

A Practical Study on English Picture Books in Preschool Students' Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract. With the acceleration of globalization, the attention to English education for young children has been continuously increasing. Common methods in current practice include situational teaching, game interaction, multimedia assistance, and picture book reading. Among them, English picture books, with the feature of integrating pictures and texts, have become a key tool for young children's second language acquisition. Based on Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory and Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, this paper adopts the literature review method to explore the practical role of English picture books in young children's English acquisition. The study finds that English picture books can provide comprehensible input, reduce emotional filtration, and conform to the cognitive characteristics of young children, effectively promoting their vocabulary accumulation, listening comprehension, and oral expression abilities. This paper confirms the significance of English picture books in English enlightenment and puts forward relevant teaching suggestions.

Keywords: English picture books, preschool students, second language, English acquisition

1. Introduction

Against the background of globalization, English education for young children has received widespread attention, and exploring effective enlightenment methods has become a research focus. Young children aged 3-6 are in the critical period of language acquisition, with strong brain plasticity and high sensitivity to language, which is an important stage for second language development [1,2]. English picture books, with vivid pictures and simple language, fit the cognitive characteristics of young children and have gradually become an important medium for English enlightenment of young children.

Relevant studies have laid the foundation for this research. Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input and low emotional filtration, providing a theoretical basis for the application of English picture books [3,4]. Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory points out that young children's thinking is concrete and imagistic, explaining why picture books are suitable for their language learning [5]. In addition, studies by other scholars have confirmed that English picture books can stimulate learning interest and improve language application ability through vivid pictures and situations [6-9].

This paper adopts the literature review method to sort out the theoretical basis, concept definition, and research status of English picture books in young children's second language acquisition, and summarizes their practical significance, conclusions, and prospects. This study aims to enrich the theoretical system of English education for young children, provide practical references for kindergartens and families in picture book selection and teaching activity design, help optimize the way of young children's second language acquisition, and promote the scientific and effective development of English education for young children.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical basis

2.1.1. Krashen's second language acquisition theory

Krashen's second language acquisition theory consists of five hypotheses, among which the Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis have important guiding significance for English picture book teaching. The Input Hypothesis proposes "i+1" comprehensible input, meaning that language input should be slightly higher than the learner's current level. English picture books, with the help of illustrations and simple repetitive language, provide input that meets this requirement for young children [2,10]. The Affective Filter Hypothesis emphasizes that emotional factors such as anxiety and interest affect language absorption. The interesting and interactive nature of picture books can reduce young children's anxiety and enhance the input effect [3,4]. In addition, the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis points out that picture books promote young children's subconscious "acquisition" of language through natural contexts, rather than deliberate "learning" of rules [3,4,11].

2.2. Definition of related concepts

2.2.1. English picture books

English picture books are children's books that tell stories through coherent pictures and concise English texts, with English as the carrier and pictures and words as the media. The pictures and texts in them complement each other. The pictures not only assist in understanding the words but also have an independent narrative function. The content is close to children's lives, and the language is real and concise, which can stimulate learning interest and promote language acquisition [1,6,12].

2.2.2. Second language acquisition

Second language acquisition refers to the process by which learners acquire another language in addition to their mother tongue. It emphasizes gradually mastering the rules and skills of the language through understanding and using it in natural or teaching environments. Young children's second language acquisition is characterized by strong sensitivity and is affected by cognitive development level, and it relies more on comprehensible input and situational interaction [2-4].

2.2.3. Acquisition and learning

Acquisition refers to the subconscious absorption of language knowledge in a natural context without deliberately learning rules, such as young children's natural understanding of English

expressions through picture book stories [3,4]. Learning refers to the conscious learning of language rules (such as grammar and vocabulary), which depends on explicit teaching. In the early childhood stage, this way should be weakened, and priority should be given to developing language ability through acquisition [3,4,10]. Krashen pointed out that acquisition is the main way to develop second language ability, while learning only plays an auxiliary role in monitoring output [10].

2.3. Research on second language learning

Research on second language learning emerged in the mid-20th century. In the early stage, it was mainly based on the Contrastive Analysis Theory, which held that learners' errors were mainly caused by mother tongue interference. However, this theory could not fully explain the complex phenomena in the learning process. The research of S.P. Corder and L. Selinker promoted the independence of the discipline, focusing on core issues such as learners' language systems, external environments, internal mechanisms, and individual differences [11].

Krashen's second language acquisition theory is a milestone in this field. Its five hypotheses (Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis, Natural Order Hypothesis, Monitor Hypothesis, Input Hypothesis, and Affective Filter Hypothesis) have laid a theoretical foundation. The Input Hypothesis puts forward "i+1" comprehensible input, emphasizing that language input should be slightly higher than the learner's current level; the Affective Filter Hypothesis points out that emotional factors such as anxiety and interest affect the efficiency of input absorption [3,4]. In domestic research, Wang Chuming's "Compensation Hypothesis" and Wen Qiufang's "Output-Driven Hypothesis" have further enriched the theoretical application, emphasizing the key role of contextual interaction and language output in acquisition [11].

The Critical Period Hypothesis holds that 2 to 12 years old is the golden period for language acquisition. During this period, young children's brains are highly plastic, and it is easier to establish second language thinking, which provides a basis for the necessity of English enlightenment for young children [1,2].

2.4. Research on English enlightenment for young children

Studies on English enlightenment for young children indicate that the window period for language acquisition is between 0-8 years old, with 2-4 years old being the critical period. Exposure to English during this stage can effectively cultivate language sense and thinking abilities [3,12]. The main places for enlightenment include families, early education institutions, and kindergartens, each with limitations: family enlightenment is easily restricted by parents' proficiency and available resources; institutional teaching faces issues such as long intervals between sessions and insufficient sustainability of effects; and kindergarten immersion teaching is highly systematic but needs to address problems like teachers' professional competence and monotonous teaching forms [7,11].

Research emphasizes that enlightenment should follow the laws of second language acquisition. For example, Krashen's "silent period" theory points out that young children need to accumulate a large amount of language materials through extensive input before naturally producing language output [4,12]. Bai Aiwa proposed that the selection of enlightenment resources should align with children's cognition; for instance, young children are suitable for picture books and animations with bright images and simple vocabulary [13]. Jin Ying noted that the collaboration between families and kindergartens is crucial: families can extend classroom effects through parent-child reading, while kindergartens provide systematic teaching support [14].

2.5. Research on English picture book teaching

English picture books, characterized by their combination of pictures and text, authentic language, and relevance to daily life, have been proven to be effective tools for young children's English teaching. Their advantages lie in providing comprehensible input (in line with the "i+1" principle), stimulating learning interest (reducing the affective filter), and fostering English thinking (through situational correspondence) [1,6,11].

Regarding picture book selection strategies, Huang Gaoling suggested that one should consider children's experiences, the proportion of pictures to text, and thematic diversity. For example, 5-6-year-old children are suitable for story-based picture books with rich plots and moderate vocabulary [3]. Liu Yuli emphasized that teaching should avoid splitting language forms but adopt an overall reading mode, promoting language use through activities such as role-playing and games [6].

In teaching practice, the model of "pre-reading introduction - in-reading interaction - post-reading extension" is widely recognized: pre-reading uses nursery rhymes and props to arouse interest; in-reading guides understanding through questions and observation; post-reading strengthens output through performances and story continuation [3,6]. Zhang Kun took Peppa Pig as an example, confirming that the coherence and repetition of picture book language can promote vocabulary accumulation and sentence pattern mastery [9].

However, studies have also pointed out existing problems, such as teachers' insufficient depth of picture book interpretation, monotonous teaching forms, and incomplete evaluation systems, which need to be addressed through teacher training and curriculum innovation [9,15]. The whole language education theory emphasizes that picture book teaching should integrate multiple fields (such as art and science) to promote children's comprehensive language development [15].

2.6. Research on the role of English picture book teaching in young children's English acquisition

English picture book teaching plays a significant role in young children's English acquisition, with relevant studies focusing on its promoting effects on language input, interest cultivation, thinking formation, and cultural perception.

In terms of language input, English picture books provide "i+1" comprehensible input through the matching of pictures and text, which is in line with Krashen's Input Hypothesis and helps children naturally acquire vocabulary and sentence patterns. For example, picture books with repetitive sentence patterns (e.g., Brown Bear) can strengthen young children's mastery of basic expressions [1,13]. In terms of interest stimulation, the interesting stories and vivid images in picture books reduce children's affective filter and enhance their initiative to participate. Studies have shown that children are more likely to maintain focus during picture book reading and actively imitate language expressions [6,9].

For the cultivation of English thinking, picture books directly connect situations with language, reducing dependence on the mother tongue. When understanding stories, children gradually establish an "English-situation" correspondence mode, such as directly associating "brush teeth" with the scene of brushing teeth [4,14]. In addition, the Western cultural elements contained in picture books (such as etiquette and living habits) can imperceptibly cultivate children's cross-cultural awareness [9,11]. Current research indicates that problems exist in practice, such as teachers' insufficient interpretation and inappropriate resource selection, which need to be improved by optimizing teaching methods and conducting teacher training [9,15].

3. Case studies

3.1. Case study on English picture book teaching for English enlightenment of 5-6-year-old children

3.1.1. Experimental process

Six 5-6-year-old children (2 with zero foundation and 4 with basic knowledge) were selected. Through three rounds of action research over 6 months, following the process of "planning - implementation - inspection - reflection", combined with observation, testing and parent interviews, the effect of English picture book teaching was explored. 48 life-oriented picture books (such as Good Night Gorilla) were used, covering themes like animals and colors, with difficulty progressing from "single words" to "short sentences". The teaching was divided into three links: pre-reading introduction with nursery rhymes/games; in-reading explanation through pictures and actions (without translation); post-reading guidance of output through "ladder jumping" and "scene performance", along with listening practice of after-class graded readers. The research was carried out through three rounds of actions: the first round focused on accumulating basic vocabulary, the second round increased scene performances, and the third round encouraged short sentence output, gradually improving children's participation [3].

3.1.2. Experimental conclusions

The experimental results showed that children's listening comprehension ability was enhanced, and they could understand simple instructions; their oral expression advanced from words to short sentences, with the average number of speaking times in class increasing from 15-23 to 31-55; their learning interest was improved, and some children took the initiative to use English. The experiment concluded that the selection of picture books should balance interest and cognitive adaptability, gradually transitioning from "combination of pictures and texts" to "narrative content". In teaching, attention should be paid to the "input - output" cycle, reducing expression pressure through gamified interaction, while strengthening home-school cooperation and using graded readers to consolidate the effect. This case confirmed that English picture book teaching can effectively promote the English ability development of 5-6-year-old children, providing a practical reference paradigm for children's English enlightenment [3].

3.2. Practical case on systematic arrangement of English picture books and effect on children's second language acquisition

3.2.1. Experimental process

Taking 6 reading picture books from the Children's English Immersion Integrated Curriculum as the core materials, a one-year observation and testing were carried out for middle-class children (4-5 years old). By analyzing 15 teaching activities (5 per teacher) where 3 teachers used the picture books, the research focused on the application of picture books in intra-text context (systematic arrangement of language items), intertextual context (review, association), communication context (role-play), and immediate context (interactive expansion), combined with TPRI language testing and quantitative statistics (number of teacher-child input and output sentences, body language, etc.) [15].

3.2.2. Experimental conclusions

The systematic arrangement of picture books (such as themes like animals and colors running through small, middle and large classes) can improve children's vocabulary mastery. Tests showed that for frequently appearing language items (such as numbers and colors), the number of children with a correct answer rate exceeding 50% reached 26-35 (out of 35). When teachers used picture books with strategies like gamification and role-play, children's language output was significantly higher, and the interaction effect was better. The "English + icons" form of picture books avoids Chinese intermediation, helping children develop English thinking and early reading awareness [15].

4. Practical value and optimization strategies of english picture books

From the perspective of language acquisition rules, English picture books provide "comprehensible input" through the matching of pictures and texts, which is in line with Krashen's "i+1" theory. Young children can understand language content slightly higher than their current level with the help of pictures. For example, the repeated daily dialogue patterns in Peppa Pig help young children naturally accumulate vocabulary and grammar [1,4,9]. At the same time, the interesting nature of picture books reduces the affective filter, alleviates young children's learning anxiety, and enhances the efficiency of language absorption, which is consistent with the view in the Affective Filter Hypothesis that "low anxiety promotes acquisition" [3,13].

From the perspective of children's cognitive development, the concrete characteristics of picture books are consistent with the thinking characteristics of children in the "preoperational stage" in Piaget's cognitive theory. 5-6-year-old children build the connection between language and meaning through pictures. For example, the correspondence between animal images and names in Brown Bear helps them establish English thinking and avoid mother tongue mediation [1,5]. In addition, activities such as role-playing and plot continuation in picture books can promote young children's transition from "egocentrism" to "understanding others' perspectives", which has both the value of language learning and social development [5].

From the perspective of teaching practice, English picture book teaching makes up for the deficiencies of traditional English enlightenment for young children. Compared with mechanical vocabulary training, picture books realize the priority of "acquisition" over "learning" through the model of "pre-reading introduction - in-reading interaction - post-reading extension". For example, using nursery rhymes to introduce and arouse interest, guiding understanding through questions, and strengthening output with the help of performances, so as to improve the systematicness and interestingness of teaching [1,6,9]. At the same time, the collaborative reading of picture books between families and kindergartens can extend the language input scene and solve the problem of long intervals in institutional teaching time [13,14].

5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the practice of English picture books in young children's second language (English) acquisition. Based on Krashen's second language acquisition theory and Piaget's cognitive development theory, it sorts out the teaching advantages, practical strategies and research status of English picture books, and confirms that they can promote the improvement of young children's English listening comprehension and oral expression ability through comprehensible input, low affective filter and concrete thinking, providing theoretical and practical references for English enlightenment of young children.

This study has certain limitations. It does not conduct a quantitative comparison of the differences in picture book needs among children of different age groups (such as 3-4 years old and 5-6 years old), and lacks long-term tracking data to verify the sustained effect of picture book teaching. In the future, the research sample can be expanded, cross-age group controlled experiments can be carried out, and combined with longitudinal tracking, the age adaptability of picture book selection and teaching strategies can be refined.

Looking forward to the future, English picture book teaching needs to further integrate the whole language education concept, strengthen the integration of multiple fields (such as art and science), and improve the teacher training system to enhance teachers' ability to interpret and innovatively use picture books, so as to promote young children's second language acquisition to be more in line with their cognitive and emotional development laws.

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