

THE APPLICATION OF THE STORY-TELLING APPROACH IN PRIMARY ENGLISH
VOCABULARY TEACHING IN CHINA

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Abstract

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Qiaoru Cai

Under the Supervision of Richard Garrett, Doctor Degree

In recent years, English has become a compulsory subject for Chinese primary students. Many teachers and experts have researched different kinds of teaching vocabulary methods, which promote the development of English vocabulary teaching. While most agree that the issue becomes the focus of our attention. This paper analyzes the problems of English vocabulary teaching and learning recently in Chinese classroom and introduces the Story-telling Approach in vocabulary teaching. This paper reports the findings of the Story-telling Approach's influence on EFL (English as a foreign language) learners' vocabulary learning. The findings of the study provide suggestions for English teachers in vocabulary teaching in China.

Key words: vocabulary teaching and learning problems, The Story-telling Approach, influence, suggestions

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Chapter I Introduction

Since China entered WTO on November 10th 2001, learning English well has been becoming increasingly important. The great English linguist Wilkins (1987) said “Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (p.135). Therefore, vocabulary is a fundamental part of a language and it is of vital importance to EFL learners. There is no doubt that mastering the vocabulary is one of the key factors for learning a language.

According to the Chinese Primary English Curriculum Requirements (2011), students should acquire a total of 700 words. However, there exist some problems in vocabularies teaching and learning in China’s EFL class. Most teachers put great emphasis on the definition and translations of the vocabularies. They often use the spoon-feeding way to teach students vocabularies. When they teach the new words, they just give the students Chinese translation directly. And under the pressure of kinds of exams, some of the teachers even think it not necessary to teach the vocabularies. When the students meet some new words, they just turn to word lists which are written in English words with Chinese translations, dictionaries or electronic dictionaries for help. They don’t pay attention to the usage of the words in the context, and they don’t know how to guess or predict the words’ meaning from the context. The students learn the new words one by one without any thinking. Most serious problem is that the students have no interest in learning English because of the traditional teaching mode and the various exam systems.

English vocabulary teaching has made great progress in the past few years. All kinds of teaching methods have been applied to the English vocabulary teaching including the Story-telling Approach. It effectively motivates students to take part in the teaching progress and gain the ability of learning English vocabulary in the situational environment. Based on the issues mentioned

above, this study will mainly focus on the topic of the application of the Story-telling Approach in primary English vocabulary teaching in China.

Statement of the Problem

The problems to be addressed are “What problems currently exist in English vocabulary teaching and learning in China?”, “Why should the Story-telling Approach be applied to English vocabulary teaching?”, “How can the Story-telling Approach influence EFL learners’ vocabulary learning?” and “How to apply the Story-telling Approach in primary English vocabulary teaching in China?”.

Definition of Terms

The Story-telling Approach is defined by National Storytelling Association that the Story-telling is the art of using language, vocalization, and/or physical movement and gesture to reveal the elements and images of a story to a specific, live audience. And Ozhan, Ahmet, Erdem, Askin and Osman (2006) regarded the storytelling as the art of real or fictitious context in words, pictures and sounds. It is often used by teaching lessons and educating morals.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to find out the current problems that exist in English vocabulary teaching and learning in Chinese class in the aspects of teachers and students. Then it introduces the importance of applying the Story-telling Approach, the methods how the Story-telling Approach influence EFL learners’ vocabulary learning and how to apply the Story-telling Approach effectively in Chinese primary classes. These findings can help English teachers guide teaching vocabularies in China.

Significance of the Study

Understanding these questions above can not only make teachers carry out the Story-telling Approach effectively and make full use of this method to teach EFL learners vocabularies in China, but also make students learn the new vocabularies easily and effectively.

Delimitation of the Study

This paper aims to study on Chinese primary English vocabulary learning and teaching. This study may not be generalizable to other groups, for example, the other elementary schools in other countries.

Methodology

I choose to write a library research seminar paper. Here is my library research plan:

- Borrow the relevant books or find the relevant literature on the Internet, using e-library in UW-Platteville, Jstor, and so on.
- Find the relevant papers or books about the Story-telling Approach. The papers' abstract should be associated with the research direction.
- Look at references closely. If 80% of the references are not recently published, they have no value to the literature.
- Pay attention to the introduction, the research ideas and research procedures.
- Combine extensive reading with intensive reading. Insist on taking notes from the relevant books or papers.

- After reading a piece of literature, summarize the main ideas. It can be reviewed from the following several aspects: 1. Find out the topic and the purpose. 2. Conclude the research method and result. 3. Find out the innovation part of the literature. 4. Find out the point that can be improved. 5. Find out the point that can inspire me. 6. Put forward my own new ideas through reading literature.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Teaching vocabulary is an important part of language teaching. All kinds of teaching methods have been applied to the English vocabulary teaching. The Story-telling Approach contributes a lot in the English language teaching. It effectively motivates students to take part in the teaching progress, gain the students' ability of learning English in the situational environment, develop the students' skills of predicting new words' meaning. It's necessary for teachers to apply the Story-telling Approach in English vocabulary teaching. This literature review describes the Story-telling Approach by responding to the following questions:

1. What problems currently exist in English vocabulary teaching and learning in China?
2. Why should the Story-telling Approach be applied to English vocabulary teaching?
3. How can the Story-telling Approach influence EFL learners' vocabulary learning?
4. How to apply the Story-telling Approach in primary English vocabulary teaching in China?

Understanding these questions above can make teachers recognize the existence of the problems, understand the necessity of the application of the Story-telling Approach and know how to carry out the Story-telling Approach. And it also helps students find an easier and more effective way to learn new English words.

What problems currently exist in English vocabulary teaching and learning in China?

English as a foreign language sweep through China since China's entry into the World Trade Organization. This makes it necessary and urgent for all the English teachers to pay more attention to English vocabulary teaching and learning problems that exist recently. Many Chinese scholars

and researchers found there exist lots of problems in English vocabulary teaching and learning in China.

In the aspect of teachers, teachers simply follow the traditional vocabulary teaching method. The teachers talk too much and give few chances for students to practice or think. They directly explain the meaning of the new word or the new text to students. They regard it as a good way of teaching English.

Chen and Ding (2011) regarded the traditional spoon-feeding way of teaching as the most serious problem of China's English education. Nowadays most Chinese English teachers adopt this method. Teachers teach the new content sentence by sentence, even word by word. They spend too much time on the analysis of grammars and sentence structures.

The teachers directly tell students the Chinese meaning when the students meet the new words. Some teachers lack of good vocabulary teaching methods but using the traditional translation method. They correspond the English words to the Chinese meaning. In most cases, the teachers give the meaning of the new word firstly, then the students get the definition without any thinking. Therefore, the students lack the ability to guess the meaning from the context themselves(Guan, 2014).

What is the more serious is that the Chinese teachers emphasize too much on the various levels of exams. They pay attention to the kinds of tests, such as TEM, CET, ect. As a result, they focus on teaching reading and writing skills and ignore the vocabulary teaching. Some teachers even think it's not necessary to teach vocabularies.

Shuang (2012) made a survey on the problems existing in current English vocabulary teaching and learning in China. She collected 184 questionnaires from the teachers. She found that most teachers think the vocabulary teaching is unnecessary. They mainly use the textbooks to enlarge students' vocabulary and teach the words needed in the exams. That is teacher-centered and exam-centered. Very few teachers think mechanical remembering is the most efficient way. They know the vocabulary should be put into the context but they just teach the vocabulary with the help of text books. According to the data, the teachers just teach the word's meaning and pronunciation directly. Only 32 teachers teach the vocabulary from the situation view by using the sentences, short stories and so on while 14 teachers focus on the students' self-study ability to learn new vocabulary and its meaning.

In the aspect of students, the most serious existing problem is that the students have no interest in learning English vocabularies. As a result, they do not want to learn. Interest is the best teacher. It is the most active element in studying everything. Lacking of interest is students' main obstacle.

Chen and Ding (2011) said that when teachers use traditional way to teach English, they just listen to teachers without any thoughts or interesting activities. They only take notes which are the important points in the exams. This mode of teaching helps students master the basic English knowledge in the exam, but it blocks students' free and open views. Their interest towards English can not be aroused. This teacher-oriented teaching method makes the classroom atmosphere boring and repressed, lacking of interest, innovative thoughts and active participation.

Li (2015) also pointed out that in the current English-learning situation in primary school, some problems do exist. Students have no interest in learning English just like "slaves dancing with shackles"(P. 15). The boring atmosphere in the class leads students to be tired of studying.

They have bad habits of listening. They take notes arbitrarily and they repeat the text again and again. As a result, they don't focus on the detailed and practical key points.

Beside having no interest, many students have a misleading conception on learning words and the words' meaning. They don't take learning or remembering vocabularies seriously. And they think it is just a practice of matching English words with Chinese meaning.

The majority of Chinese students are passive to learn new vocabulary. The students usually acquire the new words' meaning in their word list or given by teachers in the English class. Whenever many English learners think of the English vocabulary, they will naturally think a long list of new words with Chinese meaning. They meet the new words, they just wait for the teachers to give the definition or look them in the dictionary instead of guessing or predicting the words meaning themselves (Gong, 2012).

Ma (2000) further noted that the students think memorizing the English words means remembering all the equivalent Chinese meaning. They don't want to guess or master the meaning of the words, they just want to memorize the vocabulary mechanically according to the word list even the dictionary. Some of them think remembering the meaning of the new words is the end of vocabulary learning.

It can be seen that the implementation of the new curriculum reform makes English learning vivid and colorful in the classroom, but there are still some vocabulary teaching and learning problems for reflections. And the English teachers should take these problems into consideration when teaching new English words.

Why should the Story-telling Approach be applied to English vocabulary teaching?

There is no doubt that everyone especially children love stories. Turner (1996) explained that “The story is the human way to organize our most experience, knowledge and ideas”(p. 13). At the same time, Herman (2003) regarded story as “a tool for interweaving doing and thinking, navigating and knowing”(p. 183). Applying the Story-telling Approach to English vocabulary teaching is a necessity. There are the following three reasons.

First of all, it is obvious that story conforms with the age characteristics and psychological characteristics of children. Making up a new English story out of the teaching contents can make the language environment lively and vivid, and it can also stimulate the children’s interest in learning English vocabulary.

From the motivational perspectives, motivation plays an important role in the learning process including English learning. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), Learning Theory asserted that physiological elements drive all the behaviors and provide motivated activities. In other words, people hold inner interest for their activities. They also said the story can arouse students’ interest. And it can not be denied that using the stories will inspire students’ motivation.

Rilla (2001) believed that story is an interesting educational teaching technique in teaching English vocabulary to primary school children. The children enjoy and love the stories which meet children’s characteristics. They love to listen to the stories even though they have listened them for several times. After having a relaxing and enjoyable experience in the story, they learn and study many new English vocabularies easily.

The famous researcher Jalongo (2000) recommended the Storytelling as a techniques in EFL classroom. He listed some advantages of the Storytelling. He pointed out that the story itself can attract the students’ attention. It can motivate students, stimulate students’ imagination and arouse

students' interest. It can also enlarge students' vocabulary with the good usage in the story. Beside the reasons above, story can develop student's thinking skill and encourage them to talk with other students.

The second reason is that from the cognitive psychological perspective, the story can help students learn from the enjoyable experience. It is boring if the teachers always let students repeat the new content. Combining the story with learning content can make it meaningful and effective.

The stories can be a part of teaching a language. These stories help students form the sentences, express their own thoughts and keep their interest as the stories' end. The stories are always charming to students. They appeal to the curious nature of children. And the unfinished story can keep the learners worried and excited to know what happens next. In other words, it can let students always learn in the process (Anburaj, Christopher & Ming, 2014) .

The educator Martha (2005) pointed out that the Story-telling Approach can practice students' learning skills from different aspects. When listening to a story, students' listening ability is trained. In the whole story, before showing students what will happen next, students' thinking skill is trained. The Story-telling Approach can let the students interact as listeners first and then the storytellers themselves.

Strickland and Morrow (1989) also agreed that children benefit a lot from the stories. The teachers should give students chance to tell stories with each other. This process can help students develop their language learning in the aspect of vocabularies, sentences, the stories' structure and reading comprehension.

Last but not least, the most obvious feature of the Story-telling Approach in English vocabulary teaching is that it offers students a meaningful learning context. One of the most effective way to learn vocabularies is guessing the meaning from the context. It is really important in a vocabulary learning progress. Context means the words that come before or after a word, phrase or sentence. It helps students understand the vocabularies' meaning. Only by being put in a context, will a word be alive. Students learn a word naturally and effectively if the word is put in a context. The Story-telling Approach just meets the requirement.

Kerim and Serdar (2015) regarded the story as a method that establishes a meaningful learning environment for the students. The story provides students audible and visual intelligence with the help of different activities and techniques. The stories makes the understanding of language more simpler. Teachers organize the teaching aims, language points or ideas in a story which offers students thinking context. Then the students enter the effective learning context. Their vocabulary learning will become more interesting and easier. In the real teaching, using a context can promote the students' vocabulary learning.

The story puts students in a enjoyable context. In the comfort and relaxing environment, students can have a chance to acquire the words and language at the same time. They see, hear, and read the story in a meaningful and memorable context. Stories help students infer the meanings of the new words incidentally, help them develop their vocabulary by making connections between known and unknown words and help them master new words in a memorable way. This approach naturally expose students to the language in the familiar contexts (Hilal & Abdulkadir, 2014).

The famous researcher Cameron (2001) held a similar opinion. He insisted that story provides comprehensive method to language teaching and learning. It helps a lot for students' language

development in the context. The story combines the foreign language with many plots. It fully involves students in the content “with rich, authentic uses of the foreign language”(p.159).

It can be seen that according to the age and psychological characteristics of children, the story itself attracts primary students. Students show a lot of interest towards story. And according to the learning strategies of children, it helps students learn from fun and provides students a meaningful content.

How can the Story-telling Approach influence EFL learners’ vocabulary learning?

There is no denying that story has its own advantages. And when applying it in the English vocabulary teaching, it can be found many changes take place in the students’ learning progress. Students involve in the Story-telling Approach and they behave differently. There are two obvious influence on students’ behavior.

The first one is that students love the method of the story telling. They enjoy it when learning a new word in the story. And after enjoying a story, they find it much more easier to learn and remember the new word.

Kartiwi (2012) suggested teachers choose the funny technique for students so that they are interesting to English lessons. He recommended teachers adopt the Story-telling Approach in teaching English vocabulary. When using this approach, students’ interest and motivation in learning English vocabulary are aroused. And it can be obviously seen that students’ achievements are better than before.

When talking about students’ response toward teaching vocabulary using the story telling, Sutini (2012) did a study with qualitative method, observation and interview at the fifth grade

students. All students (100%) said English lesson with a story is fun. 90% of students are interested in learning English by using the story telling. 83.33% of the students said that the story telling makes English vocabulary much more easier. Based on the interview results, all the students agrees that they are motivated to learn English by the Story-telling Approach.

At the end of her thesis, Rilla (2011) concluded that the Story-telling Approach as an interesting method of teaching English vocabulary to the primary school students. After enjoying a story, the students are able to remember the vocabulary more easily with the help of story than the normal class without a story. The students also know the new English vocabulary is different form the their native language.

The second one is that some teachers adopt the Story-telling Approach in English vocabulary teaching. They have found it significant in improving vocabulary development. It is the most important finding that the Story-telling Approach helps students predict the meaning of the new words.

Some researchers did investigations in listening to the story and vocabulary learning. Elley (1989) conducted two entertainments to find out whether students can learn the new vocabulary incidentally through listening to the stories or not. The result was positive. It showed the score of the children who acquire the target words in the post-vocabulary test was higher than the score in the pre-vocabulary test.

Brett, Rothlein and Hurley (1996) also did the similar investigation whether the students aged nine to eleven years old can acquire unknown words through listening to the stories. They concluded form the survey that the grade 4 students can acquire new word and its meaning through

listening to stories. From the results, it can be seen that students can easily learn the words through listening to the stories.

Kartiwi (2012) chose the quantitative method at fifth grade students to show whether or not using the Story-telling Approach in learning English vocabulary increase the students' vocabulary mastery. He used pretest and post-test as the tool to analyze the data with t-test formulas. The result of the data analysis showed that the application of the Story-telling Approach in teaching English vocabulary was proven effective.

It can be seen that while teachers using the Story-telling Approach, students behave active in English vocabulary learning. They show their interest toward English vocabulary learning. They find it much more easier in learning a new word than before and they can predict the unknown words from the context with the help of story.

How to apply the Story-telling Approach in primary English vocabulary teaching in China?

The Story-telling Approach method mainly encourages student-centered implementation of teaching. Teachers are no longer the masters who control the class in the traditional way, but the cooperative partner together with the students in the class. The steps of applying the Story-telling Approach are as follows:

Step one: Creating or selecting a story. Teachers should choose stories depending on the students' age and linguistic level. The story must contain the key vocabularies and it must have a special propose. A well-selected story is a good start for students to learn English vocabularies.

Peggy, Sharolyn and Sharon (2004) suggested teachers choose the stories and familiar texts based on the students' interests. They should combine words that the students have already acquired with the new vocabularies. And the new words should be put in the context based on students' daily experience. Only in this important and meaningful way, can students gain the ability to describe the familiar situations and master the new words' meaning.

When talking about selecting a story, Ellis and Brewster (1991) mentioned three important factors that teachers should take into consideration. As teachers, firstly they must check clearness of the vocabularies and the whole text. Sometimes it's necessary to replace unfamiliar words with the familiar ones. Secondly the teachers should check the grammar which should avoid too many complicated structures or tenses. The teachers should also check the whole ideas in the story. The idea must be easy for students to understand.

Step two: Presenting the story. After determining which story to be told, the teachers should choose a method to present the story to the students. It should be effective and interesting.

Brewster, Ellis and Girard (2002) described how to use the story-telling in classroom in details. Teachers should start with a short story which will not make students absent-minded. When telling the story, the teachers should read or tell it clearly, loudly and slowly with varying the volume and tone so that the students will get the meaning teachers intend to tell. The most important way is to encourage students take part in the story by repeating the key words and phrases.

The Story-telling Approach has some certain requirements for teachers and the techniques. Alipanahi, Sedaghat, Sinaei and Artishehdar (2014) listed some means of telling a story. If the condition is allowed, the students should sit around the teacher. The teachers should read the story

clearly and slowly so that the students have time to think, ask questions, enjoy the pictures of the story and make evaluations. Sometimes teachers can ask students some questions and make comments about the story, too. Keeping students' attention is really important, so the teachers can read a story with the help of rich facial expression, funny body language, varied tone and intonation. Since nowadays the technology is so advanced, teachers can also use CD, DVD or PPT to present the story.

Step three: Having students role play the story. As a speaking activity, role play can be regarded as a communicative method of foreign language learning. It helps them learn from doing, learn from playing a role and learn from watching others acting.

Teachers should allow students to take roles in a show, story or something else. Firstly teachers should divide the students into different roles. Secondly teachers try to create different contexts for students. The students are required to use the new words or phrases in the activity. Only in this way, can students use the new taught words in the real context and understand the usage of the words. Finally every group can choose representatives to have a role play or they can have a role play among different groups (Wu, 2013).

Chauhan (2015) listed some benefits of using role play in the language classroom. He said the activity role play is fun. It can connect the language classroom with the outside world. It strengthens students' skills of learning English, speaking English, listening and understanding English. It allows students experience the English language the students have learned in the class. In addition to the above mentioned, role play enables students develop other social skills such as group work skills, decision-making skills, English language skills and so on.

It can be seen that applying the Story-telling Approach should be done step by step. Choosing the good story, presenting it well and having students role play can make vocabulary learning more easier.

Summary

To sum up, there exists some problems in English vocabulary teaching and learning in China. How to deal with the problems is an urgent task. The traditional vocabulary teaching makes both teachers and students boring and ineffective. Lots of researchers agrees that the Story-telling Approach is in favor of English vocabulary learning and teaching. It offers a meaningful context, stimulates the enthusiasm of students for learning English vocabulary, help them predict the new words' meaning and develop students' vocabulary learning skills. Meanwhile, the application of the Story-telling Approach makes students' role changing from passive to active in learning new vocabulary, also teacher's role changing from controlled superiors to good guiders in teaching new vocabulary. And there are also some good suggestions for teachers to adopt when they use the Story-telling Approach.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

Vocabulary is the basic component of language that can not be separated form learning English. Mastering and understanding a number of words is a fundamental of English learning. Vocabulary plays an important role in the four languages skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Having difficult in learning vocabulary may cause difficulty for students in learning

English. In other words, if students can not learn vocabularies well, they can not communicate with others or express their thoughts in English well.

Based on the above analysis, we can conclude that the existing problems of vocabulary teaching and learning are serious. The teachers are used to adopting a traditional way to teach vocabularies without any novel and innovative method. And under the pressure of different kinds of exams, teachers pay no attention to the vocabulary teaching and just focus on the reading and writing skills which are demanded in the exam. As a result, students show no interest toward English vocabulary learning. What's more, they have a misconception about learning English vocabularies.

It can be found that the Story-telling Approach itself has so many advantages that it is necessary for teachers to apply it in English vocabulary teaching. It arouse students' interest and stimulate students' learning motivation. It helps students learn from the story in an interesting atmosphere but not the boring normal class. Most importantly, story provides the context for students to learn a word in the meaningful environment.

It can be also found that students behave totally different when they are taught by using a story. They like and enjoy the story. They are active to learn English words but not passive to study any more. When being in the colorful environment, students can predict or guess the unknown words' meaning easily. Compared with the traditional way, they find it easier for them to learn the new word and master its meaning.

As English EFL teachers, developing the vocabulary of students is one of the most important responsibilities. Teachers should apply the Story-telling Approach in English vocabulary teaching carefully and comprehensively. The first main thing for teachers is to choose or crate an

appropriate story. Then the teachers should tell or read the story in the right way with the help of different techniques. In the progress of the story telling, teachers should make students pay attention to the new words. At last, having students role play the story can help students totally understand the usage of the new words' meaning. All the three steps make it easy and effective for students to master a new word.

The Story-telling Approach has its great practical value. This teaching method enhances students' cognitive ability and the usage of the new words. The course content become vivid and colorful. It not only arouses the enthusiasm of students to participate in classroom activities, but also stimulates students' interest and imagination. If teachers always adopt the Story-telling Approach with the same methods, students will lose interest in the teaching progress just like the normal class before. So generally speaking, as teachers, we should innovate the way of telling story and the way of students participating in. Therefore the students will keep interest for a long time. And the teachers should create a good classroom language teaching environment for students to make sure that the students can learn from doing in every class. So we need to further explore the innovation method of the Story-telling Approach.

In English vocabulary teaching classes, the Story-telling Approach has been on the road and will achieve more development in the future.

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