

Producing English Reading Materials for Young Children in Taiwan

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摘要

閱讀在現代生活中扮演極重要角色，它是現代人獲得各種知識的主要管道。閱讀可刺激腦部發展，增強語言技巧，及改善組織能力。閱讀本身就是一種樂趣。此外，在價值觀混淆的今日社會，閱讀短篇故事有助於澄清觀念，使讀者得以分辨是非。然而遺憾的是，目前市面上販售的兒童英語教材不是太簡單失去挑戰性，就是太難以致無法理解欣賞。由於不易找到適合臺灣兒童的理想英語讀物，我們於是決定自製教材，以同一系列三本書的型式呈現。同時，製作英語故事書的過程對我們而言也是一大挑戰，一方面考驗我們的英語寫作功力，另一方面也測試我們想像、創造及團隊合作的能力。我們希望透過自製的故事書達到以下目的：

1. 透過書中的有趣情節、彩色插畫及機智人物，使得兒童樂在英語閱讀中。
2. 透過閱讀的過程，使得兒童的語言技巧及思考能力得以提升。
3. 透過角色認同及虛擬其境，使得兒童了解美德的重要性。

Abstract

Reading plays a significant role in modern life. It provides us the access to every field of knowledge. It stimulates the development of brain cells, reinforces language skills, and increases organizational abilities. Reading itself is lots of fun. Furthermore, in this world of chaotic values, reading short stories may help students clarify their values so that they may tell right from wrong. We are sorry, however, to find that many English reading materials for children in the market are either too easy to be challenging, or too difficult to be enjoyable. Since it is not easy to find ideal readers for Taiwanese children, we decided to make our own texts in the form of a series of story books. Meanwhile, the process of producing storybooks also presents

a big challenge to us as it not only tests our ability of writing good English but also our ability in imagining, creating, and cooperating with others. In sum, we hope to achieve the following goals with our storybooks:

1. Children will enjoy reading in English through the interesting plots, colorful pictures and witty characters in the storybooks,.
2. Children's language skills and thinking abilities will improve through reading these storybooks.
3. By identifying themselves with the two leading characters in the books or imagining themselves personally on the scenes, children will come to realize the importance of virtues.

I. Introduction

Background of the Study

Learning English seems to have become a national activity since the Ministry of Education proclaimed in the year of 2000 that English be taught in elementary schools. Thousands and thousands of children are sent by their parents to private language schools to study English. While a great deal of attention has been given to the selection and training of teachers for primary level English, less attention has been paid to the selection of suitable materials and the production of new textbooks for Taiwanese children. (Witton-Davies, 2000) Nevertheless, we believe that searching for interesting and suitable materials that fit the needs of our children is just as important as looking for the right teachers because children learn best with materials that are appropriate to their age development and interests. In our opinion, it is especially important to assist our children to cultivate proper reading habits and skills as early as possible. As Ovid Tzeng, our former Minister of Education, points out, reading is closely linked with individual learning, growth, as well as a nation's ability towards competition. Reading offers many rewards and opportunities. It stimulates the development of brain cells, reinforces language skills, and increases organizational abilities. Reading also plays a significant role in modern life, for reading is a basic way to have access to every field of knowledge. (Tzeng, 2001) In addition, reading is the language skill which is easiest to keep up in an environment where English is rarely heard in daily lives.

We are discouraged, however, to find that reading has not been emphasized enough under the existing policy by the Ministry of Education, with listening and speaking being the only two skills to be taught at the elementary level. What makes it even more discouraging is that many reading materials in the market are

either too easy to be challenging, or too simplistic to be educative, or too difficult to be enjoyable. Since it is not easy to find ideal readers for Taiwanese children, we decided to make our own texts in the form of short story books, as stories can provide a rich source of activities and language, and so an ideal context for learning, skills practice, and enjoyment of a foreign language. Meanwhile, the process of producing story books also presents a big challenge to us as it not only tests our ability of writing good English but also our ability to imagine, create and cooperate with one another.

Purpose of the Study

Based on our personal experiences of learning English, we know how important motivation and interests are to keep us moving on along the way. Yet, many learners stop halfway because they lose their interests. We certainly do not want to see that happen to our younger generation. If there is something that can really catch the children's interests, something like the adventure fantasy book "Harry Potter," then no school children will ever give up learning English. Perhaps getting our children hooked to reading, especially reading for pleasure, is the best way to help them persist in learning English. With this idea in mind, we decided to write a series of storybooks, books that can activate their imagination, cultivate their personality and, most of all, arouse their interests in English. An adventure theme seems to be the best choice. We also decided that our story books possess the following features: first, they must have an interesting plot; second, they must have many colorful pictures because it is a lot easier to get small children to hook on pictures than on words. Besides, pictures can help children understand the texts better. Finally, they must be accompanied with audio tapes because listening to stories can greatly enhance learning.

In sum, it is our hope that by means of the storybook we may achieve the following goals:

1. Children will enjoy reading in English through the interesting plots, colorful pictures and witty characters in the storybooks,.
2. Children's language skills and thinking abilities will improve through reading these storybooks.
3. By identifying themselves with the two leading characters in the books or imagining themselves personally on the scenes, children will come to realize the importance of virtues.

II. Literature Review

How does children literature influence children? We may approach the issue by starting to understand the characteristics of children. According to cognitive psychology, children are natural storytellers. They build story frameworks to help themselves understand the world. The more children are read to and hear stories, the more likely they are to slip story pieces into their life experience. By incorporating stories into their life, children demonstrate that they make sense of the world. (Turner & Oaks, 1997) On the other hand, children in different periods have different needs. They need sense of security, love and being loved, belonging, achievement and even change. Many literary works can satisfy their needs. Whenever children identify something they really care about and need in books, they become more concerned about the printed information. (Chang, 1998)

Among all of the literary works for children, picture storybooks seem to be the best reading materials to start with because they are interesting, colorful and easy to understand. Since children have strong curiosity to know everything, story books are great teaching materials in developing the literary talents of the children. By introducing storybooks in second language, we may help children develop their target language, not only in quantity but also in quality. In Huei-husan Ma's study (1998), she explains the advantages of storybooks for children. First, short stories are a lot more available than other literary works and more fun to read. Second, story books are effective in teaching a moral lesson. Third, the process of reading short stories may facilitate not only the children's language awareness, but also their thinking, feeling, expressing and even aesthetic appreciation. Finally, reading short stories can help the children's "values clarification" in this world of chaotic values.

Other scholars have similar opinions, too. According to them, story books can teach values, behavior, concepts, and skills; they stimulate language development, expand vocabularies, foster intellectual growth, strengthen observational skills, and increase children's perception of beauty. (Giles, 2000; Huang, 2001) Still, pictures in the books can stimulate children to have more interests in reading the stories. Picture storybooks are excellent of beginning readers. Pictures can complement and enhance the short text and carry much of the message, instruction, or story line. Text becomes more prominent in picture storybooks. (Slinger, 1996)

There are some important criteria for choosing a book that is appropriate for beginning learners in an EFL classroom. First of all, it is necessary for the instructors to select interesting and predictable story texts. Only interesting books can encourage readers' motivation and only predictable books can activate their schemata of the text. Next, while selecting appropriate short stories, teachers should

consider vocabulary difficulty and syntactic complexity. Anyhow, we don't want children to be discouraged at the very beginning from reading books written in the target language, so that their interests in reading in L2 may continue to grow. Finally, the first and foremost purpose of reading is to extract meanings out of the printed page, not to learn grammar rules or word meanings only. Therefore, an EFL teacher who uses story books in his or her class should not use traditional teaching methods that emphasize translation, grammar, and vocabulary. He or she has to help students naturally comprehend the whole story through communicative activities such as acting, role-playing, and Q & A. (Hancock, 1990; Tierney, Readence & Dishner, 1995)

III. Methodology

In the following we'll outline the processes that we had gone through in producing the series of story books and then describe how we learned to write a research paper on our project.

1. Brainstorm and decide on the topic of our project

Following a lecture given by our advisor, Ms. Tsao, on what project work is and how we should approach the task to achieve our goal, we held a meeting among our group, discussing what we wanted to do for our project. Since we are English majors and all take interest in children English education, we finally decided to create story books in a series of three, featuring children's favorite theme—adventures.

2. Collect and examine story books available in the market

Once we decided on the subject matter of our project, we mapped out a work schedule, listing the things we needed to do step by step and setting up the deadlines. The first step we took was paying a visit to the bookstores and browsing through all the English story books on the shelves to get a better idea of the current development in children reader publication. We found quite a few books that possess all the qualities necessary to make a good story book: interesting plot, simple and clear language, colorful illustrations, big prints, beautiful graphic layout, and useful word index. We decided to include all these qualities in our books. Moreover, we would provide Chinese translation of the English text and several exercises or questions at the end of each book to help with the readers' comprehension of the story. Someone in our group suggested making a tape recording of our stories to allow children to read along without seeking help of a teacher, and we all agreed on that immediately.

3. Work on our own creation of the stories

Since we were writing books in a series of three, we first decided the sequences of the episodes happening in each book, and then had two persons in charge of one book, taking responsibilities from conceiving ideas, drafting the text in English, giving illustrations, to designing the front and back covers. During the process of producing the reading materials, our advisor gave us valuable suggestions and guidance on various aspects of the books: content, diction, grammar, graphic design, etc. After several drafts and revisions, we finally put forth the final text.

4. Provide illustrations and design cover pages

We did story-composing and revising all on a word processor, but for the graphic part, we could only resort to hand-drawing and coloring because none of us had any experience in making graphic work on computer. We first had the text printed out on separate sheets of A4-size paper and then supplied the pictures alongside with the printed text. After everything was set, we turned in our finished products to Ms. Tsao for approval before taking them to the copy center for printing and binding.

5. Make a tape recording of our stories

Before we started our recording job, Ms. Tsao played to us several well-produced audio stories so that we had some models to follow suit. We had wanted to produce as perfect taped stories as possible, but without any access to a professional recording studio, we could only make the recording with our decrepit portable stereo. Although the sound quality was not very satisfactory, we were quite confident of the quality in pronunciation and intonation as we had done lots of practices and rehearsals beforehand.

6. Learn about the research format of an academic report

Upon the completion of the series with accompanied tapes, we began working on the literary description of our project. Ms. Tsao informed us the basics required of academic writing and gave us a few samples to illustrate what a research paper is. The orientation lecture helped us a great deal in framing the outlines of our report.

7. Search and collect information on children literature and reading theory

We obtained literature materials from three channels: the internet, the library, and CD-Rom database. After we found relevant articles, we made copies for each group member to read at home. Then, in our next meeting, we decided the major points to be covered in the literature review.

8. Put the finishing touches to our research paper

We split up the task of putting ideas into words and organizing paragraphs among the six of us: two persons were responsible for the introduction, two for the literature review and two for the result and conclusion. One month later, we put

together the three parts and turned into the whole paper to Ms. Tsao for correction and comments. It took us a total of three modifications for our paper to be finalized as it is now.

IV. Results and Discussion

Summary of our stories

The series of our storybooks feature the adventures of two main characters, Billy and Molly. They are brother and sister, who live in a small town next to a forest. The first book talks about Billy and Molly's dream, in which they made a pilgrimage to the land of Santa Claus. They experienced many strange things and met many animal friends. During the dream trip, they learned about friendship and knew how to tell right from wrong. The story ends with Billy and Molly's waking up from their dream to find their room full of Christmas gifts from their parents. The second book describes a rescue move made by Billy and Molly. Their best animal friend, the rabbit, was caught by an evil giant. Once again, Billy and Molly have to overcome many obstacles in their trip before they find the giant and fight with him. The book also has a happy ending, with Billy and Molly successfully rescuing the rabbit. In our last book, Billy and Molly were driven to an unknown island while they were sleeping, and they had to use their wits to find their way back home.

Special features of our books

Chang (1998) once surveyed 377 high school students for their choice of books to read. The findings of her study suggest some reasons why students prefer certain books.

- 1) The story is interesting, affective or mysterious.
- 2) The story is easy to read with few new vocabulary and simple sentence structures.
- 3) The story has a happy ending.
- 4) The story inspires readers or shows people positive human relationship.
- 5) The story provides readers with western cultural information or experiences.

Chang thus concluded that teachers should introduce students to literature books that have these characteristics because these books not only help students expand their imagination but also help them view life and culture from various angles. Therefore, students grow in their life experience, cultural awareness as well as personality.

We have tried our best to model our storybooks on the criteria suggested above, yet with our own modification:

- 1) Easy-to-understand language, with high frequency vocabulary
Our storybooks utilize easy-to-understand language because we think it would be better to teach children with simple words which they can comprehend easily. We also use high frequency words so that children can remember better.
- 2) Simple but interesting plots
The above description of the story in each book show that our storybooks have simple but interesting plots. We hope the storybooks can attract children and even inspire them. Actually, we hope they can enhance their capacity for learning English by reading storybooks.
- 3) Skinny books with no more than 50 pages
No children like to read massive books. They like to read books that they can finish rapidly so that they'd feel sense of achievement. In addition, skinny books are easy to recite and memorize. Children can enjoy the beautiful rhythm of the English language by reading aloud the story to themselves or to their parents.
- 4) Colorful illustrations throughout the whole book
Reading books with words only is very boring for children. We want to hold children's attention to reading by means of pictures. Moreover, the colorful pictures we provide on each page can help students understand the text better, and even inspire their imagination.
- 5) Exercises provided at the back of the book
It's preferable to have some exercises at the end of the storybooks because by doing exercises children can have some idea of how much they have learned from reading the story. Owing to time constraints, however, we had not provided enough exercises .

Application of our books in actual teaching situation

We had intended for our books to be used either as an English textbook or a supplementary teaching material. We hoped to use these books to train students in the following abilities: word recognition, reading comprehension, logical thinking, creativity, and distinction between right and wrong. We had designed several lesson plans to explain to our advisor about how we would teach a specific portion of the book. In our lesson plans, we detailed the number of pages to be taught, lesson objectives, teaching activities used, worksheets and teaching aids required to successfully carry out the teaching task. But all of the above were just simulative. We have never used our books in actual teaching situation. Since we have no real users, we cannot get any feedback or comments on the effectiveness or appropriateness of the books. Nor do we have any idea of their popularity among children. Will our books make successful teaching materials or useful outside

reading materials? Perhaps the answer will be yes with a proper, skillful use of the books. But still, we'll never know until we put them into use.

All in all, we designed the storybooks with a view to helping Taiwanese children learn English while placing a particular focus on advancing their reading and thinking abilities. We have racked our brains to consider every detail of the books. We revised them several times, and met regularly with our instructor, Ms. Tsao, for her advice. We really appreciate her help and support because without her we could not have completed this project.

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