

Problems and Causes of Teaching with English Picture Books
in Primary School in China

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Dr. Madelon Köhler-Busch

Original English picture books have as their themes children's interest and stories, which play a great role in primary school students' English learning. However, the movement of teaching with original English picture books began late in China and has of yet not been popularized. The author chose teaching English with original English picture books as the topic mainly for the following reasons:

Firstly, the topic is based on the needs of primary school students' English learning. Secondly, it is based on the current situation of the original English Picture Book Teaching in China, and finally, it is based on the author's own teaching experience with English language picture books.

The research method of this paper is mainly a literature review. In addition, this paper also reflects my own experience. I will focus on the problems of and reasons for teaching with picture books and give some suggestions on the effective use of picture books in primary schools.

This paper includes the following parts: After the introduction this paper focuses on the background of the original English picture book, the statement of the problem, definition of terms, purpose of the study, Significance of the Study, Delimitation of the Study and Methodology. The second part comprises a review of literature. I will introduce the research situation of the educational value of picture books. An analysis of the problems and their causes of picture book teaching in China is the second part.

At last I will give some suggestions on the Effective Use of English Picture Books in Primary Schools.

According to the research concluded for this this paper, the following problems are found in the teaching of the original English picture books 1) teachers' lack of understanding of the original English picture books; 2) teachers' relatively random choice of the original English picture books; 3) the lack of teaching resources for the original English picture books. These problems may be related to the high price of the original English picture book, the insufficient attention paid by schools to the original English picture book teaching, the lack of teachers' professional preparation and exploratory spirit, and the possibility that teachers are more influenced by the traditional English teaching mode. Finally, according to the problems, this paper puts forward corresponding suggestions from three aspects: first, to deepen teachers' understanding of the original English picture books. Secondly, it provides practical opportunities for the teaching of original English picture books. Thirdly, it attempts to improve the teaching ability of the original English picture books.

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Chapter I Introduction

It is not enough for teaching English at the primary school level to rely solely on traditional textbooks. Successful teaching also should incorporate extracurricular reading materials which are popular with students. Therefore, original English picture books are indispensable for learning English in primary school. Currently, English teachers at the primary level generally attach importance to vocabulary and grammar teaching and neglect the improvement of students' reading development, which is harmful to students' language learning. Reading is an important way for students to learn a language. Therefore, it is particularly important to provide students with appropriate reading materials for language acquisition as it is of great significance to cultivate students' English reading ability in primary school. Picture books, with rich and colorful pictures and concise and easy-to-understand words, can effectively stimulate students' interest in learning the subject matter, so that students can change from passive learning to independent, active and engaged learning. Therefore, teaching with English picture books is truly necessary in English learning at the primary level.

Teaching with original English picture books is a new and effective teaching method. However, due to some reasons, such as the deviation of teachers' understanding of picture books, the lack of correct understanding of picture books, the lack of corresponding curriculum training and the backward scientific research of picture book teaching, etc. The picture books are not really effective for teachers, therefore, I hope that by studying the literature and combining my own experience in teaching, I can analyze the problems and their causes in the teaching of the original English picture book, and provide ideas and specific operation methods for schools and teachers who are using or about to use the original English picture books, so as to make the teaching with

English picture books really effective, and at the same time, this article aims to provide reference for schools that have not yet implemented the teaching of English picture books.

Statement of the Problem

In this paper, I will focus on the following issues

1. What are the main problems in the teaching of English picture books in China?
2. What are the causes of these problems?
3. Faced with these problems, how should teachers solve them?

Definition of Terms

Picture Book

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "picture book" as "Book with a lot of pictures, especially for children". Picture books have had a development history of over 110 years in Western countries, and in Asia, The conception of "picture books" comes from Japan and its Japanese expression is "絵本". Picture books originated from Japan and were introduced into the mainland of China from Taiwan.

Original Picture Book

Picture books in original English versions are English books that combine pictures and words to jointly express a story or a subject. Compared with other picture books, their outstanding characteristics are their original and authentic English expressions. The original English picture books in this research were written by native speakers of English and officially published by publishers from English speaking countries. They can be the source of picture books for the English classrooms at primary schools. These sources include hardcopy as well as electronic editions.

Teaching with Original Picture Books

The English version picture books from this research refer to books that teachers use in classrooms as classroom resources in order to enrich the content and form of the teaching mode of primary school English, as well as to cultivate the interest and enthusiasm for English learning from students and to elevate their cross-cultural awareness.

Purpose of the Study

The current research concerning the teaching of English with English picture books focuses mainly on theory, and little research applies to real teaching situations. Library research was used to summarize related theoretical publications as the basis for this paper. It also used surveys to glean a systematical overview of the utilization of original English picture books, and also summarized the existing problems with using English picture books and the reasons why these problems occurred. Suggestions for improvement are based on this research. This research reflects the current status on teaching with original English picture books; it also hopes to enrich current discussions on the subject. Over time the use of English picture books in the teaching of primary school English has become more acceptably in mainstream education. This research provides theoretical support for the teaching of English picture books. It also hopes to fill in missing information and provide references for future research.

Significance of the Study

In China, the data studying English picture books and related education tools is scarce and as of yet there is no systematic research. Therefore, this paper conducted a survey investigation of original English picture books and related education. Secondly, this paper hopes to aid teachers if they choose to teach utilizing English picture books. Since English picture books are not yet an integral part of the English curriculum on the primary level there is no systematic training for

teachers. This paper offers some practical advice for teachers in the implementation and teaching of English picture books. Currently, Chinese primary school students acquire English mainly through classroom teaching. Normally traditional textbooks in what can be described as the grammar-translation method, are the basic material for classroom teaching in an environment that does not provide room for English speaking. Using such a method, primary school students often face learning difficulties. The vivid images in English picture books and their child-centered content, are able to activate students' motivation for learning. Picture books also provide rich language and multi-literary materials and can serve as the medium for language functions. These books may also contain authentic material. They also address the cognitive abilities and mental characteristics of primary school students.

Delimitation of the Study

This paper mainly summarizes problems and reasons for teaching English with picture books by analyzing the literature and combining these findings with my own experience. My own understanding and teaching experience and the scope of this paper are limited. This article aims to provide a reference for Chinese teachers of English.

Methodology

Literature method

Library research and analysis of the findings were done in order to know and understand the research related to the teaching of English with English picture books which exists in China and overseas. It also forms and proposes its own entry point for research.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Picture books have had a long history in Europe and the Americas, and in Asia, the influence and the concept of picture books first came to Japan after World War II. The subsequent immense development of picture books in Japan is astounding and now Japan has become a major country producing picture books. In China, during 1960s, the concept of pictures books entered Taiwan first, and subsequently, the works of Jimi, the Taiwanese picture book writer, became a huge hit in mainland China, which initiated the popularity of picture books.

Definitions of picture books

“Picture books” refer to books telling stories in graphic text, the contents of which can be real or fictional, with characters, themes, plots and well-constructed narratives, with or without text. English picture books are those published by English-speaking countries. Nikolai (2000) points out, “picture books are a type of books telling stories through correlation between a group of coherent pictures and relatively not much text.” (p. 20). Bishop and Hickman (1987) put forward that picture books are picturesque story paintings, a kind of story presented by the combination of visual and linguistic art. (p. 20).

Characteristic of picture books

Characteristics of picture books suitable for English learners in primary school.

1. Books should address an age-appropriate theme, topic or story line.
2. Language and sentence patterns should be fairly simple and somewhat controlled, with tenses, structures and vocabulary repeated throughout the book.
3. Metaphorical language and references to unfamiliar experiences should be limited.
4. Text should include rhymes, if possible. This is an excellent tool for memorizing (always helpful in language learning) and for visual phonetic transfer.

5. The plot should be fairly straightforward, chronological in order, and unambiguous.

6. Dialogue should be used as much as realistically possible; books featuring dialects and use idioms excessively should be avoided. (Smallwood, 1987, p. 3)

Educational Value of Picture Books

Picture books can reflect real life. The British scholar Edinger (1998) considers that the picture book has the value of providing entertainment, developing imagination, providing indirect experience, and presenting universal life experience. Therefore, when stories include these characteristics they assist the mental development of the readers and offer a way of experiencing the daily behaviors of humans, allowing them to learn through the rich information provided by the stories. Picture stories provide alternative experience to children, providing springboards for the creative mental activities.

Teachers can help students master the same material presented in traditional textbooks through picture books which are more vivid. Scott (2004) suggests that replacing traditional teaching materials with authentic children's literature in the English classroom. Scott proposes four reasons to implementation of his proposal: first, authentic literature is able to provide momentum for language studies and meaningful linguistic backgrounds. Second, the natural language demonstrated by literature helps students consolidate vocabulary. Third, literature is able to promote the formation of academic attainment and mental capacity. Fourth, good literature relates various aspects of human survival and thus is able to promote the emotional development of children and help them establish positive cross-cultural communicative consciousness.

Choosing picture books

As holds true for all educational material English language picture books need to be

selected for the task and be age appropriate. The needs of the teachers should also be considered.

The following provides some references for teachers to choose the right picture books:

1. Does the book help meet curricular objectives or enhance the thematic units being studied?
2. Is the book's content appropriate to the children's age and intellectual level?
3. Does the book use language that is at or slightly above the level of the learners?
4. Does the book contain repeated, predictable language patterns?
5. Are there clear illustrations that help tell the story?
6. Will the book add to the collection of bilingual and multicultural books in the classroom

that represent the diverse languages and cultures of the children? (Smallwood, 2002, p. 3)

According to English scholar Ellis (2009), words and sentence patterns that are rich, original and rhythmic should be first considered in the selection of picture books, and high-quality illustrations are also worth noting and considering, as they can help narration and children's comprehension of the story. Stories also contain cultural information and reflect social consciousness and emotions.

Therefore, teachers should not simply depend on their own preferences to select English picture books but make choices according to the stages of cognitive developments of their students. For students in lower grades, picture books with more pictures than text can be appropriate, when illustrations amend the storyline. For students in the middle grades, stories familiar to them, generally traditional fairytales, can be selected, because most of them are familiar with them and they can quickly get immersed in the storylines. For students in higher grades, picture books with easily predictable plots easy can be chosen, as they can make flexible use of the language by guessing plots, and each time they guess, they will become involved, eager to find out whether the plot coincides with their guesses. In addition, sentence patterns should be considered in the

selection of picture books, so as to help students grasp new sentence patterns. In general, teachers must select picture books that not only meet teaching goals but also are in accord with the language competence and interest of students. A picture book suitable for students first should be able to arouse their curiosity and motivate them to learn. Second, their current language competence and maturity should be considered. Third, rhythmic, repeated sentence patterns and predictable story plots can help beginners learn grammatical structures by heart. Fourth, picture books with cultural information, portraying emotions and various attitudes should also be considered. Texts need to be clear of racial, ethnic, gender and social discrimination. Last, texts should initiate discussions and allow for imagination and activities.

Chapter III Problems of Teaching with English Picture Books

Original English picture books are composed of delicate pictures and beautiful words, which have become one of major teaching materials for early childhood reading due to their characteristic of picture-based storytelling that breaks the barrier of children's limited vocabulary. That's why it plays an important role in helping primary students learn English. Because of the short history of English picture books introduced to mainland China, they are not highly popularized here, and there are still deficiencies in teaching original English picture books. In this paper, the author summarizes shortcomings in teaching of original English picture books now by studying relevant literature and drawing on the author's own experience. They are mainly embodied in four aspects, namely the qualifications of teachers, their cognition of original English picture books, their understanding of teaching such books, and actual teaching of such books.

Teaching qualities

Teachers focus on methods for teaching picture books. This shows that teachers are interested in and recognize and emphasize the use of picture books in education, but there is a relative lack of in-depth research on teaching original English picture books. As a part of English teaching, teaching original English picture books is special in the sense, that it requires teachers to change their concepts and methods of teaching. This unintentionally makes the theory and practice of teaching English picture books more difficult for teachers. Teaching of English picture books is still at the initial stages in China, mainly focusing on exploring practical teaching methods while relatively lacking relevant theoretical basis.

To put it simply, teachers have to be skilled in techniques and capabilities. The skills required for teaching original English picture books include the ability to interpret picture books and then to design teaching activities. At present, picture books are seldom used as textbooks in the

classroom teaching of English, but usually adopted as extracurricular reading. Teachers meet difficulties in selection of picture books and adaptation of these materials to the curriculum, such as designing teaching activities. Therefore, English teachers in primary schools in China don't have rich experience in teaching original English picture books and relevant practice, and inevitably have no such strong teaching skills.

To a certain extent, consensus has been achieved about the benefits of original English picture books to primary school students who are learning English, such as the need to provide rich resources for them to learn English, building up their vocabulary, stimulate their interest in learning and thus helping them form strong study skills. Teachers react positive about students learning English through original English picture books, but their knowledge of such books and relevant teaching methods is still at the beginning stage. Such books can only be used as an extracurricular supplement to English learning, and even though appearing in class, they are usually used to create scenarios etc. to assist teaching based on traditional textbooks. Many teachers mention that picture books boast beautiful pictures, but they have not noticed how these beautiful pictures can be integrated, except for their role in attracting students' attention and motivating them to learn. This is indeed one of the features of picture books, as beautiful pictures can also enhance the students' aesthetic ability, creativity, imagination and so on, which have not been sufficiently recognized by teachers.

Now, in China quality-oriented education in primary education further emphasizes the development of multiple intelligences. However, stress is still placed on intellectual education in English education, which is exam-oriented in form and utilitarian. Teachers select original English picture books according to the age, cognition and interest of students, but they tend to make selections based on how much they match teaching topics, as they think it is an important factor

and picture books should serve teaching. Though graphic information and language content are major elements of picture books, they are not factors that teachers first consider when selecting picture books. Teaching of original English picture books is also affected by utilitarianism. Teachers at times select picture books from the perspective of teaching. In other words, they may choose those containing knowledge which they think students should learn, such as words, sentences and grammar, or what they should know. Actually, this is understandable. Nonetheless, what teachers think students should learn or know can reflect personal characteristics. Generally, teachers tend to make decisions according to their own experience or interest, so their selection may be less than optimal. If they make random selections which do not accord with the cognitive characteristics of students, they will lose interest and feel less motivated to learn English.

Disadvantages of Teaching with Picture Books

Picture books occupy a certain share in the children's reading market, and gradually become children's extracurricular reading. These books tend to be expensive and a high price for teachers. Now, most teachers choose to buy books online. In the experience of the author genuine original English picture books sold online can be cheaper than those in shops, but they are still more expensive than common books. Therefore, without strong financial support, it is hard to widely popularize original English picture books in English classes in primary schools.

Deficiencies in teaching original English picture books are closely related to the lack of attention at the school level. Here curriculum planning is aimed at traditional English textbooks, and there are seldom special courses on teaching original English picture books. As for teachers, they are so busy with routine teaching that they have no opportunity to teach original English picture books when schools do not provide school-based courses. Consequently, their ability to teach original English picture books cannot be improved easily.

These problems partly reflect that schools fail to pay enough attention to teaching original English picture books. Due to the lack of relevant training and lectures in schools, teachers have to explore teaching of original English picture books on their own. Without the experience of predecessors or relevant training, progress in improving their ability to teach original English picture books can be slow.

Chapter IV Reasons for Teaching with English Picture Books

If teachers want to teach with picture books, it is necessary for them to have accumulated sufficient practical teaching experiences, abundant knowledge reserves, as well as a strong desire to accept new trends. There are various reasons for the lack of teaching with original English picture books. For example, there is a lack of professional literacy training in this field.

Promoting the quality of English teachers

Since schools do not provide enough training for teachers about how to teach with original English picture books, the teachers need to rely on their own spirit of exploration to find out how to teach with English picture books and thus improve their teaching skills in this field.

When looking at teachers' lack of teaching abilities with original English picture books we must consider that teachers are trained in the traditional English-teaching method. Currently, the major criterion to evaluate the quality of education is still the students' grades and the main object of education is to improve students' grades. As this is the case, even if the original English picture books are adopted into teaching, teachers tend to choose the traditional teaching methods they are familiar with.

Lack of teaching experience

Teaching with English picture books is a newer development in China. A new model of teaching English, teachers tend to be skeptical toward it and less willing to explore this new way of teaching. Discovery and exploration of new teaching methods are less likely with the time constraint experienced by many educators. This shift in English language pedagogy presents contradictions between the new and old teaching models will cause some confusion.

Limited ability of students

English is the second language for Chinese primary school students, and they mainly acquire English through formal education. Currently, the main English teaching method in Chinese primary schools is to help students learn words, sentences and passages based on standardized textbooks while at the same time, adding some grammatical points. Original English picture books present English language and aesthetics authentically which could cause confusion to the students with only limited English vocabulary and cultural awareness. In the long-term, the student's enthusiasm for English learning will be reduced. If the teachers ignore the cognitive traits and individual variations while choosing the picture books, the content of the books may go beyond students' cognitive capacity.

Chapter V Suggestions for Improving Teaching with Picture Books

As detailed above, teaching with original English picture books comes with its own set of concerns. Here are five reasons which lead to these problems: Firstly, original English picture books tend to be expensive; secondly, schools are not championing teaching with these books; thirdly, the teachers' lack of training and time constraints; fourth, traditional English Second Language pedagogy; fifth, the primary school students have an inadequate English level. Based on these reasons, the author will offer some insights on teaching English with original picture books.

School financial support

One reason leading to the lack of resources for using original English picture books is that these books appeared on the Chinese market only recently and the research on the efficacy of teaching with these books from the Chinese scholars are not widely accepted. In addition, original English picture books are more expensive than traditional reading materials. To enrich educational materials in this aspect requires the schools or educational departments to set up exclusive funds, so that a certain amount of hardcopy or online books can be purchased. In addition, resources could be shared by exchanging picture books in schools or cooperating with local libraries so that the students can use public picture book resources.

Specific training for teaching with picture books

Before getting employed, many teachers lack the appropriate training on teaching with English picture books; if they still have not received some training when they start working, they will always lack competence in it. It is essential to level this need through a significant amount of training. On the one hand, the schools should actively organize various kinds of training and study programs for teachers such as lectures and seminars. On the other hand, the administrative

departments in charge of education should also support the training financially and with policy so as to promote teaching skills that are suitable for the development of primary school students.

Understanding the characteristics of picture books

If the teachers do not have a deep understanding of the features of those English picture books, deviations are more likely to appear in teaching. Therefore, it is necessary to let the teachers gain a better knowledge of the characteristics of English picture books. Teachers need to acquire theoretical knowledge about the features of these books. They could analyze these features by reading a large number of English picture books, or they can also study both domestic and foreign research and thus fine tune their theoretical knowledge about the English picture book. On the other hand, by organizing reading parties and exchange their book reviews, teachers would be able to gain a deeper understanding. It is possible that different teachers might hold different opinions towards the same book, however, if the ideas can be shared among the teachers, their understanding of the English picture books can also be enriched.

Correct Selection of Picture Books

The positive effects for kids in learning with original English picture books have gained recognition with both domestic and foreign educators. If suitable English picture books can be chosen, and the schools, parents and students also cooperate in learning English with them, it is believed that the learning process successful. Based on the value of those original English picture books, the author believes that the frequency of teaching with these books should be increased through a variety of ways such as organizing teaching skills competitions. On the one hand, these competitions could make a teacher attach greater importance to their teaching. On the other hand, they would provide the teacher with practice opportunities. Such competitions could also be used

as reference and for learning opportunities. In this way, teachers could make improvements in their teaching skills and thus increase development of teaching skills with original English picture books.

Choosing picture books varies from teacher to teacher. However, teachers ought to take the following aspects into considerations while selecting English picture books. Firstly, the content of the picture books should accord with the basic teaching requirements. What the teachers teach in school is usually based on the curriculum demands. Learning outcomes state what learning tasks students are expected to complete and the content of the original English picture books should conform to curriculum demands so that the students can accomplish the related learning tasks. Secondly, the content of the picture books should be appropriate with students' mental development and age appropriate. For example, students in a lower grade tend to be more interested in pictures, and teachers should choose picture books that mainly reflect students' interest. Thirdly, picture books that can be used in an English language acquisition context should be chosen. Some Chinese students have difficulties in learning English because they are not in environments where English is used. When a teacher picks an English picture book, they could choose books depicting everyday life. Then the student can apply the language to their own life while interest in learning English is also cultivated. Certainly, there are standards for teachers to choose suitable picture books, however, the final goal is to cultivate students' interests, improve their aesthetic awareness, creativity and imaginations as well as help them form sound habits for learning English-learning.

Addressing the individual needs of students

Thus teachers should base their teaching on students' actual situations and set the teaching objectives to reflect these. Teachers also need to pay attention to individual differences among their students. For instance, teachers could set higher learning objectives for students with a higher

English proficiency while at the same time not exceeding the limit of their abilities. For those students with a lower English proficiency level, the instructional objectives should not be too unrealistic and too high since this will lower students' motivations. All in all, the teaching objectives should not follow rigid uniformity, on the contrary, they should contain different layers which take each students' development into consideration.

Teachers should uncover profound meanings hidden within the process of teaching with picture books. One of the preconditions for teachers to promote the hidden meanings is to respect students' diversified ideas. With the teacher's guiding support differences in the students' way of thinking can be expressed. Teachers are usually more mature and more logical whereas primary school students usually display less abstract and more concrete ways of thinking. Together various interpretations can be unearthed.

Reasonable evaluations

Rational feedback also can have positive impact on cultivating students' interests and motivation. In a society where quality-oriented education is stressed and pursued, feedback for students should be fair, justified, objective and comprehensive. Diversified feedback is thus required. Students can acquire knowledge in many fields through picture books, including grammar, aesthetic judgment abilities, emotional experience as well as understanding of life. Feedback could be given from many aspects of the picture books. Besides, the teacher could evaluate different aspects of learning by applying different evaluation methods. For example, language points such as the words, vocabulary, sentence structures and grammar could be evaluated through examination papers; students' aesthetic judgment abilities could be evaluated through observations in integrated practice; emotional experience could be evaluated from students'

notes and their feedback; the understanding of life could be evaluated through teachers' observations or the feedback from students and parents.

Chapter VI Conclusion and Recommendations

In the process of writing the paper, the author firstly collected a great deal of information related to original English picture books through literature review, then the author combined real-life teaching experience and found the following the following problems: teachers' theoretical knowledge concerning English picture books is lagging; teachers don't have strong facility teaching original English picture books; teachers don't have a meaningful understanding of these books; teachers understand language output to be the main purpose of teaching; teachers are unsure of how to select suitable English picture books; time allotted for using picture books is limited; lack of resources; lack of scientific proof; the teaching method is out of date; teaching design is simple. The existence of these problems can be linked to 1) the high price of original English picture books; 2) schools' lack of emphasis on teaching with these books; 3) teachers' lack of exploration spirits and professional literacy; 4) the influence of traditional teaching methods on teachers; 5) insufficient English knowledge of primary school students. Based on this analysis, the author offers the following suggestions: firstly, deepen teachers' understandings of original English picture books; secondly, provide more practical teaching opportunities with these books; thirdly, improve teachers' teaching abilities using original English picture books.

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