

Research on the Selection Principles and Application of English Picture Books in Primary School English Teaching

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Abstract

English Curriculum Objectives for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) set clear curriculum objectives for primary and secondary school English teaching in four aspects: cultivating students' linguistic competence, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. English picture books which are used to be supplementary materials in primary school English teaching, due to their characteristics of having rich and colorful pictures and authentic language, and being informative and entertaining, can serve these curriculum objectives well, for they meet the psychological and cognitive needs of primary school students. Therefore, it is indispensable to implement English picture books teaching in school. How to apply English picture books to primary school English teaching has been of great interest to researchers and teachers nowadays. This paper puts forward four selection principles of English picture books for teachers, analyzes major problems of English picture books teaching in primary schools and works out five solutions to these problems, hoping to improve primary English teaching and promote primary school students' English competence.

Key words: English picture books; English picture books teaching; Selection principles; Problems and solutions

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since English picture books combine vivid pictures with authentic language and are in accordance with the cognitive characteristics of primary school students, applying English picture books to primary school English teaching is able to motivate students' passion for learning and foster students' thinking and learning abilities, hence primary school English teachers need to make full use of English picture books teaching in their class. In step one, applicable English picture books are selected by for students. Then effective teaching methods are taken to improve students' English proficiency. Finally, teachers take some time to evaluate students' learning and their own teaching. This paper intends to study and analyze the current situation of English picture books teaching, and poses selection principles of English picture books and solutions to problems in current English picture books teaching.

2. A BRIEF VIEW OF ENGLISH PICTURE BOOKS

As for English picture books, Bai Wei (2012) put it well when she said, "They are children's books published in countries where English is the first language. They are books with the combination of pictures and words for children's sensory stimulation". Interesting and complete English stories with clear logic , which are described in vivid pictures and concise sentences, easily arouse children's interest. It is inferred that English picture books are those published by English-speaking countries which tell stories by pictures and in words, and are in line with children's cognitive characteristics. What make English

picture books suitable for primary school English teaching are their two major features. First, pictures in English picture books are as important as words. Perry Nordelman (2003) mentioned that pictures and words are not subordinate, but complementary to each other and pictures in English picture books can be perceived as “language”. To make it simple, vivid pictures and interesting stories make students more willing to read the words in English picture books, while the role of words is to make an explanation of pictures, thus the perfect combination of pictures and words is capable of improving the integrity of the stories. Second, English picture books are appropriate for primary school students at the ages of 7-12, for they can greatly improve children’s thinking ability, cultivate their cultural awareness and capture their imagination and creativity. Through reading and learning English picture books, children get to know different thinking patterns, and have the ability to integrate what they have learned into their own life.

3. THE SELECTION PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH PICTURE BOOKS

First, since English picture books are wide-ranging, covering topics in all respects, teachers need to ensure that English picture books used in their teaching is proper for children’s cognitive development. In term of the theory of cognitive development by Piaget (1980), children at the ages of 7 to 11 are at the stage of favoring the concrete operation, in which pictures in English picture books help children perceive things in the most intuitive manner. Meanwhile, children’s abstract logical thinking has not yet been developed in this period. To be simple, pictures have great influence on children, but children are unable to sort the good from the bad without the help of teachers. Besides, ideas reflected in these books should be clear and consistent, and they must be good for children’s mental health.

Second, English Picture books should be selected to help promote primary school students’ cognitive development in each grade in different areas under the guidance of *English Curriculum Objectives for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition)*. It is worth mentioning that this paper focuses on English picture books teaching in Sichuan province. There are six grades in most primary schools there. Children in Grade 1 and 2 prefer English picture books with large, bright and colorful pictures and simple recurring English words, such as the books *Lola and the King*, *Fat Cat* and *Ted’s Cat*. Students in Grade 3 and 4 like to read English picture books in which there are concise and logical sentences and vivid pictures, such as the books *A Brave Dog*, *Be Quiet* and *A Box for Me*. More complicated and logical stories and expository picture books must be chosen to meet the needs of pupils in Grade 5 and 6, such as the books *The*

Holiday, *What to Draw* and *Sports Day*, for Grade 5 and 6 students have gradually developed their abstract thinking ability, as they grow older. All applied English picture books in teaching together with English textbooks must abide by the new curriculum objectives, thereby achieving the teaching and learning goals of each grade in primary schools.

Third, English picture books related to children’s real life are the wise choice for primary school students. When selecting English picture books, teachers had better take this factor into consideration in order to motivate students’ reading interest, enrich students’ experiences and enlighten students’ study and life. Take the English picture book *Grandpa and Holly* for example, it tells the story of how grandpa and a dog, Holly live together, like lots of families with a lovely pet in real life. If the book is taught by teachers in class, those children who are pet lovers will feel the same way as the grandpa. They will be soon immersed in this story and imitate to speak English outside the classroom in their daily life.

Fourth, English picture books whose topics are close to the textbooks used in school can facilitate English teaching and learning. If topics in selected picture books are irrelevant to what students are learning in English textbooks, teachers will set two different teaching goals and students will find it hard to get the sense of achievement. Except the topic, there must not be many words beyond the primary school English teaching syllabus in the chosen English picture books .

4. PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS OF ENGLISH PICTURE BOOKS TEACHING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

In primary schools, English textbooks are the must to be taught in class, while English picture books teaching is perceived as an auxiliary teaching way. Although researchers and teachers have put forward that there are apparent advantages of English picture books teaching and they have paid more attention to English picture books teaching nowadays, there are still some problems with English picture books teaching. The following part poses five major problems of English picture books teaching and works out solutions to these problems.

4.1 The Lack of the Unified Teaching Criterion for English Picture Books Teaching

Since English textbooks are assigned to be taught in primary schools, as for English textbooks, primary school English teachers are well-trained and fully-prepared in pre-teaching, while-teaching and after-teaching stages, for experienced teachers and researchers have studied how to teach English textbooks in class and provided teaching approaches about English textbooks. However, when it comes to English picture books teaching, teachers are not

instructed under an unified criterion, as English textbooks teaching does, thus how to plan, implement and evaluate their English picture books teaching in class rests with teachers themselves. It is necessary for primary schools and researchers to lay down an unified teaching criterion which gives instructions to teachers, especially new and inexperienced teachers, like English textbooks teaching.

4.2 Teachers' Incomplete Understanding of English Picture Books

Teachers spend less time studying English picture books, because English picture books teaching have not been paid enough attention to by the primary schools. As a result, teachers are lack of deep understanding of English picture books, which mainly manifest in the following respects. First, pictures in English picture books are as important as words, but teachers attach more importance to words than pictures, which makes these picture books fail to play their roles in English learning and teaching. Second, there are varieties of English picture books, but in most teachers' and students' eyes, English picture books are equal to English storybooks with pictures. If teachers treat picture books as storybooks, they will teach picture books in the traditional ways of teaching textbooks in class. English picture books are not working as they should. Third, teachers do not draw a distinction between English picture books and English textbooks. To be clear, English picture books are classified into levels for students in corresponding grade, each book with an independent topic, while textbooks are edited surrounding a system from the junior level to senior level.

Fourth, teaching different types of English picture books, especially expository picture books, requires teachers' knowledge about these picture books and their full preparation before class, but it is under-emphasized by teachers, so it is essential for teachers to gain knowledge by attending relevant classes and doing researches on English picture books themselves.

On account of lacking knowledge about English picture books, teachers need to learn the characteristics and classifications of English picture books, as well as the differences between English picture books and English textbooks by taking part in academic forums, lectures and training classes, and discussing with experts and colleagues. Only if teachers get in-depth interpretation of English picture books, they can be good English picture books teachers, who will guide their students to learn and appreciate English picture books.

4.3 The Lack of Selection Principles of English Picture Books

Owing to the lack of unified teaching criterion for English picture books teaching, primary school English teachers have no clue about how to select picture books in their teaching under no guidance. What to buy is decided by the teachers themselves, instead of the schools. To be exact,

teachers' professional competence, their understanding of English picture books and their preferences are three major factors which affects their selecting English picture books. Consequently, some chosen picture books are not suitable for children's cognitive development. Some are too simple or difficult for children. Some can not arouse children's interest. Some topics in picture books are out of scope of the teaching syllabus. As to teachers' preferences, teachers prefer to select story-based picture books, for these books are easy to attract children's attention. Meanwhile, teachers find it easier to employ their teaching approaches in story-based picture books teaching. Since expository picture books are not so interesting as story-based picture books, though meaningful, they are not successful in appearing in class.

4.4 Teachers Failing to Optimize Teaching Methods

Traditional teaching methods employed in English picture books teaching are centered around teaching words, phrases, sentences and grammar. Before class, teachers set teaching objectives which enable students to use words, phrases, sentences as well as grammar. However, it is not enough to teach texts rather than pictures, for pictures in English picture books are more than pictures and they should be treated as another kind of "words", which help student not only comprehend texts, but also get thinking ability and creativity, so that teachers ought to add other teaching objectives in their lessons which enable students to make use of pictures to retell the stories and write short essays. In class, game teaching method and role play, language points explanation and grammar teaching are still the popular teaching approaches in primary school English class. Teachers do not invest too much time in the observation, description and reasoning of pictures on books. Pictures are naturally ignored in teaching, so students are unable to get the connotation of picture books. Therefore, teachers need do some researches on how to combine pictures with their teaching.

Besides, teachers do not take the overall comprehension of the text in English picture books and the cultivation of students' thinking ability as their teaching objectives, so the traditional approaches which lay emphasis on words, phrases, sentences and grammars have difficulty in realizing the functions of English picture books.

Moreover, because the story-based picture books are the first choice of teachers, the story-oriented teaching approaches are often applied in English class, such as questions and answers, role play, game-playing and dramas and so on. However, these above-mentioned teaching approaches do not fit for the expository picture books teaching in certain aspects. Before class, students are assigned to read some simple related Chinese materials or watch some Chinese programs with specific questions. In class, group discussion, simple experiments and project

activities are the good teaching ways. After class, students are asked to write short essays or records.

4.5 The Lack of the Evaluation Criteria of English Picture Books Teaching

In this part, the evaluation refers to evaluating students' learning as well as teachers' teaching towards English picture books. On the one hand, evaluating students' learning falls into two categories. One is language evaluation and the other is thinking ability evaluation. For language evaluation, there are instruments for evaluating pronunciation, words, grammar, sentences, discourses, texts and writing in teachers' books, but it is a pity that seldom teachers make full use of these evaluation instruments in their class. There are three major reasons involved in it. The limited class hours and their ignorance of instruments are the first two reasons. Furthermore, teachers are not guided by a unified evaluation criterion to employ these instruments in class. Apart from language evaluation, it is hard to evaluate students' thinking ability and learning ability without the guidance of evaluation criteria. Since English textbooks teaching has a longer history, teachers can take its evaluation criteria as examples.

On the other hand, it is of great necessity to evaluate teachers' teaching, for it makes teachers reflect on their teaching and then renew their teaching plans. In this way, students' English proficiency can be greatly improved. However, the teaching evaluation criteria have not been established yet and the teaching evaluation still falls on teachers themselves. On the basis of teachers' personal understanding of evaluating their teaching, through asking students to read English picture books and take the exams, teachers achieve their teaching evaluation, but it is far from enough. The establishment of the teaching evaluation criteria by schools and researchers will solve the problem of how to evaluate teachers' teaching.

5. CONCLUSION

English picture books are conducive to the cognitive development of children, for pictures in picture books are "words" which works well to promote children's English learning, and for picture books can help children develop their thinking abilities and creativity, as well as foster their cultural awareness. What make English picture books teaching necessary are these above-mentioned points. However, some problems in English picture books teaching need to be analyzed and explored. It is of great significance to work out these problems. This paper finds out five major problems in current English picture books teaching. First, it lacks the unified teaching criteria for English picture books. Second, primary school English teachers have incomplete understanding of English picture

books. Third, there are not any selection principles of English picture books for teachers. Fourth, the teaching methods are not renewed towards English picture books teaching. Fifth, it is lack of the evaluation criteria in evaluating English picture books teaching. Then, the author puts forward solutions to these five problems. First, the unified teaching criterion for English picture books need be laid down for the primary school teachers. Second, teachers are required to have a good knowledge of English picture books through attending academic forums, lectures and training classes. Third, when selecting English picture books, teachers ought to follow four selection principles, which refer to being suitable for the cognitive development of children, fitting for children's grades in school, being close to children's real life and being related to the topics of English textbooks. Fourth, the teaching methods should be optimized when teaching English picture books. Teachers ought to know how to teach "pictures" and teach different types of English picture books. Fifth, it is of great importance to set up evaluation criteria for evaluating students' English competence and evaluating teachers' teaching ability. As for English picture books teaching, there are still some problems which are not explored by the author and the views will be improved by future researches and teaching practices. Since English picture books teaching has a great impact on primary school English teaching, how to improve English picture books teaching is and will be the author's research subject, so as to promote primary school students' English competence.

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