

## Effects of integrating children's literature and DVD films into a college EFL class

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*ABSTRACT: The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of the use of children's literature and DVD films on EFL adult language learning. A total of 89 non-English majors enrolled in two Freshman English classes participated in the study. The study employed a quasi-experimental, pretest/posttest comparison group design. The participants in the experimental group were exposed to the children's literature and DVD films. In the control group, the participants were exposed to the English Language Teaching (ELT) textbook. The experiment was conducted for two hours per week over two months. Then the reading comprehension sections of the Elementary GEPT posttests were administered and their outcomes were compared with those of the pretests. At the end of the course, the questionnaires were administered to the participants in the experimental group to elicit their perceptions about the various aspects of the use the children's literature and DVD films. The findings of the study revealed that alternately, reading, viewing the film, and discussing a children's fantasy novel significantly increased the scores on the reading comprehension subtests over the control group with exposure to the ELT textbook.*

*KEYWORDS: Children's literature, captions, DVD films, EFL learners, literacy.*

## INTRODUCTION

### The statement of the problem

English teaching in Taiwan has been viewed as ineffective, far from satisfying social needs. The reasons for the failures are varied and complex. One reason may be that too much emphasis has been placed on intensive reading-analysis of words, sentences and grammar. In a traditional language classroom, teachers often focus on grammar decoding and skill drilling. Reading becomes a series of decoding practices and looking up words in the dictionary. In addition, learners often read assigned articles that are too difficult for them either in form or content. The difficult language forms and content may frustrate language learners, whenever they have difficulty decoding the language or understanding the messages. This may cause language learners' negative attitudes toward reading.

The rationale for using children's literature for English as a foreign Language (EFL) instruction is that it provides comprehensible input through content and style (Krashen, 1982). It is also important for exposing learners' to grammatical patterns within the context of meaningful language experiences. Smallwood (1992) claims:

Children's literature can be one of the most effective teaching materials available for students of all ages. Using it to develop literacy is a well documented approach for elementary students, both native and nonnative speakers. It is newer, but increasingly popular, with adult ESL learners, especially in ESL family literacy programs. (p. 3)

As mentioned above, children's literature can be an effective and efficient way of English teaching for learners of all ages.

Film-viewing has long been used as a source of authentic listening input and as a stimulus for listening activities. Many studies have provided strong evidence that the use of films has beneficial effects on learners' language performance in listening and speaking (Chung, 1999; Lin, 2002; Weyers, 1999). A few studies have examined the impact of popular literature study on lit-level EFL students in Hong Kong, in which five novels were assigned, and one novel was chosen by the students based on their own interests. Students saw the video version after they had read approximately half of the book. The results indicated that students who participated in a popular literature class made significant gains on measures of vocabulary and reading rate. Nevertheless, studies investigating reading instruction using alternately, reading, viewing the film, and discussing a children's fantasy novel are still limited. Thus, there is a need for further exploration into the potential of integrating children's literature and DVD films to discern their contribution to the language teaching of EFL students.

### **Purpose of the study**

This study was conceived based on the hypothesis that children's literature is a linguistically adequate tool for beginning- and intermediate-level adult English as a foreign language (FL) learners. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of the use of children's literature and DVD films on college students' language learning in Taiwan. The study compared the impact of exposure to both reading the children's literature and viewing a film on the participants' reading proficiency. While teachers are more willing to use the film version of literature after students have first read the book, some students are motivated to read the book after viewing the film (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). The film/DVD can activate student schema, supply background information necessary for comprehension, and pique student interest. Many popular films are produced based on children's literature, so this study may encourage EFL teachers to use the films to teach reading. It is also hoped that students will develop reading interest and ability in a meaningful and enjoyable way.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Children's literature for adult EFL learners**

Because of self-esteem issues, it is considered inappropriate to use children's literature that is well below grade level for delayed readers. However, these concerns may not apply to older language acquirers. This study suggests that quality literature for young adults is ideal for second and foreign language acquisition at the intermediate level, and that no longer is it necessary for a child to be present when an adult reads a good children's book.

Some argue that literature is too linguistically complex, and the culture represented in these texts is often too distant from those of the language acquirers (Maley, 2001). Most texts used in EFL classrooms are simplified in style, structure and vocabulary. They offer a limited context and are often not authentic. These texts provide simple manifestations of language usage that invite little thought (Chan, 1999). Simplified

abridged readers are “pale shadows of classic texts” (Maley, 2001, p. 184). Extracts from longer works are also sometimes used. However, for students to receive the greatest benefit, they need to interact with complete authentic texts (Chan, 1999).

Authentic materials are recommended in the ESL/ EFL classroom for many reasons. First, authentic texts encourage contextualised learning of vocabulary and grammar (Krashen, 1993) and increase interest, motivation and engagement (Freeman, Freeman & Mercuri, 2002). Authentic texts also help develop linguistic and cognitive skills, provide cultural knowledge, and offer opportunities for students to respond (Henning, 1993; Kramsch, 1985; Lazar, 1993). However, the major problem with authentic texts is students at the lower level of proficiency seem to lack the grammar, lexicon and cultural knowledge necessary to understand literary texts (Garcia, 2004). Children's literature is considered an adequate means for beginning and intermediate level EFL learners because of its simple language, universal themes, predictable patterns, contextualisation of information and interesting illustrations (Galeano, 1983; Smallwood, 1998).

Some studies have investigated the use of children's literature with adults in the ESL/ EFL setting. These studies found that the use of children's literature has a positive influence on students' level of motivation and interest (Chen, 2006; Estridge, 2000; Goh, 1996; Ho, 2000; Khodabakhshi & Lagos, 1993; Wu, 2001). For instance, Wu (2001) conducted a quasi-experimental pre-/post-test design to investigate the effects of American children's literature on the changes of college students' English reading attitudes and English progress. The findings showed that the literature-based course did have a significant influence on the subjects' reading attitudes, concluding that American children's books provided an alternative more pleasurable way to learn English. Khodabakhshi and Lagos (1993) investigated the relationship between students' responses to children's literature and read-aloud in college ESL classes. The findings indicated that “reading such material aloud to be extremely useful and productive, and equally enjoyable for instructors and students” (p. 56).

Other studies investigated the influence of children's literature on students' linguistic abilities, concluding, in general, that students' linguistic abilities improved (Garcia, 2004; Garcia, 2007; Ho, 2000). For example, Garcia (2007) used qualitative research to investigate the integration of children's literature into an intermediate Spanish-as-a-foreign-language class at the university level. The findings indicated that students enjoyed reading children's literature, believed their Spanish improved, and appreciated the presence of Hispanic/Latino culture in the texts. Ho (2000) investigated the possible role of children's literature with a group of 20 students from China with an average age of 19, concluding that children's literature is effective in teaching linguistic skills such as pronunciation and improving language acquisition. One quantitative finding reported by Wu (2001) didn't confirm other qualitative findings. Wu found that the use of children's literature did have a positive influence on subjects' English reading attitude but no significant effect on subjects' English growth measured in cloze tests designed by the researcher. More quantitative studies are needed to determine whether children's literature is beneficial for adult learners' linguistic growth.

## **Use of films for English language learners**

Films can be used for discussions, writing assignments, giving access to language input, and for powerfully moving picture books (Baddock, 1996; Sherman, 2003). Compared with the words and pictures in books, students have more interest in the changing pictures and sounds of films, and they can concentrate on the story more easily (Huston & Wright, 1983; Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990). Poor readers tend to have little background knowledge about the text, which causes them to have difficulty comprehending what they are reading (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Since films supply additional background information, they can activate schema to aid reading comprehension.

Because films are good means of providing realistic examples of living language and show the ways of peoples' communication visually as well as verbally, they can generally be used to fit into reading instruction (Gerngross & Puchta, 1992). Irving and Rea (2006) argued that if the imagination and belief in a fiction can be transformed into a film, both the film and the fiction can simultaneously provide readers and viewers with vast linguistic resources and audio-visual satisfaction. The union of films and fictions is potentially an effective motivational resource.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

A total of 89 non-English majors enrolled in two, freshman English classes at a vocational university in Taiwan participated in the study. All participants were freshman students majoring in nursing. Most students had studied English for six years. They were comparable in age and educational background. All the participants were given consent forms describing the purpose of the study and experimental procedures within the study.

### **Research design**

The study employed a quasi-experimental, pre-test/post-test comparison group design. Because the study was conducted in established classrooms, neither random selection nor random assignment of students was possible. To determine whether the experimental groups and the control group had different English proficiency, a General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) was administered at the beginning of the semester. An Independent-Sample T-test showed that there was no significant difference between the groups in English proficiency ( $p=0.081$ ). Therefore, it could be concluded that the two groups were comparable in terms of the students' English proficiency. The participants in the experimental group were exposed to the children's literature and DVD films. The participants watched scenes 1-4 of the film with Chinese subtitles and discussed what they saw in the film related to characters, setting, context, and so on. Then the participants read chapters 1-5 of the book, looking for information that matched what they saw in the film. After discussing, the participants viewed scenes 5-8 of the film, discussed, read chapters 6-10 of the book and discussed. The cycle of watch, discuss, read, discuss, watch, discuss, read, discuss continued until the book was complete. In the control group, the participants were taught by the same instructor as in the experimental group, except the English Language Teaching

(ELT) textbook was used. The text, *Reading for a Reason: Expanding Reading Skills* (Blass & Whalley, 2006), is a reading series based on academic themes. The series at three levels from high-beginning to high-intermediate includes a student book, teacher's manual and audios. The selected textbook, *Reading for a Reason: Expanding Reading Skills 1*, has five themes (psychology, food and nutrition, physics and history of sports, biology, literature), ten chapters which present reading passages range from 150 to 600 words, vocabulary and grammar tasks and post-reading activities.

The experiment was conducted for two hours per week over two months. Then the reading comprehension sections of the Elementary GEPT posttests were administered and their outcomes were compared with those of the pretests. At the end of the course, the questionnaires were administered to the participants in the experimental group to elicit their perceptions about the various aspects of the use the children's literature and DVD films. The statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS 13.0. The 0.05 level of confidence (P-value) was used as a criterion level for determining significant differences.

### **Material selection**

The text *Charlotte's Web*, published by Bookman Books (White, 1988), was chosen for this study because it is a wonderful mixture of imagination and realism beloved by generations. The DVD film, *Charlotte's Web*, released by Paramount Pictures in 2006, was also used in this study. A DVD was employed because its sound and picture quality were much higher than the traditional VHS format. Furthermore, a DVD is a useful resource in language learning and teaching because of its subtitles in several languages. Standard subtitling (English audio and Chinese subtitles) were used in the study because L1 subtitles facilitate language learning by helping learners visualise what they hear, especially if the input is slightly beyond their linguistic level (Danan, 2004).

Adult literature was not used because the length, vocabulary difficulty, idiomatic expressions, and complex themes and plots can be discouraging. Children's literature was used in this study because it is simple in language and storyline, facilitating reading comprehension and reading interest. It can build up the confidence of the participants in using the target language.

### **Treatment**

In the experimental group, the teacher facilitated a class discussion eliciting background knowledge from students. Discussion prompts included: We are going to read a book about friendship. What do you know about friendship? What makes a good friend? Think about a friend of yours and answer the questions: What's your friend's name? When did you meet? What things do you and your friend have in common? Then the teacher asked the students to make a prediction about the book using the question "What do you think a story with a title like this might be about?" After making a few predictions about the text, the students watched the first clip of the film with Chinese subtitles. The teacher directed the discussion to what the students saw in the film and briefly introduced six or seven new vocabulary words that students would encounter in the story. Then the teacher engaged the students in an oral reading of a book and stopped occasionally to highlight new words to check

for comprehension. Then teacher directed the discussion to the critical elements that would facilitate comprehension. For example, after the students read the passage about Wilbur's first impressions on Charlotte "I've got a new friend, all right. But what a gamble friendship is! Charlotte is fierce, brutal, scheming, bloodthirsty-everything I don't like. How can I learn to like her, even though she is pretty and, of course, clever?", the teacher asked: "What do you think Wilbur means by "What a gamble friendship is!" "How did you feel when you were in a new situation surrounded by new people?" The students read the passages

"Well," said her mother, "one of the pigs is a runt. It's very small and weak, and it will never amount to anything. So your father has decided to do away with it."

"Fern," said Mr. Arable, "I know more about raising a litter of pigs than you do. A weakling makes trouble."

"But it's unfair," cried Fern, "...If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?" (White, 1988, p. 3)

and then the teacher asked "What is a runt? Why does Fern think it would be an injustice to kill Wilbur?" Then the students watched the second clip of the movie covering the material that the students have just read. The students could confirm the understanding they gained from reading by seeing the visual images in the film. This cycle continued until the text was complete.

### **Instruments**

In order to measure the increase in reading comprehension, the participants in the control and experimental groups completed pre-tests and post-tests. One reading subtest of the Elementary General English Proficiency Test was used as pre-test and post-test to measure students' overall language proficiency in reading skills. The General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) is a criterion-referenced English proficiency test developed by the Language Training and Testing Center (LTTC) in 2000 in Taiwan to assess the general English proficiency of EFL learners (Wu, 2012). Numerous studies have been conducted to ascertain that the GEPT has good reliability and validity to assess learners' knowledge and ability to use English in real-life situations (Chin & Kao, 2004; Liao, 2009; LTTC, 2003; Wu, 2002a, 2002b).

To elicit the students' perceptions about the various aspects of the use the children's literature and DVD films, the questionnaires were administered to the participants in the experimental group. The questionnaire consisted of 7 items developed by the researcher based on the review of literature on film and literature in foreign and second language education (Cho, 2006). The questionnaire was reviewed by two Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) professors to ensure content validity, and the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for the total questionnaire was 0.863. The participants were asked to respond to each statement. Item responses followed a five-point Likert-scale which ranged from "agree strongly" (point 5), "agree" (point 4), "neutral" (point 3), "disagree somewhat" (point 2), to "disagree" (point 1).

## RESULTS

In order to examine whether or not the experimental groups improved more significantly than the control group in the reading comprehension, a GEPT Reading Comprehension Section test was administered before and after the treatment. The comparisons of standard deviations and differences in mean scores between the pre-test and post-test of the experimental and control group are displayed in Table 1. The findings show that the experimental groups had more gains on the scores of GEPT reading post-test than the control group. An Independent-Sample T test revealed that the experimental group scored significantly higher in the post-test than the control group ( $p < .01$ ). That is, the participants exposed to the children's literature and DVD film outperformed those exposed to the English Language Teaching (ELT) textbook on the GEPT reading subtest.

Group	N	Pre-test		Post-test		Gain	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control group	49	68.31	12.29	68.96	11.57	0.65	2.73
Experimental group	49	73.14	15.08	77.58	13.71	4.15	9.22

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics for GEPT reading pre-tests and post-tests**

The questionnaire was administered to students in the experimental group following the post-tests. The participants were required to respond to the statements by choosing one of five likert alternatives to elicit their general thought toward using the children's literature and DVD films in learning. There was a return rate of 96%, with 47 students returning their questionnaire. Of these, 43 questionnaires were valid and used in the final analysis.

As shown in Table 2, more than 70% of the participants in the experimental group indicated that reading the children's literature and viewing the DVD film can promote their English reading, listening and vocabulary ability. Over 60% of the participants indicated that the use of children's literature and DVD films can improve their speaking and writing ability, help them learn Western cultures and increase their motivation in reading. The results of the questionnaire suggest that integrating children's literature and DVD films has proved to be an engaging way for EFL learners to improve their language ability and expand their reading interests.

## CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that reading, viewing the film, and discussing a children's fantasy novel significantly increased the scores on the reading comprehension subtests of an elementary GEPT over the control group with exposure to the ELT Textbook. Children's literature and DVD films may serve as a viable alternative to ELT textbooks in reading classes, because they give students opportunities to learn not only language skills but also to be sensitive to different cultures. The finding is in agreement with Smallwood's (1998) conclusion, which reported that high-quality children's literature "characterized by an economy of words, stunning illustrations, captivating and quickly moving plots" (p. 1) can help adults as well as children in

developing language and literacy skills and content knowledge. The most important thing is that texts should be carefully selected and matched with students' proficiency level. Students need to have confident and lasting enjoyment or pleasure in reading. Their deep satisfaction with reading could result in continuing reading. Krashen (1993) stated that "free reading in a second or foreign language is one of the best things an acquirer can do to bridge the gap from the beginning level to truly advanced levels of second language proficiency" (p. x). Through reading on their own, students get confidence in reading English. Once they are confident reading English, they will be more confident writing and speaking English.

Statement	Five-point Likert	F	%
1. Reading the children's literature and viewing the DVD film can promote my English reading ability.	Agree strongly	13	30.2
	Agree	20	46.5
	Neutral	10	23.3
	Disagree somewhat	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
2. Reading the children's literature and viewing the DVD film can promote my English vocabulary ability.	Agree strongly	11	25.6
	Agree	21	48.8
	Neutral	10	23.3
	Disagree somewhat	1	2.3
	Disagree	0	0
3. Reading the children's literature and viewing the DVD film can promote my English listening ability.	Agree strongly	12	27.9
	Agree	23	52.5
	Neutral	8	19.6
	Disagree somewhat	0	0
	Disagree	0	0
4. Reading the children's literature and viewing the DVD film can promote my English speaking ability.	Agree strongly	9	20.9
	Agree	19	44.2
	Neutral	14	32.6
	Disagree somewhat	1	2.3
	Disagree	0	0
5. Reading the children's literature and viewing the DVD film can promote my English writing ability.	Agree strongly	9	20.9
	Agree	18	41.9
	Neutral	15	34.9
	Disagree somewhat	1	2.3
	Disagree	0	0
6. Reading the children's literature and viewing the DVD film can increase my knowledge of western cultures.	Agree strongly	11	25.6
	Agree	16	37.2
	Neutral	15	34.9
	Disagree somewhat	1	2.3
	Disagree	0	0
7. Reading the children's literature and viewing the DVD film can increase my motivation in reading.	Agree strongly	11	25.6
	Agree	16	37.2
	Neutral	15	34.9
	Disagree somewhat	1	2.3
	Disagree	0	0

**Table 2. Frequency of participants' responses to the use of DVD films and children's literature**

In this study, only one children's book was used; other genres of more children's books can be included in further studies. Secondly, the participants viewed the literary film with English audio and Chinese subtitles. The findings revealed that there were significant differences in the scores between the experimental and control group. It



is suggested that L1 subtitles give learners the opportunity to comprehend and access authentic target language in a comprehensive and meaningful context. Further research could investigate the effect of viewing a literary film with English audio and subtitles on the possible improvement of English speaking and writing ability. Furthermore, future study could investigate the effects of order of reading text or viewing a film on participants' reading comprehension.

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