

# *The Use of Literary Texts in Primary Level Language Teaching in Hong Kong*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Traditional course books include many extremely dull written materials that have neglected the interest of learners of a second language. As our approach to teaching English has been shifted from the traditional oral-structural approach to communicative approach, course book publishers try to produce more speech materials that they consider really situational and very 'communicative'. Nevertheless, according to the basic objective of our new English syllabus in 1997, teachers have to enable our learners 'to develop an ever-improving capability to use English' (CDI, 1997).

It is doubtful that the use of speech materials is the only means to improve learners' ability to use English. R. Carter and J. McRae (1996) points out that literary texts contain 'culturally-rooted language which is purposefully patterned and representational, which actively promotes a process of interpretation and encourages a pleasurable interaction with negotiation of its meanings.' They advocate that imagination as a vital source for language learning must be developed. Through imaginative interaction with the text, learners learn to read, infer, and think creatively. They can become more aware of the target language and better readers of the world.

In the present paper, I am going to show the use of literary texts, especially short stories, are appropriate teaching materials for young learners. I tried to use a short story in two versions, a narrative text and a drama script, in teaching primary three pupils. Learners were asked to think imaginatively about the story, to discover the use of present tense, to appreciate the music of the texts, to recognize certain new vocabulary, to act out and rewrite the story. Activities included listening to the story, reading aloud practice, role play, making word walls, retelling and rewriting the story. Children's participation was active. The teacher's role was more a provider of resources and a motivator than an instructor. A happy and enjoyable learning environment was created and learner involvement was great. It implied that genuine communication cannot depend on some conversational speeches which are only communicative on the surface. Literary texts especially short stories are valuable sources for language teaching.

I would conclude that effective language learning is based on the use of literary texts under appropriate teacher guidance. Teachers need to focus on choosing appropriate reading texts and flexible teaching methodologies which can provoke reading interest and enhance language development. R. Carter and J. McRae (1996) suggest that a wider range of texts should be provided for reading. Learners need to develop a habit of reading extensively and effectively on their own. When children become independent language learners, they can really develop 'an ever-improving capability to use English'.

## **Text selection**

J. McRae & R. Boardman (1984) have pointed out that the final goal of second language teaching is to enhance learners' ability to read literary texts comprehensively and happily. J. McRae (1991) has listed out factors that need to be concerned in text selection. He prefers texts that

‘To be usable and valid, a short text must have a clear and readily identifiable setting, and/or situation, and/or characters. Any one of these can be sufficient.’ He adds that, ‘...there will almost always be a turning-point in the passage, something that will indicate a movement within the passage, implying a beginning, a middle and an end.’ (p.44)

In this sense, short stories are always the most ideal literary texts for language teaching. Ellis and Brewster (1991) have encouraged the use of story-telling in the primary sector because they believe that every child likes stories. It is very true that children find stories easy to access and understand since most stories have familiar settings. Through reading stories, children can discover more about the world and foreign cultures that they are curious about. They enjoy learning the language because they can think and exercise their imagination freely when reading stories.

In the present study, I have chosen the story of ‘Jack and the Beanstalk’ in two versions, one is in direct speech and the other is a narrative description. I would like children to discover the difference between these texts as they read. This story is one of the most familiar ones for children. The main character, Jack, is a boy. Children can penetrate themselves into the character. The adventure of Jack in the story is always attractive to young children. As for the character of a giant, it is imaginary and familiar enough to young children. This may associate their memory with the giant in the story of Alladin.

## **Language choices**

### ***Vocabulary***

Teachers believe that vocabulary needs to be simple and concrete in a text. It is especially true for young children. N. Schmitt and M. McCarthy, eds., (1997) point out that most beginning learners have problems to learn vocabulary directly from context.

I agree with their observation, that most young learners always find it difficult to guess new vocabulary. Even when children understand the meaning, they are not able to explain it to the teacher in the second language. They lack confidence and their basic content vocabulary is really limited. Usually, primary school teachers use pictures to illustrate the meaning of new vocabulary and children are allowed to use their mother tongue to explain their meaning. In this way, the work of guessing becomes possible and easier. Vocabulary learned from the chosen texts are: beans, beanstalk, giant, castle, gold, goose, grow, rich, sell, buy, chase and laying. For those nouns, children can guess easily from pictures and real objects. For verbs and adjectives, they need to understand them from context.

However, traditional reading activities emphasize the comprehension of the text only. Teachers are satisfied when learners have answered all the questions about the content correctly. J. McRae and L. Pantaleoni (1990) emphasize the importance of learners' response to what they read rather than understanding every single word or comprehension of the text. It is important to let children make guesses from context and allow them to remember the meanings by images. They suggest that learning vocabulary from cards is probably more effective because learners can acquire a sense of

progress and achievement.

### ***Grammar***

Effective grammar learning is no longer teacher-centred and transmissive. We allow learners to investigate the grammar rules. Carter (1997) states that,

‘A study of grammar in texts is a study of grammar in use.’ (p.34)

In order to be able to use the language expressively and correctly, it is better for learners to understand more about the usage of grammar rather telling how it is used. Teachers are responsible to foster learners’ language awareness and ability to reflect on the language. As Ellis and Sinclair (1989) have suggested that the more conscious and reflective the learner is, the more effective the learning will be.

The grammar focus in the two texts is the use of simple present tense to indicate things happening and to express simple truth.

### ***Phonology***

It is the ‘music’ of the text. G. R. Roberts (1999) reminds second language teachers that our learners are not ready to understand the relationship of letters to corresponding sounds although they have learned the alphabet. He adds that children, at the early stages of reading, need to be taught how sounds can be attached to letters. Young learners need to be taught how to blend phonemes, blends, digraphs, syllables, and morphemes. Teacher demonstrations and classroom practice are necessary. When children can discover memorable sound patterns from texts, their confidence to read increases. When they can read fluently, they enjoy reading.

Activities like building up the word-wall, making the word-train and word-tree, and making use of letter-sound or sound-letter relationship to read can foster children’s competence in pronunciation and spelling. Finally, teachers need to pay attention to teach proper intonation so that the music of the text can be brought out naturally.

## **STAGES AND THEMES OF TEACHING FROM THE TEXTS**

### **Pre-reading stage**

J. McRae (1991) reminds teachers that the pre-representation of an imaginative text is a ‘warm-up’ exercise that enables learners to understand the reason for reading it. He stresses the importance of the pre-reading stage as the key part of the whole learning process.

In my try-out, I used a picture of Jack’s family to show the background knowledge of the story. In the picture, children saw a cow, a boy and a woman with sad faces in a small hut. I asked questions to elicit the relationship between the boy and the woman, why the family was happy or sad, what they were going to do with their cow. They were encouraged to infer and express their ideas freely. Some of them were shy to open their mouths because they lacked the confidence to speak in English. In order to encourage more pupils to join in the guessing activity, I allowed some less able pupils to use some mother tongue in their expression. I let the others to help them in converting the mother tongue

into English. I went on to ask them if they had cows at home and why not. They laughed and started to imagine what would happen if they had cows at home. It took quite a while for this brainstorming and I found they really enjoyed thinking imaginatively.

In the beginning, I did not tell them any answers but asked them to read the text and try to find out if their guesses were correct. Children were clear about what they were going to find out when they started their reading. They were excited to know the story and prove their guesses by themselves. I let them read the narrative text of the story first.

### **While-reading stage**

For young learners, learning certain basic vocabulary, which may impede their understanding of the text, is important. It is very common for teachers to use pictures to show the vocabulary at the beginning of every lesson in the primary school classroom. I do not reject the use of pictures to show new vocabulary. However, I find that when children are able to grasp the main idea of the story, they can explore the meaning of new vocabulary presented in the text. As some stories are so familiar, it is not difficult even for young learners to guess the meaning of basic vocabulary. They learn when they read. They read and they learn. It is important to train young learners to make reasonable guesses for the meanings of new vocabulary by reading the whole text rather than just showing them what they are by pictures although this is the most convenient way.

As the story of 'Jack and the beanstalk' is one of the most popular stories, many pupils could guess the meaning of most vocabulary like beanstalk, castle, giant, and the gold eggs. They were proud of understanding these new words by themselves. Then I asked them to draw beans, beanstalk, goose, castle, and the giant on the blackboard. They were so excited to draw what they could imagine. Then I showed them a wall-picture of the story, and asked some of the brighter ones to label the new vocabulary to the objects on the picture. This activity was helpful for the less able learners to understand those vocabulary and remember them more easily by images.

I let children listen to the cassette while they read the story for the second time. J. McRae (1991) points out that listening to and reading the text simultaneously is important because

"The text comes to life when read or performed; it comes off the page, and becomes very much more than either simply a reading text or a listening exercise." (p.110)

I agree that texts become alive when it is presented orally especially by native speakers. Children enjoy listening to the story when they can read at the same time. They not only can understand the text better but also appreciate the music of the text when they read.

I asked the class to read aloud after the listening activity. I believe that young children need to imitate and practise pronunciation together at this early stage. Although J. McRae (1991) says that there are many better ways for teachers to check and practise pronunciation, I find that class reading is necessary for young learners with less confidence. Children may prefer to read aloud together before they can carry out other reading activities like jigsaw reading. They need to build up their confidence with peer support.

In order to develop an awareness of a letter-sound relationship, children were asked to build up word-walls, word-trains, and word-trees. Different groups were doing different worksheets. They searched words from the text and other reading materials in the class library. They discovered many words with the same beginning and ending sounds.

When they finished their worksheets, they had to show their work to the others. I let them and helped them read out what they had written down and stuck all worksheets on the board. I told them to add new words when they encountered them in future reading materials.

In the past, I used to check children's comprehension about the text after they learned the vocabulary and pronunciation. Teachers like to ask traditional questions like: What did Jack sell? What did Jack see when he climbed up the beanstalk? Who wanted to eat Jack? However, J. McRae and M.E. Vethamani (1999) have reminded teachers teaching literature that the focus of teaching is no longer on mere facts searching but on the interaction with the text. They point out that teachers need to provide chances for free response. I tried it. I asked my pupils the following questions:

- Jack sells his cow for some beans. Do you think he is stupid?
- Why is he stupid/not stupid?
- What do you pay when you buy something?
- Look at Jack in this picture. Do you think he is happy?
- Why Jack is not happy?
- Is the cow a good friend of Jack?
- Why do you think so?
- Do you think Jack is greedy when he takes the goose away?
- Can you take away things that do not belong to you?
- Would Jack take the goose to the police?
- Will you take it home or to the police if you were Jack?
- What will your mother say if you take a gold goose home?
- When Jack becomes rich, what will Jack buy?
- What will Jack's mother buy?
- When you become rich, what will you buy or what will you do?
- What will your mother/father buy?
- What do you think the gold goose will eat in order to lay gold eggs?

All these questions allow pupils to think imaginatively and respond freely. However, I encountered some difficulties in explaining my questions to the pupils. They were surprised when they understood my questions. Some of them still tried to refer to the text to find out answers as they used to! It took quite a long time to enable them to think imaginatively and start to answer my questions. At last I allowed them to use their mother language and they began to react more actively then.

Then I presented another text to my pupils. It was a drama script of the same story. In the text, some of the basic vocabulary were replaced with relevant pictures. Children had to listen to the cassette and find out the words missing in the text. It was not a difficult task. I let them listen for the second time, and asked them to pay attention to the way that different people spoke. Then jigsaw reading began. They were very excited and tried to read with proper intonation and stresses. When I invited them to read individually, they were enthusiastic to participate. I realized that they were confident and interested to read at that moment.

Pupils were asked to role-play the story of Jack and the beanstalk by following the drama script text. I monitored the role-play and encouraged them to act in front of the class. Pupils enjoyed acting and watching the role-play. Different pupils were invited to act out. Later, some pupils played my role as monitors enthusiastically. The actors and actresses were practising their pronunciation and intonation of the target language spontaneously and productively.

### **Post-reading stage**

Usually teachers will be satisfied at this stage when they realize that their pupils can read independently. The foremost objective in traditional reading is comprehension. When pupils can answer most of the questions about the content of the text, the lessons are supposed to be successful and over. However, J. McRae (1991) reminds us that more meaning may emerge after repeated and careful reading, more ideas may be constructed when learners become more informed and aware. He repeatedly stresses the importance of communication about the text, learners' response and their reaction to the text. It implies that further exploitation of the text can be carried out at this stage. Children should learn how to use the language but not the facts from the text. Language learning can only take place through the process of genuine communication.

I let children discuss in groups about the following questions:

- Do you like Jack?
- What do you think about Jack? Lazy? Brave? Greedy?
- What do you think Jack usually does?
- Who is the man that gives Jack some beans? A magician? A fairy?
- Why does that man give Jack the beans?
- If someone gives you some beans, what will you do?
- Can a goose speak?
- What do you think the goose can be? A princess? A witch?
- Do you want to have a goose that can speak? Why?

They tried to write down their answers on a piece of cardboard. When they came back to me after their group discussion, they started to express their ideas according to the above questions. There were always no definite answers for every question. The goal of this activity was to elicit free response and it was easier than the previous stage. When they expressed their ideas, they naturally used the simple present tense.

Then I tried to ask pupils to discuss for a written assignment. Each group had to rewrite the drama script by negotiating new words to replace the pictures in the text. They were very excited to do this activity and it did not take a very long time to finish. I walked around the class and realized that they were thinking more imaginatively than before. They were braver to use their own words.

At last, each group came out and role-played their own drama in front of the class. The new stories were very interesting and imaginative. I appreciated their thinking and performance. I told them that their stories were so good that they could go home and tell the stories to their relatives.

## **RESULTS OF THE TEACHING**

### **Analysis of the effectiveness of using literary texts**

Course-books always provide stereotype conversational speeches. They are usually boring and referential, but not imaginative and representational. Teachers always find that it is hard for young children to learn and remember new vocabulary from these speeches. We try many ways to help them remember new words learned like: copying the new words for assignment, dictation every week, and spelling activities in the class. However, children still forget what they learn.

Literary texts provide a meaningful base for vocabulary learning. In the try-out, vocabulary was presented in a story. Children learned the new vocabulary in context by making their own guesses for the meaning of new words. They enjoyed and were proud of being able to learn by themselves. It is not surprising to find that most of them could remember all the new vocabulary learned from the story.

Literary texts are a rich source for learning activities of building up word-trees, word-trains and word-walls. They foster the development of an awareness of the letter-sound relationship. They are helpful for pupils to remember the pronunciation of the new vocabulary. In the past, children always forgot the spelling of new words because simply they could not read them out. Literary texts are a springboard for activities like reading aloud, jigsaw reading, and role-play. They familiarize children with the pronunciation of the new vocabulary and makes it easier for them to remember the spellings. Moreover, in participating in these oral activities, children learn to use proper intonation and appreciate the beauty of the language.

Group discussions and rewriting activities based on the literary texts can provide writing practice to consolidate vocabulary and grammar learning. Children can avoid the monotonous copying of new vocabulary. They become free writers with their own thinking. They become eager to learn to express their ideas in the target language. Their learning becomes more effective with the use of literary texts because they simply enjoy their learning.

### **Learning difficulties encountered**

Time is always a problem. It is quite rigid in a primary school time-table that every week we have ten English lessons. Every lesson has 35 minutes. Every week there must be a dictation, a listening lesson, and an ETV (educational television) lesson. We have to finish most of the modules in the course-book which provide only a little amount of literary texts. Teachers have to select suitable texts and make good use of the limited time available.

For young learners, they are not accustomed to respond freely during their language lesson. It takes time and effort for them to understand what the teacher means in the second language. I would suggest that a little use of the mother tongue in giving instructions may be helpful. To elicit children's response needs to be patient. When we require children to think of something imaginary, we need to give examples. Usually children can think but they cannot express their thinking in the second language. In the early stage, we need to allow them to use a little mother tongue in their response. It is important that teachers need to develop learners' confidence to think as well as their ability to use the language. This is always not easy.

During group discussions, some brighter pupils may tend to dominate as leaders. This may be helpful or harmful.

Teachers need to be very careful to monitor the discussion so that all members are doing the job. My pupils complained their friends were like dictators when their opinions were not accepted. Teachers need to encourage children to negotiate.

## IMPLICATION FOR FUTURE TEACHING

There is a growing tendency for language teachers to use literary texts in teaching Chinese, the first language in Hong Kong. Teachers encourage children to rewrite stories and poems creatively. It is found that children learn and use the language more effectively when they have freedom to think and express their own ideas. It is time for English teachers to evaluate the use of literary texts and think about an adaptation of our teaching materials in teaching the second language. L. Machura (1991) after her experience of using story books to teach English in Poland concludes that no course-books are capable of offering young learners to 'gain access to a richness and magic of language'.

After my try-out, I realize that effective language learning depends on the process of exploiting literary texts. I am aware that the main objective of reading is not merely for comprehension as J. McRae and L. Pantaleoni (1990) have mentioned. Learning activities like class discussion, reflection of what has been read, role-play, rewriting and retelling stories that can activate learners' free response need to be encouraged. Through class interaction, children can develop and increase their communicative and language competence. To bring about children's improvement in the use of English, we need to provide our young learners a wider range of literary texts (R. Boardman and J. McRae, 1984; R. Carter and J. McRae, 1996). We need to read with our learners together. We hope our children can become effective readers and language users.

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