

A Study on the Values and Strategies of English Picture Book Reading for Improving Pupils' English Reading Literacy

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Reading is one of the core skills in English learning. It is indispensable for EFL learners to develop good English reading literacy in primary schools. English picture books are consistent with pupils' cognitive and thinking modes, which is valuable to improve their English reading literacy. However, at present, most Chinese pupils have some problems in English reading. The paper aims at analyzing the current problems in Chinese pupils' English reading and digging out the values and strategies of English picture book reading, so as to stimulate their reading interests, cultivate their intercultural awareness, and improve their English reading literacy.

Keywords: English reading literacy, English picture book reading, values, strategies

Introduction

Reading plays an important role in English learning. Learning to read is not only a requirement to lay a solid language foundation, but also a necessary prerequisite for English beginners to broaden their cultural vision and understand the society and the world (Aonarentuya, 2022, p. 1). Cultivating students' reading ability has always been one of the vital tasks of schools. As scholars Wang Qiang and Aonarentuya (2015) stated, the traditional concept of "reading ability" is gradually being replaced by the new concept of "reading literacy", which contains a more comprehensive connotation, including not only reading ability but also reading character. Wang Yuxin (2022) believed that with the development of information technology, English picture book has become the best resource for early childhood education. English reading in primary schools has entered an era of image reading which is more intuitive and concise compared with traditional reading. Applying English picture books to English teaching in primary schools can effectively enhance pupils' reading literacy.

Definition of Relevant Concepts

English Picture Books

In the 17th century, picture books originated from the European continent and was gradually spread to other countries. Perry Nodelman (1988), the pioneer of children's literature, defined picture books as story books with massive pictures and fewer words. Nikolajeva and Scott (2001), the authors of *How Picturebooks Work*, claimed that picture books are the types of books that rely on the mutual relationship between texts and pictures to jointly

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play the role of narrative plot. And the illustrations are crucial to the integrity of narrative.

Wang Yuxin (2022) held that English picture books are reading materials using authentic and original English expressions to narrate the story and setting off the plot with colorful illustrations. Texts and illustrations interact and complement each other to jointly express a certain theme or story. Professor Kang Changyun (2002) pointed out that an English picture book is a kind of children literature whose illustrations are essential for learning English as a foreign language. Its vivid illustrations stimulates children's imagination and creativity.

English Picture Book Reading

English picture book reading is a reading activity that integrates visual and language arts (Hu, 2020, p. 5). While reading English picture books, students immerse themselves in the context which helps them not only improve their critical thinking ability and gain aesthetic experiences, but also expand their horizons and enjoy the process of reading (Wang, 2022, p. 4).

English Reading Literacy

"Reading literacy" refers to not only reading, but also the beliefs, attitudes, and habits that individuals and social groups need to possess in different situations (Pearson & Raphael, 2000). In recent years, China has put forward the concept of English reading literacy. In 2016, *English Graded Reading Standards for Chinese Primary and Secondary School Students (Experimental Draft)* proposed that primary and secondary school students' English reading literacy includes reading ability and reading character. Reading ability consists of decoding ability, language knowledge, reading comprehension, and cultural awareness. And reading character involves reading habit and reading experience (Wang & Chen, 2016, p. 2).

The Existing Problems in Chinese Pupils' English Reading

At present, most Chinese primary schools do not pay enough attention to English reading. And there are some problems, such as pupils lacking of reading interest, reading quantity, reading strategies, and intercultural knowledge.

A Lack of Interest in English Reading

Pupils aged 6-12 are active and are keen on imitating and exploring. English picture books with rich pictures and bright colors can quickly attract their attention. In the early stage of learning English, children often show strong curiosity and interest in learning vocabularies and songs. However, in the senior stage, they tend to get bored while reading the texts with many new words and few illustrations. Therefore, they gradually lose motivation in English reading.

A Lack of English Reading Quantity

English picture book teaching is a newly emerging teaching method. But in China, there are few primary schools carrying out this method. One of the reasons is that due to insufficient class hours, teachers are unable to implement English picture book teaching systematically and continuously. Another reason is that, most pupils' reading materials are limited to textbooks and their teachers don't pay enough attention to English reading. Thus, pupils' reading frequency cannot be guaranteed, leading to limited vocabularies and poor reading ability.

A Lack of Effective Reading Strategies and Good Reading Habits

Nowadays, English tests in Chinese primary schools generally consist of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and question-answering, with few reading. Influenced by traditional educational concepts, some English teachers

attach too much importance on pupils' scores and teaching the vocabularies and grammars. As a result, pupils lack reading strategies, such as prediction, inference, and summary. When encountering with new words, they cannot guess the meanings according to the context. In addition, they lack the awareness of reflection and summary after reading. Their ability to find, analyze, and solve problems in reading is limited. Besides, many pupils have bad reading habits, such as reading word-by-word with their fingers or pens. For failing to read in correct sense groups, their reading fields of vision are narrow.

A Lack of Intercultural Knowledge

When learning a second foreign language, Chinese pupils are easily affected by the fixed thinking mode originated from their mother tongue, making them unconsciously think in Chinese during English reading. For example, due to a lack of western culture knowledge, some pupils think that "a lucky dog" means a dog that is lucky, not knowing that it refers to "a lucky person" in English. In addition, a lack of cultural knowledge will affect pupils' understanding of the texts. For instance, many pupils do not know that "waiting for the other shoe to drop" has the special meaning of "waiting for the final result anxiously" in English.

The Values of English Picture Book Reading for Improving Pupils' English Reading Literacy

English picture books are favored by pupils for their exquisite pictures, vivid plots, and abundant language. The use of English picture books as supplementary teaching materials can effectively solve pupils' English reading problems and has the following important values for improving their English reading literacy:

Enhancing Pupils' Language Ability

According to second language acquisition theory of linguist Krashen (1981), "acquisition" means that language learners can use the language fluently and correctly on the basis of unconsciously absorbing other languages through communication with the outside world. And it is essentially a subconscious process. English picture books are in line with the rules of children's language acquisition. Most of the themes come from real life, which make these books easily arouse pupils' resonance. Reading English picture books helps pupils form phoneme awareness and internalize the second language, thus enhancing their language ability.

Cultivating Pupils' Cultural Awareness

Learning and using English helps pupils experience different cultures. English picture books contain various contents, including western fairy tales, traditional festivals, historical geography, etc. In reading, pupils can learn different cultures, history, and customs while broadening their global vision. Moreover, they are able to compare cultural similarities and differences, improving their understanding of Chinese and foreign cultures. The cultivation of pupils' intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence are conducive to the formation of their good characters, proper values, and national pride.

Developing Pupils' Thinking Quality

In the process of English picture books reading, pupils will think actively and interpret the words and pictures through a series of thinking activities, such as association, imagination, logical analysis, induction, and deduction. By thinking about the problems in the books, pupils learn to analyze and solve problems as well as make their own judgments. At the same time, teachers can create some open questions and contexts to inspire their analytical and critical thinking. Therefore, pupils have more opportunities to understand the world from multiple perspectives.

Improving Pupils' Reading Character

Reading character, including reading habit and reading experience, is of great importance in the development of pupils' reading literacy. Catchy language, eye-catching illustrations and vivid storyline of English picture books can easily arouse pupils' curiosity and reading interest. Strong interest in reading is beneficial to develop their good reading attitude and reading habits. Specifically, some electronic picture books incorporating with sound and video bring pupils more enjoyable reading experiences.

Strategies of English Picture Book Teaching in Primary Schools

English picture books can create real situations and contexts for Chinese students and offer more intuitive access to authentic English texts and experience more authentic English culture, which is helpful to improve their English reading literacy. The specific implementation strategies are as follows:

Selecting Appropriate English Picture Books

There are a large number of English picture books in physical bookstores or on the Internet, including audio English picture books favored by pupils. Teachers should select appropriate English picture books from the perspectives of pupils' needs, language level and cognitive level (Wang & Aonarentuya, 2017, p. 72). In the lower grades (Grades 1-2), the selected picture books should mainly focus on communicative topics, with vivid pictures and simple texts which emphasize on cultivating pupils' reading interests. Reference picture books: Oxford Reading Tree Level 1 and 2, Heinemann Graded Books GK and G1. In the middle grades (Grades 3-4), most selected picture books should be based on emotional themes and real life while including basic vocabularies and sentence patterns. Reference picture books: Oxford Reading Tree Levels 3 and 4, and Heinemann Graded Books G2 and G3. In the senior stages (Grades 5-6), the selected picture books ought to target on cultural themes, involving social, cultural and scientific materials and appropriate compound sentences. Reference picture books: Oxford Reading Tree 5 and 6, and Random Books.

Innovating Teaching Methods

To improve pupils' English reading literacy, some innovative English picture book teaching methods have been proposed by some English educators in recent years, including Picture Tour, Sustained Silent Reading, Reading Circles, and Jigsaw Reading (Wang & Aonarentuya, 2017, p. 69):

1. "Picture Tour" is a kind of instructive sharing reading. While reading English picture books, teachers will ask pupils to raise a question according to the picture on the cover and then break the question into smaller questions according to the small illustrations in the book. After solving all the small questions, the answer to the first question will be obtained naturally. This method can practice pupils' ability of independent reading (Aonarentuya, 2022, p. 1).

2. "Sustained Silent Reading" refers to continuous and silent reading, which allows pupils to read quietly in a fixed period of time every day (Luo & Jiang, 2022, p. 6). In this way, pupils can fully enjoy reading, develop a hobby of reading and improve reading fluency.

3. Daniels (2002) defined "Reading Circles" as reading groups, in which members select and read the same story and jointly decide the content for discussion. After reading independently, each member prepares for the discussion according to his or her specific role in the group and shares the information he or she gets from the discussion with other groups (Chen & Li, 2022, p. 2). These activities are beneficial to cultivate pupils' reading ability, critical thinking ability and cooperation ability.

4. "Jigsaw Reading" is a text-based cooperative reading mode which means that the book is divided into several sections that are randomly distributed to different pupils. Then pupils are asked to join group discussion, integrate the information they get from reading, and finally retell the story by themselves. This process is like completing a jigsaw puzzle (Ma, 2022, p. 2). As a result, pupils' English comprehensive ability and logical thinking can be trained through communicating with their members.

Attaching Importance to Emotional Education

Teachers should integrate language learning with emotional education, as pupils are easily attracted to emotional stories. By guiding pupils to read stories and analyze different characters, teachers can stimulate pupils' emotional resonance and cultivate their emotional expression ability. For example, while teaching the text "My Friends", teachers can ask pupils to read it in combination with the picture book *Midge in Hospital*, guiding them to help their classmates when they are in need. Thus, pupils can learn to be kind and cherish their friendship. Another example, when learning the text "Environmental Protection", pupils can be guided to read the picture book *I Can Save the Earth*. In this way, teachers can show pupils the important concepts of environmental protection and a community with a shared future for humanity.

Arousing Pupils' Cultural Consciousness

English picture book is the carrier of cultural transmission. Therefore, teachers can introduce some foreign cultural knowledge and combine the cultural connotation of picture books with intercultural communication. In this way, teachers can help pupils understand different expressions and the unique characteristics of different cultures, cultivating their intercultural awareness. For instance, in many picture books, the image of "owl" is usually serious and intelligent for being a symbol of wisdom in western culture. Nonetheless, it represents ominousness in Chinese culture. Through the comparison, teachers can guide pupils to correctly understand the content and expand their intercultural knowledge.

Cultivating Pupils' Reading Strategies

The cultivation of reading strategies should be infiltrated into the daily reading activities from lower to upper grades (Wang & Aonarentuya, 2015, p. 21). Teachers can integrate English picture books with textbooks to teach reading strategies such as skimming, intensive reading, prediction, summary and reflection. In this way, pupils can not only guess the meanings of new words, find keywords and topic sentences according to the context, but also make reasonable judgement and prediction of new information based on known information. For instance, "billabong" is a relatively rare word for pupils. When teaching the sentence "Kakadu has many rivers and billabongs" in the picture book *Kakadu Park*, teachers can lead pupils to read the next sentence "Crocodiles swim and hide in them". As a result, it is easier for pupils to infer that "billabongs" must be related to water and means "swimming pools". The speculation strategy cultivates pupils' inferential ability and removes their dyslexia. Another example, when learning the text about the universe, pupils can be led to read the picture book *The Spaceship* and think about the question "Where do spaceships go in space?" to practice their predictive ability. Similarly, after reading the picture book *I am Planet Earth*, teachers can ask them "Why does the Earth go around the Sun?" to stimulate their inquiry thinking, helping them apply reflection strategy.

Popularization of Picture Book Reading

The cultivation of pupils' English reading literacy should not only be permeated in the classroom, but also be carried out by creating a variety of learning opportunities after class. In order to popularize English picture

book reading, schools, teachers and parents should be aware of its values and cooperate with each other. Firstly, schools should pay more attention to English picture books teaching and provide certain financial and policy support, such as purchasing English picture books for teaching and placing them in the library and classrooms. In addition, more relevant classes and activities such as reading sharing meetings should be arranged regularly for pupils to exchange their reading experiences. Secondly, English teachers can set up a teaching and research office of English picture books to prepare lessons together, learn advanced teaching methods and choose suitable teaching contents. Thirdly, parents can download some electronic picture book materials and encourage their children to read more. Hence, with a pleasant reading environment both at school and at home, children can easily enjoy reading.

Conclusion

The proposal of “English reading literacy” indicates that English reading education in China has entered a new stage of development. The use of English picture books as supplementary teaching materials meets the requirements of cultivating pupils’ English reading literacy. Solving the problems existing in pupils’ English reading and adopting effective teaching strategies can cultivate pupils’ English reading interests and reading habits, improve their English reading literacy and provide prerequisites for them to adapt to lifelong learning and globalization.

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