A Course Design in a Technological University
Using Two Versions of a Children’s Storybook

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Abstract
This paper examines the use of two versions of a children’s storybook with 30 seniors of a technological university who took an elective English course for fulfilling their general education requirements. The two versions (simplified and original versions) of the children’s storybook were used because these students’ English proficiency was generally limited. They needed the confidence to start with something simpler. A simplified version of the children’s storybook, which has a shorter story, an easy-to-follow plot, and simpler language, should help develop their reading interest and lay the foundations for vocabulary and reading comprehension. An original version of the same text, which offers detailed and rich language context for good characterization and themes, a clear and interesting plot, and an intriguing narrative style, should help reinforce their reading interest, promote their awareness of story structure, and enhance their vocabulary and reading comprehension. Data was collected from teaching plans, student-centered activities, and interviews. The findings have revealed these students’ positive attitudes to the use of the two versions of the children’s storybook in the EFL classroom. In addition to reading interest, the two versions of the children’s storybook can increase their reading competence and awareness of story structure. Pedagogical implications for adult EFL learners and limitations of this study are also provided.

Keywords
Children’s Storybook; Adult EFL Learners; Technological University

Introduction
Since English is the most commonly used language in the world, English learning has long been an important issue in Taiwan. Thus, different teaching approaches have been proposed to help students develop their English proficiency. For example, the use of literature in the language classroom has attracted a lot of attention. Many researchers stress the benefits of using literature as the basis for language development, cultural awareness, and personal growth (Collie & Slater, 1994; Icoz; 1992; Wong, 1998; Wu, 1998). Therefore, to maximize the benefits of using literature in ESL/EFL classes, text selection plays an important role. A text that is beyond students’ linguistic and cultural level will lessen benefits. In choosing the literary text, length of the literary texts, the difficulty of vocabulary, and the lack of cultural background should be taken into account (lazar, 1990).

In order not to discourage the ESL/EFL learners with limited language proficiency, simplified reading materials is assumed to be helpful in developing reading comprehension of beginning and intermediate EFL/ESL learners (Krashen, 1982). But, the effect of simplified literary texts on reading comprehension is inconsistent. Some researchers indicate that simplified literary texts can be selected to increase their reading interest and improve their reading comprehension (Chen, 1996; Lin, 2005). Other researchers, however, have contrastive views about the use of simplified literary texts in that the simplified literary texts can lack natural features like redundancy and cohesion. These natural features are important keys to constructing the meanings of the texts. Consequently, comprehension will be hindered (Honeyfield, 1977; Swaffar, 1985). They maintain the importance of using authentic texts. Simpler authentic texts such as children’s literature can be the answer because children’s literature is both authentic and appropriately simple in language and concept (Day and Bamford, 1998).

A host of studies provide children’s literature as an alternative way to facilitate EFL/ESL learners’ language learning (Ghosn, 2002; Ho, 2000; Liaw, 1998; Lipp, 1989, Nantz, 2002; Smallwood, 1992). In general, many researchers advocate the use of children’s literature in primary or secondary school ELT classes, only few promote teaching children’s literature to EFL/ESL adult learners (Ho, 2000; Malu, 2013;
Smallwood, 1992). Therefore, the issue about the use of children’s literature with EFL adult learners needs more discussions. To add more information to this issue, this study attempts to examine how two versions of a children’s storybook can be used jointly to develop reading interest, language competence, and awareness of story structure with adult EFL learners.

The reason behind using the two versions (simplified and original versions) of the same story is based on the researcher’s class where a scary book was used as their main reading material. Students in that class expressed that the story they read was too long and had no illustration. To meet students’ need and promote authentic material, the simplified version is used first and then the original one is read.

**Literature Review**

**Benefits of Using Literature in the Language Classroom**

Collie and Slater (1994) showed that teaching literature to ESL/EFL learners was beneficial in 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 increased their language proficiency through reading it. In addition to helping the development of language competence, literature was rich in providing cultural information. 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). Similarly, to gain better understanding of multicultural America, Wong (1998) also suggested the use of Chinese American literature in EFL classroom in a predominantly Chinese community (e.g., Taiwan). Moreover, active personal engagement might be triggered due to cultural familiarity of the material, improving EFL learners’ motivation and performance.

**Contrastive Views About Simplified Literary Texts**

Lin (2005) in selecting English reading material for Taiwanese senior high school students found that the selected graded readers which were appropriate to the students’ reading proficiency level could motivate the 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 help. Chen (1996) carried out a study to examine the effects of simplified literary texts on Chinese EFL senior high school students’ reading comprehension. The finding indicated that the students who read simplified texts significantly comprehended better than those who read original literary texts. Hu (2002) also compared the effects of simplified and original versions of adolescent literature on Chinese EFL senior high school students’ reading comprehension. Unlike Chen’s finding, the result did not show significant difference between the two versions on the reading comprehension. As Honeyfield (1977) pointed out, there were problems with simplification. Simplification might produce homogenized products in which the information was diluted. That is to say, the information in the simplified texts tended to be spread out uniformly over the whole text rather than to be localized in relatively isolated items. Moreover, simplification of syntax might reduce cohesion and readability. Due to the importance of the cohesive devices and localized information in understanding meanings of the texts, removing these elements would hinder reading comprehension. Swaffar (1985) also disagreed with the effectiveness of graded readers for learners. She stated that authentic texts contained the following characteristics: repetition, redundancy, and discourse markers. However, simplified texts lacked such features; therefore, the process of simplification led to more reading difficulty.

**The Use of Children’s Literature in EFL/ESL Classes**

Children’s literature by its definition is written for children to read for pleasure, rather than for instructional purposes. However, carefully selected children’s literature can be served as an alternative and motivating medium for foreign language acquisition (Ghosn, 2002). Accordingly, some studies showed the advantages of using children’s literature for EFL/ESL learners. Nantz (2002) presented a literature-based curriculum by listing seven levels of activities with a sequence of selected children’s literature appropriate to the needs and interests of elementary students in Taiwan. Covering from kindergarten to sixth grade, the implementation of seven levels would enable students to read, write, and assess themselves independently. Liaw (1998)
suggested the use of children literature as an alternative approach in secondary school EFL class. First, she presented recent research and scholastic effort on the second language acquisition and literacy instruction to establish the rational of using a “real book” approach. Second, she analyzed practicalities and feasibility of using children’s literature in accordance with the Secondary School Curriculum Standards. Third, she provided instructional activities for meaningful and motivational learning of English. Lipp (1989) proposed picture books for teaching adult and young EFL learners. She discussed ways to select picture books and provides methods to use the picture books for instruction. She also recommended fifteen different types of the picture books for teachers to use. Other studies suggested that children’s literature could be used for adult EFL/ ESL learners as well. Children’s literature was not just for kids because many of children’s books had universal appeal and mature themes and topics. Smallwood (1992) promoted to adopt children’s literature to teach literacy skills to adult ESL learners. She believed that the age-sensitive book selections, clear class presentations, and the creative development of related lesson plans could contribute to its successful use in adult ESL classes. Ho (2000) assessed how children’s literature could be effectively employed with EFL adult learners and found that teaching children’s literature to EFL adult learners could lead to their language acquisition, and develop their reading interest and literary competence. Malu (2013) further confirmed the benefits of using children’s picture storybooks with her adult and adolescent EFL learners in Rwanda.

Methodology

Subjects
The subjects in this study were 30 seniors of a technological university in northern Taiwan, who took an English course to fulfill their general education requirements. They were non-English majors from different departments. Prior to taking the English course given by the researcher, they had already had seven years’ exposure to English reading in schools (six years for the secondary school and one year for Freshman English). In general, their reading proficiency was limited because most students at technological universities have lower English proficiency compared to students at regular universities. However, they all thought exposing themselves to English would improve their English ability.

Text Selection
Two books were used in this study. They were all called “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”; however, one was an original version while the other was a simplified version. Here the simplified version of this storybook refers to a graded reader. The graded readers are simplified books written for ESL/EFL learners of different ability levels. They allow ESL/EFL learners to read without difficulty. As such, they are controlled in vocabulary, sentence structure, phrasing, and information. It is hoped that by reading the graded readers within their language ability, ESL/EFL learners build their confidence and are motivated to move up to higher level readers or even to unsimplified (original) literary texts (Waring, 1997).

Reasons for choosing this storybook with two versions are listed below. First, it is one of children’s fiction bestsellers written by Roald Dahl, whose books are mostly fantasy, full of imagination. His mixture of the grotesque and comic touch appeals to children and adults alike. Second, the film adapted from this book was so popular that students want to know what it is like on the printed pages. Third, this book has a complete set of supplementary supply, including CD and a graded reader audiopack. It is convenient for teachers to employ this supply as teaching aids to facilitate language learning.

Procedures
There were two sections in this 18-week study. One was devoted for the simplified version (graded reader) while the other was for the original version. There are similarities and differences in these two sections. With regard to the similarities, brainstorming served as an initiator to start the reading. Making inferences from the context was also encouraged to guess meanings of unknown words or to predict what would happen next. A glossary was provided to reinforce students’ inference skills. Worksheets were employed to check students’ comprehension as well. Furthermore, the group discussion was used to ease students’ anxiety for active participation.

With reference to the differences, the introduction of the author and story structure was presented in the two sections respectively. Introducing the author was giving students some background knowledge to begin with the simplified version. After they finished
reading the simplified version, it was a good time to introduce the story structure in the beginning of the original session. Their knowledge of the story structure would be enhanced in reading the original text. The range of reading is different between the two versions, too. The whole text of the simplified version was completed within two weeks. However, there were two or three chapters per week for the original version. Furthermore, redundancy, repetition, and cohesive ties are common in the original version while such features are lacking in the simplified version. Therefore, there were more discussions on synonyms/antonyms, points of views, and conversational features in the original version.

Data Collection

Data was collected from teaching plans, student-centered activities, and interviews with students. The teaching plans consisted of lesson plans, worksheets, and glossaries. The student-centered activities referred to small-group discussions. The interviews were conducted based on their final worksheets for further information.

Results and Discussions

Findings are derived from two sources. One is from the teaching plans and student-centered activities. The other one is from the interviews.

Teaching Plans and Student-Centered Activities

Three features of this reading course are presented below.

Reading Interest

The findings indicated that the simplified version developed students’ reading interest while the original text reinforced their reading interest. As the simplified version was easy to read, students could read it without difficulty. They were motivated to read more. Accordingly, they finished reading the whole text within two weeks and eagerly participated in answering comprehension-check questions of the worksheets. Lin (2005) and Shen (2004) also confirmed that the simplified version stimulated their students’ interest in reading.

Owing to their thorough understanding of the simplified version, students had the main ideas of the original text in their mind. Moreover, though the vocabulary was more difficult in the original version, the original text providing a natural and meaningful context helped them to find out meanings by repetition, redundancy and discourse markers. They were excited about this discovery and enjoyed making inferences from these cues in their group discussion. Their reading interest was intensified by their better and better inference skills each time. Their performance in the worksheets also manifested that they were getting interested in reading this original text. Enhancing students’ interest in reading the original literary text of children’s literature was also documented in Ho (2000) and Malu (2013). These researchers found that these authentic literary texts were able to get students hooked on reading.

Reading Competence

The results showed that the simplification version laid the foundation for reading comprehension while the original text enhanced the vocabulary and reading comprehension. Since the simplified version assisted them to understand the story well, they did well on the comprehension-check questions of the worksheets. It affirmed the value of simplified text in improving reading comprehension (Chen, 1996).

Based on their complete understanding of the simplified version, students could grasp the main ideas of the original text fast. To tackle the meanings of unknown words and sentences, they used repetition, redundancy, and cohesive ties as the cues. For example, they recognized more words through synonyms/antonyms. With the aid of such aforementioned features, they could better understand the sentence structure. Thus, their progress was shown in their worksheets and their group work because the more vocabulary and sentence structure they learned, the better reading competence they had. As Icoz (1992) stated, massive exposure to literature can not only compensate for the deficiencies of the linguistic approach in the area of grammar, idiom, vocabulary, and syntax but also strengthen the students’ competence in English. Other researchers also suggested that exposure to children’s literature was an effective way to build up their reading competence (Liaw, 1998; Lipp, 1989).

Awareness of Story Structure

After reading the simplified version, the introduction of plot, setting, characters or theme, and time and place increases their awareness of story structure. They could identify Charlie and other four children as main characters, their adventures in the chocolate factory as the element of plot, and the chocolate
factory as the setting of the story. Similarly, Richards et al. (1999) used scary books to teach story structure for literature study and reported that their students could identify scary characters like monsters, mummies, and ghosts, elements of plot such as scary adventures or problems, and scary elements related to the setting of the story like haunted houses and castles. Ho (2000) also maintained that children’s literature could offer numerous ways for language learning activities, reading programs, and literature studies.

Interviews

More detailed descriptions of the three characteristics of this reading course were listed based on interview questions in the following.

Q: Why did you want to take this course?

All of them expressed that they took this course to improve their English because they knew the importance of English in their future jobs. Some thought that they loved stories. Reading the stories would strengthen their motivation in learning English. Moreover, reading the stories could provide them with abundance of daily expressions. Others said that due to the simplified version they had courage to take this course even though their English was poor.

Q: What are your opinions about the use of the simplified version?

Most of them pointed out that as the simplified version was easy to read, they understood the story well. This understanding helped them to know the gist of the original text. Therefore, the simplified version made the original version more comprehensible to them. Some added that the simplified version could not only provide the gist of the original text but also arouse their interest in reading. Few stressed the importance of the picture support in increasing their patience and interest in continuing reading further. However, they all expressed that the simplified version could only help them review the familiar words. It could not help them learn new words in the original text.

Q: What about the use of the original version?

All of them agreed that compared to the simplified version, the original version is more difficult to read in terms of vocabulary and sentence length. It’s also more time-consuming for reading each chapter. Nevertheless, some said that it’s more interesting and easier to find cues for comprehension. Some stated that although there were more words and longer sentences, they learned more new words through the repetition and the synonyms/antonyms. Few expressed their difficulty in understanding the details of the story though they admitted the original text is more interesting than the simplified version.

Q: What did you gain from this course?

One expressed that he learned how to guess meanings of the unknown words from the context. Another one said that his reading comprehension had been increased so that he had more confidence in reading other longer stories. Many indicated that they learned many words and understood more sentences. Some of them even had a sense of achievement by understanding English subtitles. Others talked about the aid of glossary in recognizing more words and improving reading comprehension.

Q: Could you give some comments on the class?

There were four suggestions. First, more true/false items and multiple-choice items were demanded in the worksheets where there were many essay questions and some multiple-choice items. They thought that the true/false items and multiple-choice items could also work to check reading comprehension and word recognition and thus reduce their writing load. Second, bilingual explanations (English and Chinese) of the glossaries could be used occasionally for quick reference. Though they admitted the significance of exposure to English explanations of the glossaries, sometimes for quick review they preferred Chinese explanations. Third, student-centered activities should be maintained in class to lessen their anxiety and to facilitate their learning. They liked the group discussions because they could say their ideas freely and knew different views about the same topic. Through discussions, they retained more material for longer periods of time. Fourth, the audio-visual equipment such as a tape or a DVD should be used after the reading to review what they had learned and therefore increase their reading comprehension. They felt good about themselves by understanding the English subtitles.

Conclusions

Based on the results, some suggestions are provided for pedagogical implications. First, awareness of the function of the simplified version in using the two versions of the storybook will help teachers use the two versions effectively to increase reading competence. Second, text selection should take
students’ interest into account. If they like the text, they will take a challenge to keep on reading the original text after reading the simplified version. Third, more student-centered activities should be adopted to create an anxiety-free environment for students’ active involvement. Fourth, using audio-visual aids like a tape and a DVD in the end of the reading can help student review what they have read and increase their reading comprehension. Fifth, glossaries with bilingual explanations (English and Chinese) can be used occasionally for quick references in class. Finally, consulting some resource books and studies will inspire teachers to polish their literature-based instruction skills.

However, there are some limitations in this paper. As this study was confined to a complete children’s fiction, more studies will be needed to find how EFL adult learners will respond to other genres. The subjects were from the same school. More subjects from various schools and regions will be required to have more accurate description of literature-based instruction. More longitudinal studies will also be wanted to find out the tendency and pattern of literature-based instruction. It would be better to have other researchers participate in the study for more objective observations.

To conclude briefly, the simplified version can develop students’ reading interest and acquaint them with the gist of the original text. The original text, however, can strengthen their interest and increase their vocabulary and reading comprehension. Therefore, using the two versions of the children’s fiction jointly can enhance their reading interest, reading competence, and awareness of story structure. In selecting children’s literature, students’ interest should be considered to arouse their desire to read the original text. The student-centered activities are good ways to encourage their active participation. The audio-visual equipment is another way to reinforce what students have read. More practice and modifications will help teachers enjoy using children literature in class.

REFERENCES


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