Using Children's Literature to Develop Pupils' English Language Acquisition

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ABSTRACT

English learning has become more and more popular nowadays in China. Most Chinese children begin to learn English from the primary school or even from kindergarten. Therefore, the learning materials designed and chosen for English learners are closely related to their English learning interests and efficiency. This study focuses on using children's literature to develop children's English acquisition.

Keywords: *English acquisition, interests, children's literature*

1. INTRODUCTION

Children's English literature is meaningful in children's life, which refers to folk stories, fairy tales, fables, myths, epics, poetry, historical/modern fiction, biography, and picture books. It can cultivate children's empathy, creativity, language skills, benefit their moral development, and critical thinking. So it is necessary to develop children's English literature class in school. The significance of this study is to explore the benefits of using children's literature in English learning classrooms in China and encourage educators to concern the use of English children's literature in order to develop primary school students' English acquisition.

2. CHILDREN'S ENGLISH LITERATURE IN CLASSROOM

2.1 The Educational Psychology Theory Related to Children's English Literature Teaching

2.1.1 Zone of Proximal Development

Lev Vygosky, a Soviet psychologist and sociologist, developed the theory of the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as:

"the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" [1] .

Choosing the right children's literature to use in a classroom with the ZPD is important. In America, there is a popular method used by schools to measure a student's reading ability called the Lexile level or a Lexile measure. A Lexile measure is a valuable tool for teachers, parents, and students to assess the complexity of reading texts. It was originally founded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Though this system is created for the English as a first language learner, it also can give guidelines to the English as a second language learner.

2.1.2 Krashen's Input Hypothesis

Krashen, an expert in the field of linguistics, specializing in theories of language acquisition developed his input hypothesis. According to Krashen, there are two independent systems of second language performance: 'the acquired system' and 'the learned system'. The 'acquired system' or 'acquisition' is the product of a subconscious process similar to the process by which a child acquires a first language. It requires meaningful interaction in the target language -- natural communication -- in which speakers focus not on the form of language but on communicative act. A "learned system" or "learning" is a product of formal instruction and involves a conscious process that leads to conscious knowledge of a language, such as grammatical rules [2] . Krashen believes that "learning" is less important than

"acquisition". The input hypothesis is concerned with "acquisition", not "learning". Based on this hypothesis, the learner progresses when he/she receives second language 'input' that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence. For example, if a learner is at a stage 'i', then acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to 'comprehensive input' that belongs to level 'i + 1'. We can then define 'comprehensive input' as the target language that the learner would not be able to produce but can still understand. It goes beyond the choice of words and involves presentation of context, explanation, rewording of unclear parts, the use of visual cues and meaning negotiation. This progress successfully conveys the learning experience.

Reading children's English literature is students' comprehensive input. For example, when students are reading some English fairy tales, like *Cinderella* or *The Ugly Duck*, they can understand the content even though they cannot produce some complex sentences.

2.1.3 Swain's Output Hypothesis

Swain develops the output hypothesis related to second language acquisition. He states that learning begins when the learner encounters a gap in his or her second language ability. There are three specific functions of output: the noticing function, the hypothesis-testing function, the metalinguistic reflective function [3].

Children's literature gives children a particular thematic output. The process of reading requires students to acquire language when they attempt to transmit a message and retell the plot of a story but they fail and have to try again. Eventually, the learner arrives at the correct form of the utterance when their conversational partner finally understands and they acquire the new form they have produced. Therefore, through this process, children's English becomes more and more fluent. The conversation should be as natural as possible. For example, a teacher can use an Initial, Response, Evaluate (I.R.E.) cycle in classroom discussions about a text [4]. The I.R.E. cycle refers to a discourse pattern in which the teacher initiates a question, such as: "Why do you think Moose's mother lies about his sister's age?" Then the student responds to the question: "Because she's embarrassed about her behavior." Then, the teacher evaluates the response: "Good thinking." Teachers can then encourage students in a variety of ways, from correct pronunciation to reading strategies to good quick writing.

2.2 Children's English Literature Teaching

2.2.1 How to Select an Appropriate Book to Teach in ESL Classrooms

Choosing suitable children's literature for children's ESL class is an essential step before class. Here we can measure a text's complexity by incorporating these measures.

(1) Quantitative Measures: Overall quantitative text difficulty can be determined by readability formula, sentence length, and word frequency.

(2) Qualitative Measures: There are four factors that should be considered when English teachers select books. First, levels of meaning. Does the text have one single level of meaning or does it contain hidden levels of meaning? Second, structure. Is the story told in flashback or other chronological orders? Third, language conventionality and clarity. Whether the language in the book is direct and simple; or does it contain lots of academic language and words with multiple meanings? Last, theme and knowledge demands. How much background knowledge do students need to understand from the literature?

(3) Reader-Task Considerations: When deciding whether a book is suitable for classroom or individual use, it is also important to consider the needs, interests and abilities of students, as well as the tasks they are being asked to perform.

2.2.2 Three Researches in These Years

I conducted a qualitative study about children's English literature teaching. I stated that although children's English literature was not yet an official school subject, a club had been formed. I guided the club members to read children's English literature, role-playing, story retelling, musical chair and other activities. After one semester, club members made great progress in their English skills. They could retell stories with confidence and were more interested in reading children's English literature. This initiative is a great support to this research and provides reliable data to prove the positive effects of using children's literature in students' English learning.

Secondly, 5 students were recruited in a summer school in 2017 to investigate using edited children's literature to cultivate 4-5 grade school students' English learning interests which I conducted in my study. *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *The Prince and Pauper* (which were not the original versions) were selected. These edited versions were simple and easy for children to understand, and the main plot of the story was the same as original one. The finding showed that through these familiar stories, students had more English discussions with others in class and increased their interest in English learning.

Thirdly, there was another online class experiment conducted with the help of a university professor in my study. Students read *The Boxcar Children* with the supervision of their parents. The only limitation of this experiment was that the students who participated in the experiment had a high level of English in school, and their parents were English teachers who supervised the subjects to finish reading tasks and post discussions on

time. Although this experiment has some limitations with students' special backgrounds, we can predict the social situation in the future, that is, parents need to corporate with teachers to supervise their children's learning. This is not only good for communication between children and parents, but also good for children's English learning. Besides, online study is a new learning way in 21st century that enriches students' learning resources.

Above all, through school clubs, actual classroom practices, and online discussions, these three researches have proved that reading children's literature is an effective way to develop students' English acquisition.

3. THE EFFECTS OF CHILDREN'S ENGLISH LITERATURE TEACHING IN ESL CLASS

3.1 Knowledge Aspect

According to previous discussion, a pupil's English acquisition can make great progress after listening to and reading English children's literature. This significant progress includes the following four English language abilities: phonological knowledge, semantic knowledge, syntactic knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge. Teachers need to help students to apply these types of knowledge by using interesting and meaningful materials. Referring to the comprehensive input which this study mentioned in chapter 2, though there are some difficult words in a fairy tale, the plot of the story will give readers some cues to predict the meaning of the words. Therefore, learning vocabulary in the plot will enhance English learning efficiency. In addition, students can mix Chinese and English together in the conversation, like a sandwich. It is a practical and useful teaching method proposed by Chinese scholar Ji, called "Sandwich Story Methodology' [5]. In ESL classes, teachers are recommended to use the children's literature that has been recorded so that the ESL learner can listen to the recording to practice their listening abilities. Moreover, children's literature is an effective motivator in ESL classrooms to encourage ESL learners to improve their oral English. Students can use the words learned in the books to share their perspectives in class discussions.

Apart from English acquisition, reading is also a life-long treasure. Reading and listening to children's literature is a good way to improve children's reading abilities. The goal is for them to improve the ability to read and retell the plot quickly and accurately Pikulski and Chard explain that reading fluency is a bridge between decode and comprehension [6]. Through this process, students can form the good habit of reading, expand their horizons and know more about exotic cultures.

3.2 Emotion Aspect

Literature is beneficial to cultivate students' humanities accomplishments. Students can learn morality and ethics from children's literature. Through the exploration of characters, plots and cultures, they form their own world views.

4. CONCLUSION

Combined with the theoretical and practical perspectives, this paper analyses the fundamental knowledge and benefits of children's English literature.

Though the English Children's literature is not a particular lesson in China now, we hope one day it will be developed into a new curriculum. Tyler identifies "four fundamental questions which must be answered in developing any curriculum and plan of instruction" [7]: educational purposes, educational experiences, the methods to effectively organize these educational experiences and determine whether these purposes are being attained. It is clear that the purpose of children's English literature class is to cultivate pupil's English acquisition. Different reading strategies and teaching methods are the educational experience that teachers can provide to students to achieve purposes. Choosing the appropriate book and designing the specific and scientific syllabus can effectively organize the learning process. By using formative assessment to determine whether these purposes are being attained, such as, role play, quick writes, speech, discussion and etc. It is meaningful and necessary to using children's literature to support students' English learning.

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