

ENHANCING YOUNG CHINESE LEARNERS' ENGLISH READING LITERACY BY
USING PICTURE BOOKS

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ENHANCING YOUNG CHINESE LEARNERS' ENGLISH READING LITERACY BY
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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Laura Anderson

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) points out that reading literacy consists of reading proficiency as well as reading attitude and behaviors (Li, 2013). This research is built on teaching English reading through the use of picture books and focuses on the impact that the use of picture books has on young Chinese learners' English reading literacy. Moreover, the PIRLS also states that pictures can enhance learners' reading proficiency and develop their positive reading attitude as well as good reading behaviors.

Research into the use of picture books in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom has led to several conclusions. First, ESL learners' reading literacy is significantly enhanced by picture books. Second, English picture books conform to the cognitive features of students of upper-grades in primary schools. Third, picture books can improve their reading proficiency and attract their interest in the process of reading. These books can enrich students' vocabulary and improve their reading comprehension. Fourth, for reading courses, teachers should select engaging English picture books and take the cognitive features of primary students of upper-levels into consideration, in order to give full play to the role that illustrated English storybooks play in developing reading comprehension and improving students' reading proficiency.

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Chapter I Introduction

In the era of the knowledge economy, there is a consensus in developed countries that one's reading literacy impacts his or her creativity and individual development. It is an important indicator of a nation's prospective competitiveness. Therefore, reading literacy has attracted the attention of international education. One important research project in the area of international education is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). It is an international comparative study of the reading literacy of Grade Four students in America and other participating countries. The study was initiated in 2001 and has been conducted every five years since then. Mullis et al. (2007) stated that the "PIRLS indicates that the value of reading literacy is changing along with the development of economy and culture" (p. 34). Currently, reading literacy is not only determined by reading proficiency, but also by reading behaviors and attitudes. Piro (2002) strongly believed that the ability to read is "a basic skill that children should acquire in language class. The driving force in extra-curriculum reading is a positive attitude, interest in reading and good reading behaviors" (p.126).

Ruddell (2005) asserted that English has become "a lingua franca" in many parts of the world, and many classical picture books written in other languages have been translated into English for language teaching (p. 15). Kim (2010) observed that a majority of overseas primary and middle school language teachers have successfully made full use of picture books (p. 109). According to Huang (2014), young Chinese students have "poor reading competence, insufficient reading skills, and little interest in reading materials. Additionally, English picture books are not taken seriously by teachers and readers" (p.47). Therefore, few current teachers have any experience teaching English reading through picture books, and schools are unaware of the value of this reading material. Children have no knowledge of and little access to reading

materials. In other words, English picture books have not been popularized or widely introduced to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in China. Hence, this study is an analysis of the influence and use of picture books for Chinese instructors and students.

Statement of the Problem

At present, there are some problems with reading literacy in Chinese EFL classes. According to recent domestic surveys, young learners' English reading literacy is of great concern. Fang (2013) found that "children are more inclined to indulge in the digital world now" (p. 22). Children would rather spend more free time playing computer games and watching television than reading books. As a result, reading time has given way to this fast-paced, media-driven world with its increasingly vivid visual experiences. Meanwhile, primary schools that are teaching English literature in China have been confronted with many problems. Yu (2008) conducted an empirical study and generalized two of the most common ones. On the one hand, English reading materials in China are wanting and not as good as they need to be. Most reading materials are confined to English textbooks, and they are not difficult enough to challenge the brightest students. On the other hand, some teachers regard reading training as doing overload exercises, asking the students to drill as much as possible, while others practice the traditional "vocabulary-and-grammar" way in which teachers fragment reading materials into words and sentences. Willis (1996) suggested that this teaching method goes against the "whole language approach," which focuses on language meaning and contextual skills (p. 45). Yu (2008) concluded that many English educators believe there is a need to improve young learners' reading literacy.

Definition of Terms

Picture Books

A picture book combines pictures with text in a large font format (Chao, 2004). According to Kiefer (1995), “picture books are one type of multimodal text; the meaning of the whole involves the weaving together of multiple modes, including the linguistic, visual, spatial, and gestural. We intentionally write picture books as one word to emphasize these multiple modes” (p. 97). In other words, the term “picture book” as used in this paper refers to a book that does not have many words or sentences, but rather a combination of pictures and words that can encode meaning.

Reading Literacy

Andre and Antra (2008) defined the term “reading literacy” as “the capability to comprehend and use the literary language commanded by society or valued by oneself” (p. 16). Several definitions have also been proposed by the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Zhi, 2012). According to Zhi, the latest elaboration of reading literacy in 2011 stated that “young readers can construct meaning in the process of reading various types of text and gain pleasure in group reading at school and in daily life” (p. 67).

Purpose of the Study

This study centers around research on the effect of English picture books on young Chinese learners’ reading literacy in light of the data collected. This paper aims to carry out research on picture books in order to potentially contribute to the field of English reading strategies and young learners’ extra-curricular reading. To achieve this objective, this study will respond to three research questions:

1. What are the features of picture books?
2. What is the influence of picture books on developing young Chinese learners' English reading literacy?
3. How can picture books be used to enhance young Chinese learners' English reading literacy?

Significance of the Study

Studies of language usage have found that superior language development has a close and positive relationship with reading achievement. Therefore, picture book reading programs for EFL learners promote the development of the other three basic language skills and improve their readiness for developing reading comprehension abilities.

Methodology

This study will be qualitative in nature. First, a brief review of the literature on the features of picture books used in English as a Second Language (ESL) will be conducted. Then, a review of the influence of picture books on developing young Chinese learners' reading literacy will be conducted. Lastly, a review of the uses of picture books in ESL classes will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and synthesized, and recommendations will be made.

Chapter II Review of Literature

This literature review will first examine the characteristics of picture books as used in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, and then the influence of picture books on the development of young Chinese learners' reading literacy in English will be reviewed. Finally, the use of picture books in ESL classes will be reviewed.

The Features of Picture Books

As researchers have defined and demonstrated, besides the illustrations and texts, picture books possess many other qualities and features. These include various topics, subjects, repeated words, sentence structure, illustrations, and aesthetic enjoyment. Huck, Hepler and Hickman (1987) spoke highly of illustrations in picture books and considered them as great works of art "...because illustrators apply themselves to experiments with color, form, and a variety of media ranging from collage, cut paper, and chalk to watercolor and wood engravings" (p.12).

Meanwhile, Henry and Simpson (2001) agreed that picture books are fascinating for old and young alike, as picture books are the combination of attractive illustrations and great writing. Moreover, they expanded on the features of picture books and compared them to "portable art galleries" (p. 27). In other words, instructors are aware that the art of picture books contributes to students' emotional development and academic success.

Bishop and Hickman (1992) agreed that picture books provide a variety of opportunities for learners to combine excellent artistic works and photographs with different themes and subjects. Moreover, they stated that picture books help students, especially visual learners, increase aesthetic satisfaction. As mentioned above, multiple themes are one feature of picture books, but what are the themes and why does this feature help ESL learners? The conclusion is

that picture books refer to different subjects, such as common sense, science, technology, logic information, real-life situations and even personality training. Lin (2012) analyzed several of these themes and found a relationship between the themes and various intelligences, such as linguistic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence and naturalistic intelligence. These intelligences can be found in different subjects, such as science, situational conversations, interpersonal relations, and environment consciousness. By combining various interests and topics, picture books can broaden students' horizons, enrich their life experiences and develop their cognitive abilities. That is to say, the characteristics of picture books are not only repeated words and sentences, but also diversified themes and subjects that can improve learners' other skills and abilities. The popular visual resource of picture books is better than video because reading picture books is more interactive. Reading picture books is much more like a live play performance, and each time can be different. Therefore, given the advantages of picture books, various methods should be found to help learners use picture books effectively.

The Influence of Picture Books in Developing Young Chinese Learners' English Reading Literacy

Studies in European and American countries. Picture books have been around for more than three hundred years in Europe. Studies about picture books in Europe were initiated earlier than in mainland China and now are deeper and more comprehensive than ten years ago. Several experts and scholars have discussed picture books from various perspectives, such as reading and reading education, reading obstacles and EFL learners' reading development, supplementary functions in curriculum, and selection criteria.

As mentioned above, picture books play an important role in the history of education, and most researchers have recognized the significance of picture books in education. Mitchell (2002) combined definitions and advantages of picture books and proposed that picture books are so

special and popular because of their attractive bright colors and beautiful illustrations. Mitchell (2002) stated that “no matter what the reader’s age is, most of us still enjoy reading picture books because they delight our senses, touch our emotions, appeal to our whimsy, and bring back memories of our childhood” (p. 96). Nodelman and Reimer (2003) added that picture books address various cultural aspects of European countries, including vivid and understandable illustrations, rich and interesting texts, profound and meaningful subjects, unique styles and interesting cultural changes. Moreover, Heuvel, Boogaard and Doig (2009) conducted observational research on picture books in the language classroom. Their findings hinted that illustrations and drawings in picture books are “...inviting to children and help them remember and retain information; similarly, picture books open new vistas to teaching strategies of reading comprehension explicitly” (p. 132). In other words, in the process of reading picture books, readers decode the words in the book by studying both texts and illustrations. Reading picture books develops reading strategies as well as decodes texts. This implies that readers need a variety of strategies to decode meaning and to mix and analyze text and pictures in different perspectives and teaching skills. As mentioned above, picture books provide important opportunities for teaching reading comprehension strategies, and they help students decode reading through illustrations.

Related studies have indicated that picture books play an increasingly important role in reading. Chomsky (1972) stated that the introduction and use of literature with children is positively associated with the development of complex language structures, including vocabulary and syntax. Picture books are useful for students who have difficulty in reading or who use English as their second or foreign language. Neal (1992) concurred, stating that picture books in content subjects are especially helpful for less able readers and English as a second or foreign

language learners. Picture books can interpret literary elements well. In a language class, the reading load of picture books is lighter than that of novels or textbooks, for there is less text, and the pictures carry part of the information by providing clues to unfamiliar vocabularies (Huck et al., 1987). Middleboro Youth Advocates in Massachusetts (MYAM) launched a reading campaign in 2004, which offered aid to children with reading disabilities. Jack Healey and Tony McAlear, cognitive psychologists in Canada and the directors of MYAM, found that once children associated pictures with words, they could successfully understand the word meaning and figure out the whole sentence. In other words, picture books with matching words and pictures can effectively improve children's reading and cognitive abilities. Furthermore, Peregoy and Boyle (1993) conducted a cognitive analysis of Healey and McAlear's research, which showed that picture books provide context and background for people who have poor reading ability. The importance of picture books for readers, especially less able readers, is that reading picture books not only enhances reading abilities but also improves cognitive performance, which includes remembering and reasoning.

In addition to increasing readers' motivation and providing extensive knowledge, picture books are more likely to focus on a concept more deeply than textbooks (Huck et al., 1987). Martinez, Roser and Strecker (2000) came to a similar conclusion. In their research, they introduced students to a number of perspectives on a topic and concluded that picture books focus more on a topic and explore it in greater depth than a textbook does. In other words, picture books help students learn more about the world. Picture books supply students with content material and specific illustrations for knowledge, thinking, and learning. It must be pointed out that picture books also provide a story line, typically lacking in textbooks, that can personalize concepts as the reader or listener comes to know the characters in the story.

Only certain kinds of picture books should be used in a language class. Farris and Fuhler (1994) concluded that picture books should have attractive stories, illustrations and real-life information. They can also expand the content of class topics, enrich the target language and help language learners reflect on text, and differentiate facts from opinions. Goodwin (2008) had similar views on the selection of picture books. Farris, Fuhler and Goodwin all highlighted the elements that should be included in picture books, such as reading comprehension strategies, relevance to the learners' real life, length and accessibility. The process of choosing a picture book should include whether it can meet the learner's objectives and age.

Studies in China. English is a foreign language for Chinese students. Therefore, they rarely have authentic settings in which to learn this language. With the popularity of English, teachers and educators take great effort to provide students with original English materials. After observing the application of picture books in China, scholars in Taiwan made great contributions to the study of picture books. Some researchers developed the implementation of cooperative learning through student-made picture books. They also integrated life education into picture books' instruction for upper-levels in elementary schools in order to address young learners' self-concept, values and attitudes toward life.

Although studies on picture books in English classes have only recently been conducted on mainland China, picture books have gained attention from researchers and teachers, especially since 2000. Some of this research has dealt with the use of English picture books as a stimulus to increase class efficiency; the role English picture books play in the cognitive development of children; and the value of English picture books in students' reading.

Taking the value and effectiveness of English picture books into consideration, many teachers and educators agree that picture books are helpful for both teachers and students. Ye

(2013) stated that picture books could promote students' expression and comprehension as well as improve memory, imagination and manipulating ability. Ye proved that picture books could stimulate students' interest and expand the understanding of different cultures. As for English teachers, picture books play a vital role in teaching reading and can create a natural and authentic English environment in which students can use the target language for communication with confidence.

It is possible to draw the conclusion that picture books will gradually be used more frequently by teachers and educators in mainland China. Some researchers have carried out experiments to verify that picture books can improve students' proficiency and assist teachers in delivering a higher quality reading education. In her research, Jian (2000) demonstrated the feasibility of using picture books as reading materials for English beginners and pointed out that, with the help of repeated sentences in picture books, it is easier for students to understand the meaning of new words and keep sentence structures in mind. Zhao (2009) attempted to test whether the practice of a storytelling program in an English class could be applied by students to improve their reading ability. In a forty-minute class, she spent twenty-five minutes on the prescribed textbook and fifteen minutes in a storytelling program. Ten months later, the data, gathered from pre-tests, post-tests, questionnaires and other forms of assessment, demonstrated that a storytelling program in an English class is conducive to improving students' reading proficiency and enlarging their vocabulary. After comparing and analyzing the data gathered in different experimental conditions, Zhao stated that, in the process of teaching reading comprehension through picture books, students at different levels could improve their reading proficiency by completing different reading assignments. Students' interest in reading should be stimulated, their vocabulary should be enlarged and correct strategies should be adopted. As

mentioned above, most researchers agreed that picture books help learners improve their proficiency reading.

Using Picture Books to Enhance Young Chinese Learners' English Reading Literacy

Exploration of using picture books. Since 2002, many English teaching institutions for children, such as the website Cat's Educational Group in Taipei, recommend picture books to kindergarten and primary school students, because picture books can attract students through wonderful stories and beautiful pictures, while also influencing students emotionally. Similarly, in "Integrating Picture Books into a Child's Life," Li (2011) said that "students in some primary schools in Hong Kong have a one-hour English reading activity called 'reading workshop' after school" (p. 36).

In Singapore, English teaching generally starts in kindergarten, and the textbooks are introduced from the United States and Canada (Zhao, 2009). Zhao came to the conclusion that literary works are introduced to influence children in primary school textbooks, and most texts are excerpted or adapted from famous English fairy tales, myths, ancient legends, folk tales and poems. Similarly, English picture books are even more widely used to improve reading in the United Kingdom and the United States, and there are many fine graded reading materials, such as *Oxford Reading Tree* by Oxford University Press, *Fountas and Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention Books* by Heinemann and *Scott Foresman Reading Street* by Pearson Education. As mentioned above, picture books can be conducive to the cultivation of love and aesthetics for literary works as learners are influenced by literary works in the English language at an early age.

Li (2013) stated that the strategy of using picture books to teach reading has been used in Taiwan for many years. He noted that picture books could make up the deficiencies of teaching

English and that they are useful in improving students' reading proficiency. Picture books not only improve reading proficiency, but also have other advantages. Li read English books to students not only to let them know a story but also to use the attractiveness of the stories, the repetition of words in stories and the contextual logic of stories to improve students' multi-intelligence abilities. Moreover, picture books can develop a student's habit of reading original English books independently in the future. In Li's opinion, the most profound improvement in learning English does not occur in a lively classroom, but in independent study by learners themselves. It means that students do not find fun in extensively reading English books without first intensively reading English picture books. Students who want to strengthen their reading skills should pay more attention to reading habits, as they will lay a solid foundation for the sustainable development of reading. In other words, more than improving reading proficiency, picture books can help learners develop reading habits that play an important role in reading proficiency and literacy education.

The role of English picture books in learners' cognitive development should be stated. Wang (2014) discussed the standards for selecting picture books, the effective integration of textbooks and picture books in the classroom, and educational strategies developed through teaching experiments, questionnaire surveys and interviews. Wang substantiated the claim that English picture books conform to the cognitive characteristics of primary school students and can improve students' reading literacy, leading to a significant increase in their vocabulary and greater use of more sophisticated sentence patterns. Moreover, reading picture books can help students use effective learning strategies to improve their reading comprehension, and students can experience the joy of reading while strengthening their reading skills. Wang also stated that "English picture books should be selected following the principle of conforming to students'

cognitive features, stimulating students' interest and motivation in reading and facilitating the effective integration with textbooks" (p.28).

Other researchers also concluded that teaching reading through picture books could not only stimulate the young learner's motivation, but also enhance students' reading comprehension and enlarge their vocabulary (Chao, 2004). Chao's research subjects were learners around nine years old, and the picture book applied in her research refers to a storybook with large print and simple but colorful pictures to be used for the development of pre-school learners' reading skills. Moreover, picture books also help improve the reading proficiency of higher-grade students in primary school. Zhang (2014) conducted several experimental and empirical studies that focused on teaching reading with picture books to upper-level students. Zhang conducted this research in order to examine the benefits of picture books on the development of language and imagination in young learners in primary school. Based on his research, Zhang proved that picture books could be used to enhance learners' reading literacy.

Criteria for selecting English picture books. After reviewing the features of picture books, Zhang (2014) concluded that the theme and plot of picture books should be the main criteria used in the process of selecting picture books. Teachers can choose various themes in accordance with the learners' life experience and cognitive patterns. These themes are conducive to developing students' positive emotions, attitudes and values. In addition, the stories should follow predictable plot lines. In the process of reading stories, teachers can pose questions and set situations to have students predict the development of the story. In order to use picture books more effectively in the classroom, several selection criteria should be considered.

Wang (2014) asserted that language features and students' language proficiency are important factors to be considered in selecting picture books. He found that picture books with more repeated sentence structures are strongly recommended. In other words, if students have a better understanding of the meaning expressed in the sentence, they can apply the sentence structure to real-life communication. Teachers should choose a series of picture books with increasingly difficult vocabulary. This progressive accumulation of words and sentences makes stories easier for students to understand. Finally, the difficulty level of picture books should be based on students' language proficiency, and narrative sections should be relatively short. However, if most of the words in picture books are beyond the students' comprehension, the story will soon lose its appeal.

Summary

To summarize, the selection of picture books should conform to teaching aims and to learners' language level and cognitive features. Moreover, EFL learners' reading literacy is significantly enhanced by picture books because they contribute to students' understanding and memorization of vocabulary. Meanwhile, more access to interesting and true-to-life English picture books can attract students' interest in reading more and develop a positive reading attitude and good reading behaviors.

Chapter III Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study set out to clarify the relationship between English picture books and learners' reading literacy. The major conclusions are summarized below.

First, reading picture books builds a sense of story structure that tallies with young learners' cognitive characteristics, attracts their interest and motivates them to read independently. Thus, this kind of reading material can be fully applicable to EFL learners. Students experience an improvement in reading proficiency in terms of retrieval of explicitly stated information, making straightforward inferences, integrating information, and guessing word meanings.

Second, picture books can extend students' ability to be independent in decoding unknown words through context clues. Meaningful context makes new words clear to them, and they are able to guess word meaning and build vocabulary, which contributes to the development of greater reading proficiency.

Third, not only do English picture books provide meaningful context, which encourages the student's enthusiasm in reading exploration, but they also stimulate the reader's willingness to do extra-curricular reading at home. The student gradually develops an appetite for reading, tends to voluntarily spend more time in reading after class and consciously tries to apply the reading strategies on his or her own. In other words, picture books influence the development of learners' positive reading attitudes and good reading behaviors.

The conclusions above not only cast light upon the significance of English picture books in reading, but also put forward a new path for teaching reading. Teaching reading through

picture books is regarded as a new way to enhance learners' reading proficiency, as well as improve their reading attitudes and behaviors.

Recommendations

The influence of multimedia technology on reading literacy should be included in future research. Teachers should take into account their students' varying levels of reading proficiency when selecting picture books for classroom use. Teachers should make use of varied resources, such as libraries and websites, in the selection of picture books. Picture books can also be generated by the translation of original Chinese texts into English, and students can be encouraged to write and illustrate their own picture books.

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