

Literature-based Instruction in a Freshman English Course

This study attempts to examine how literature-based instruction can be implemented to increase students' reading interest and language proficiency in a Freshman English course. The participants were forty-seven non-English-major freshmen at a technological university. Four simplified children's stories were used by the fact that the freshmen's language proficiency was limited. Phonics, vocabulary expansion activities, and prediction making skills were taught. Data were collected from classroom observations, student activities, a questionnaire, and homework. The results show an increase in students' reading interest and language proficiency. Pedagogical implications for non-English majors in technological institutions and universities in Taiwan, and limitations of this study are also provided.

Key words: literature-based instruction, Freshman English, simplified children's stories

INTRODUCTION

Among four skills in EFL teaching, reading has been emphasized most since reading is a key to increasing learners' language proficiency. To help learners achieve this goal, the text selection plays an important role to boost their interest in reading. If they have strong motivation in what they read, they can often upgrade their reading level. Motivation is a driving force for the successful reading. Some researchers have advocated the authentic reading materials to arouse learners' interest in reading (Chow et al., 1991; Guariento & Morley, 2001; Wu, 2005). Among the authentic materials, the use of literature is helpful in language learning process because it offers precious authentic material, rich language environment and cultural background, and active personal engagement. (Collie & Slater, 1994; Icoz, 1992; Wu, 1998). However, length of the literary texts, the difficult of vocabulary, and the lack of cultural background can cause problems to ESL/EFL learners with limited language proficiency (Lazar, 1990). As such, simplified reading materials are assumed to be helpful in developing reading comprehension of beginning and intermediate EFL/ESL learners. Some researchers claimed that simplified literary texts like graded readers can serve this purpose (Cheng, 2003; Hsu & Lee, 2005; Lee, 2005; Lin, 2005) since they are written or adapted for second or foreign language learners at various levels of language proficiency (Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation & Wang, 1999). They are usually controlled in structure, sentence length and complexity, and vocabulary. Claridge (2005) further asserted that graded readers can offer an authentic reading experience for learners as long as they are well-written.

Therefore, numerous studies have been carried out to illustrate the effect of graded readers in extensive reading programs for ESL/EFL learners. They demonstrated learners' positive attitude toward reading and gains in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and grammar (Cheng, 2003, Hsu & Lee, 2005, Lin, 2005, Lee, 2005). This study also attempts to add more evidence to show how simplified children's stories can be used to develop reading interest, and language proficiency with these EFL learners in a Freshman English course. Here simplified children's stories are presented like graded readers because the stories are condensed to three pages with important themes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authentic materials as a motivating factor

Chow et al. (1991) stated that exposing students to genuine language, they willingly learned to read. Guariento and Morley (2001) showed that the use of authentic texts enhanced students' motivation for learning because they felt they were exposed to target language for real communication. According to Wu(2005), popular fictions did change reading attitude of junior students at the university level and they were more willing to read.

Benefits of using literature in language classrooms

Collie and Slater (1994) indicated that teaching literature to ESL/EFL learners was beneficial to their language learning process since it offered precious authentic material, rich language environment and cultural background knowledge, and active personal engagement. According to Icoz (1992), literature could be used effectively to develop language competence. As literature provided evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage, and complex and exact syntax, students developed a better feel for language and increased their language proficiency through reading literature. In addition to helping the development of language competence, literature was rich in offering cultural information. Similarly, Wu (1998) proposed using a Chicano/Mexican American legend in the EFL classroom to have a realistic view of the multicultural America in that Chicano culture and literature had gained more and more attention in the United States and "literature was a good complement for foreigners to learn abundant cultural information along with language learning" (p.91).

Benefits of using graded readers as reading materials

Lin (2005) found that the selected graded readers which were appropriate to the students' reading proficiency level could motivate students to read. Most of the students also demonstrated that they felt comfortable to read the graded readers and

could read them without the teacher's assistance. With the help of graded readers in extensive reading programs, learners showed an increase in vocabulary size, reading comprehension, and grammar knowledge (Cheng, 2003; Hsu & Lee, 2005; Lee, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Forty-seven freshmen participated in this study. They were from five different departments at a technological university. In general, most of them were at beginning level but few were at low intermediate level.

Text Selection

A book called "A Doorway to English Classics" was used as a textbook for the following reasons. First, this book is like graded readers, containing a variety of abridged literary works: eight classics and seven children's stories. Second, it lists Chinese translation for the whole text, vocabulary and phrases in bilingual translation, and tips for sentence structure. Third, a brief introduction of each author is also presented. Fourth, a CD ROM/MP3 is offered for listening practice. Fifth, the price of this book is affordable, costing NT\$ 224. Finally, the graded readers and DVDs of the same stories are available in the school's library and in stores respectively.

Procedures

This eighteen-week study was divided into four sessions. Each session presented one children's story. The presentation order of four children's stories was *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. The story "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" was chosen in session 1 because it was relatively simple in terms of the plot and language. By doing so, students might feel easy to access the story, building up their confidence in English. For the first week, the focus was on literary elements such as characters, plot, setting, point of view, and theme. There was also a brief introduction of author and the text. After that, in each section, brainstorming was done by asking some questions in the pre-reading section. Through the brainstorming, student might have some clues about what they will learn. In the while-reading section, phonics and vocabulary expansion through synonym and antonym were emphasized in class. Predictions making was also taught. In the post-reading section, reviewing what they had learned was done. Reflection was assigned for homework.

Data collection

Data were collected from classroom observations, student activities, a questionnaire, and homework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading interest

The findings indicated that the literature-based instruction did increase their reading interest. More involvements and better performance were shown in student activities and classroom observations. They were more willing to say what they knew about the stories. More people liked to discuss their answers with their classmates for correctness. Their answers to the reader response questions illuminated that they were motivated to express their points of view about the stories they read. The questionnaire also displayed their willingness to read more. Promoting learners' interest in reading by the children's stories was also confirmed by some studies (Ghosn, 2002; Ho, 2000; Liaw, 1998). These researchers found that these children's books were able to get students hooked on reading.

Language proficiency

They showed more confidence to pronounce words using rules of phonics taught in class. Synonyms and antonyms helped them acquire more words for reading comprehension. More correct answers to the comprehension questions demonstrated their improvement on language proficiency. The above phenomenon was also confirmed by the questionnaire. They agreed that phonics helped their pronunciation, vocabulary expansion activities increased their vocabulary size, and prediction making skills facilitated their reading comprehension. Ho (2000) also showed that using children's literature could help "develop oral skills in pronunciation and reading practice, vocabulary building" (p. 336). Other researchers proposed that exposure to children's literature was helpful to acquire English (Liaw, 1998; Nantz, 2002).

IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Literature-based instruction can be implemented to promote students' reading interest and language proficiency in the Freshman English course. But the presentation order of stories should take students' proficiency level and background knowledge into account to encourage their involvement and build up their confidence. There are also some limitations in terms of the number and level of students, time constraint, and text selection. That is, more students from different schools and with different language proficiency, and more longitudinal studies are necessary. Children literature for English native speakers can be used as well.

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