Elementary School Students’ Views on Story Reading’s Influence on the Improvement of English Reading Ability

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a trend toward reading English stories in order to enhance elementary school students’ reading development. By using a semi-standardized interviewing technique, data were gathered from seventeen elementary school students who had had particular experience in English story reading. The major finding of this paper is that reading English stories is not effective because elementary school students lack the required level of vocabulary and interest in reading. However, reading English stories can be useful for improving elementary school students’ reading comprehension, and English story grammar won’t be a barrier to comprehension. It is expected that these results can provide elementary school English teachers a new direction for employing story reading strategy in their reading class in order to enhance students’ English reading ability.

I. Introduction

“Without sufficient storybook reading experience in early childhood—whether at home or at school—students may be missing a key part of the initial foundation of reading” (Gunn, Simmons, & Kameenui, 1995, p. 13). For children, storybooks as a kind of literature resource play a primary role in their reading learning process. In the past, literature, including stories, novels, drama, poetry and so on, was the core and the most important part of language development, but there was a period when the value and the practicability ascribed to literature decreased (O'Sullivan, 1991). Recently, reading stories seems to have become a more and more popular reading training strategy (Kortner, 1990), and some elementary schools and teachers have started to follow this trend of using stories instead of textbooks in order to improve students’ reading ability.

Just as with other learning methods, the perspectives toward using stories as a learning material are also various. Doubts about whether elementary school students have sufficient vocabulary and have acquired enough grammar rules are the basis of the main disagreements. However, a lot of research shows the effect of reading on developing reading comprehension (Jan & Jiang, 1994; Lin, 2004). Through reading stories, young students not only get involved when they are reading, but also link their personal experiences to the contents, which has a positive effect on their reading development.

Since the subject is a controversial issue, the purpose of this paper is to compare and analyze the effects from the standpoint of elementary school students’ attitudes toward reading English stories. Although the arguments regarding insufficient vocabulary and knowledge of grammar remain the major disagreements, there is still a lot of evidence proving the positive effects on developing students’ reading comprehension and increasing their interest in reading. The major hypothesis is that reading different kinds of stories effectively improves elementary school students’ reading comprehension.
II. Literature Review

1. Negative Effects

According to previous studies, the first barrier for elementary school students in reading English stories is that they haven’t acquired sufficient vocabulary, so they cannot comprehend the text. “Although it is true that comprehension is far more than recognizing words and remembering their meanings, it is also true that if a reader does not know the meanings of a sufficient proportion of the words in the text, comprehension is impossible” (Texas Education Agency, 2002, p. 3). This citation shows that vocabulary plays a primary role in reading comprehension. Although students might understand the meaning of a word from the context, it still takes time for them to develop such competence. Besides, the meanings of a vocabulary item, which include the word knowledge, are very complex. If a student just learns the superficial meaning of a word, a lot of misunderstandings might happen while he or she is reading. Also, vocabulary can be divided into content words and function words, which are much more complicated (Texas Education Agency, 2002). From O’Sullivan’s (1991) point of view, although those poets, novelists, and playwrights transmit their feelings and messages in a natural way, the content and meanings still seem too complicated for children to understand. As for the linguistic difficulty of literature, which includes the morphology, a story as literature is a sort of language art, so when the readers are young students, it is not surprising that the complexity of words and word usage will be very difficult for them to understand (O’Sullivan, 1991). Furthermore, Wu and Zhang (1994) provided a questionnaire to the participants, teachers from 57 elementary schools in Taichung City, in order to know what kinds of teaching materials, besides textbooks, they would use. The result shows that 40.2% of the teachers chose English stories as supplementary teaching materials. The reason for the stories’ lower usage than other materials is because of the low comprehension level of elemental school students, who lack enough lexical ability and reading competence to understand the content. To sum up, before using stories as reading materials to improve elementary school students’ reading ability, the problem of insufficient vocabulary influencing their reading comprehension should be considered.

Besides the factor of insufficient vocabulary, another contention is that elementary school students do not learn enough grammatical rules to be able to read English stories. In other words, the structures of the sentences in English stories might interfere with students’ reading comprehension. In Puurtinen’s (1998) study, she indicated that although children’s literature might be a useful tool to develop children’s reading ability, a requirement is that the children should understand the content without interference from grammar. Unless students can really comprehend the grammar and sentence structures in order to understand the main ideas of stories and get the messages from stories, using this kind of reading materials will become aimless and ineffective. Furthermore, sentence complexity and grammar seem to affect students’ reading comprehension. Those difficult or unfamiliar grammar and sentence structures are incomprehensible for children, and they lead children to distance themselves from reading. If the focus is on the grammatical structures, the suitable materials should be textbooks taught in target groups. However, in children’s books, content with a lot of complex grammatical structures will not contribute much to children’s improvement in reading comprehension. Therefore, since students have not acquired enough grammatical rules, and they are unfamiliar with certain sentence structures, this condition will adversely influence students’ understanding when they are reading English stories (Puurtinen, 1998).

2. Positive Effects

In contrast, there is still lots of research supporting the idea of letting children read stories as a useful reading method, maintaining that developing reading comprehension is one of the advantages. A study by the ERIC Development Team (1999) described the use of literature teaching at five elementary schools in the Los Angeles area. Teachers used stories as teaching materials. Before or during the teaching process, students were enabled to obtain better content and theme comprehension of the story, and then they constructed the information as their background knowledge. Once students had gained more and more background knowledge, they could understand different types of reading content easily. Besides, Jan and Jiang (1994) conducted a study focused on the outcome of using children’s literature, including nursery rhymes, level-appropriate picture books, and chapter books, to teach students having difficulty in reading. Four
students were selected, and they took the lessons based on children's literature, four times a week for 16 weeks. During the process, those students read, recited, and reviewed children's literature, which seemed to be more interesting and easier for them to understand than the formal materials. Also, the teacher evaluated the effects on reading ability by observation, interviews, reflective notes and questionnaires. Finally, when those four students came back to the original classes, their reading comprehension ability was almost at the same level as other students. Both the teacher and those four students proved that students' reading ability improved significantly by reading children's literature. In sum, with the reading materials of stories, students' learning obstructions can be reduced. Young learners, especially, are more willing to assimilate the content, get involved in the reading process, and then increase their reading comprehension gradually.

No matter how many researchers have indicated that reading English stories is effective for elementary school students, one of the most important elements for improving reading ability is to increase students' interest in reading. Lin (2004) cited the idea of the literature group, which was a kind of discussion conference. The literature group used storybooks in order to encourage students to read. The main procedure included sharing individual ideas, listening and reflecting on others' opinions, arranging and analyzing those ideas, and finally encouraging multicultural points of view. According to the trainees' feedback, the literature group could increase the enthusiasm towards literature with extensive and deep reading. Furthermore, by using children's literature, trade books, and picture books, students start to develop their interest both in reading and in the content of literature (Goerss, 1994). On the other hand, for example, Shen (2004) went to Pennsylvania State University in 2003, and he interviewed foreign students and their parents from America, Taiwan, China and Singapore. He summarized the results and found that over half of the foreign students interviewed hated tests and textbooks. Also, when they are required to take many tests and write a lot of homework responding to the texts they have read, students evade reading and dislike it in the event, and then their interest towards reading likewise decreases. Nevertheless, if the text materials are replaced with children's literature, students' motivation towards reading is more likely to increase. Similarly, McCammon and Betts (1999) conducted a study by interviewing teachers, students, parents, the principal, and the theatre specialist at Mesquite Elementary School, and collected the data to analyze their perspectives on the stories of dramas. The data show that teachers can teach more fluently by teaching the stories of dramas, and students also can increase their interest during the literature-oriented learning process. In conclusion, stories are considered to be a very useful material for increasing children's interest toward reading. Drawing on students' personal experiences shows the effect of reading stories, too. By using literature materials, students connect their related experiences to the story content. Also, the more connections students make, the more motivation there will be for them to read stories (ERIC Development Team, 1999). In addition, a study done by the American Booksellers Association analyzed American children's reading behavior, which included the kinds of books and literature they would be more likely to choose to read. The results point out that the way children choose books is mostly based on their familiarity (Oppenheim, Brenner, & Boeghóld, 1986). Therefore, it becomes a circle in which the more connections students make between their own experiences and the contents of stories, the more familiarity students will have. In sum, reading stories in order to promote students' interest in reading is an effective and useful approach. When contrasting textbooks with literature materials, the difference reveals an extra advantage of reading stories—providing the relationships between the facts and the contents. In fact, textbooks usually provide the facts only, which are difficult for children to understand; on the other hand, children's literature offers the relationship between the fact and the content, which gives children opportunities to make connections with their own background knowledge and other related content (Goerss, 1994). Shen and Chen (2003) observed and interviewed students, teachers, and librarians at the Pennsylvania Elementary School in the U.S. They discovered that elementary school students prefer easier and more entertaining stories over boring textbooks. By reading stories, students felt that the vocabulary and wording were facilitated with rhythm and rhyme, so students could play with the language and felt interested at the same time. Also, by building children's love and joy of reading stories, stories can promote young readers' interest in reading (Cullinan, 1989). Thus, the rationale for interest promotion is well
documented, and more and more studies have shown that the literature-based teaching approach, even with young children, can establish a positive attitude towards reading through stories. In addition, Kortner (1990) based on some observations and reflections from teaching stories such as asking questions or telling a familiar story, concludes that during the process of reading literature, children actually make progress in reading. Furthermore, most parents agree with the strategy of story reading, too. In conclusion, children can learn how to make connections with their own background knowledge and stories, and build relationships between the content and the real world during the learning process, all of which has a positive effect on reading ability.

Since there are both some negative effects regarding lack of sufficient vocabulary and grammar rules for reading English stories as well as the positive effects of improving reading comprehension ability and increasing the interest in reading, the purpose of this study was to use the semi-standardized interviewing strategy to obtain elementary school students’ views on the effect of reading English stories.

III. Methodology

1. Participants

The participants in this study were seventeen elementary school students in total (eight fifth graders and nine sixth graders) from two elementary schools in Kaohsiung. In order to get the permission from these two elementary schools, the consent form was provided to the school principals, showing the purpose of this research, the process of the interview, the risks which the participants might encounter, the rights of the participants, the dissemination of the research results, as well as some steps to protect the participants from harm. For example, the names of the participants were not to be disclosed, and the responses from the participants would be summarized only.

2. Sampling Strategies

Purposive sampling was used in this study because the participants needed to have the experiences which were related to the research purpose. In other words, the participants were selected based on their experiences of reading English stories.

In this research, the total number of the participants was 17 without regard for gender. The criteria to determine the number of the participants were based on the saturation and sufficiency of information. In addition, the data from those seventeen participants were enough to analyze the results.

3. Instrumentation

A semi-standardized interviewing technique was used in this study because it was easier to ask questions focusing on the topic, and to compare the participants’ answers. In addition, the content of the interview was composed of the participants’ past experiences, present experiences, and opinions. More detailed interview questions are attached in the Appendix.

During the process of establishing access to the principals of the elementary schools, telephoning was used to get the first contact and to arrange the time for the interviews. However, one school did not allow the individual interviewing because the interview process might interrupt the whole class. As a result, a compromise was made to interview the students who lived in the school’s dormitory.

The pilot test of the interview was done with the first and second participants. From their reflections, the adjustments made included revision of the wording, increased follow-up questions, and modification of double-barreled questions.

Based on the pros and cons in the literature review, four hypotheses were postulated as in the following:

Hypothesis 1: Without sufficient vocabulary, it is hard for elementary school students to catch the main ideas of English stories.

Hypothesis 2: When elementary school students have not acquired enough grammatical rules, they are not able to understand the content of English stories.

Hypothesis 3: By reading English stories, elementary school students can improve their reading comprehension ability because their background knowledge is gradually built.

Hypothesis 4: Reading English stories can increase elementary school students’ interest in reading due to the entertaining content, which can be connected to their personal experiences.

4. Analysis Techniques

Tape recording was employed to obtain the raw data, and transcription was used to get
the information for analysis. Using a computer-based word-processing program, the record was transcribed verbatim with nonverbal signals. In addition, participants’ transcripts were organized through copy and paste processes and written as narrative-form crafted profiles.

Based on the data, the majority opinions from the participants would be the final results; on the other hand, the minority opinions in the data would be drawn out and regarded as the considerations for the suggestions section. The following results present statistics and excerpts from the data.

IV. Results

Hypothesis 1: Without sufficient vocabulary, it is hard for elementary school students to catch the main ideas of English stories.

The results show that eleven out of the seventeen elementary school students, almost 65% of the students, thought that vocabulary in English stories influenced their understanding of the stories. For example, Participant #8 said, “...sometimes I feel distracted by the grammar and the familiarity of new words, especially the key words. If I know the meanings of the key words, I can understand the whole sentence, the whole page, and then the whole structure of that story.” Also, Participant #12 indicated, “I think reading English stories is difficult, especially the new words. If I can understand the new words, [most of the time] I can understand the whole sentence. Moreover, to check the dictionary is not very helpful because I just forget the meaning of the new words after checking for only once.” Moreover, Participant #14 mentioned, “In my opinion, I think the most important thing in reading is to comprehend the main points. If comparing the influences of the new words and grammar, I think the role of new words is more primary.” According to the statistics and excerpts above, the results fit the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: When elementary school students have not acquired enough grammatical rules, they are not able to understand the content of English stories.

The data indicate that fifteen out of the seventeen students (88%) thought that the grammar structures of English stories were not difficult for them. To illustrate, Participant #1 said, “I think that when I understand the vocabulary, the grammar structures are not problems at all.” Besides, Participant #7 said, “Most sentences in English storybooks are already simplified with easy grammar, and I choose the stories according to my own English level, so it isn’t very difficult to read English stories, and I often take notes, too.” Also, according to Participant #13, he mentioned, “The part which I usually have problems with is the part of new words, and I don’t care much about the grammar since the sentence can be understood after knowing the new words.” Therefore, the results don’t fit the hypothesis since the findings show that knowledge of grammatical rules does not influence the understanding of English stories.

Hypothesis 3: By reading English stories, elementary school students can improve their reading comprehension ability because their background knowledge is gradually built.

Fourteen out of the seventeen students (82%) considered that reading English stories could improve their reading comprehension ability. For example, Participant #1 said, “I learn a lot of vocabulary by English stories, and reading English stories is just like a springboard for me to understand other English articles. Therefore, I think reading English stories is helpful for my reading ability.” Furthermore, Participant #3 indicated, “In my opinion, the background knowledge I learn from English stories is useful, and it can be linked to a similar story. In addition, reading English stories is just an initiation into other English books, and it also improves my reading comprehension ability.” Similarly, according to Participant #7, “I will learn some background knowledge, and when reading the similar words, characters, and background, it is easier to understand without checking them repeatedly. In addition, reading English stories helps me to improve my reading ability, and it is fun.” As a result, the findings broadly fit into the hypothesis, showing that it is helpful to read English stories because students can build their background knowledge to enhance their reading comprehension ability.

Hypothesis 4: Reading English stories can increase elementary school students’ interest in reading due to the entertaining content, which can be connected to their personal experiences.

Nearly 65% of the participants, eleven out of the seventeen students, disagreed that reading English stories could increase their interest in reading. In the reflection of Participant #5, he said, “In my free time, I won’t read English stories because we have a lot of English homework to do. When I finish all of the homework, I don’t want to read more. I think
reading English stories does not really increase
my interest, and it all depends on the topic
whether I like or not..." Also, Participant #10
mentioned, "To be honest, I don't read English
storybooks or other English books in my free
time. I usually read Chinese books, and I think
they are more interesting. When reading English
storybooks, I have to check the dictionary,
which is painful, but reading Chinese ones is
faster." Finally, Participant #17 indicated, "...I
don't like to read stories, too. It takes time to
understand, and English stories are difficult and
uninteresting. Therefore, my interest in reading
even decreases. Really, I am sick of English
stories, and I just want to read Chinese books." Such findings do not fit into this hypothesis.

V. Discussion

After presenting the results, we find there
are some inconsistencies between the
hypotheses and the findings. For example, the
second hypothesis regarding the impact of
grammatical structures is not consistent with the
results. Based on the participants' opinions,
most of them indicated that they do not pay
much attention to grammar or sentence
structures for two main reasons. First, students
think that the grammar is less important than
vocabulary. For Taiwanese students, once they
understand the meanings of the vocabulary, they
can catch the main points of the sentences fairly
well. Second, there is often a certain degree of
syntactic simplification in storybooks because
the target readers are usually children. As a
result of these two factors, elementary school
students do not think that they need to acquire
more grammatical forms in order to understand
the content of English stories. Such a result does
not fit into Puurtinen's (1998) points of view.

Another inconsistency, which disagrees
with hypothesis four, is that most of these
elementary school students do not think that
they can increase their interest in reading
English stories. For these students, reading
English stories is a boring and tiring task, and
they still prefer Chinese stories to English ones.
Reading English stories in leisure time is just
like having another assignment. As a result, the
findings do not fit into the views of related
studies (Lin, 2004; Goer, 1994; Shen, 2004;
McCannon & Betts, 1999; ERIC Development
Team, 1999; Oppenheim, Brenner, & Boegehol, 1986;

On the other hand, students' responses do
support the other two hypotheses. Regarding
hypothesis one, the results show that vocabulary
is definitely an important and basic element for
elementary school students in understanding the
story content. When reading stories, if students
have the competence to recognize the meanings
of the vocabulary, they are able to enjoy reading
the story, and the content will become a
comprehensible input to improve their reading
ability over the long term. On the other hand,
lack of vocabulary might result in a breakdown
in reading comprehension. Such a result fits into
the views of several previous studies (Texas
Education Agency, 2002; O'Sullivan, 1991; Wu
& Zhang, 1994).

Another consistency, which matches with
the third hypothesis, shows that by reading
English stories, students can improve their
reading comprehension ability. Since stories
contain a lot of background knowledge, students
can link the content to a similar story and help
the comprehension of the content (ERIC
Development Team, 1999). Moreover, in the
first experience of reading English stories, a lot
of the participants got the main ideas of the
stories by browsing the pictures. In other words,
these extra elements can also facilitate students'
reading comprehension (Jan & Jiang, 1994).

Based on the research results, the
supported theory is that reading English stories
can be ineffective due to insufficient vocabulary
and interest in reading; however, it is useful to
improve students' reading comprehension
ability, and insufficient knowledge of
grammatical forms won't be a barrier for them
in understanding the English stories.

VI. Implications and Conclusion

Due to the controversy over using English
stories as an approach to improving students'
reading ability, the minority's opinions should
be employed as suggestions for further
instructional improvement. First of all, in order
to arouse elementary school students' interest in
reading English stories, students should have the
right to choose the stories or reading materials
they like. Perhaps at school, the teacher can give
students the opportunities to choose one story,
and then have a short presentation or a role-play.
In this way, students might feel that they do not
read only for the assignments and tests.
Secondly, targeting the unfamiliar vocabulary, a
teacher should teach students some reading
strategies for facilitation in advance, such as
skimming, scanning or guessing from the
context. If students can read without constantly checking the dictionary, they are able to enjoy the stories much more. Last but not least, for some students, reading English stories is painful; however, to build the habit of reading is necessary and important during language development. Therefore, how to foster reading habits, and how to interest students should play the primary roles in English reading development.

Since the sampling strategy that was used in this study was purposive sampling, there are some limitations: The conclusion cannot be generalized to the population at large or to groups without English reading experiences and environments. Moreover, the results will only fit some certain groups that also have experiences related to reading English stories.

After analyzing the research data, the conclusion of this paper is that although reading English stories is not completely suitable for elementary school students under some conditions, such as insufficient vocabulary and inability to increase interest, there are still some positive effects. For elementary school students, reading English stories is a transition to exposing them to other reading English materials. Furthermore, it is also a good way to improve students’ reading comprehension ability since the sentences and grammatical structures are already simplified. As a result, the effective outcomes of English stories should be worth considering. It is expected that the result can provide elementary school English teachers a new direction for employing story reading strategy in their reading classes in order to enhance students’ English reading comprehension ability.

References


Appendix: Interview Questions

Interview One
1. How old were you when you started reading stories by yourself?
2. Please talk about the experience.
3. Which part didn’t you understand when reading stories for the first time?
4. Did you get the main point of the story at that time? If not, what is the reason?

Interview Two
1. Before reading the story, will your teacher introduce the vocabulary and the grammar to you?
2. After teachers’ explanation, which aspects helped you most?
3. Besides teachers’ explanations, if you encounter some difficult vocabulary or grammar structures, what do you often do?
4. How often do you check the dictionary when reading stories?
5. Can you recognize which definition is correct for the word in this context?
6. Besides the reading class, do you often read stories outside the classroom? Why or why not? If the answer is yes, for what kind of purposes do you want to do so?

Interview Three
1. Do you think reading stories is too difficult for you? If yes, which part is especially difficult, the vocabulary or the grammar?
2. Do the new vocabulary and complex grammar structures influence your comprehension of the story? How do you feel?
3. When you check the dictionary, is that really helpful in understanding?
4. With the help of the dictionary or teachers’ explanations, do you think the problems of the vocabulary and grammar structures you encounter can be solved? Why or why not?
5. If you have some leisure time, will you want to read some stories or books? Why or why not?
6. Do you think reading stories will increase your interest toward reading?
7. By reading stories, do you acquire some background knowledge?
8. Do you think that background knowledge is helpful in reading comprehension?
9. Do you think reading stories is effective for improving your reading comprehension ability? Why or why not?
國小學生對於閱讀英文故事對提升英語閱讀能力之意見調查

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摘要

近年來，閱讀英文故事以增進國小學童的英文閱讀能力已成為一個趨勢。因此，本論文的研究目的，旨在分析閱讀英文故事對於國小學生英文閱讀能力的影響。本論文以訪問十七位有過閱讀英文故事經驗的國小學生為測試對象，並調查國小學生對於閱讀英文故事對提升英語閱讀能力之看法。根據本研究結果顯示，國小學生由於缺乏足夠的單字量以及閱讀興趣，使得閱讀英文故事的成效受限；然而閱讀英文故事的確能增進國小學童的英文閱讀理解能力，加上故事中為較簡易的英文文法，不易造成學童閱讀時的障礙。此篇論文的研究結果，可提供國小英語教師採用閱讀英文故事的教學策略，以提升國小學童的英語閱讀能力。

關鍵字：閱讀英文故事、國小學童、英文閱讀能力。