On the Interactive Reading Strategies of Picture Books in English

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Abstract. Interactive reading of English picture books is the primary concern of family education, which is also complained to be difficult for many Chinese families. The present thesis makes an analysis of the interactive reading strategies of picture books in English from three aspects: pronunciation and rhythm, cognition development as well as emotional expression.

Introduction

In recent China, interactive education between parents and children has become more and more popular. Against this background, children’s (especially those of preschool) early childhood reading has become the primary concern of educators and parents. Early childhood reading is one of the important ways of children cognition, which is conducive for children to understand and explore the world around them. And the major medium to children’s early age reading is the picture book. Literally, picture book is the combination of picture and book, the latter of which is easy to understand as words. Moreover, picture books in English are the picture book in which the words written are English. Distinguished from the Chinese version, picture books in English can also initiate children into English despite the function of enhancing cognitive development and nurturing emotion.

Generally, English picture books can be categorized into three groups based on their language styles. Firstly, nursery rhymes; secondly, narrative picture books rich in dramatic stories and long sentences; lastly, books without words or with few words. By means of the characteristics of English picture books and some principles of second language acquisition, we will discuss the interactive reading strategies for the three kinds of books in the following.

Pronunciation and Rhythm

The first group is the most acceptable for very young kids. It is comply with man’s disciplines of language acquisition to start constructing a perfect sense of language from nursery rhyme with all the rhythms. Take the classic “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?” for example. The first two lines are:

Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see? I see a red bird looking at me.
Red Bird, Red Bird, what do you see? I see a yellow duck looking at me.

For obvious reasons, “see” is rhymed with “me”. In addition, the whole book adopts the same sentence pattern, with only the substitution of nine other different animals and colors. Then comes the question, how to read this kind of rhymed picture book in an interactive way? In the process of children’s reading, the primary subject is children. However, in most cases,
children are often too young to read by themselves. For children of very young age, adults (usually parents) have to take the place of the reading subject in part. The first thing for adults to do is to preview before the reading time. Besides the plot of the story, adults should start with the accuracy of pronunciations in dealing the first kind of picture books in English. For instance, in the word “brown”, the diphthong [au] should be emphasized, otherwise it could be sounded like [ɔː]; meanwhile, the reduction of “t” in “what” also needs to be noticed. Such details are often ignored or neglected by adults for the reason that they believe meaning of the sentence and vocabulary is more important, which is exactly against the principles of language acquisition. The more the non-standard input of pronunciation, the more obstacles in listening and speaking even with a large vocabulary. Wrong input inevitably leads to wrong output. Thus adults should make good preparation in interactive reading. First of all, adults should learn either the D.J. or K.K. phonetic alphabet; then read the words in the books in a right way. At the same time, one should pay attention to the stress of words which is often difficult for Chinese learners. After the above preparations, adults read the whole sentence focusing on the liaison, contraction and reduction, which can be mastered only with systematical study and practice. Once recited can adults take up the first-time interactive reading with children, which is the way to guarantee the accuracy of input. However, if adults do have problems in pronunciation, they can resort to audio lessons to learn. Moreover, this kind of picture book can also be read in a singing way. Adults should also make a preview: read the story of the book and learn to sing it. The melody of this kind of nursery rhyme is usually simple and repeated. If only some adults can sing the whole song, no matter they sing out of tune, they could add some funny elements in reading. The rhymed lines have already given enough hints to children, that is, these lines are repeated in one way or another. This is the way advocated by phonics, which could lay natural and solid foundation for children’s English learning. Besides, it is pretty good for enlarging children’s vocabulary for in the same sentence pattern only the keywords will be replaced. And children could learn new words more easily in a relatively familiar rhythm. To tell a story in a singing way is better for interaction between adults and children, both of whom will be in a relaxing state that can helps a lot in the input of phonetics of children.

Cognition Development

The second kind of picture books in English is the narrative one. It comprises a significant proportion in picture books. Some are with paragraphs of lines, which relate to older children’s reading; others relate to the enlightenment of children in early age. The present thesis discusses the latter one. One of the classics of this kind is The Very Hungry Caterpillar. It is typical in education of pictures and vocabulary contributing a lot to the cognitive development and enlargement of English vocabulary.

Take two pages in The Very Hungry Caterpillar for instance. One page reads “On Saturday he ate through one piece of chocolate cake, one ice-cream cone, one pickle, one slice of Swiss cheese, one slice of salami”, and the page also drawn with all the objects mentioned in the above line in order. Undoubtedly, in interactive reading between parents and children, the very first reading mission is the cognition of things. Eastern culture differs a lot from the western one, including the disparities in diets. Thus, the food listed in this page is not commonly seen in Chinese family. Due to this reason, adults could make preparation work strategically. At the early stage, adults had better lead the children to taste the above food or some of them and introduce them in English simultaneously. Or adults and children read the
book together once, and adults could find the ones interest children most and then take them to eat, which can also impress the children a lot. If the foods in the book are unavailable in life, adults could introduce and explain them to children by video materials. During the process of explanation, adults need to add some information, including flavor, color etc.

The other picture reads “On Friday he ate through five oranges, but he was still hungry”. This picture is a good example to show how to enlighten children’s thoughts of math. There are five oranges drawn on the page. The number of oranges is increasing in accordance with the word “five” in the picture. It is also worthy to notice that the words “Friday” and “Five” are corresponding with the words “Monday, Tuesday …” and “One, Two…” in the previous pages as days and number sequences. Such suspension is also shown in the change of the figure of the caterpillar: at the very beginning of the story, the caterpillar is tiny but after some voracious days, it becomes very fat. As for children, the change is intuitive visually. What adults should do is to purposely draw conclusion of these words as antonyms: tiny/little/small vs. big/fat and then repeat them to children.

The second kind of picture books in English inevitably requires adults’ more preparation work. The themes of this category are usually about color, number and size. As long as the principles are learnt, adults’ preparation will be very effective. And adults can also seek help from the guideline pamphlets of these picture books. The more children read this kind of books, the more possible they will enlarge their vocabulary in certain sorts. In addition, there will be progress in cognitive development for children.

**Emotional Expression**

The most difficult one among the three kinds of picture books is the third one: books without a word or with few words. As a result, it is impossible to read this kind of book in a literal way. One can only figure out the true meaning of the books by means of interpreting the logic between pages all by oneself. Distinguished from the previous two kinds of picture books, the subject in reading the third kind of books is not adult but child. Let’s take the classic *No, David!* for example.

One page of the book is the scene in a living room leaving one cluster of footprint with dirty mud. And David the protagonist is totally untidy with mud on his face and body. The line of this page puts “No David no!” another page is about the scene David playing with toys in the bath tub. The water has already run over the bathtub. The line in this page reads “No! No! No!” Throughout the whole book, the lines in each page are almost the same word “No”, with few other words. This kind of picture book is favored a lot by children of young age. That is because the scenes and things drawn in the book are quite close to children’s life in reality. Adults should encourage children to tell the story in their own understanding. After that, adults can retell the story with his understanding: for example, they can tell the child that due to David’s messing-up, his mommy is so angry that she shouts, “No, David”; then, David needs to clean all the mud so he goes to take a bath. It is worthy to notice for adults that what they should focus on is not language but the logical association of pictures. In the linguistic level, the high-frequency words or sentence in the book is enough for children to learn. The appreciation of different styles of drawing and utility of colors as well as the interpretation of theme are more important in this kind of book. For instance, in the last page of *No, David!*, naughty David and mommy hug each other tightly with the line “I Love You”, which is the theme of the book and also the access to children’s inner world.

All in all, in the picture books in English, the most distinguishing feature is emphasizing
the interaction between adults and children while reading and the preview work of adults. The three types of picture books take on different characteristics yet interweaving with each other. Pronunciation and rhythm, cognitive development and emotional expression join into an entity.

References

