

English Stories Teaching and Learners' Attitude Towards English

DUAN Jing^{[a],*}; SUN Yinghui^[b]

^[a]Xizang Agriculture and Animal Husbandry College, Nyingchi, China.

^[b]Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

The present case study intends to explore how English story learning and teaching promotes young learners' English. Learners' attitudes towards English and English learning were examined. Five students in Grade 4 of a primary school were involved in this case study. The participants learnt 10 short stories in 9 months. Data was collected through interviews and classroom observations. The analysis shows that there are no differences of the participants' cognitive attitudes before and after the teaching practice. All of them show a positive attitude through the whole process of the study. The participants' affective and behavioural attitudes towards English and English learning tend to be more positive after the English story teaching practice.

Key words: Attitude; English stories; Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of positive attitudes in enhancing second/foreign language learning is obvious. Positive attitudes are believed to lead to strong desire to persist to reach their goals, and negative attitudes may hinder their development or progress.

Wikipedia defines "attitude" as "a favorable or unfavorable evaluation of something". It is people's

negative or positive views towards an object, a person or an event. Gardner (1985) considers "attitude as a component of motivation". However, Wenden (1991) states that "attitude" includes three components: cognitive, affective and behavioural. The cognitive component is the beliefs and ideas or opinions about the object; the affective one refers to people's feeling and emotions towards an object, such as "likes" or "dislikes" and "with" or "against"; the behavioural component is one's actions or behavioural intentions towards the object. These three components will be taken as the scale of determining the changes of the participants' attitude towards English in the present teaching practice.

Barker (1988) cannot agree more with Wenden. Besides cognitive and affective component, he adds three characteristics of attitudes: dimensional, learned and predisposing. First, attitudes can be improved by experience. This suggests that learners' experiences in classroom are very important. A happy experience would stand with the positive attitude, while the learning experience full of unhappiness, failure may bring in negative feelings. Therefore, a collection of interesting contents, well-designed teaching plans, relaxed atmospheres and other tools can be used to bring learners happy experience. Second, attitudes tend to be persistent. This means that learners with positive attitudes will not need interventions to continue the state. However, this also means that it may need more efforts to change learners' negative attitudes to positive ones. It tells us that it is important to help learners to form positive attitudes at the very beginning of their study. Besides, attitudes are learned rather than inherited. Consequently, it is possible to change children's attitudes towards English learning by creating positive learning experience. "Dimensional" means that attitudes are at various degrees of favorability. Attitudes vary in degree and strength, that is, they are on a continuum. It may take only a slight step from negative to positive attitudes. Dimensional also means that students

may show different attitudes towards a language. Baker (1992, pp.29-30) identifies eight major areas: attitude towards language variation, dialect and speech style, attitude towards learning a new language, attitude towards a specific minority language, attitude towards language groups, communities and minorities, attitude towards language lessons, attitude of parents towards language lessons, attitude towards the uses of specific language, and attitude towards language preference. The present study would focus on the second and the sixth areas: young learners' attitudes towards learning English and English lessons.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

The present research intends to discover how English story learning and teaching promotes learners' English. The data of the changes of learners' attitude towards English and English learning during the research are collected and analyzed.

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.

2. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

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 (see Appendix I). Every class was recorded by another researcher in order to help researchers to check their observation. The criteria for the overall assessment (see Appendix II) 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.

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 with the participants every two months.

Questions about the participants' attitude towards English and English learning were adapted from Gardner's

(1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (the instrumental and integrative orientation scales). The questions about the participants' attitudes towards English and English learning cover the aspects of cognitive, affective and behavioural components. The questions of their cognitive attitudes include "Do you think English is important"; questions such as "Do you think English lessons are interesting or not" were used to collect the data of their affective attitude towards English; while the behavioural components of their attitudes were collected from the questions such as "Do you participate the activities in English class actively" and "How much time do you spend on English beyond classroom" combined with researchers' observation.

The interviews with the participants were transcribed and translated into English. For the analysis of the interview data, the interviews with the five participants were read and categorized. Then the researcher undertook the coding and decoding of the interview data. The coding includes open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In opening coding, the researcher discovers and classified the identified concepts into different categories; in the axial coding, the researcher tried to find the relationship among these categories and set up connections among them; in the selective coding, the core categories were abstracted to help narrow down the analysis scope of the research.

3. DATA DESCRIPTION

3.1 Description of Tina's Case

Tina is a talkative girl. She likes English very much and works so hard that she always gets high marks in English tests. She attends all the classes in the English story teaching practice, the follow-up interviews and did five semi-structural interviews.

In the first interview, Tina showed a positive attitude towards English learning but a negative attitude towards English textbooks:

Extract 1:

Of course, learning English is important. ...I like reading the texts and doing English homework. Our English homework is not so difficult. I just spend a little time in finishing it. ...I listen carefully to my English teacher in class and I like to answer the questions because my teacher will praise me and sometimes she will give us a gift. ...Our textbook is not so interesting. There are so many words. Sometimes I will feel exhausted and lose interest if the paragraphs are too long. But I still feel learning English is interesting for my teacher will explain the difficult parts and translate them into Chinese. I can remember these words, phrases and grammar....

From the interview, we can see, the cognitive aspect of Tina's attitudes to English was positive. Although she expressed her affections for English, most of them are external factors such as "to get praise". She was attentive

in class, but she rarely learns English if she was not asked by the teacher or her parents. However, this situation changed during English story teaching practice. Besides finishing homework assigned by her English teacher, she also tried to read English stories by herself at home and discussed the stories with her friends and teachers. Tina said:

Extract 2:

English learning is not only easy but interesting. I thought learning English was to remember the words, phrases and grammar. But now I know there are many interesting stories in English. Every time I read a new story, I want to know the results and I will finish the book as quickly as I can. Although I do not know all the words, I can guess from the pictures or the plots. If our textbooks are like these stories, I think I would like English classes much more than before.

Her attitudes towards English and English learning in the affective and behavioural aspects tend to be more positive after the English stories teaching practice. She has finished all the ten stories and another five stories of Level 4 and wants to read some longer and more difficult English stories.

3.2 Description of Betty's Case

To Betty, learning English is very important because English is a necessity if she wants "to go into a good middle school and a great university in the future and travel around the world". When asked whether she liked learning English at the beginning of the study, she said:

Extract 3:

I like English very much. I like reciting the words. Our teacher says the English and we write them and their Chinese equivalents down. It is easy. ...others? En, I like answering questions in class. Our teacher often asks us to translate the words and sentences. Sometimes she asks questions about the texts but they are very easy. I like writing English homework because English homework is much less and easier than other homework.

From the interview, we can see, Betty has a positive cognitive attitude towards English and English learning. Her positive affective attitude towards English learning derived from external factors such as "it is easy to remember words, finish homework or answer a question". She listened carefully to her English teacher in class and tried her best to finish all the assignments. After class, she would look up the new words in the dictionary when doing her homework. However, she rarely reads other English materials or spent much time on English at home.

After several months of English story teaching practice, there were some changes. Betty found learning English was not only easy but interesting and she liked English much more than before. Her positive affective attitude towards English learning did not only come from the external factors but derived from her genuine

affection of English. After class, she would like to spend more time in learning English. She even tried to make English stories by herself and shared them with her friends and teachers.

By the end of the teaching practice, she had finished all the 10 storybooks and made 5 other English stories except for the tasks assigned by the researchers. Her attitudes towards English and English learning in the affective and behavioural aspects tend to be more positive. In the last interview with Betty, she said:

Extract 4:

Learning English is very interesting. I can read English stories just as what I do in learning Chinese. I can even write English stories by myself. Now making English stories have been an important thing for me. Sometimes if I do not know how to express myself in English, I would look up the words in the dictionary or ask my teachers and my parents. I am very proud when I read or tell my own stories to others.

3.3 Description of Linda's Case

Linda has a positive cognitive attitude towards English and English learning. She believes if one wants to enter a good university, to meet people from all over the world, they must learn English well. Although she thought highly of the importance of learning English, she did not show much interest in it at the beginning of the study.

Extract 5:

I don't think learning English is interesting. In class, we learn English words and grammar. Our teacher translates the text into Chinese. Sometimes, there are too many words in one class and I cannot remember all of them, so I would give up and do other things in English class. If the text is not so difficult I'll listen carefully to my teacher.

From this extract, we can see, Linda did not have a positive affective attitude towards English learning. She would listen carefully to her English teacher in class if the input was comprehensible to her but she rarely tried to answer the questions unless she was asked to. She would finish her assignments on time. Sometimes, she would try to remember the words and read the texts. However, if the words or the texts were too difficult for her, she would give up.

It was two months later that Linda's affective attitudes towards English learning began to change. During these two months, she was Betty's partner. They often read and discussed English stories and finished the tasks together. She felt "learning English is not so difficult especially with the help of my partner". Besides, she dared to raise her hands to answer the questions in class. After class, she would like to spend more time in learning English. Once, in order to retell a story, she read the story three times every morning for a whole week. Her retelling proved to be successful and she became more confident from then on.

In the following months of teaching practice, Linda showed a great interest in English. She was more attentive in class and she tried to read English stories and finish the tasks by herself. By the end of the teaching practice, she had finished the study of all the 10 story books. After class, she spent much more time on reading English stories especially after she realized it was not necessary to know every word to understand the meaning of the story. Her positive attitudes towards English and English learning in the affective and behavioural aspects were shown in the following interview:

Extract 6:

I like English now. In fact, I liked learning English when I was in Grade One. Learning English was easy and I always could get high score. But gradually, I found it was difficult for me to remember so many words and English learning became more and more difficult. I lost confidence and interest in learning it well. Now, I find a good way to remember words: remembering the words in the sentences. Besides, those stories are short and not difficult. I like reading them. So I would like to read more stories if I have time after class.

3.4 Description of John's Case

John's cognitive attitude towards English and English learning is positive. He thinks learning English well is important for his future life. When asked whether he liked English and English learning, he said:

Extract 7:

It depends. If the text is interesting I would like it. But most of the texts in our books are not interesting and the content is a little easy. Sometimes I feel they are childish. My teacher often asks us to write a word for five times or ten times. It is so boring. I like to do some more difficult assignments such as word puzzle.

From this extract, we can see, John likes some challengeable work rather than the repetitive tasks. Some interesting books which are a little above his current level seemed more attractive to him. Therefore, he would listen carefully to his English teacher in class when new texts were presented but pay little attention to the content that he had known well. After class, besides finishing the English homework, he would do some assignments arranged by his mother, such as reading comprehension and some tests. However, he did not show much interest in this.

When John saw the series of the story books, he could not hold his joy. He browsed them again and again and reads them eagerly. He even finished reading these ten books in two months and later he asked for some difficult and longer stories. He talked about his feelings of reading English stories in the following interview:

Extract 8:

I like English very much now. I never knew there were so interesting English books. I thought all the books were like our

textbooks. I often finish reading a story without a break. What's more, I can choose the books that I like. It's fantastic. Besides, the pictures in the books are great. I like drawing. So I like the books illustrated with well-drawn pictures.

By the end of the study, 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 was so excited when talking about his experience of learning English stories. He said, "I do not care too much about the words and grammar in the story and the content and the plot are more attractive. The most important thing for me is reading some lines of storybooks every day. I love learning English in this way." He tended to have a positive attitude towards English and English learning in the affective and behavioural aspects in the end of the teaching practice.

3.5 Description of Frank's Case

Like other participants, Frank holds a positive attitude to the importance of English and English learning. He believes that if he does not learn English well, it will be a little difficult for him to go into the university or get a good job in the future. However, he did not show any interest in English and English learning in his first interview. He thought learning English was boring and difficult. It was not easy for him to remember English words. Therefore, he did not perform well in English class. He usually listened for around ten to fifteen minutes at the beginning of the lesson and then he would lose interest. He always slept in English classes or plays tricks on his classmates. His English teacher lost patience with him and rarely took care of him unless he disturbed the lesson. Frank rarely finished his English homework on time. Sometimes, he would pretend to learn English if his parents scolded or beat him. He did not attend the English story teaching practice frequently in the first two months of the study.

This situation lasted until two months later when the participants were taught the story *Brown Mouse Plays a Trick*. This story is interesting and with many repetitive words and structures. Frank showed great interest in the story. The following extract indicated some changes in his affective attitude towards English learning.

Extract 9:

English is not as difficult and boring as what I thought before. I think some of the English stories are interesting. I like reading the story about the clever mouse. It will be great if learning English is to read an interesting English story and I am not asked to remember many words and grammar. ...Yes, I like English a bit more than before.

Because of his strong affection of this story, he paid careful attention to the lessons and he would turn to others' help if he had some difficulties in learning the story. At home, he often read some lines every night and even could recite the story. His progress gave him a lot

of encouragement in English learning. From then on, he attended all the following teaching practice and performed well in doing all kinds of tasks.

By the end of the teaching practice, Frank's attitudes towards English and English learning in the affective and behavioural aspects had tended to be positive. His interest in learning English had been nurtured through learning the materials that he was fond of. He did not view learning English as a boring task any more. He paid careful attention to his English teacher in class, and in most of the time, he could finish English homework on time.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that there are no differences of the participants' cognitive aspects before and after the teaching practice. All the participants show a positive attitude through the whole process of the study. All of the participants emphasized on the importance of learning English. They viewed English as a necessity of "continuing their study", "going abroad", "meeting foreigners" or "finding a good job". This shows that most young learners view English as playing a vital role in their lives, both currently and in the future.

The changes of the participants' affective aspects towards English and English learning are obvious. Tina and Betty expressed their affections for English at the beginning of the study. However, they liked English for some external reasons. Tina always got a good score in English tests and thus she would get praise from her teacher and parents, as well as the admiration from her classmates. Therefore, she was satisfied with all these praise and admiration that learning English well brought to her. For Betty, learning English was easy for "it is easy to remember English words, finish homework or answer questions". She could always get good scores in English tests although she spent much less time than other subjects. In the following teaching practice, both of them showed great interest in English stories. They thought English stories were "interesting" and "attractive" and they were eager to know what would happen next when reading English stories. They claimed they "love English much more than before". Unlike these two girls, Linda and Frank hold a negative attitude in the affective aspects towards English and English learning. Linda had a hardship struggling with English learning; therefore, she had lost confidence in English learning and thought "English is the most difficult thing in the world". Frank stood the same line with Linda. He thought English was boring and it was too difficult for him to learn English well. In the process of English story teaching, Linda made some progress with the help of her partner and researchers and she began to rebuild the confidence in English learning while Frank showed great interest in the mice of an English story and became active in learning the story

well. They thought these English stories were easy to understand with the aid of the pictures and the plot and the repetitive words, phrases and structures contribute a lot to help them remembering those vocabularies and stories. By the end of the study, Linda and Frank's interest in English learning had been nurtured and they hold a positive affective attitude towards English and English learning. In the interviews with John's affective attitude towards English and English learning, he said "it depends". He liked some challengeable work rather than the repetitive tasks. Some interesting books which are a little above his current level seems more attractive to him. This is in accordance with Krashen's theory of "i+1", which means what language learners are exposed to should be neither too difficult nor so close to their current level stage so that they can understand most of it but still be challenged to make progress. Therefore, he could not hold his joy when he saw the series of this set of storybooks and showed great interest in them.

The participants' behaviour in English learning tend to be more positive after the English story teaching practice. Before the teaching practice, both Tina and Betty were attentive and active in English classes and they would finish English assignments on time. Tina rarely learned English in her spare time while Betty would look up some new words when previewing her English lessons. In the process of the teaching, both of them performed more actively in English learning. Tina was fond of reading English stories in her spare time while Betty spent most of her time in writing English stories. By the end of the study, Tina had besides reading five other storybooks of Level 4 and Betty made five English stories by herself except learning the ten storybooks selected as the teaching materials. Before the study, Linda did not perform so well in English learning. She would listen to her English teacher in class if the input was comprehensible to her and finish English assignments on time. She rarely tried to answer questions unless she was asked to. Sometimes, she would try to remember words or read texts but she would give up quickly when she came across some difficulties. With the help of her partner and researchers, Linda rebuilt her confidence. She dared to answer questions actively in class and she would like to spend more time in learning English after class. She was more attentive in class and tried to read English stories and finish the reading tasks by herself. Frank was another one who did not perform well in English learning before the study. He usually listened to around ten or fifteen minutes at the beginning part of the lesson and then he would lose interest. He always slept or played tricks on his classmates in English class. Besides, he rarely could finish his English homework on time. Sometimes, he would pretend to be learning at home if his parents scolded or beat him. He did not attend the English story teaching frequently in the first two months. In the following teaching, he showed great interest in the

story about some clever mice. He listened carefully to the lessons about the mice and would ask for help if he had some difficulties in learning the story. Besides, he began to read English at home. He made some progress, which gave him a lot of encouragement in English learning. In the following teaching, he attended all the classes and was attentive and active in class. Besides, he could finish most of his homework on time. John liked challengeable work, therefore, he would listen carefully to his English teacher in class when new texts were presented but pay little attention to the content that he had known well. Although he always did some reading comprehension and tests arranged by his mother, he thought they were "boring" and he did not want to do them if he was not forced by his mother. After he had the chance to read different kinds of English stories, he became crazy about them. He finished reading the ten storybooks selected as the teaching materials in two months, which was seven months earlier than the schedule. He asked for some more difficult and longer stories. By the end of the study, he had finished 10 storybooks at Level 3, 5 at Level 4, 4 at Level 5 and another one at Level 6.

It seems that there is no relationship between the cognitive and the other two components of learners' attitudes towards English and English learning. All of the five participants in the present study view English as important in their lives, however, their affections and behaviors in English activities are different. On the other hand, if learners are fond of English, they would behave actively in attending the related activities. Frank did not like English at the beginning of the teaching practice, therefore, he refused to attend classes or do some assignments. He became interested in English because of a story about mice and performed actively in the following teaching practice. Although in other teaching methods and approaches, young learners' positive attitudes would be nurtured, these methods and approaches have their limitations. For example, in rural areas where few of the students have the chances to use English, the communicate approaches would lose their charms. The learners would think it is useless to do tasks in English or to talk with each other in English for they may have no chances to use English in all their lives. English stories teaching would be a good supplementary. First, listening to, reading or acting out stories are real tasks that learners would do in learning their mother tongue. Second, learners can read English stories at any place, in any time, by oneself or with others. What's more, if there are enough storybooks, young learners could choose the stories they like rather than learning the materials they do not like. If learners feel they are doing a real task and have the chances to choose their favorite books and the way of learning, they would perform more actively in English learning, that is, they would hold positive attitudes towards English and English learning.

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