to help the researcher better plan the 2nd semester's course. The student's identity when filling out the survey was kept anonymous. Due to the participating students' limited English proficiency, the researcher explained each question in Chinese and gave them the option of answering in either Chinese or English. It took the students, on average, approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. Only one student chose to write in English. Data was finally translated and coded with assistance from a debriefer.

The designed survey is comprised of two sections, that is, students' overall responses to children's literature and evaluation of the usefulness of such instructional material in adult literacy education. Typical questions included: (1) How do you feel about reading children's literature in this class? Explain. (2) How difficult or easy do you find those stories? and (3) Do you think reading children's literature is helping your English skills? If yes, how? If not, why? Refer to the Appendix for a complete version of the survey.

RESULTS

In this study, the participating students revealed overwhelmingly favorable attitudes toward the selected readings, demonstrated multiple interpretations of the texts, as well as considered children's literature a helpful learning device for building one's English competence. They especially seemed to welcome the various activities that encouraged peer collaboration and artistic responses. Each finding is synthesized as follows.

Attitudes toward Reading Children's Literature

Of the 39 students, only eight regarded the supplied reading as too difficult for their current state of English proficiency due to the length of or vocabulary used in the books. Although the remaining participants suggested that the material was relatively easy for them to understand, with the exception of one participant outright stating that it was a “waste of time,” they generally appreciated reading children's literature as it allowed them to explore a diversity of meaningful issues through well-written yet comprehensible texts. They also enjoyed the colorful illustrations, and felt that they had the opportunity to learn new words and to practice speaking. Below are some comments from the students:

Not so bad. It is more interesting than reading textbooks, which often put me to sleep. (comment #1)

Compared to passages using difficult grammar or infrequent words, picture books are much easier to follow. (comment #2)

Through reading these children's storybooks, I regain the long-lost innocence of childhood. (comment #3)

Fun. Interesting. Totally stress-free. Can easily pick up vocabulary words. (comment #4)

It is great. Reading English picture books is more fun than, say, regular textbooks. The stories immediately stuck in my brain. (comment #5)

I did wonder at first if the reading materials were way too easy. Now I still find it easy but realize that those picture books discuss issues that deserve careful pondering. (comment #6)

It is fun to read children's literature. They use relatively easy words and tell short interesting stories. I found reading picture books less stressful. In addition, I get a sense of accomplishment when I am able to finish the storybooks with no problem. (comment #7)

Really interesting. It motivates me to read in English. It could be the fact that the stories are shorter. It could also be the fact that I truly enjoy the dual presentation of text and illustrations. (comment #8)

Varied Responses to Individual Stories

Most Popular Books

The three most popular books, as voted by the class, were “The Missing Piece” series (25%), “Ish” (20%), and “Willy the Wimp” (15%). Students appeared to greatly appreciate the inspirational message shared by these three stories; that is, to accept who one really is and always be true to himself. For instance, the book “Ish” depicts a young boy, Ramon, who quit drawing after being scorned by an older brother. He soon came to the realization that he could and should continue to enjoy what he was doing without worrying about being perfect. As one-third of the class was composed of art majors, this book might have aroused profound personal connections.

Least Favorite Books

The controversial picture book “King & King & Family” was the least popular among the class. Although appreciated by some students (12%), most others (41%) felt the story violated common sense, dealt with an uncomfortable subject, and might be age-inappropriate for young readers. These comments correspond to many *Amazon* customer reviews which criticized the storyline being over-simplified, e.g. how could the little girl hide in a suitcase without suffocating or be legally adopted with no consent from her biological parents. Moreover, “Voices in the Park” (10%) and “The Missing Piece” series (7%) were the second and third least favorite because the stories were allegedly uninteresting, gloomy, or simply a repeat of what they had read previously. The following includes some of the comments students made:

I love The Missing Piece. It got us thinking how to fill those so-called missing pieces and whether our lives have truly gotten better after the long search. This story brings up numerous important questions for us to reflect on. (comment #9)

I like The Missing Piece Meets the Big O. The title itself is appealing enough and the story is interesting as well. The book tells readers that it is OK to be imperfect and that we should enjoy spending time with ourselves. It truly is trying to send a meaningful message. (comment #10)

I love Ish. The drawing is cute and the story is inspiring. (comment #11)

I like Ish. We all hit our lows at times. This story helps lift my mood. (comment #12)

The story Ish stresses that people should not look for perfection. It is very much like my life at the moment. Or, to put it another way, it is similar to what I have been through. (comment #13)

I enjoy Willy the Wimp as it is funny and relaxing. I like the drawing as well. (comment #14)

I like Willy the Wimp. It encourages people to get up and make a difference if they do not like certain things about themselves. The ending is cute, too! (comment #15)

I don't appreciate the story of King & King & Family. I don't like gay people. Having said that, I do think the illustrations are quite nice. (comment #16)

I dislike King & King & Family. It is perplexing that a little girl just showed up out of nowhere. (comment #17)

I don't get King & King & Family. Other stories we read at least have some points. This book, nonetheless, is just about a couple going on a honeymoon and adopting some kid. This is just how I feel. Perhaps others see it differently. (comment #18)

King & King & Family is my least favorite book. The style of drawing is messy. The ending is weird. The girl was hiding in the suitcase for such extended period of time. She never needed fresh air or had to use the bathroom? (comment #19)

I don't like Voices in the Park as it is a bit depressing. (comment #20)

For me personally, Voices in the Park tells a dark story. (comment #21)

I read The Missing Piece series before in Chinese and knew the stories quite well. I am

not learning anything new. (comment #22)

Potential of Children’s Literature for Teaching EFL Adult Literacy

The survey received three less than favorable comments concerning the effectiveness of using Children’s literature for EFL literacy instruction, primarily because the supplied books failed to introduce a large enough number of words or phrases, did not focus on test preparations, and were not challenging for advanced learners. While these criticisms may be valid, most of the participants welcomed such reading practice, the main reasons being that the stories dealt with universal and ageless themes (38%), and were beautifully written (20%) with the added attraction of rich illustrations (7%). When requested to assess their own linguistic improvement over the 18-week time span, one-third of the class agreed that they had developed greater reading motivation/confidence, and even more reported gaining knowledge of vocabulary words (23%), oral skills (10%), grammar (2%), reading comprehension (2%), etc. They explained:

Children interpret books differently than adults. Actually, some picture books are written for mature readers, which can cause confusion for little kids. (comment #23)

Children’s storybooks use intelligible vocabulary and sentence structures. It could be beneficial for struggling readers. (comment #24)

I used to be someone who was terrified of reading in English. Now I can generally comprehend the main themes of the storybooks with no difficulty. When there were parts that I didn’t quite understand, the pictures helped solve the mystery. (comment #25)

I often gave up after one or two pages if a book I was reading was beyond my knowledge of English. With the intriguing storyline and reading ease, I am now more motivated to read. (comment #26)

My English is poor so reading children’s literature has helped me a lot. I have better motivation to read because those stories are comparatively easier. Perhaps those who are at a higher level will find it too simple. (comment #27)

I have learned grammar as the books are written in authentic language. I don’t feel I learn as many new words as I could have, though. Occasionally some unfamiliar words do show up in the text. (comment #28)

I feel more comfortable now reading aloud the books. I am not as afraid to speak in front of other classmates. (comment #29)

Books we read in this class have helped my speaking and reading comprehension. (comment #30)

Diverse Literacy Activities

A drawing activity was voted as the most interesting (15%) by the class. Following the book-reading on “The Missing Piece” series, students were instructed to draw a freeform shape which best describes themselves as people. Several students were randomly picked to recreate their drawing on the board for the whole class to see. One picture left a deep impression on the researcher: a balloon with flashy light saying “I want to be the center of attention but I am also sensitive.” The boy student explained that it was an imitation of Shel Silverstein’s artwork with a

twist. He saw himself as a balloon that floated high in the sky desiring all the attention. Meanwhile, a balloon could pop easily with one tiny needle. The researcher of this study was quite surprised by so many favorable comments the students gave since the inclusion of this activity was an impromptu idea.

The second successful activity was the mini-play (12%) on “Willy the Wimp.” Students were well prepared with props and costumes and all six groups gave decent performances. Even though it could be potentially awkward for some adult EFL learners, participants in this study seemed to appreciate the opportunity of performing a drama as a final project.

Similarly, the third popular activity (10%), Tableau, required that students in small groups create a “frozen picture” based on the book “Faithful Elephants.” Each individual then had to say a few lines best representing the role s/he took on, such as a starved elephant or an agonized zookeeper. Going beyond conventional grammar practices, this dramatic tableau activity makes readers feel empathic toward the characters in the story, and connects reading with making meaning. Students in this study completed the task spontaneously and seemed to have much fun.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

Reading children’s literature is fun. It reminds me so much of my childhood memory.
(comment #31)

The results of this study yield several pedagogical implications for EFL reading instruction. First, the students’ varied enjoyment of the provided storybooks have shown that reading is a private practice in which everyone brings in different prior experiences and interprets a given text from multiple perspectives. While this may appear troublesome for teachers who are working on planning appropriate reading materials for a particular course, the opposite is actually true. Since no one single book will be totally embraced or rejected, teachers are given a lot of leeway to pick out any and all texts that they believe to be theme-appropriate, culturally relevant, and that match the target learners’ current state of language development (Tseng, 2010). Moreover, even books receiving negative reviews from a class do not necessarily imply that they are not pedagogically beneficial. With proper prompting from a teacher, these same materials may instead provoke a reader’s intense emotional involvement, in which case s/he may begin to take stances as well as voice opinions regarding certain sensitive issues. Reading, at that point, will have gone far beyond word decoding for getting a test question correct, and instead brought forth a humanistic touch.

Next, participating students in this study responded enthusiastically to specific literacy activities, namely drawing and drama. Such reactions could be the result of them being educated in a system which has done little to change the overall passiveness that is prevalent in many language learning classrooms. To optimize the strengths of children’s literature, it seems essential that language teachers incorporate into the curriculum many more activities that facilitate artistic responses. Additionally, teachers must develop discussion activities that promote peer collaboration in constructing meaning, along with fostering multiple perspectives and critical reflections. Pair Reading, Questioning the Author (QtA), and Literature Circle (LC), to name just a few, are found to be effective interventions.

Third, the majority of the participating students revealed positive attitudes toward using children’s literature as the main reading material. The instructor’s choice of books may have puzzled them at first, as indicated in the survey, but the initial confusion soon turned into a high

degree of enjoyment and a sense of achievement. Clearly, when carefully planned and implemented, illustrated books can have a place in EFL adult reading classrooms. The key is probably that language teachers maintain flexibility. Contingent upon the nature of the classroom or students' needs or goals (Khatib et al., 2011), teachers can use children's literature as the primary source of reading material or as a supplement when they deem it to be necessary and appropriate. For example, in a writing course, "King & King" is a suitable free-writing prompt about gender stereotypes or same-sex marriage. Another book titled "Someday" would be a nice book to share with young adult college students simply for sole pleasure as, first time in life, they are far away from their families. Should the school curriculum mandate a fixed schedule, which makes using children's literature impossible in the class, teachers might want to consider directing students to free online resources (e.g., International Children's Digital Library) for extracurricular reading. Constantly exposed to e-books that are of their own individual interests and levels, learners will quite likely become motivated readers who read extensively for meaning and pleasure.

In closing, language teachers resist using children's literature possibly so that they do not offend adult learners who likely have good education and high maturity level. They themselves may also fear being wrongfully seen as unprofessional for supplying seemingly "childish" storybooks to adult reading classes. These concerns, albeit legitimate, can be answered with a quote from Appelt (1985), "In the long run, the question is really whether or not you are comfortable with picture books yourself. If you are, then your students will be too and together you will find a whole new world of books" (p. 74). If a class is open to the opportunity of reading children's literature, as has been shown in this study, it seems EFL educators owe these adult learners (and perhaps themselves as well) to at least start considering using such alternatives.

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APPENDIX**Survey**

Faithful Elephants, Ish, Voices in the Park, King & King & Family, The Missing Piece, The Missing Piece Meets the Big O, Willy the Wimp.

1. How do you feel about reading children's literature in this class? Explain.

2. In general, how interesting or boring do you find those stories?

3. Which book do you like the best? Why?

4. Which book do you like the least? Why?

5. How difficult or easy do you find those stories?

6. Some people say children's literature is childish and inappropriate for adults. What do you think about this?

7. Do you think reading children's literature is helping your English skills? If yes, how? If not, why?

8. Which activity did you enjoy the best? Why?
