Values and limitations of children’s literature in adult language education

ZHANG Hai-yan

(School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Education Institute, Hangzhou 310012, China)

Abstract: Using children’s literature to teach is something new but increasingly popular with adult ESL or EFL students. This paper is intended to explore the values and limitations of children’s literature in language education and concludes that children’s literature exposes adult students to a new world of language education.

Key words: children’s literature; values; limitations; language education

1. Introduction

B. Singer remarked in The present state of English children’s literature that “While adult literature, especially fiction, is deteriorating, the literature for children is gaining in quality and stature” (Singer, 1994, p. 23). Children’s literature has burgeoned over the decades, offering an overwhelming variety of stories for children of all ages. It has been read, researched and reviewed, studied and integrated in universities, critiqued, translated, illustrated, rewritten in simpler versions, promoted and publicized, discussed and presented and adapted for all sorts of media and format (Ho, 2000, p. 259). All these activities have mostly been carried out by adult with a professional or academic interest in children’s literature. This paper will start by taking a look at some of the claims often made for the merits of children’s literature in language education.

2. What are the values of children’s literature in language education?

Children’s literature, compared to adult literature, has arguably simpler language, fewer lengthy stories, fewer abstract ideas, less complicated themes and offers just as a wide variety of stories. All of these features were encouraging, especially in boosting reading confidence.

“Children’s books often have captivating story lines and beautiful illustrations, and many have universal appeal and address mature themes and topics as well. Then children’s literature is not just for kids” (Smallwood, 1991, p. 54). Children’s literature is stimulating and interesting in terms of its plot, theme, and characterization. At the same time, because it is simple in the language and storyline, facilitating reading comprehension and reading interests, it builds up the confidence of students in using the target language. Picture books with stunning illustrations often leave a lasting impression on the readers. Usually, the pictures convey messages which relate to topics such as war, religion, race that students can easily predict and guess. Inside the message, students have the chance to see some relevant vocabulary which fits the occasions. “Stories are made comprehensible by illustrations, by repeated language patterns and by predictable story structure.” (Savage, 1992, p. 372) Therefore, children’s books can also be used effectively for oral language practice such as reading aloud and pronunciation.
This is more interesting than the drills in prescribed pronunciation textbooks because of the challenge it poses for dramatized reading. Students have to learn to read with the correct intonation, pitch, stress, diction and enunciation (Ho, 2000, p. 263). Furthermore, illustrations in picture books can also be the focus for discussion, language and concept building as well (Karlin, 1994, p. 158). Some illustrations reveal the whole theme of the story. Themes such as war, friendship and independence can always arouse the interests of both children and adult (Savage, 1992, p. 376).

The stories in children’s literature are contextually whole and inherently meaningful. They provide an authentic source of comprehensible English language input and can lower inhibitions or the “affective filter” (Krashen, 1982, p. 345). In addition, children’s literature can also support the many dimensions of language development such as increasing reading comprehension and speed for ESL/EFL adult students. Allen (1989, p. 45) points out that a picture book provides students with “a large, cohesive, uninterrupted chunk of language”. It can be used in a variety of language activities for children and adolescents. It offers a varied and wide range of literature from real life to imaginative topics. There are stories with well-developed characters, engaging plots and vivid themes, offering good sources of knowledge, particularly concerning history and culture (folklore), sociological and psychological insights into realistic fiction, and a story framework for reading and writing when exploring genres, whether comprehending or composing (Karlin, 1994, p. 159).

Reading western children’s literature can also heighten students’ awareness of some moral, ethical values and issues with which they are unfamiliar with: for example, developing empathy and compassion, charity, or the importance of teamwork and cooperation. It can open students’ eyes to social, economic, and cultural problems of worldwide communities. Children’s literature also enriches the arts and humanities, such as visual arts and drama, and encourages the faculty of imagination. Advocates of children’s literature testify to its usability and value in the reading programs and in teaching literature in the classroom for children. Collie and Slater (1987, p. 256) are certain that children’s literature is able to stimulate personal involvement, arousing learners’ interest and provoking strong positive reactions from them; it is meaningful and enjoyable, and reading it has a lasting and beneficial effect upon learners’ linguistic and cultural knowledge. Therefore, children’s literature is used in literacy programs for adults and teenagers with reading difficulties, or simply used to enhance language learning of foreign adult learners.

3. What are the limitations of using children’s literature?

No matter how effective and innovative children’s literature is in teaching adult English, it has its limitations and disadvantages. Not every genre of children’s literature is suitable for the international students. The stories that are better suited to adult readers are stories with an international appeal such as mythology, legends, science fiction, fantasy, or supernatural tales. Folk literature addresses universal themes that transcend cultural boundaries and appeal to people of different backgrounds, they are well accepted by students from different nations. However, realistic fiction on unfamiliar social, economic, or cultural issues is not always suitable. This is mostly because the students’ lack of knowledge as a result of unavailability of information. Certain moral and ethical issues maybe too sensitive for some students because of certain cultural and moral values. Ho listed some novels unsuitable for Chinese students: Robert Cormier’s *After the first death* (the betrayal of son by a parent goes against the grain of Confucian teachings), Robert Westall’s *The scarecrows* (ambiguous ending), Paul Zindel’s *The pigman* (disrespect for elders), Robert Cormier’s *The chocolate war* (anarchy in the school system), Paul Fox’s *The slave dancer*
Values and limitations of children’s literature in adult language education

(unfinished history) and so on and so forth. In the author’s opinion, the following works will arouse the interests of Chinese students: *Ideals* (festivals such as Christmas); *The amazing bone* (magic); *The dragon* (fantasy); *The star fisher* (history); *Yang the third and her impossible family* (life experiences) and *Little house on the prairie* (family history) and stories with similar cultural and educational backgrounds. The limitation of using children’s literature in teaching adult foreign students also lies in that the stories of teenagers and teenager problems are easily identifiable—regardless of backgrounds, culture, and experiences of Chinese students from the various parts of China. Books such as *Times for a small harmonica* (Barbara Wersba), *The outsiders* (S.E. Hinton), *I know what you did last summer* (Lois Duncan), *A solitary blue* (Cynthia Voight), *A summer to die* (Lois Lowry) (which is a familiar theme because of the familiarity of tear-jerking modern stories from Taiwan) and *Madame Doubtfire* (Anne Fine) will pose no reading difficulty to the Chinese adult students.

Another limitation of using children’s literature in language education lies in, to a great extent, the factor of the language proficiency of language instructor. Teachers’ language ability, cultural background and classroom management ability all have a great impact on the students’ learning. In China now we have a shortage of native English teachers and as most of English teachers here are non-native English speakers. Growing up in a different social, cultural and educational background, comparatively speaking, Chinese instructors’ own language proficiency and cultural boundary hinder them from doing the job as competently as native speakers. It is very likely they might encounter language difficulty in understanding and interpreting the cultural practices and issues. In order to overcome this disadvantage, they might spend a great deal of time and exhaustive efforts to prepare for the lessons by doing research and looking for materials and information relevant to the story. Therefore, to teach such a course is time-consuming and demanding. Teachers not only need courage, but also should ask for certain training provided for non-native English speakers. To these non-native instructors, this process can be both taken as a learning and teaching process. In order to let students gain more insights and subtle interpretations of English children’s literature, it is highly advisable that native English teachers or well-trained teachers teach this course.

The last limitation is that the present Chinese school system is basically test-oriented. Most of the time, students learn for the ultimate purpose of passing the test and achieving good grades in the achievement tests. Normally, College English Test Band Four comes in a package which includes reading, writing, speaking and listening. Children’s literature class certainly helps students to promote reading comprehension and critical thinking, and also increase reading speed with extensive outside assignments; however, when it comes to listening comprehension which is the weakest part among all Chinese students, children’s literature class certainly offers less to meet the students’ demands.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the use of children’s literature may be limited as it cannot be used for all language skills instruction, neither can it be effective all the time as the protagonists are children and identification for adult readers is difficult. Similarly, unfamiliar Western culture may discourage reading and this applies to adult fiction even if the protagonists are adults. However, the use of children’s literature can increase a second language learner’s speed, efficiency and pleasure in reading. It is new, but increasingly popular with adult ESL or EFL students. Sharing literature with students from other cultures can be fun and interesting; in addition, it can create a powerful bond between people. Although the main objective of introducing children’s literature is to aid in language acquisition, it also will help readers to develop literary competence and aesthetic responses, as well as
enriching their education. Learning and classroom activities using children’s literature will help to provide stimulating materials for peer interaction, foster cooperation, open up avenues for free individual expression and critical thinking, encourage the faculty of imagination and creativity in drama, and increase multicultural exposure. And most important of all, children’s literature takes on a new perspective as it can be enjoyed by adult readers and it can expose them to a new world of language education.

References:

(Edited by Katrina, Stella and Doris)