A Study of Preschool Children's Second Language Acquisition From the Perspective of Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development Stages
——A Comparison between *Raz* and *Oxford Reading Tree*

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ABSTRACT

Through a comparative study, this paper explores the needs of preschool children in second language acquisition under the guidance of Piaget's cognitive development stage theory, and aims at finding out the characteristics of picture books should contain when they are used by Chinese preschool children in second language acquisition. According to the analysis of Piaget's theory of pre-operational children's cognitive development characteristics, it is argued that the theory can be used as a standard to evaluate picture books for children at different stages, and it is also argued that picture books targeted at preschool children should have the following features: transformation from descriptive senses to communicative senses, games with rules, anthropologic animals and objects, as well as exquisite details. Most of the picture books pay attention to the anthropomorphism of animal images, while games with rules are often ignored. This study provides a new criterion for the selection of picture books for Chinese preschool second language educators and a new method for the researches of preschool children's second language acquisition.

Keywords: Second language education; preschool children; picture books; cognitive development.

1. Introduction

The development of children's language ability is always one of the most important topics in linguistic research. The researches on that topic has expanded from that on children's mother tongue acquisition to their second language acquisition of which the most famous achievement is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH).

In the last half-century, scholars led by Penfield and Lenneberg have been making efforts to study the relationship between the age of learners and their second language acquisition ability (Penfield, 1959; Lenneberg, 1967). Based on the study of the impact of second language education on children's language development, Ronjat and Leopold have also conducted researches on its influence on children's cognition and concluded that an early second language education can promote the development of children's abstract cognitive ability (Ronjat 1913; Leopold 1970). In the recent decade, many researchers have explored the practical approaches and methods of children's second language education through classroom practice (Skibbe, 2016; Sheridan, S.& Gjems, L, 2017; Schwartz, 2014).

In China, the study of it has only a short history of 20 years, while researches conducted by foreign scholars on preschool children's second language acquisition have been carried out for more than 100 years. According to the current situation of early childhood English education in China, numerous scholars have been exploring the teaching methods and teaching models of it (Liao Shengdao, 2002: 139-141). Among them, the most famous and widely accepted is the English Immersion Teaching model (Qin & He, 2017; Wang & Dou, 2018). Additionally, from 2010 to 2019 researches were conducted on other methods which are widely used in children's English classes such as the TPR (Total Physical Response) teaching method, games used in the classroom and picture books (Zhang Hong, 2019; Wang Yanmin, 2019).

In the recent five years, scholars such as Guo, Wang and Shi have been researching the application of English picture books in English classes and most of them mainly focus on primary and secondary school English reading, spelling, thinking training (Guo Xiaonan, 2019; Wang Mengxue, 2017). However, it is found that there are only a

few pieces of research on the characteristics of popular English picture books. Therefore, under the guidance of Piaget's cognitive development stage theory, this paper will make attempts to compare the popular English picture books in China, and finally select the most suitable picture books for Chinese preschool children's English learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Piaget's Cognitive Development Stage Theory

Piaget divided children's cognitive development into four stages: Sensorimotor Stage (from birth to about two years old); Pre-operational Stage (about two to six or seven years old); Concrete Operational Stage (from about six or seven years old to about eleven or twelve years old); Formal operational stage (from around 11-12 to 14-5 years old).
The research object of this paper is preschool children in the pre-operational stage during which their spoken language develops rapidly, which promotes the development of concepts. At this stage, children's mental activities are gradually completed through concept and representation. But the reasoning is still dominated by perception, and children do not have the ability of reversible reasoning. This kind of "practical intelligence" plays a very important role in this stage, which is an extension of pure instinct behavior in the Sensorimotor stage. At the same time, it also prepares children for further development of various thinking and logic in the later stages, which is a continuous developing stage connecting the preceding and the following.

2.1.1 Socialization

2.1.1.1 Socialization of Language

In this stage, children's talk can be divided into two categories: ego-centric and socialized. Ego-centric language is made up of repetition, monologue, and collective monologue, and they are egocentric mainly because the purpose of the speaker is not to make the audience understand, but to entertain himself or herself and there is often no communication (Piaget, 2005: 5-6). However, children become increasingly social over time, as "the individual is not born social, but progressively becomes it. (ibid, 1963: 6)". At the beginning of this stage, children's language is generally ego-centric, but it has been evolving to show us progressive socialization of thought, and the children in later of that stage (about 7 years old) already have the characteristics of socialization (ibid, 2005: 44-45).

2.1.1.2 Socialization in Games

At this stage, the development of children's socialization is also reflected in the games with rules (Piaget& Inhelder, 1969: 119). According to Piaget's observation, the children in the early pre-operational stage cannot understand the rules, but they play the game as if they know them, and each game player can win. There is no common rule to restrict each other's behavior. Not until they reach the age of seven or eight did they start to care about winning the game, as well as the rules. For the first time in these games, collaboration has emerged. Players are convinced that there are needs to be some kind of rule that everyone has to follow, and they do abide them in the game. These behaviors are obviously social. The rules of the game can be divided into two categories: "those which are handled down, and those which are sporadic". The rules of the first category are often inherited from older children to younger children, while the socialization brought by the rules of the second category is more about the result of the relationship between equals and contemporaries (Piaget, 1999:142-146).

2.1.1.3 Animism

Piaget believes one of the characteristics of the behavior and thinking of pre-operational children is ego-centrism. In other words, children can neither understand the role of others nor understand their views. He believes that everyone thinks the same thing as himself and in the same way as himself. Therefore, within the scope of his involvement, he never doubted his thinking, because it was the only possibility, and therefore it must be correct. The egotism at this period is not intentional because children do not realize that they are self-centered and therefore never attempt to solve it (Wadsworth, 2004: 66). Being ego-centric also makes them have the characteristics of Animism, that is to say, children in this period have a psychological tendency of regarding all things as living and conscious things and they see everything as alive, thoughtful and active. This tendency can, therefore, explain the phenomenon that preschool children talk to teddy bears and make friends with pillows.

2.1.1.4 Centration

Another characteristic of pre-operational thought is what Piaget called the Centration. When presenting a visual stimulus to a child, he tends to focus his attention on the limited perception of the stimulus. Children do not seem to be able to "explore" all aspects of stimulation. Children lack the overall grasp of things and tend to center on the perceptual aspects of objects. Only with the passage of time and the accumulation of experience, can they become able to "decenter" and evaluate perceptual events in a coordinated way with the participation of cognition. By the age of six to seven, children have reached the level that

cognition presents their proper forms of perception in thinking (ibid, 2004: 68-69).

2.2 Popular English Picture Books

Chinese front-line English teachers found that the original picture book written by native English writers very suitable for teaching preschool children, so the educational community began to try to localize the teaching of English picture books (Lian Rong, 2018: 230). At the same time, many parents also regard the original English picture book as the best way for children's English enlightenment. A range of original English picture books such as The Very Hungry Caterpillar, A classic case of Dr. Seuss, and picture books written by Eric Carle are widely welcomed in China (Yang chenwenjuan & Sun Junxiu, 2019; Dai Zuoxin, 2016). The following table lists the sales volumes of the popular English picture books on taobao.com, the largest online shopping platform in China.

SALES OF THE POPULAR PICTURE BOOKS IN CHINA		
NAMES	SALES VOLUMES	AVERAGE SCORE
A Classic Case of Dr. Seuss	375	4.8
Heinemann	1769	4.9
The Very Hungry Caterpillar	3890	4.9
My Mum &My Dad	676	4.8
Oxford Reading Tree	18610	4.9
Raz	3110	4.9

From the above table, we know that The Very Hungry Caterpillar, Oxford Reading Tree, and Raz are the best-selling picture books with a score of 4.9 and a sales volume of more than 3000. Meanwhile, through empirical research, it is found that graded English reading materials can improve the reading strategies and reading comprehension ability of readers who learn English as a second language (Wu Yanman, 2018: 89). On taobao.com, the sales volume and average score of two sets of English picture books are relatively high. As of the day of writing this paper, the specific sales situation is as follows:

SALES OF RAZ AND OXFORD READING TREE			
	Monthly sales volume	Cumulative evaluation	Average score
RAZ	1459	18610	4.9
OXFORD READING TREE	533	3110	4.9

Therefore, this paper will make a comparative analysis of Raz and Oxford Reading Tree, two sets of graded English picture books that are highly accepted and highly praised in China.

3. Comparison Between Raz and Oxford Reading Tree

This section will make attempts to describe and compare the characteristics of AA level picture books of Raz (designed for children who are 4-6 years old) and level 1-3 of Oxford Reading Tree (designed for children who are 4-5 year old) in detail through three aspects: content design, characteristics of pictures and texts, and grading standards.

3.1 Raz

Raz, the abbreviation of Reading A-Z, is one of the most popular English graded reading materials on the market. In the United States, more than 10,000 public schools put it into their children's daily homework, and most of China's international schools are also loyal users of Raz.

3.1.1 Content Design

The AA level of Raz contains 93 picture books and each book is written and illustrated by different professionals. As the initial level of this set of picture books, every book of AA level has eight to nine pages containing two or three simple words in the same theme. The purpose of each book to present the story through the combination of repeated short sentence patterns and vivid pictures which is in line with the characteristics of children's psychological and cognitive development (Li Changmei, 2017: 135). Among them, 36 books set up "Focus Questions" that are related to the theme at the beginning, which guide children to read with questions and help them better understand the theme. This has been seen in the case of the picture book The Baseball Game, there is the "Focus Question" of "What can you see at a baseball game?" listed at the beginning of

it. After the book, there are 35 of them designed after reading exercises that are related to writing and art, math, science, and social studies, linking the content of picture books with other disciplines.

As for the themes selected for the books, some of them cover certain natural phenomena. The book which is under the theme of water introduces that water forms different substances under different temperatures so that children can acquire scientific knowledge while learning new words. Besides, not only family scenes such as bathing and cooking are reflected in this series, other social places including school, subway, and bookstore are also introduced in this set of picture books. Finally, some of the stories in the picture book also play an educational role in children's daily words and deeds, as can be seen in the book Too Many Sweets shows the consequences of eating too much candy.

3.1.2 Characteristics of Pictures and Texts

Raz picture books are not only illustrated by caricatures created by painters, but also by pictures of real objects. The main content of the photos is mostly children and animals, but some of the real objects are out of date. For example, the children's clothes in the photos do not accord with the favorite styles of children nowadays. Moreover, the sharpness of the photos is lower than the current standard. Because the illustrators of each picture book are not the same, the whole set of books does not have a unified painting style.

3.1.3 Grading Standards

According to the Raz website, The Learning A-Z Text Leveling System determines the complexity of the text according to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) that evaluates student reading materials in three areas of text complexity. Firstly, qualitative measures including predictability of text, text structure and organization, and other features can only be evaluated by a human reader are used in the evaluation. In addition, CCSS also depends on quantitative measures that include factors such as average sentence length, number of syllables per word, and the total number of different words to define the text complexity. Finally, because each reader brings different skills, background, and motivation to the act of reading, consideration of the reader and the reading task makes up the final part of CCSS.

Under the guidance of CCSS, AA level which is the initial level of Raz grading reading system shows the following features: 3.5 words average; 21–40 words total; repetition of high-frequency words; 2–6 words per line; 1 line per page; 10 pages; complete sentences; predictable language; familiar topics; one-to-one text-to-picture correspondence; consistent text placement; repetitive pattern with one-word change per page.

In summary, the texts in picture books in the AA level contain short sentences that are made up of high-frequent words and the chosen topics are also closely related to the readers' daily life.

3.2 Oxford Reading Tree

Oxford Reading Tree is a set of reading materials aimed at cultivating the reading interest of English-speaking preschool and primary school children, which has the reputation of "the nation's favorite reading scheme". In China, many international schools choose *Oxford Reading Tree* as their teaching material, and many families use this set of picture books to enlighten their children in learning English.

3.2.1 Content Design

Oxford Reading Tree picture books are divided into two series: First Stories and Phonics. Level one and Level two contain six picture books in each series, while Level three has four books.

Each book in the First Stories series includes one or two simple but amusing stories, all of which have the same protagonists: Biff, Chip, and Kipper. In this series, children can easily understand the plot of the stories and the meaning of short sentences by connecting them with pictures. These stories do not just aim at introducing new words by repeating the same sentence patterns, but to "help build children's confidence at this early stage" (Kate, R & Annemarie, 2014:14). On the first page of each book, there are tips that guide parents and children how to read them and the main words that appear in this book. Also, there is a little game that requires readers to spot a small icon that appears in the pictures. An example of this is that readers are required to find a shell in the pictures of the story *Get On*. After each story, there are after reading exercises in the form of games, including the maze, spotting differences in similar pictures and role-playing.

As for Phonics series, six books in level one have six distinctive targets: "*Kipper's Alphabet I Spy* introduces each letter of the alphabet and the sound it represents; *Chip's Letter Sounds* reinforces and practices letter sounds; *Biff's Wonder Words* introduces simple three-letter words; *Floppy's Fun Phonics* and *Biff's Fun Phonics* practice reading simple captions and sentences; *Kipper's Rhymes* introduces simple rhymes" (ibid. 2014: 13). Books in level two and three, however, contains short stories that children can practice new letter patterns while reading the sentences. In this series, the tips given at the beginning plays a vital role in instructing the parents to guide the children to read the words and practice the pronunciation. There is also a little game and a list of main sounds requires practicing in each book in this series. Though the main focus of Phonic is to practice oral ability, the words and sentences still matches perfectly with the pictures. Young readers can still find a lot of fun doing puzzles and getting out of mazes at the end of the books.

3.2.2 Characteristics of Pictures and Texts

The illustrations of the whole set of Oxford Reading Tree picture books are drawn around the cartoon images of Biff, Chip and Kipper and their family and all of them conform with a unified style. The cover of each book is based on a different color, which can easily attract children's attention. The game listed on the first page of each book helps to reinforce the readers' attention to the details in the pictures. Also, in the Phonics series, children sometimes need to match the corresponding words with the items and actions in the pictures, therefore each item has prominent characteristics so that the readers can quickly lock in the target.

3.2.3 Grading Standards

According to the handbook *Helping Your Child to Read (level 1-3)*, level one picture books are designed for children who can listen to a story and retell bits of it, recognize their names and some letter sounds, pick out patterns and details in pictures, and sustain concentration for 5-10 minutes. Level two picture books are for children who can read short sentences with simple two and three letter words, recognize 5-10 common tricky words by sight (e.g. *the, and*), and build sentences using familiar words. Level three is for children who can read words and sentences containing less common letters, as well as *sh, ch, th*, recognize 10-20 common tricky words by sight (e.g. *was, you, they*), recognize all the letter sounds at the beginning and end of words, and use some expression when they re-read books (Kate, R & Annemarie, 2014:8).

On the *Oxford Reading Tree* official website, there present an explanation of Oxford Levels which "offer a detailed, finely graded progression - taking learners from their very first steps in reading, all the way up to being skillful, independent readers". There might be simple captions and very short sentences that are made up of common, predictable words that are easy to work out using simple phonics. "Books with words offer the opportunity to practice tracking the words from left to right, and to use children's knowledge of letters and sounds to begin working out some simple words".

Obviously, picture books of *Oxford Reading Tree* level 1-3 correspond with the Oxford Level One. "At this stage, children are just beginning to learn about books and reading. Children at this level can listen to and enjoy stories that they would not be able to read by themselves and use pictures to help them work out what a book is about. They can give a simple response to a story, for example, saying whether they like it or not. With help, they can sometimes retell a story that they know very well - though their retelling may not be very accurate".

3.3 Comparison Between Raz and Oxford Reading Tree

3.3.1 Similarities

In terms of grading standards, both sets of reading materials have their own standards. The initial levels of the two sets of picture books have short sentences containing high-frequency vocabulary that have a strong connection with pictures. In both Raz and Oxford Reading Tree, there are corresponding exercises designed before and after the books, so that readers can read with tasks and review the stories after reading.

3.3.2 Distinctions

As for the selected themes, what *Raz* covers ranges from festivals, social scenes to basic scientific knowledge, helping to increases their knowledge while helping children improve their reading ability. *Oxford Reading Tree*, however, seems to pay more attention to the improvement of children's reading ability. Therefore, the topics are relatively restricted to the life of the protagonist's family. There are tips and games listed before and after each *Oxford Reading Tree* book that form a fixed pattern, while not all *Raz* books can provide such exercises. More importantly, on the first page of each *Oxford Reading Tree* book there provides some suggestions to help parents guide their children to read these books using the correct methods.

The pictures of *Oxford Reading Tree* are all paintings within a unified style, while these of *Raz* are a combination of photos and paintings, with various styles. The advantages of painting all the pictures are that the author can have a better grasp of the details. In the *Oxford Reading Tree* picture books, each small item in the pictures has prominent characteristics, so that young readers can easily distinguish them. In addition, each book cover of *Oxford Reading Tree* has a different color as its background while *Raz* books use white as the unified background color. In comparison, the outlooks of *Oxford Reading Tree* books are more colorful which would attract children's attention more easily.

4. Selection of Picture Books for Preschool Children

According to Piaget's theory, children in the pre-operational stage show initial socialization, which is reflected in oral communication and games with rules. Besides, due to this stage of children's ego-centrism, they also show Animism. Also, they have the characteristics of Centration. Based on the characteristics of the pre-operational children, this paper infers what should be paid attention to in

selecting picture books for children in the pre-operation stage.

4.1 Descriptive Sentences Gradually Transiting into Communicative Ones

The pre-operation stage is a stage of the rapid development of children's language. In its early stage children do not have the intention to communicate with others, so their language is often reflected as monologues or collective monologues. However, in the later part of this stage, when children reach the age of about 7, their language communication gradually begins to take socialization as the purpose which shows that the socialization of children's language is a process of gradual development. Therefore, the sentences contained in picture books for preschool children should reflect the gradual transition to socialization as well: in the books of elementary levels, the main purpose of the language contained should be to describe the things that children are familiar with, and in the books of higher levers communicative sentences should be involved, and certain social scenes that might be a little new to the children can be introduced to the children.

According to Wadsworth (2004: 65-66), during the construction of social knowledge, oral language can be used as an effective means for children and other people to exchange ideas, which helps to make the social experience easier for children to understand. Therefore, it can be concluded that picture books should contain a vast range of topics, and vocabulary and sentences contained should also be presented in colloquialism to help readers have a better understanding of the content. In this way, children can increase social experience in the process of reading picture books, which is beneficial to their development in the later stages.

In the books of aa level in *Raz*, most of the texts are listing the names of the items in the pictures or describing their states. But the communicability is embodied in using simple sentences and vocabulary to express the protagonist's communication process in the book. In *The Fort*, the combination of text and pictures shows the readers the scene of three children playing games together. It is worth noting that, even in the same level of *Raz*, with the increase of the serial number, picture books that reflect communication appear more frequently. The first 30 books mostly show the family environment which the children are familiar with, while in the picture books later, other scenes such as school bus, playground, and the supermarket are added. In the last 20 books, the theme is further expanded to festivals such as Hanukka and Easter, to communicative scenes such as summer camp and birthday party, as well as to the social scenes like the airport and the bookstore.

In the Phonics series of *Oxford Reading Tree*, the choice of words and sentences is based on their pronunciation features, so their topics are relatively scattered. But they are still close to children's lives, and the form of them is very colloquial. In the First Stories books of *Oxford Reading Tree* level 1-3, the topics covered are relatively limited, mainly concentrated in the family life of the three protagonists. However, it is important to notice that every book contains some common expressions in oral communication besides the sentences describing pictures. With the rise of the book level and the increase of sentence length, the communication expression also appears more frequently, and the difficulty also increases. In *I Can Trick a Tiger* in Level 3, there are oral expressions such as "look out!", "Oh no!", "there is a bee on your nose."

4.2 Designing Games with Rules

The development of children's socialization can also be reflected while they engage in games with rules. By following the rules of the game with other players, children begin to communicate and cooperate with others, which further promotes their socialization. Moreover, according to Wadsworth, "[s]ocial knowledge is constructed by each child as he or she interactions with results and other children" (Wadsworth, 2004: 65). In the process of the game, the verbal communication of the game players can further promote the development of children's language and increase their social knowledge.

In *Raz*, some of the books have post-reading activities at the back of the book to connect the content of the book with other subjects. In the book *Green*, two suggestions are listed in the "connections" section after the book: (1) Writing and Art: thinking of something else that is green and found in nature and drawing a picture of it and label it. (2) Science: comparing two animals from the book and telling a partner how they are the same and how they are different. It can be seen that although the second proposal puts forward the requirement of communicating with others, it cannot be regarded as a game of rules in which children take pleasure.

There are games in every book of the *Oxford Reading Tree* series. However, most of them are visual games, such as "Spot the differences", "Maze", "Matching" and "Spot the pair", which do not involve many language exchanges.

4.3 Personification of Animals and Articles

Under the influence of egocentrism, children in the pre-operational stage also show characteristics of Animism, which is a tendency of children to regard everything as living and conscious things, which is a manifestation of children's assimilation of objects into their activities. It can be therefore inferred that anthropomorphic animals and objects should appear in picture books to participate in the stories which can be more in line with children's understanding of the world in pre-operational period, so as to help them understand the contents of picture books. This method can also be used to cultivate children's empathy.

Each book in the *Raz* series has a different protagonist, among which the animals are mostly personified when

they are the protagonists. In *Fido Gets Dressed*, the protagonist Fido is a dog. In the pictures, he is dressed in shoes, hats and other clothes. However, what appears in the text is "My shoes.", "My hat.", which are uttered by the will of Fido, the personified Fido. And the series of books that introduce prepositions to readers, such as *Out*, *Off*, and *In*, all contain animals with human thoughts as protagonists.

In the *Oxford Reading Tree* series, the dog floppy has always been one of the fixed protagonists. Its role in the story is more like a family member than just a pet, who has its thoughts and feelings. In *Floppy Did This* it draw together with the family, fish together in *Funny Fish*, and experience its own adventure in *Floppy and the Bone*.

4.4 Paying Extra Attention to Details

Another feature of the thinking of pre-operational children is centralization, that is, children can only focus on parts of the stimulus and will exaggerate and emphasize what they see and think. From this feature, it can be inferred that the drawings of the picture books should pay attention to the portray of every small detail. Even if an object is not the main body of a picture, its characteristics should also be highlighted, so that children readers' attention can have an accurate grasp of the content of the pictures even if their attention deviates from the main body. When depicting the person figures in the picture, their external characteristics should also be exaggerated, so that the readers can directly identify the identity of the figure through them.

The drawings of the *Raz* series are divided into two types: photos and paintings. Most of the photos contain only one main object, without any other accessories, and the books with paintings as illustrations may contain many details. On page 9 of *City Street*, there appear characters such as buskers, a puppy, and a kitten in the picture, all with obvious characteristics.

The illustrations of the *Oxford Reading Tree* series are all paintings, which makes them have more delicate details. Before each book, there is a little game to guide readers to pay attention to the details of every picture. The games behind the book, such as "Spot the differences", also consider the readers' tendency of paying attention to the details. Each character in the book has its distinctive features, such as Mom's big earrings and Biff's big bows, which makes it easy for young readers to distinguish them from each other.

4.5 The Criteria for Choosing Picture Books for Second Language Education

4.5.1 Comparison between Raz and Oxford Reading Tree

First of all, the table below shows whether the two sets of graded English picture books meet the four characteristics proposed:

COMPARISON BETWEEN RAZ AND OXFORD READING TREE				
	Gradually socialized sentences	Games with rules	Anthropomorphic animals and objects	Delicate details
RAZ	YES	NO	YES	NO
OXFORD READING TREE	NO	NO	YES	YES

It can be seen from the table that both sets of picture books personify animal characters, which is closer to the world view of preschool children. Both Raz and Oxford Reading Tree have their advantages in content design: the texts of Raz are more suitable for children's language socialization than that of Oxford Reading Tree; the attention to detail in the illustrations of Oxford Reading Tree is corresponding to preschool children's visual habits. However, it is a pity that neither of these two sets of picture books contain language games with fixed rules. Parents or teachers who want to use games to promote children's language socialization need to choose other picture books or organize games according to the story content. In this way, the plot of the Oxford Reading Tree will be more suitable for designing games such as role-playing than Raz. In addition to the above points, there are some other differences between the two sets of picture books. For example, Oxford Reading Tree has a special series that

aims to train English learners' pronunciation.

To sum up, for Chinese preschool English learners, Oxford Reading Tree picture books may be a better choice. However, from the perspective of expanding knowledge, Raz provides a wider range of content. So, if time permits, both sets of picture books should be thoroughly read. Teachers and parents can start with the Oxford Reading Tree, wait for their children's English level and reading ability to grow to a certain stage, and then continue to read both Oxford Reading Tree and Raz that are at the equivalent level.

4.5.2 New Criteria for Evaluating Picture Books

For English language learners, especially those who cannot understand a large amount of texts directly without the help of pictures, picture books can provide them with appropriate input through a small number of texts and

illustrations as comprehension aid (Krashen, 1985; Richard Amato, 1996; Hadaway & Munday, 1999). For pre-school English learners, English picture books that are suitable for their cognitive development characteristics can bring them more comprehensible input, and ultimately help them acquire English. According to Piaget's theory of the cognitive characteristics of children in the pre-operational stage, the picture books that are most beneficial for children in this stage should have the following features: the transformation from descriptive sentences to communicative sentences; games with rules; anthropomorphic animals and objects; and delicate details. When choosing picture books as preschool children's English education materials, the above characteristics and children's English level should be comprehensively considered.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to explore what characteristics should English picture books contain so that they are suitable for Chinese preschool children's second language acquisition. Through the analysis of Piaget's theory of the cognitive characteristics of the children in pre-operation stage, the advantages and disadvantages of Raz and Oxford Reading Tree, two sets of English popular picture books in China, have been found, and neither of them contains games with rules that are beneficial for children's language socialization. The findings indicate that Piaget's cognitive development stage theory is suitable for analyzing picture books, and it can also be used to predict the characteristics of picture books suitable for children at different stages according to their developmental features. These findings would suggest that parents and pre-school English educators in China should raise their awareness of choosing the right picture books according to the characteristics of children in pre-operational stage, and even recreate certain exercises based on the content of picture books, to make up for the shortcomings in picture books. In this way, the effect of children's English learning can be maximized, and so be the picture books utilized.

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