

# Graded Readers as an Effective Strategy in Elementary ESL Teaching in China

## ABSTRACT

The current mode of teaching English in primary and secondary schools in China mainly revolves around reciting words and studying grammar, which are not only less efficient, but also very uninteresting to the students. This paper, by referring to the Input Hypothesis proposed by Stephen D. Krashen and some previous studies, discovers that introducing graded readers to elementary ESL classrooms in China can effectively build up the students' language competence and spark their interest in learning this second language, which will be very beneficial to their future study.

**Key words:** ESL; graded readers; elementary English; teaching strategy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As English is a very important subject in the educational system in China, learning English is integral to all stages of education for Chinese students, from kindergarten, primary school, secondary school to undergraduate, graduate and even PhD studies. Therefore, English as a school subject plays a critical role in students' education. Moreover, as a global language of communication, English is essential to broadening students' horizons and advancing cross-cultural communication. There are many problems, however, with the current state of English teaching in this country. In particular, the curriculum is not interesting, failing to capture the students' attention. Likewise, the pedagogy, which emphasizes grammar, vocabulary and test drills, fails to capture the students' attention. Consequently, many of them get tired of learning English in primary or secondary school, which in turn renders English a huge barrier to their future education. Therefore, it is requisite to reform the way English is taught in primary and secondary schools in China in order to help students establish a solid foundation in English learning. One effective approach is to introduce graded readers to elementary English classrooms.

Graded Readers are books of various genres that are specially created for learners of foreign languages (ERF, 2022). They are often chosen from famous stories or literary works and simplified to meet the different language proficiency of the readers. According to the Input Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982), a person's language skills develop naturally when being exposed to "comprehensive language input". In other words, acquisition is extremely important in learning a foreign language. Thus, theoretically speaking, graded readers can work as a powerful tool in building up this "comprehensive language input" and benefit foreign language learners in the long run.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT ELEMENTARY ENGLISH TEACHING IN CHINA

A common problem is found in foreign language teaching in K-12 education in China: the teachers are hard-working, while the students are not interested in learning (Zhang Yan, 2019). A major reason for this problem is the undesirable curricular design and lack of proper planning for the class. This is evident in the content, methodology, modes and notions of education, as well as the overall role that teachers play in this teaching process.

### 2.1 Unvaried Teaching Method

As Huang Wenze (2020) indicates, most English teachers follow their mother-tongue teaching method in China, which means that they emphasize the cultivation of test-oriented abilities because of the huge pressure to excel in the College Entrance Examination in China. Moreover, since primary and secondary school students are beginners, they are not used to classes given in English, and thereby teachers have to explain the vocabulary and grammatical rules in Chinese. The above-mentioned situation contributes to the student's lack of interest in learning English and passive performance in the class. All such problems have a significant negative influence on the students' learning of this second language in the future.

## **2.2 Monotonous Teaching Content**

At present, the majority of teachers of English in primary and secondary schools in China focus on teaching the linguistic knowledge of English, including vocabulary, phrases and grammar, rather than cultivating practical language skills for actual communication. For instance, in their English class, teachers mainly explain the grammatical structures of sentences found in the texts, seldom emphasizing how to apply them or how to understand them from the context. This practice tends to ruin the students' passion in learning this foreign language, especially when it has no way of application except in tests. Besides, English teachers often stick too much to the textbook and fail to extend the curriculum beyond the textbook. Moreover, very few teachers connect English with other related subjects, such as history and music. This makes the English class very tedious and boring. Thus, the teachers are unable to inspire students' passion for self-motivated learning or improve their learning efficiency.

## **2.3 Single Teaching Mode**

The current teaching model overemphasizes the "only" right answer, which neglects the cultivation of student's self-led learning skills, an essential way to the improvement of learning efficiency. In class, if students fail to get the "only" right answers a couple of times, they gradually become less engaged and lose interest in English. Some students even become diffident in learning this second language. In addition, teachers rarely create culturally or generationally appropriate scenarios for certain topics in class. This causes the students to feel that what they have learned has nothing to do with their life. The lack of attractive scenarios tends to render the language more abstract and more difficult to remember, which in turn leads to the students' frustration of learning English.

## **2.4 Limited Educational Concept**

In the teaching practice, many instructors in primary and secondary schools still hold the traditional educational concept that it is teachers, rather than students, who should lead the process in the classroom. Those teachers emphasize imparting knowledge to students and neglect the importance of fostering students' self-led learning ability. As a consequence, students are passive in learning and the class is inclined to lack a dynamic atmosphere, which leads to undesirable learning efficiency. According to a survey conducted by Li Yanlei, the English teachers' schooling also has great impact on their educational philosophy (2019). For example, compared with those holding a bachelor's or master's degree, teachers with an associate's degree or diploma are more likely to focus simply on imparting English knowledge. In other words, they pay more attention to grammar, vocabulary and syntax. Teachers with a more advanced degree are more likely to emphasize the cultivation of students' language using skills, which is a reflection of their teaching philosophy. Currently, many

teachers in primary or secondary schools, however, do not hold a bachelor's or master's degree. The conventional teaching practice, which focuses on grammar, vocabulary and syntax, is still popular in most of the Chinese schools. Those teachers' educational background, in a sense, limits the development of their teaching philosophy and constrains the progress of teaching reform in their classrooms.

### **2.5 Shift of Teacher's Role**

The roles that teachers play should shift during different stages of teaching. Before teaching in the classroom, teachers are planners. Throughout the process of teaching, teachers are also administrators, commentators, organizers, participants, facilitators, and supporters. After class, teachers serve as evaluators. Thus, teachers should change their roles as their teaching activities progress. Many teachers, unfortunately, are stuck in the role of administrator, which prevents students from expressing their ideas, being creative and fostering their language using competence.

There are many problems that curtail the efficiency and effectiveness of the teaching and learning in elementary English classrooms. Owing to these problems, the students tend to lose their interest in learning English and fail to be self-motivated. As for the teachers, their performance is often fairly limited despite their hard work. Therefore, this paper tries to introduce graded readers to the classroom in hope of providing an alternative approach to second language teaching.

## **3. IMPORTANCE OF GRADED READERS TO ELEMENTARY ENGLISH TEACHING**

Based on what has been mentioned above, there is certain limitation in the content, methodology, concept and teachers' roles for language teaching in the primary and secondary schools in China. Thus, it is of great necessity to ameliorate this situation. Yet, what should we start with? Based on both theory and practice, graded readers are found to be one of the efficient means to achieve this end.

### **3.1 Benefits of Reading in ESL Teaching**

To figure out why it matters to introduce graded readers to elementary English classroom, first we have to bear in mind what benefits reading could bring to second language learning.

Generally speaking, the way English is taught in primary or secondary schools in China is usually confined to assigning students burdensome tasks of rote memorization or doing worksheets. Undeniably, this way of teaching contributes to the improvement of the students' performance in tests; yet, it can hardly trigger their self-motivation in learning English. Moreover, the students would have no idea how to apply what they have acquired from rote memorization to actual speaking, reading or writing. Instead, teaching or learning through reading could overcome such drawbacks to a great extent. Many International and Chinese scholars have discovered the benefits of reading in second language acquisition. For instance, Krashen discovered "FVR (free voluntary reading) is one of the most powerful tools we have in language education.... It will not, by itself, produce the highest levels of competence; rather, it provides a foundation so that higher levels of proficiency may be achieved. When FVR is missing, these advanced levels are extremely difficult to attain" (2004). Hong Juan believed that reading English literary works can facilitate one's learning of this language, chiefly in building up vocabulary and phrases, comparing the alternative way of expression with their mother

tongue and then imitating it, cultivating one's intuition for the language, learning about foreign culture and fostering one's interest in learning English (2018).

First, learning the English language through reading is not as boring as the conventional methods. A great many reading materials incorporate stories with entertaining plots. Illustrated graded readers, for example, are very apt to serve as entry-level reading materials for primary school students in China. The charming illustrations and interesting stories would grab the students' attention and thus keep them reading on. In this way, the students' self-motivation would be aroused. Furthermore, in the course of reading, the students will learn the meaning of words or phrases from the context, which, unlike rote memorization, will facilitate their memorization. Furthermore, many idiomatic expressions that are often unfamiliar to the students in their daily study are found in English literary works. In the course of their reading, they could inadvertently learn and memorize many such expressions, which could embellish their writing and thus improve their school performance in English tests. Moreover, overtime elementary English learners will get to know better about the syntax of English sentence and various forms of expression. In addition to what they are taught about grammar at school, they can gradually internalize grammar, producing in turn idiomatic expressions in both spoken and written English instead of Chinglish ones. Therefore, with the help of reading, the students' English proficiency will be raised in multiple ways, and their efficiency of language learning will be improved as well.

### **3.2 Merits of Graded Readers**

Apart from what is taught in the textbook, supplementing English reading materials that are of great fun to the students can not only uplift their language skills but also trigger their interest in learning English as a foreign language, which they rarely have use of except in exams. The selection of proper reading materials for the students, therefore, is of vital importance. Here the students' age, English level and interests should also be taken into consideration. What is more important is that the reading materials should be both fascinating enough and gradually challenging. As He Qixin put, "in primary school the task of teaching is to lead the children to shift from follow-up reading to self-led reading and from mere curiosity for reading to the pursuit of knowledge, so as to gradually foster their reading habit. In secondary school, however, the task is to expand their scope of reading and help them keep up a good reading habit, in addition to grasping some basic skills of oral expression" (2020). Thus, what the educators should do in the phase of primary school is to cultivate the kids' interest in learning English as a second language and their habit of self-led reading, while in secondary school they should encourage the students to read extensively and express what they have learned from the reading in simple spoken English to develop their skills of oral expression.

Here, graded readers is one of the most ideal choices. Up to the present, a wide range of such reading materials have been published in the Chinese book market. The most notable ones include *The New International Standard English Graded Readers* jointly designed by He Qixin and Yang Xiaoming, two famous professors of English language teaching in China, and *Helbling Readers* introduced by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press. The former incorporates various stages of education, covering kindergarten, primary school and secondary school, with very entertaining contents, such as those of *Aesop's Fables* or from traditional Chinese stories, such as *Havoc in Heaven*. *Helbling Readers* is a series of graded readers that fit students in China ranging from lower grades of primary school to the second year of high school. It has many rewritten stories from famous literary works, such

as *Peter Pan*, *Fireball's Heart*, *Jack's Endless Summer* and *The Fisherman and His Soul*. According to Wu Hongying (2021), "graded readers, by catering to the demand of students of different levels and creating a wide space of selection for them, greatly motivated their inner drive for learning". Therefore, these graded readers, with their amusing contents and corresponding recordings, serve as quite ideal teaching or reading materials for school students.

#### **4 HOW TO APPLY GRADED READERS TO THE TEACHING**

After the status quo of elementary English education in China as well as the importance of introducing graded readers to primary and secondary English classes having been discussed, the next issue to be considered is in what way educators could achieve this goal. As primary and secondary English teaching focuses differently, the form of introducing graded readers to the classroom should also vary.

##### **4.1 The Phase of Primary School**

For the phase of primary school, as educators should pay attention to fostering the students' interest in learning English as a second language and their habit in self-led reading, the reading materials they are supposed to select should be entertaining enough to grab the students' attention. Illustrated graded readers here serve as great teaching materials. *The New International Standard English Graded Readers* and *Helbling Readers* mentioned above fit quite aptly into this category. The beautiful illustrations from the books, plus entertaining stories taken from famous literary works, would certainly arouse the students' interest in learning English. Shi Yingchun discovered that the way of teaching English with illustrated readers can efficiently enhance the students' competence in speaking, listening, reading and writing, with fairly remarkable progress in reading and speaking (2017).

How to incorporate illustrated graded readers into actual teaching in English classes in primary school? As Su Luxia proposed based on her own practices,

"after finishing the unit titled *We love animals*, the teacher can introduce such illustrated readers as *Brown Bear, What Do You See?* to the class. By guiding the students to read illustrated readers, he or she can enrich the content of the textbook and help students digest better what they have learned from the classroom, coupled with developing an interest in learning English and improving their English proficiency step by step" (2021).

This mode of teaching is basically using illustrated graded readers as supplement to the textbook.

A better choice, however, is to expressly set up a reading course to encourage the students to attach greater importance to the amount of time they spend on reading, thus expanding their scope of reading. In the reading class, the teacher is supposed to lead the students to read the illustrated graded readers, learn new words and help them digest what they have learned in various ways. For instance, when treating such stories as *The Lion and the Mosquito*, *The North Wind and the Sun*, *The Fox and His Shadow*, *the Crow and the Dove*, and *The Horse and the Donkey* (He, Q. & Yang X., 2018), the instructor can ask the students questions regarding what has been talked about in the stories or the morals conveyed therein to solicit their expression of the content of the stories in their own words in their native language (they are unable do so in English as they are merely beginners of the second language). Moreover, he or she can assign the students tasks of loud reading to exercise their English pronunciation. After finishing every chapter or story he or she can give a quiz on the new words and phrases, in order to consolidate those they have learned from the new chapter.

## **4.2 The Phase of Secondary School**

In the phase of secondary school, as the aim of English teaching varies, the way of teaching should also change accordingly. The purpose of teaching during this period needs to center around expanding the students' scope of reading and building up their vocabulary, plus cultivating their basic skills of oral expression. While designing the reading class, the teacher should supplement more reading materials, which means guiding the students to read more increasingly challenging graded readers with a faster pace. The way of putting this method into practice is the same as that of primary school. The reading can either be incorporated into classroom teaching or be carried on in a reading class. When leading the students to read the stories, the teacher can expound more about the grammar as teaching grammar through reading will facilitate the students' understanding of the grammatical rules. Furthermore, the instructor can design some simple interpretation exercises based on the graded readers. This way of teaching, apart from exercising their skills of spoken English and improving their reading capacity, can build up their preliminary skills in translation, which will be very beneficial for their language study in the future.

Another quite captivating exercise is role play. Grouping the students after having finished a story, the teacher can assign them the task of dramatizing the story on stage. This fascinating way of learning will arouse the students' interest and trigger their desire for self-expression. Thus, not only will they have a greater interest in learning this foreign language but also have opportunities to practice what they have learned and their spoken English. In addition, as students in the secondary schools in China are faced with considerable pressure for examinations, the teacher can combine the reading class with test-oriented exercises. For example, after having finished the reading of a book, the instructor can give students some worksheets on grammar, vocabulary or reading related to the exams, which can both test and consolidate the progress they have made through the reading and build up their confidence in learning English through graded readers. Thus, by applying graded readers to the English teaching of secondary school in China, the teacher can efficiently improve many skills of the students, including reading, vocabulary and oral expression.

## **CONCLUSION**

In sum, in view of the status quo of the current elementary English education in China, it is of great necessity to introduce graded readers to the English classes of primary and secondary schools, thus laying a solid foundation for the students' learning of this second language in the next stage. Some graded readers currently published in China can serve as great teaching materials fit to be introduced. The way of introduction can either be a form of supplementary module to what is taught in the textbook inserted in the normal English teaching or the creation of a special reading class to enhance the training of the students' reading skills and expand their scope of reading. As the goal of English education varies from primary school to secondary school, the graded readers to be used should also be of varying difficulties and taught with different approaches. In a word, the introduction of graded readers to elementary English teaching can not only spark the students' interest in learning this foreign language, but well prepare them for future learning. More importantly, graded readers, apart from helping the students acquire a second language efficiently, can improve the students' ability in multiple ways, thus benefiting them for a whole lifetime.

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