

## A Case Study of the Effects of English Stories Teaching on Learners' English Proficiency

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### Abstract

The present case study intends to explore how English story learning and teaching promotes young learners' English proficiency. Five students in Grade 4 of a primary school in Linzhi District, Tibet Autonomous Region were involved in this case study. The participants learnt 10 short stories in 9 months. Data were collected through interviews and classroom observations. The analysis shows that all of the five participants' English proficiency had been developed by the end of the study. The present study aims to contribute to the enrichment of the knowledge about story teaching practice in foreign language teaching, to provide educational policymakers and teachers with insights into English reform in primary schools.

**Key words:** English; Stories; Language proficiency

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English stories, as a vehicle of TEYL, have been drawing more and more researchers' and teachers' attention in recent years. Although a lot of research has been done both in China and abroad, which provides us a good understanding of English story teaching and learning, there are still many limitations. Most of the researches are the theoretical introduction of the values and benefits' of English story teaching or the implementing strategies

in classrooms. Although some empirical research has been done to prove the effectiveness of English stories in arousing learners' interests and promoting their language ability including listening, speaking and reading abilities, most of them are quantitative and give subjective data and the changes during the English story teaching practice is not carefully exploited. From the perspective of philosophy, all the things develops and changes with time and space. Compared with the results, the changes in the teaching process account more. Besides, Scovel (2001) points out SLA researchers pay little attention to the individual learners. Although the theory derived from the study of a group of learners are more comprehensive and subjective, the implication that individuals brings to us should not be neglected.

Therefore, the present study intends to find out the changes of five individuals in English story teaching. The study adopts interview and classroom observation as tools for data collection. The thesis hopes to gain theoretical and empirical insights into English story teaching to young learners and to contribute to the enrichment of the knowledge about story teaching practice in EFL classrooms. It will provide educational policymakers' and local educational administrators' insights into the English reform in primary schools. Based on the findings of the research, some implications will be made in terms of the further promotion of innovative curriculum.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 Language Proficiency

Murray and Christison (2010, p. 197) thinks "language proficiency is a scale along different dimensions of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing". That is, language proficiency is related to the ability of a person to understand, read, speak, and write a language. Although the term "language proficiency" is well

known to most people, it seems difficult to identify its components. Different agencies have their own methods to define proficiency levels. For example, the European Common Framework of Reference for Language has six levels: basic, independent, and proficient users with two levels in each. The Interagency Language Roundtable also uses a six-point scale: no proficiency, elementary proficiency, limited working proficiency, professional working proficiency, full professional proficiency, and native or bilingual proficiency. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages has a list of five levels: novice, intermediate, advance, superior and distinguished.

Listening refers to making sense of spoken language with the aid of our prior knowledge, the context, speakers' expressions and gestures. In the field of SLA, many factors would affect listening, such as the characteristics of text, interlocutor, tasks, listen and process (Rubin, 1994). For example, if there are few speakers and objects and the context fit what the listener already know, listening would be easier. However, if the speaker tells an event in a random order, it is difficult for the listener to get the main idea. Gibbons (1993) points out young language learner have a shorter attention span and it is difficult for them to pay attention to the listening materials; they are not good at following a series of instruction consistently and have difficulty in predicting what is about to be said; they cannot differentiate genres and do not understand the words that alter meaning, such as "although" and "however". Listening is especially important because it is the most frequently used way to get information. Besides, listening enables learners to acquire good speaking habits and helps them improve their pronunciation. Therefore, listening training is necessary.

Speaking is an important part of daily life. Through speaking activities, we exchange information, maintain and sustain good interpersonal relations, express our feelings or attitudes towards an object, a person or an event and accomplish many other goals. Speaking events can be described in different dimensions. Speaking has transactional or interpersonal functions in terms of purpose; it may be interactive or non-interactive in terms of participation; the speaking events could be planned or unplanned. In order to speak fluently, "speakers need to be able to pronounce phonemes correctly, use appropriate stress and intonation patterns and speak in connected speech" (Harmer, 2007, p. 343). This means a speaker must have a mastery of two things: pronunciation, which includes all aspects of how we employ speech sounds of communicating and the conversational strategies, such as the conversational rules, survival and repair strategies and other aspects in spoken discourse.

Reading is not only a process of receiving and interpreting information, but a process that requires the knowledge about the phonology, morphology, syntax,

semantics and discourse and the ability of building text-summary, elaborating information, making adjustments and making repairs. Therefore, it is a challenging task for learners to develop their fluency in L2 reading, especially for those at lower grades. As Gibbons (1993) points out, young language learners read slowly and have poor comprehension in unfamiliar topics; they have difficulty in paraphrasing, isolating the main idea and predicting; they rarely self-correct in the process of reading aloud.

Writing was a way of transcribing speech in its early years. However, writing is difficult and requires much knowledge about the targeted language and the discourse, especially for young learners. Gibbons (1993) also identifies some of young language learners' behaviours in writing. They have poor written language skills. For example, they can write sentences using a limited vocabulary and simple sentence structures but have difficulty writing a paragraph. Their sentences may be full of grammatical errors, poor spelling and repetitive things over and over again. To develop students' writing skills, language teachers should use different ways to motivate them. For example, teachers can select the topic that is close to the students' lives, give them enough time to create, encourage them to work in groups, and provide positive feedbacks. The writing tasks should be well designed and communicative. For example, teachers ask students to write down the problem they encounter in English learning and the other student would write back to him/ her to give suggestions. Besides, teachers also can use the Internet to promote writing skills. For example, students can find a pen friend from English-speaking country and exchange their views through E-mails.

## 1.2 Research on English Story

The most influential theory of English story teaching method in China is Sandwich Story Methodology invented by Ji Yuhua of Xiamen University. In the year of 2005, Xu Huayan proposed another story teaching method: teaching stories with songs and dances. However, unlike the Sandwich Story Methodology, the theory is not widely used in teaching practice and no storybook based on this theory has been found published.

Many researchers give their reasons and suggestions for using stories in English teaching in primary schools. Lu (2006) discusses the advantages and strategies of using English story teaching in lower grades in primary schools while Chen (2005) concerns about how to choose and teach English stories to students in higher grades in primary schools. Cheng and Wang (2008) point out English stories selected as the teaching materials in primary schools should be interesting, have a definite beginning and end and cover the key language points. They suggest students should understand the story and know the key language points such as vocabulary and sentence structures in the story and the context where they are used. Students are also required to be able to read the story by themselves

and can act it out. Sun and Sui (2008) claim that English story teaching should be designed from two aspects: preparation of the lesson, including the teaching objective, the content of the story, teaching materials and teaching activities, and the teaching procedure, including the tasks in pre-teaching, presentation and post-teaching of the story. Liu and Gao (2008) discuss about the English story teaching from the perspective of psycholinguistics. Zhang (2010) suggests English stories should be used both in English curriculum and the hidden curriculum in primary school. Recently, more and more pre-school children are becoming English learners and English stories have their way in kindergartens. Li (2011) believes that English stories provide comprehensible and adequate language input for pre-school children. English stories can stimulate their interest in learning English effectively, provide opportunities for language practice, and help build their confidence to learn English. In the teaching process, the selection, presentation of English stories should be based on children's cognitive level.

Other researchers do empirical studies to prove the effectiveness of using stories in English teaching to young learners. Chao (2004) wants to know whether Big Book Approach (BBA) could enhance young learners' reading comprehension and the ability to use vocabulary. The research takes young learners at around 9 years old as the participants and lasts for 10 months. The data prove the effectiveness of teaching reading with BBA in EFL classrooms. Tian's (2011) study also suggests English stories can be used to teach vocabulary in primary schools. In order to teach pronunciation in an interesting way, Lin (2011) makes a new story with the words including the target phonemes. The phonemes are acquired by students after being repeated for many times. The data show that among 34 students, 4 of them master the phonemes before the lesson; 28 students master the phonemes in the lesson; only 1 student has difficulty in acquiring the phonemes. Other studies (e.g., Lu 2008; Lei 2011; Zhang & Li 2003) also proved the effectiveness of story teaching in enhancing English learning interest, listening, speaking, and reading. Besides, English stories are also found effective in revising the content that has been taught (e.g., Zhou, 2011) and facilitating the word recognition (e.g., Ding, 2011).

Although English stories are proved to be effective in enhancing students' interests and developing their language proficiency, there are many problems in the teaching practice. In the traditional story teaching, students are divided into different groups and asked to read in different roles; some teachers ignore the significance of the story, focusing on vocabulary teaching; some teachers are involved in explaining the contents of the story (Zhang, 2011). With the development of the theory and practice of English story teaching, researchers pay more attention to the methods of solving the problems in teaching practice and the way to use English stories

more effectively. Lin (2009) explores the strategies in enhancing the efficiency of reading English stories in primary schools. Jing (2009) argues by analyzing the cohesion and coherence in English stories, students would have a better understanding of the whole stories and enhance their ability of organizing the language. Zhu (2011) focuses on the blackboard design in the process of teaching, holding the view that a good presentation of the blackboard will help the story teaching while the bad arrangement will diminish the effects of English stories. Wang (2012) discusses some issues in English story teaching in primary schools. Shan (2012) tries to find out the way to make effective use of English stories in higher grades in primary schools. Some researchers (e.g., Li, & Xu, 2011; Zhu, 2012) suggest students should be encouraged to make their English stories. They believe the purpose of making English stories is to explain and consolidate students' vocabulary and sentences and the story should be an interesting account of topics and vocabulary, highlighting the key sentence structures. In the cooperation of Xiangyang Vocational and Technical College and New Star Education, a series of English pantomime were created and performed (Wang, 2011).

As in China, the research of stories in FLT abroad focuses on three aspects: the theory of story teaching, the significance and the education value of stories, and the empirical studies of the application of English stories in FLT curriculum. The research in other countries, especially in America and Europe, is much earlier than that in China, therefore, they are richer both in theory and practice of stories in foreign language teaching and learning.

The most influential theories of story teaching abroad include Story-Centered Curriculum, Teaching Proficiency through Reading Storytelling (TPRS), Episode Stories and other story teaching methods. The idea of story-centered curriculum is to create a story that a student will live in for a certain period that encompasses everything he or she would do in the given time frame. However, this curriculum requires learners' autonomy and a higher cognition. Therefore, it is unlikely to apply such a curriculum among young language learners. TPRS lessons use a mixture of reading and storytelling to help students learn a foreign language in a classroom setting. In TPRS lessons, students are involved in the story making and learn words and structures by repetition in different contexts. However, the classroom management will be big problem if TPRS is used in a large class. Episode Stories are first used in McGraw-Hill International School. There is a separate story in each unit and those separate stories comprise a whole big story just as stories in a soap opera. Most English books such as *Primary English* by Beijing Normal University Press and *PEP Primary English* published by People's Education in China are organized with episode stories. Episode stories provide to students a real language context, relaxed atmosphere and chances to contact each other.

The practice of story teaching in the context of foreign language classroom is as rich as its theories. As early as in 1990, Barton and Booth pointed out that English stories could be viewed as an important tool in teaching foreign language. In the following years, the significance and education value of stories in foreign language teaching has been discussed over and over again. Andrew Wright is one of the researchers who are interested in using stories in foreign language teaching. He practiced teaching English with this method in Hungary for years and made great achievement. In his book *Storytelling with Children*, Wright (1996) shares his experience of using English stories in foreign language teaching and offers systematic guidance to foreign language teachers. Other researchers (e.g., Ellis & Brewster 1991; Watts 1992; Handler 1993) also give their suggestions for including stories in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Wilson (1997) believes storytelling can improve the level of learning in speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Isbell (2002) finds out many stories that work well with children include repetitive phrases, unique words, and enticing description. Slattery and Willis (2001) hold the view that stories are valuable resources for language teaching. For example, the funny stories are motivating so as to encourage students to continue their learning. The fantasy are adapted from the real world, therefore, they can stimulate students' imagination and creativity. Through listening or reading stories, the learners will share a social and emotional experience.

Besides the significance of education value of stories in foreign language teaching, many researchers give their suggestions in selecting, teaching English stories and testing the story learning. Ellis and Brewster (1991) propose some criteria for selecting storybooks. First, the language, sentence structures, grammar and vocabulary involved in the story should meet learners' current level. Second, the contents and illustrations should be attractive to children and related to their daily life. Third, the story should contain repetitive vocabulary and patterns. In addition, when teaching English stories to a group of learners, their different taste should be taken into consideration. Andrew Wright (1996, pp.14-15) also suggests language teachers should choose a story that the tellers like and feel they can tell well. The selective stories should be appropriate for the learners and engage the children within the first few lines. Besides, the stories should offer children a rich experience and do not have long descriptive passages.

However, the researchers abroad have not spared so much effort to empirical studies to prove the effectiveness of stories in the foreign language curriculum as what has been done in China. They are devoting to the developing of the storybooks based on the findings in the fields of linguistics, psychology and language teaching. In the year of 2004, Pearson-Longman developed a multi-level primary course: *Hip Hip Hooray*. This course aims at

making English fun through classic stories. It covers six classic fairy tales, such as *Urban and Rural Mice*, *The Elf and the Shoemaker*, *Jack and Peas* and other stories. Children learn vocabulary, sentences and dialogues with the storylines supplemented by songs, verses, and games. *Our Discovery Island* published in 2012 by Pearson-Longman is another series of storybooks designed for English learners from elementary one to six. Different from the traditional storybooks, this series provide learners with The Online World, which recreates a digital environment for children and guide them in their English learning through a real desire to play, explore, create, and interact. Therefore, learners are not only the listeners or readers; they are part of the story. The research which aims at perfecting the electronic storybooks is still going on. For example, in Smeets and Bus's (2012) study, extra textual vocabulary questions were added to the electronic storybooks. Children respond to the questions presented in a multiple-choice format by clicking on the picture that best represented the target word. The data show that children learn more words when reading with questions.

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## 2. RESEARCH DESIGN

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The present research intends to discover how English story learning and teaching promotes learners' English, and the research question is:

Is there any development of the participants' English proficiency during English story teaching and learning? If yes, how?

Five students, three girls and two boys, in Grade 4 were selected as the participants in the study. All of them began their English learning from Grade One. The participants were asked to attend a two-hour class for English stories teaching from 2 to 4 o'clock every Sunday afternoon. *ENGLISHXP LIBRARY* published by Higher Education Press was selected as the teaching materials. English teaching in this study followed Chen's (2004) four-step model: Warm Up-- Presentation-- Practice-- Follow-up. The following is a lesson plan of one of the storybooks *Kitty Cat and the Paint*:

### Teaching Content:

Story *Kitty Cat and the Paint*

### Students:

Five students, three girls and two boys, of Grade 4 in a primary school.

### Key and difficult points:

The differences in expressing time in Chinese and English;

- The meaning and use of past tense;
- Some important words and phrases;
- The skills of retelling a story.

### Teaching Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to

- know the differences in expressing time in Chinese and English;
- understand the meaning and the use of past tense in English;

- master the important words and phrases that are necessary in retelling the story;
- Read the story fluently and retell the story in their own words.

| Warm-up  |  |  |                         |           |
|--|--|--|-------------------------|-----------|
| Steps  | Students' activities   | Teacher's activities   | Interaction patterns    | Time      |
| Step1  | Guess the content of story from the picture  | Shows Ss a picture from the story and asks Ss to guess what happened in the story  | Whole-class work        | 10'       |
| Step2  | Discuss about the meaning of the words and phrases and circle the words and phrase they think that would appear in the story | Explains the following words and phrases; asks Ss to circle the words and phrases they think that would appear in the story:<br><br>Cat, paint, go away, window, table, sleep in the sun, run, paw, red, blue, wake up, naughty, lovely  | Individual or Pair-work |           |
| Presentation   |  |  |                         |           |
| Steps  | Students' activities   | Teacher's activities   | Interaction patterns    | Time      |
| Step1  | Listen to the story and check their predictions  | Asks Ss to listen to the story and check their prediction  | Individual or pair work | 10'       |
| Step2  | Listen to the story again and answer the questions   | Plays the CD again and asks the following questions:<br>1. What is Kitty Cat doing?<br>2. What colour is the paint?<br>3. What did Fat Cat want to do?<br>4. Who is naughty?<br>5. Which cat do you like better?   | Whole-class work        | 15'       |
| Step3  | Read the story and finish the questions in the handouts.   | Asks Ss to read the story and fill in the blanks in the handouts.<br>1.Kitty Cat saw      and some      outside.<br>2.Fat Cat wanted to      .<br>He asked Kitty Cat to      .<br>3.Kitty Cat was not      .<br>Fat Cat was      and he to      Kitty Cat.<br>4. Fat Cat ran too      and he ran into the      .<br>5. Kitty Cat and Fat Cat are very      . | Individual-work         | 20' - 25' |
| Step4  | Check their answers and find out the words and sentences they do not understand  | Check the questions and explain those difficult and key points to students   | Whole-class work        | 15' - 20' |
| Step5  | Find out the verbs of past tense and try to write down their original forms.   | Guides Ss to notice the past tense of the verbs in the story and asks them to find out all verbs of the past tenses; Explains the different way of telling a story in Chinese and English  | Whole-class work        | 5'        |
| Practice   |  |  |                         |           |
| Steps  | Students' activities   | Teacher's activities   | Interaction patterns    | Time      |
| Step1  | Fill in the word puzzle  | Reviews the words and phrases in the story and asks students to finish a word puzzle   | Group work              | 10'       |
| Step2  | Find out all the actions about Fat Cat and Kitty Cat respectively;<br>Guess the actions                                      | Asks students to find out all the activities about the Fat Cat and Kitty Cat respectively.<br>Ask one of the students to act in front of the class and the other students say the sentences.   | whole-class work        | 10' - 15' |
| Step3  | Find out all the utterances spoken by Fat Cat and Kitty Cat;<br>Play the role of Fat Cat and Kitty Cat in pairs              | Asks students to find out all the utterances of Fat Cat and Kitty Cat<br>Ask students to take turns to reply to each other in pairs.   | Pair work               | 10' - 15' |
| Follow-up  |  |  |                         |           |
| Speaking activities: Retell the story in their own words |  |  |                         |           |
| Writing activities: Write a summary of the story         |  |  |                         |           |

The teaching program lasted for about 9 months. There was a two-hour English class from 2 to 4 o'clock every Sunday afternoon, followed by interviews.

During classes, one researcher would observe the participants' behaviors and fill up an observation sheet.

Every class was recorded by another researcher in order to help researchers check their observation. The observation sheet includes five parts: the overall assessment, times of hand-up or responding to questions, story retelling, reading and writing.

The criteria for the overall assessment are adopted from Lu's (2008) research on English teaching. The assessment includes three parts: behaviors, oral participating and attendance. These three components would be recorded using a five-point scale, ranging from "excellent" to "bad" with a score from 5 to 1 in every scale.

Times of Hand-up or Responding to Questions is used for testing participants' listening. In order to get the accurate data, in the following interview, the participants would be asked to explain their reasons for raising or not raising their hands in class. During the class, the teacher would ask every participant who has raised their hands to answer the questions and the observer would count questions the teacher asked and the times the participants raised their hands or respond to the teacher.

Irwin and Mitchell's (1983) framework for evaluating students' retelling (see Appendix I) was used to collect data of the participants' story retelling. The criteria for assessing writing (see Appendix II) was adapted from Irwin and Mitchell's (1983) framework for evaluating students' retelling.

In collecting the data of reading, the observer should record the time the participants spend in reading a story, the way they finish reading (with others' help or by themselves), the tasks they finish successfully in the process of reading, and other aspects which are considered important to the research. For example, if a participant finish reading a story in 20 minutes and 3 of the 5 reading tasks successfully by himself, the researcher would record like this: 3/5-20mins; if the participant finish all these tasks with a partner, the record would be: 3/5-20mins, p. All the fractions would be expressed in the percentage forms for the convenience of analyzing.

After classes, the participants were encouraged to talk freely about their feelings of English and English learning in the past week and researchers would ask the participants to explain their behaviors in class, such as the reason that they do not raise hands. The semi-structural interviews were conducted to the participants every two months.

The researcher read all the materials in the participants' portfolios to determine whether they made progress in English. For the analysis of the participants' listening proficiency, the researcher compared the ratio they respond to the questions in the teaching practice and analyze the interviews about the reasons they raise or do not raise hands in class. Participants' speaking proficiency development is based on the analysis of their levels in Irwin and Mitchell's (1983) Richness Scale of Retelling through in different stages of the teaching practice. The time the participants spent in reading a story, the way they finished reading (with help or by themselves), the tasks they finished successfully in the process of reading and related information about reading through the whole teaching practice were compared to find out whether they have made progress in reading. The information about the

usage of the vocabulary and link words, the length of the sentences and the story in their writing tasks was used to analyze their writing proficiency at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the teaching practice.

### 3. DATA DESCRIPTION

#### 3.1 Description of Tina's Case

Tina's English is very good and she always gets high marks in English tests. At the beginning of the teaching practice, she performed well in reading while listening, speaking and writing was not as good as her reading. She could only understand a little of the teacher's English. Even she knew all the words and grammars in the sentences, it still seemed difficult for her to understand the whole sentences. For example, in the first lesson, researcher asked five questions in English, and there were twice that she tried to respond. In the follow-up interview, she said,

*"The first two questions are easy, I know most of the word, such as kitty cat, what, doing, I guessed the teacher wanted to know '猫在做什么'. The other three questions were difficult. There were too many words in the sentences; I did not know how to guess. After the teacher's explanation, I found I knew all the words, but I do not know why I did not understand the whole sentences. Maybe I forgot the words."*

In retelling of the story *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, Tina recited most of the lines in the storybook. However, when the teacher asked her to retell the story in her own words, she felt nervous and did not know what to do. By the teacher's guidance, she retold the skeleton of the story with five sentences and only reached Level 1 in the retelling criteria. Her reading outperformed the other abilities. She spent twenty minutes in finish the reading of the story *Kitty Cat and the Paint* by herself and finished three of the five reading tasks successfully. Writing was the most difficult part for Tina. When asked to write a summary of the story, she only took five sentences randomly from the storybook.

After practice for several months, Tina made progress in all the four abilities. She could understand and respond to most of the questions. In retelling of the stories, she could reach Level 2 and Level 3. For example, she retold the story of *Bugs for Breakfast* as:

*"One morning, Dilly Duck and Dally Duck (go to) find food for breakfast down at the river. Dilly Duck see(s) a frog on a leaf. He say(s), 'We can't eat frogs. Frogs are too big for little ducks to eat.' Dally Duck see(s) the fish and she say(s), 'We can't eat fish. Fish are too big for little ducks to eat.' Dilly Duck (is) very very hungry. Dally Duck say(s), 'we can eat water bugs.' Mother Duck say(s) 'You are clever.'"*

From her retelling, we can see, she included the main ideas and details of the story and correctly sequenced the materials. In reading, she just spent around 10 to 15 minutes to grasp the main idea of the story and could finish

nearly all the reading tasks successfully. Her ability to guess the unknown words and phrases was improved. However, although she could write more sentences than before, most of them were short with repetitive words and structures.

At the end of the teaching practice, Tina could not only understand all the English questions but tried to respond even before the teacher finished the questions. In an interview about her listening, she said, "I can understand most of my English teacher. Listening to the videos of English texts or stories is much easier than before." Her retelling of stories was at around Level 4. She could give a very cohesive and complete retelling, including most main ideas and supporting details, and sequencing material properly. Sometimes she would relate the story to her own life and give her opinion of the story. These stories were a little easier for her, therefore, she asked her parents to buy the books of Level 4 which is intended for learner of 10-12 years old. She expressed her strong desire to read more stories, "Reading stories is easy for me. I want to read some longer and more difficult stories." Her progress in writing is not as great as the other aspects. She could write a complete story with some longer sentences,

but she could not sequence properly and did not use the connection words such as "and", "but" and "so". However, she added, "Although writing is still not so easy for me, I believe if I read more and practice more, my writing would be better."

Table 1 shows Tina's development of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the process of learning the ten stories. In learning the first four stories, Tina could only understand 40%-60% of the questions asked in English, while in the study of the following three stories, she could understand around 80% and the ratio had reached 90%-100% by the end of the teaching practice. Her development in English speaking is obvious, from Level 1 at the beginning of the study to Level 3 and Level 4 by the end of the teaching practice. Besides, Tina had made great progress in reading. In the study of the first three stories, she had to spend around 20 minutes in finishing reading a story and could only understand 60% of the stories; while by the end of the teaching practice, she could understand all of the content in around 10 minutes. Her writing had reached Level 3 from Level 1 by the end of the study.

**Table 1**  
**Tina's English Proficiency Development**

| Skills           | Story              |                    |                    |                    |                    |                     |                    |                     |                     |                     |
|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
|                  | 1                  | 2                  | 3                  | 4                  | 5                  | 6                   | 7                  | 8                   | 9                   | 10                  |
| <b>Listening</b> | 40%                | 50%                | 67%                | 60%                | 75%                | 80%                 | 87%                | 90%                 | 87%                 | 100%                |
| <b>Speaking</b>  | L1                 | L1                 | L2                 | L2                 | L3                 | L3                  | L3                 | L4                  | L3                  | L4                  |
| <b>Reading</b>   | 60%<br>-20<br>mins | 60%<br>-20<br>mins | 60%<br>-18<br>mins | 87%<br>-16<br>mins | 80%<br>-14<br>mins | 100%<br>-15<br>mins | 83%<br>-13<br>mins | 100%<br>-11<br>mins | 100%<br>-12<br>mins | 100%<br>-10<br>mins |
| <b>Writing</b>   | L1                 | L1                 | L2                 | L2                 | L2                 | L3                  | L3                 | L3                  | L3                  | L3                  |

**3.2 Description of Betty's Case**

Betty's English is also good and she often performs well in English tests. At the beginning of the teaching practice, she could only understand some of the teacher's English. In the lesson of *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, Betty only responded once successfully to the five questions asked in English by the researcher and in the other two tries, she did not understand the researcher's questions. In the follow-up interview, she said,

"In fact, I only understood the first questions. When you asked the second and third questions, I saw they raise their hands. I did not want them to know my English was not good enough. So I raised my hand. When you wrote down the questions on the board I found they were easy but I do not know why I could not understand them when you speak them out."

In retelling of the story *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, Betty retold the skeleton of the story with six sentences. However, these sentences were not logical and correlated with each other. She only reached Level 1 in the retelling

criteria. Her reading was better than other abilities. She spent seventeen minutes in finish the reading of the story *Bingo Goes to School* with Linda and finished four of the five reading tasks successfully. Although her writing was not so good either, it was better than her listening. In the first writing task, she wrote a short conversation with eight sentences: "Hello(.) Li Ming(.)"; "Nice to see you again(.) How are you(?)"; "I'm fine(.) thanks ((Thanks!))"; "Are you ready for English class(?)"; "Yes(.)"; "Can you say the months of the year(?)"and "Sure(.)".

In the following teaching practice, Betty made progress in all the four abilities. She could understand and respond to most of the questions. For example, in the study of the story *Bugs for Breakfast*, she answered four of the six questions successfully and the follow-up interview proved that she had understood another question. Therefore, the ratio that she could understand the questions reached 5/6 which was much higher than her previous performance in listening. In retelling of the stories, she not only included

the main ideas and details of the story but could sequence the sentences correctly. Sometimes, she would give her own opinions of the story, such as "I think Sam (is) very clever", "(The) story is not very good but the picture(s) are so good" and some other comments. Most of her retelling could reach Level 2 or Level 3 at this stage. In reading, she was also used to reading in pairs, but the time they spent on a story was less than before, around 15 to 20 minutes to grasp the main idea of the story. Beside, they could finish nearly all the reading tasks successfully together. In writing, she could write some longer sentences. The English stories she made were longer and more interesting than before.

By the end of the teaching practice, Betty could respond to nearly all the questions successfully in a shorter time than before. For example, in answering the questions about the story *Little Chimp and the Bees*, she answered all the 8 questions successfully without hesitation or guidance. Her retelling of the stories was very cohesive and complete and usually reached around Level 4. Sometimes she would relate the story to her own life and give her opinion of the story. The following extract is her retelling of the story *Brown Mouse Plays a Trick*:

"One day, Grey Mouse, White Mouse and Brown Mouse have a party. They want (to) go home. But (the) cat is outside (the) door. Brown Mouse is very clever. She play(s) a trick on (the) cat. She say(s), 'Here (is) my toy mouse. My toy mouse look(s) (like) me. I will make my toy mouse run outside. The cat (will) run after it (and) you can go home. ' Brown Mouse make(s) the toy mouse run fast. (The) cat run(s) after (the) toy mouse. Grey Mouse and White Mouse go home. I like Brown Mouse. Her(She) (is) very clever. "

She could finish reading the stories by herself in around 15 minutes and most of reading tasks. When asked about her feelings in the process of reading, she said, "I would give up the story if the words were too difficult. But now, I can guess the words from the pictures and the plot of the story. I can finish reading more quickly than before." She made the most rapid progress in her writing. By the end of the study, she had made 5 English stories by herself. She could write more sentences, sequence them properly. Besides, she tried to use the connection words such as "and", "but" and "so". She expressed her strong desire to write more English stories, "I like writing English stories very much. There is no big difference between writing an English story and a Chinese story. I want to write more interesting stories and become a writer when I grow up. "

**Table 2**  
**Betty's English Proficiency Development**

| Skills    | Story              |                      |                      |                      |                       |                       |                       |                     |                    |                     |
|-----------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
|           | 1                  | 2                    | 3                    | 4                    | 5                     | 6                     | 7                     | 8                   | 9                  | 10                  |
| Listening | 20%                | 50%                  | 63%                  | 60%                  | 75%                   | 83%                   | 87%                   | 90%                 | 100%               | 100%                |
| Speaking  | L1                 | L1                   | L2                   | L2                   | L3                    | L3                    | L3                    | L4                  | L4                 | L4                  |
| Reading   | 60%<br>-20<br>mins | 80%<br>-18<br>mins,p | 60%<br>-16<br>mins,p | 87%<br>-15<br>mins,p | 100%<br>-16<br>mins,p | 100%<br>-15<br>mins,p | 100%<br>-17<br>mins,p | 100%<br>-15<br>mins | 90%<br>-16<br>mins | 100%<br>-14<br>mins |
| Writing   | L2                 | L2                   | L2                   | L3                   | L3                    | L4                    | L4                    | L4                  | L5                 | L5                  |

Table 2 shows Betty's development of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the process of learning the ten stories. In learning the first story, Tina could only understand 20% of the questions asked in English. Although she could understand around 60% in learning the following three stories, her performance in English listening was not good at the beginning of the lesson. After practice for a period, the ratio reached 80%-90%, and even 100% at the end of the study. Her speaking had reached Level 4 from Level 1 by the end of the study. Besides, Betty performed well in reading. In the first stage of the study, she could finish reading a story in around 18 minutes and 80% of the corresponding tasks with a partner. Although the reading speed was not enhanced greatly, they could understand all of the content. In the learning of the last three stories, Betty could finish a story and nearly all of the reading tasks by herself in around 15 minutes. Her reading score in the last story, finishing the story and 100% of the reading tasks in 14 minutes,

was much higher than what she had got in the first story, finishing the story and 60% of the tasks in 20 minutes. Betty was the only one who had made great progress in writing, from Level 2 to Level 5.

### 3.3 Description of Linda's Case

At the beginning of the study, Linda did not do well in all the four skills. She could not understand the teacher. In the lesson of *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, Linda even did not try to respond to the questions asked in English by the researcher. She was asked to give a try after the researcher repeated the first question slowly with the aid of gestures and pictures. In the follow-up interview, she said,

"They were too difficult. I felt very nervous when I heard so many words. I just saw your lips were moved but I could not hear any word. You explained the sentences again and again but I just knew the words 'cat', and 'what'. So I guessed you might mean '猫是什么'. They laughed at me. I do not want to study. I want to quit this program."



In the first lesson, Linda lost her confidence in listening and she wanted to give up as what she did before. Her other three abilities were no better than her listening. In retelling of the story “Kitty Cat and the Paint”, Linda could only recite some sentences randomly from the story. The sentences were not complete and logical and did not correlate with each other. She was a little lower than Level 1 in the retelling criteria. Although her reading was a little better, she could not finish reading the story even in 30 minutes and her performance in reading tasks was not good. She refused to do the writing tasks. It was a hard time for her in the first several lessons until the researcher suggested she find a partner.

With Betty’s help, Linda began to make some progress. After practice for another two months, she could understand and respond to nearly half of the questions. For example, in the study of the story *Bugs for Breakfast*, she answered three of the six questions successful, which was much better than her previous performance in listening. In retelling of the stories, she could give the skeleton of the story and include the main ideas and details of the story, but sometimes she could not sequence the sentences properly. Her retelling has moved to Level 1 and Level 2. Her progress gave her a lot of confidence. In an interview, she said, “I was afraid of English when I met some difficult words before. But now I found I could understand the general meaning when I referred to the pictures and the plot of the story. I think I can learn English well.” In reading, although most of the time, she still wanted to read English stories with her partner, she began to try reading by herself after class. In writing, although making

or rewriting a story was still difficult for her, she began to try to write some sentences. In a writing task, she wrote a short conversation with five sentences: “Look, Xiao Hong. Donuts.”; “Oh my favourite (.) May I have one (?)”; “Sure (.)”; “Thanks (!)”; and “You are welcome (.)”.

At the end of the teaching practice, Linda could respond to most of the questions successfully. For example, in answering the questions about the story *Little Chimp and the Bees*, she answered 6 of the 8 questions successfully without guidance. Her retelling of the stories reached around Level 3. She could give a fairly complete retelling, including some main ideas and details. She could sequence most material correctly and understand text organization. She liked to write her retellings down before she gave her presentation, and her writing was improved with her speaking abilities. She began to read English stories by herself. Her best record in reading was 17 minutes plus finishing 6 of the 7 reading tasks successfully. Linda even claimed it was in reading that she made the rapidest progress:

“I did not think I could get a good score in this test. I nearly get all the points in reading comprehension. I feel reading is not so difficult for me now. I still have to spend more time in remembering a new word than my classmates. But it doesn’t matter. I can guess. Once, my teacher talked about a new word ‘palyground’. She said, ‘we can run, play Pingpong on it.’ I said, ‘操场’ without hesitation. My teacher praised me and my classmates said I was great. In fact, the pictures jumped into my mind when my teacher said the sentence. I think it was because I read so many picture storybooks and formed a habit of drawing pictures in my mind in the process of reading. This gives me a lot of help in reading.”

**Table 3**  
**Linda’s English Proficiency Development**

| Skills           | Story    |            |            |            |            |            |            |          |          |          |
|------------------|----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|
|                  | 1        | 2          | 3          | 4          | 5          | 6          | 7          | 8        | 9        | 10       |
| <b>Listening</b> | 0%       | 20%        | 40%        | 50%        | 50%        | 60%        | 75%        | 60%      | 63%      | 75%      |
| <b>Speaking</b>  | <L1      | L1         | L1         | L1         | L2         | L2         | L2         | L3       | L3       | L3       |
| <b>Reading</b>   | 0%       | 80%        | 60%        | 87%        | 100%       | 100%       | 100%       | 87%      | 90%      | 86%      |
|                  | -30 mins | -18 mins,p | -16 mins,p | -15 mins,p | -16 mins,p | -15 mins,p | -17 mins,p | -20 mins | -20 mins | -17 mins |
| <b>Writing</b>   | L1       | L1         | L1         | L2         | L2         | L2         | L2         | L3       | L2       | L3       |

Table 3 shows Linda’s development of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the process of learning the ten stories. In learning the first story, Tina could understand none of the questions asked in English. In the study of the following two stories, she could understand 20% and 40% respectively. She gradually made some progress and could understand more than 60% of the questions in English. Linda also made some progress in English speaking, from lower than Level 1 at the beginning of the study to Level 3 by the end of the teaching practice. Besides, Her development in reading is obvious. In the study of the first story, she finished

the story even in more than 30 minutes and none of the reading tasks. With the help of Betty, she could finish reading a story in a shorter time and understand most of the story. Although she still had to spend around 20 minutes in finishing reading a short English story and could understand 80%-90% of the content, Linda had made great progress compared with her performance in the first story. Linda’s progress in writing was not as great as her reading. Her writing reached Level 2 from Level 1 by the end of the study.

### 3. 4 Description of John's Case

John's English is excellent and he did well in all the four aspects of English learning at the beginning of the study. He could understand most of the questions raised in English. For example, in the lesson of *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, John understood four of the five questions asked in English by the researcher. In the follow-up interview of that lesson, he said,

"I did not understand every word. But I tried to guess the general meaning according to some words I had known. Listening is not so difficult for me. My mother asks me to listen to English every day for at least 20 minutes every day. Sometimes the content is interesting, but most of the time I cannot concentrate on the listening materials."

John could recite English very quickly, so in retelling of the story *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, he recited all the sentences in the storybook. After the researchers explained how to retell a story carefully to him, he retold the story *The Beach House* with ten sentences. He could include all the main ideas and arrange these sentences logically, but he forgot some important details. He could reach Level 3 in the retelling criteria at the beginning of the study. In reading, he only spent fifteen minutes in finishing the reading of the story *Kitty Cat and the Paint* by himself. However, in testing whether he had understood the story, John only did well in the three of the five reading tasks which described the skeleton of the story but was lost in the tasks about the details of the story. His writing was better than other participants. In the first writing task, he drew a series of pictures *The Turtle and the Rabbit* and described the story with six sentences: "Let's race!"; "OK!"; "I want to sleep."; "You are foolish! Bye-bye, rabbit."; "My god! Tortoise is the first!" and "I am the first."

Although John's listening, speaking, reading and writing was good, he did not do well in his English tests. The most frequent strategy he used is guessing. He liked to guess teachers' questions or the content of the story without listening to the whole sentence or finishing reading the story. In the process of the story teaching practice, researchers tried to help John to be more patient. In listening, he still could understand most of the questions as before. However, there were some differences as he said "I always guessed from the first

several words you said before. But now, I can understand most of the words". For example, in the study of the story *Bugs for Breakfast*, he answered five of the six questions successfully and the follow-up interview proved he knew the questions well. His retelling of the stories was very cohesive and complete and usually reached around Level 3 and Level 4. In retelling of the stories, he not only included the main ideas, but the important details of the story. He could combine the sentences with the conjunction words such as "but" and "so". Sometimes, he would give his own opinions of the story. In reading, he still finished reading a story in around fifteen minutes but he would pay some attention to the details of the story and could finish nearly all the reading tasks successfully. In writing, he still performed well. He liked to write some longer stories with more characters and more sentences.

By the end of the teaching practice, John had made rapid progress. He could respond to nearly all the questions successfully in a shorter time than before. He could give very cohesive and complete retelling including all main ideas and supporting details. He could sequence the sentences properly, infer beyond the story and relate the story to his own life. Sometimes, he would give his own opinion of story and justify it. He could reach Level 5, the highest criteria for retelling. Besides, he would ask some questions about the story in English. By the end of the teaching practice, John had finished all the 10 storybooks at Level 3, 5 storybooks at Level 4, 4 storybooks at Level 5 and 1 storybook at Level 6. He would use different reading strategies for different purposes. For example, he would scan the story and the pictures to make sure whether he would be interested in the story or not. After he chose the storybook, he would read through the whole story carefully. He liked to give his own opinion of the story he was reading. Sometimes, he would write his opinions down. For example, after he learnt the story *Little Chimp and the Bee*, he wrote, "This story is not interesting. The chimp (is) (ugly). The picture(s) are not good. I don't like the story." Maybe due to this habit, he made rapid progress in his writing. By the end of the study, he could not only write stories with dialogues and pictures, but with paragraphs. He even tried to use the past tense in his story.

**Table 4**  
**John's English Proficiency Development**

| Skills    | Story    |          |          |          |          |          |          |             |             |             |
|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|           | 1        | 2        | 3        | 4        | 5        | 6        | 7        | 8           | 9           | 10          |
| Listening | 80%      | 80%      | 75%      | 83%      | 87%      | 83%      | 75%      | 90%         | 100%        | 100%        |
| Speaking  | L3       | L3       | L3       | L3       | L3       | L4       | L4       | L5          | L4          | L5          |
| Reading   | 60%      | 80%      | 60%      | 87%      | 100%     | 90%      | 100%     | 100%        | 100%        | 100%        |
|           | -15 mins | -15 mins | -15 mins | -16 mins | -15 mins | -15 mins | -14 mins | - < 15 mins | - < 15 mins | - < 15 mins |
| Writing   | L2       | L2       | L3       | L3       | L3       | L3       | L4       | L4          | L4          | L5          |

Table 4 shows John's development of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the process of learning the ten stories. Although he had performed well in all these four skills before the teaching practice, John still made some progress. John could understand around 80% of the questions raised in English at the beginning of the study. At the end of the teaching practice, he could understand all of the questions. His speaking was enhanced from Level 3 at the beginning of the study to Level 5 by the end of the teaching practice. Besides, he made rapid progress in reading. He spent much less time in finishing reading a story and his scores in reading comprehension reached 100% from around 60%-80%. John's writing reached Level 5 from Level 2 by the end of the study.

### 3. 5 Description of Frank's Case

Frank's performance in English was not good at the beginning of the study. His listening was poor. In the lesson of *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, his response to the questions in English was 0. The following extract shows he did not understand the question:

"I did not know what you were saying. I don't know this word. We haven't learned it. ... Yes, I rarely understand what my English teacher is saying in English class unless she speaks Chinese. I always sleep or do other things in English class. I don't want to listen to English."

His retelling of the story *Kitty Cat and the Paint* was no better than his listening. He just could only describe the story with some broken English such as "cat sleep", "cat wake", and "cat ran". He even could not reach the lowest level in the retelling criteria. In reading, he did not finish reading the story even half an hour later. He just browsed the pictures and some Chinese explanations. He did not understand the reading tasks and finished none of the tasks successfully. Beside, he refused to do writing tasks.

After finishing the first story *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, Frank refused to attend the study and did not show up in the following month. Researchers were trying to communicate with him and his parents to encourage him to come back to the teaching practice. We promised he could refuse to do the tasks that he did not want to. At last, he was persuaded into continuing the study. No data showed that Frank had made some progress until the lesson of *Brown Mouse Plays a Trick*. He liked the story very much; therefore, he spent much time on it. He tried to respond to the questions although he was not sure about them. For example, when the participants were asked about the colours of the mice, Frank gave his answer quickly even before the others raised their hands. He admitted in the follow-up interview that he only knew some of the words, but he would like to guess. Although it was still a little difficult for him to retell a story, he spent a lot of time in reciting it. Besides, he spoke more English

in the process of teaching than before. It was the first time that he finished reading a story although he spent more time than other participants and he finished two of the three reading tasks in a given time. In his writing assignments, there was an extract about his little white mouse: "I have (a) white mouse. (The) Mouse is可爱. I say (read) (the) story (to him). I like my mouse." Although his English was broken, this was a good beginning for his English writing. In the following teaching practice, researchers gave a lot of help to Frank. For example, we read stories and did reading tasks with him together; we taught him how to recite a story with the aid of pictures and many other clues. Frank got a good score in his mid-term English test, which gave him a lot of encouragement in English learning.

After learning five of the ten storybooks, Frank had made great progress. He could understand and respond to more than half of the questions. For example, in answering the questions about the story *Little Chimp and the Bees*, he answered five of the eight questions successfully. Although his listening was not as good as the other participants, his progress was undeniable. In retelling of the stories, he could sequence most of the sentences correctly; he would include the main ideas and some details of the story and sometimes he would give his own comments. Most of his retelling could reach Level 2. The following extract is his retelling of the story *Little Chimp and the Bees*:

"The chimp(s) go (to the) forest. Little Chimp see(s) (some) bee(s). Big chimp see(s) (the) bees too. Big Chimp hit(s) (the) tree. Some bee(s) fly out. Little Chimp hide(s) (in) the grass. Big Chimp get(s) some honey. Mother Chimp give(s) (some) honey to Little Chimp. Big Chimp (is)... Little Chimp (is) ..."

He could finish reading a story in around 25 minutes with the help of the researchers and most of the reading tasks by himself. He admitted he would have given up reading when he met some difficulties before. However, reading was not a difficult task for him now. He could guess most of the meaning from the pictures or the context. Besides, the repetitive words and structures helped him to remember vocabulary better and these vocabularies made his reading much easier. Although his progress in writing was not as great as the other three abilities, he did not refuse to write something in English and he added, "My writing is not good now. But I think I could write better if I learn more English and read more interesting English stories."

Table 5 shows Frank's development of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the process of learning the ten stories. Frank's performance in the four skills was poor at the beginning of the study. He did not get any information from listening and reading. He refused to do the speaking and writing assignments in the first lesson. Frank did not attend the study of the following three stories frequently; therefore, there was no record during this stage. From the fifth story, he began to attend the

teaching activities and made some progress. His listening was improved from 20% to around 60%; both of his speaking and writing reached Level 2 from Level 1. With the help of the researchers, Frank could understand around

80% of the story in 25 minutes. Although his English was not as great as the other four participants, his progress was great compared with his performance at the beginning of the study.

**Table 5**  
**Frank's English Proficiency Development**

| Skills    | Story    |   |   |   |     |            |            |            |            |            |
|-----------|----------|---|---|---|-----|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
|           | 1        | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5   | 6          | 7          | 8          | 9          | 10         |
| Listening | 0%       | - | - | - | 20% | 20%        | 50%        | 40%        | 63%        | 63%        |
| Speaking  | -        | - | - | - | -   | L1         | L1         | L1         | L2         | L2         |
| Reading   | 0%       | - | - | - | -   | 50%        | 80%        | 60%        | 87%        | 80%        |
|           | >30 mins | - | - | - | -   | -30 mins,p | -28 mins,p | -25 mins,p | -26 mins,p | -25 mins,p |
| Writing   | -        | - | - | - | L1  | L2         | L2         | L3         | L2         | L2         |

## 5. DISCUSSION

The results indicate that all of the five participants had made some progress in the four aspects by the end of the study.

Most of the participants did not perform well in listening at the first period of the study. Take the lesson of *Kitty Cat and the Paint* as the example. Tina and Betty only understood two and one of the five questions raised in English respectively. They said they understood some of the words but did not know what the whole sentences meant. Linda and Frank were totally lost in answering the questions. They rarely listened to English; therefore, they could not connect the words with their sounds. John was the only one who performed well in the first lesson, with a record of replying to four of the five questions correctly. However, he admitted that he did not understand all the words but tried to guess from the plot of the story. After practice for a period, all of them made some progress. Tina and Betty could understand most of the questions. Linda could answer about half of the questions on average. Frank tried to respond to the questions raised in English. John could answer most of the questions successfully and the follow-up interviews show he had totally understood the questions. By the end of the study, Tina, Betty and John could understand all of the questions and the waiting time was much shorter than before. Linda could understand more than half of the questions and the best record for Frank is half of them.

The participants' speaking was no better than their listening at the beginning of the study. In the retelling of the story *Kitty Cat and the Paint*, Tina and Betty's retellings were very incomplete. They only gave some details and some relevant information with poor sequences. Linda recited some sentences randomly from the story and these sentences were not complete and logical and did not correlate with each other. Frank described the story with some broken English such as "cat

sleep", "cat wake" and "cat ran". John's performance was much better than the other four participants. He included the main ideas and arranged these sentences logically, but he forgot some important details. After practice for several months, all of them made some progress. Tina and Betty could reach Level 3 in the retelling criteria, which means they could "give a fairly complete retelling, include some main ideas and details, correctly sequences most material, understands text organization and gives opinion of text". Although Linda's retelling was still incomplete, she always tried to include some ideas and details and give some relevant information. Frank did not want to retell the story but he could recite the story about the mice fluently, which was much better than before. John was still the one who did best. His retelling was very cohesive and complete. He began to relate the story to his own life, and give some opinions of the story. At the end of the study, Tina and Betty's retelling was very cohesive and complete while Linda could give a fairly complete retelling. Frank's retelling was incomplete but he always included a few main ideas and details. John had reached the highest level in the retelling criteria.

Compared with the other three aspects, reading was much easier for them. Both of their reading rate was increased and their reading ability was improved. At the beginning of the study, Tina spent about 20 minutes finishing an English storybook of 16 pages with around 150 words illustrated by some pictures and 60% of reading assignments successfully. Linda felt the story was a little difficult and could not finish reading by herself. Therefore, Betty was invited as her partner in the following teaching practice. They could finish reading such a story and finish 80% of the reading assignments successfully in around 18 minutes together. Frank did not finish reading the story even half an hour later. John only spent 15 minutes in finishing the story *Kitty Cat and the Paint*. However, he only did well in the three of the five reading tasks which wanted some skeleton of the story but

was lost in the tasks about its details. Two months later, all of them made rapid progress in reading. Both Tina and John could finish their reading and all the reading tasks successfully in 15 minutes. Betty and Linda had the same record with them. To our excitement, Linda tried to read some English materials by herself at home. Frank still spent much time on English reading but he could finish more than half of the reading tasks with the help of the researchers. In the following study, Tina and John felt the stories of Level 3 were a little easy for them; therefore, they tried some longer and more difficult stories. By the end of the study, Tina had finished some books of Level 4 while John had read 5 stories of Level 4, 4 books of Level 5 and 1 book of Level 6 by himself or under his mother's help. Betty could finish reading and the following tasks in around 15 minutes while Linda spent 17-20 minutes on them by herself. Frank could finish reading and most of the tasks in 25 minutes with others' help.

Although writing was the most difficult part for the participants, they had made some progress by the end of the study. Tina took five sentences randomly from the storybook when she was asked to write a summary of a story for the first time. She admitted that she rarely wrote something in English, therefore, she did not know how to organize her thoughts. After a period of practice and reading more stories, she could write more sentences, but most of them were short with repetitive words and structures. Her progress in writing is not as great as she did in other aspects. At the end of the study, she could write a complete story with some longer sentences, but she could not sequence them properly or use the connection words such as "and", "but" and "so". However, she believed if she read and practice more, her writing would be better. Betty made the rapidest progress in writing. In the first writing task, she could only write a short conversation with eight simple sentences. Later, she could write some longer sentences and more interesting stories. By the end of the study, she had made 5 English stories by herself. These interesting stories were composed of more sentences, properly sequenced with some connection words. Writing was too difficult for Linda at the beginning of the teaching practice. It was such a long time later that she tried to write a short conversation with some simple sentences. In her following learning, she liked to write her retellings down before she gave her presentation and her writing was improved with her speaking abilities. Like Linda, Frank refused to write something for a long time. After he had made some progress in other aspects, he tried to write some broken English with the researchers' encouragement. Although his writing was still poor, Frank did not view writing as "an impossible task" any more. John's writing was as great as other aspects. At the beginning of the study, he often wrote some interesting stories illustrated with pictures. Although the sentences were short and simple, he liked to try to use some new

words in his stories. Later, there were more and more characters in his stories. Gradually, he became fond of writing his opinions of the story he was reading. Besides, he could not only write stories with dialogues and pictures, but with paragraphs. He even tried to use different tenses in his stories.

Listening and reading skills can be improved through extensive and intensive materials. In the practice of English stories teaching, a large amount of stories covering different topics were supplied to those young learners to cater for their different interests. Therefore, except for learning the selected stories extensively in classes, most of the participants listened to and read the stories they like intensively after classes. Therefore, a supply of appropriate English stories in primary school would have many benefits to young learners' English listening and reading. The way to promote speaking and writing skills is to give learners more chances to practice. Most of children would like to retell the stories they like. Learners may have practiced for many times before they could retell a complete story.

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## 6. CONCLUSIONS

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### 6.1 Main Findings of the Study

All of the five participants' English proficiency had been developed by the end of the study. Most of the participants understood little or none of the questions in English at the beginning of the study. At the end of the teaching practice, most of them could understand more than 80% of these questions. Their speaking was developed from Level 1-2 of the retelling criteria to Level 3-5. Their reading rate was increased and reading ability was improved. The time participants spent on reading a story was shorted by 5 to 10 minutes and the accuracy of reading comprehension was increased by more than 40%. In writing, one participant reached Level 2 from Level 1; two reached Level 3 from Level 1; the other two reached Level 5 from Level 2.

### 6.2 Implications of the Study

The study findings can be used as a beginning point for providing some pedagogical implications that should be taken into consideration by both English instructors and syllabus designers in primary school.

#### 6.2.1 For English Instructors

English teachers should consider students' conceptual development and their diversity when designing tasks and setting up the teaching aims. Children exhibit differently at different conceptual developmental stages; therefore, suitable teaching content and activities in class should be chosen and designed. Children of the same age may be at different levels of language proficiency, therefore, teaching materials should be well chosen so that the students of high level would feel challenged enough to make progress

while those of low level would not feel frustrated and lose confidence in English learning. Besides, learners have different personality, aptitude, learning styles and they may be fond of different strategies. Language teachers should provide for alternative activities to cater for different learners.

Children have a limited attention span. To arouse learners' attention, at least three things could be done. First, language teachers should select the materials young learners are interested in, such as stories, songs and chants. Second, teachers should make full use of visual aids, such as pictures and multimedia. Third, the class should be divided into a series of activities which last no more than 5-10 minutes.

Learning English is not restricted to the classroom environment but connects to learners' daily life. Students should be supplied with more chances to use English in their daily lives so that their motivation and interest in English learning would be sustained. Besides, teachers could make use of the influence from students' parents and companions.

Besides the traditional way of assessing learners' English, instructors could try to make full use of the portfolios. The portfolio can be of great use in tracing and recording learners' progress so that teachers could evaluate learners' work in a more objective way. The learners may have a concrete image of their achievements so that they can gain self-esteem from the things they have achieved. Besides, parents could get more involved with their children's life in school through the portfolio.

### 6.2.2 For Syllabus Designers

The materials selected in the textbook should cover a wide range of topics. Different genres of literatures, including stories, comics, science fictions and other genres, could be tried in the textbooks to cater for different students' interests and needs. The content of the textbooks should be memorable, as the language is repeated, and this encourages students to participate. This recycling of patterns incites students to predict what is coming next in the story and, at the same time, exercises their imagination.

The role of pictures in English books should not be neglected. Pictures can help learners to predict sequence and exercise memory. Words are better to be remembered associated with pictures. In addition, a story is more memorable if it can be related to a sequence of pictures. The pictures are closely related to the text, and sometimes they even structure the text, which can support learners' understanding.

Although communicative approach has been proved successful to promote learners' English, the role of reading cannot be neglected, especially in the rural areas, where most of the students have no chance to communicate with others in English. Some reading materials designed for young learners could be selected as the supplementary

teaching materials to the English texts or extracurricular reading materials.

### 6.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Although the researchers tried to keep the design of the present study scientific and rigorous, strive to seek truth from facts in the process of data collection. However, due to the limited time, the researchers' ability and many other factors, the study still bears some limitations: the teaching practice was carried out among a small amount of participants. Whether the findings elicited from five participants are universal among most of the young learners is still under investigation. Furthermore, the period of conducting the study once a week in 9 months is too short. If the study had been extended over a longer time, further longitudinal outcomes might have been established, which would be more significant to English teachers and educational policy-makers.

Therefore, with respect to the limitations of the present study, the further study should have more students in a longer period of time. Except for investigating the role of the English stories among young learners, the further research may focus on the following aspects:

Sandwich Story Methodology has been proved effective in some aspects in a short span, such as enlarging English vocabulary. However, its effectiveness in promoting other abilities in the long run still needs investigation.

The researchers of English story teaching in China focus on the importance or the effectiveness of stories in foreign language curriculum. However, few products based on these findings have been found in the markets. For example, the theory of teaching stories with songs and dances proposed by Xu Huayan made a great success in enhancing students' interest in English learning and promoting their English proficiency. However, the theory is not widely used in teaching practice and the storybooks based on this theory have not been developed.

With the development of technology, English teaching calls for the marriage of English stories with the multimedia. Although two series of the digital storybooks designed for English learners from elementary one to six published by Pearson-Longman have been introduced to China, the high prices hinder their widely use in primary schools. Therefore, researchers in China should develop our own digital products about English stories so that more and more young learners could benefit from the research on English teaching and learning.

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## APPENDIX I

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### Criteria for Assessing Story Retelling

| Level | Criteria  |
|-------|---|
| 5     | Very cohesive and complete retelling<br>Student includes all main ideas and supporting details, sequences material properly, infers beyond the text, relates text to own life, understands text organization, summarizes, gives opinion of text and justifies it, and may ask additional questions. |
| 4     | Very cohesive and complete retelling<br>Students includes most main ideas and supporting details, sequences material properly, related text to own life, understands text organization, summarizes, gives opinion of text and justifies it.   |
| 3     | Fairly complete retelling<br>Student includes some main ideas and details, correctly sequences most material, understands text organization, and gives opinion of text.   |
| 2     | Incomplete retelling<br>Student includes a few main ideas and details, has some difficulty putting material in sequence, and may give relevant information, and gives opinion of text.  |
| 1     | Very incomplete retelling<br>Student gives details only, sequences material poorly, and may give relevant information.  |

(Adopted from Irwin & Mitchell, 1983)



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## APPENDIX II

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### Criteria for Assessing Writing

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| Level | Criteria   |
|-------|--|
| 5     | The story is very cohesive and complete.<br>The writer can use tense correctly and some conduction words such as “and”, “but”.<br>There are no spelling and grammatical mistakes.<br>The writer can choose appropriate vocabulary and sentence structures. |
| 4     | The story is very cohesive and complete.<br>The writer can use some conduction words such as “and”, “but”.<br>There are few spelling and grammatical mistakes.<br>The vocabulary and sentence structures are rich.   |
| 3     | The story is cohesive.<br>There are some spelling and grammatical mistakes.<br>Sentences are longer with different types of structures.  |
| 2     | The sentences are arranged randomly.<br>There are some spelling and grammatical mistakes.<br>Sentences are short with simple structures.   |
| 1     | The sentences are arranged randomly.<br>The writing is full of spelling and grammatical mistakes<br>Sentences are short with repetitive words and structures.  |

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