The Use of Picture-word Inductive Model and Readers' Theater to Improve Chinese EFL Learners' Vocabulary Learning Achievement

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary, as the fundament of any language, is one of the most crucial aspects of language learning. And it also draws great attention from Chinese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL). This study conducted an experiment to examine the effectiveness of the picture-word inductive model (PWIM) and readers' theater on Chinese primary EFL learners' vocabulary learning achievement. The samples were 34 fifth-grade students from a primary school of China. The students received a vocabulary learning treatment with the lesson plans constructed based on the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater using Chinese Cheng-yu, and an English vocabulary learning achievement test was conducted before and after the treatment. Results of the test showed that the students' mean scores in the posttest were significantly improved than in the pre-test, and results of the questionnaire showed that the participants were highly satisfied with learning English via picture-word inductive model and readers' theater. The results indicated that learning English via picture-word inductive model and readers' theater is an effective way for improving learners' English vocabulary learning achievement as it provides the visual support and opportunities for learners to engage in vocabulary acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

With the proceeding of globalization, international communications among all countries are becoming increasingly frequent and closer. In the meantime, English is functioning as a bridge connecting people speaking different languages. As a basic element of any languages, vocabulary is one of the most crucial aspects of language learning (Chen & Chung, 2008). Laufer and Hulstijn (1998) claimed that vocabulary knowledge is the prerequisite for learning a foreign language, and vocabulary learning should be a lifetime task for language learners. Hence, improving learners' vocabulary learning ability is the essential task for language teachers.

Picture-word inductive model is originally developed by Calhoun (1999) to help young learners improve their English literacy with the aids of pictures. It is an inductive teaching method that develops not only learners' vocabulary learning ability but also the overall aspects of English literacy. Readers' theater, in education settings, "is an activity that requires students to perform a text (Young & Nageldinger, 2017, p. 50)." It is a teaching technique that appears in language classrooms frequently in recent years. Different from traditional theaters, readers' theater requires no props, no memorization, no memorized lines, and even no costumes, which encourages the students to read scripts loudly with appropriate expressions (Martinez et al., 1998; Young & Nageldinger, 2017).

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In this study, the studyer intends to implement the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater with Chinese Cheng-yu stories for improving Chinese primary EFL learners' vocabulary learning achievement. Chinese Cheng-yu is a typical unit in the Chinese lexical system, typically in a four-word pattern, and is conventionally used by Chinese speakers like idioms. It is an effective communication tool in Chinese language and serves as a vital component in Chinese vocabulary learning. Chinese Cheng-yu is very concise, or even abstract in that most of them contain a vivid story and aim at enlightening people of the wisdom or philosophy of life. Therefore, this study attempts to teach English vocabulary to Chinese EFL learners by using the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater under the context of Chinese Cheng-yu.

Statement of the Problem

Since China's reform and opening up in 1978, the past decades have witnessed an explosion of the communications between China and the world. Considering the role of English as a lingua franca, the importance of learning English is realized by every Chinese, and hence China becomes the country with the largest number of EFL learners in the world currently. In China, having a good mastery of English is the essential route to step into higher education, find a good job, get promotion, and take part in international communications. China has been increasingly attaching importance to its English education. In 2001, the Ministry of Education of China listed English as a compulsory course in its primary education, starting from grade three. "Learning English, starting from the kids" has become a common-sense for each Chinese.

However, despite the money and resources paid, the outcomes of China's English education are unsatisfactory (Yang, 2016). According to the test and score data summary for TOEFL iBT Tests in 2018, the overall mean score of Chinese test takers was 80, ranking19 among the 36 Asian test-taking countries (TOFEL, 2018). It means that the English proficiency of Chinese EFL learners is lower than the average level of that of other Asian EFL/ESL learners. For a large number of Chinese EFL students, they cannot even speak English after 10 years of English learning experience. The unsatisfactory English performance of Chinese EFL learners was the result of China's problematic English education. China has always been following the traditional teaching approach (Wei & Su, 2012), adopting outdated teaching methods, and rarely conducting teaching with the application of theories. To improve its English education, China should start from the fundamental education and begin with the primary elements of English teaching.

Laufer and Hulstijn (1998) claimed that vocabulary knowledge is the prerequisite for learning a foreign language, and vocabulary learning should be the lifetime task for language learners. The importance of effective vocabulary teaching has gotten much attention since 1970' (McDonald, 2010). In China, the amount of vocabulary mastery is an essential aspect of assessing students' English proficiency. However, vocabulary acquisition is considered to be one of the biggest obstacles in English learning for Chinese EFL learners. Under the traditional grammar-translation approach, Chinese students get used to following the "listen-repeat-memorize" pattern of vocabulary learning (Yang, 2000), while previous study showed that it is inadequate to memorize the separate word form with fixed meaning for learners to build up their lexical knowledge (Wei, 2007).

Basing on the above-mentioned problems, this study aims at improving Chinese primary EFL students' vocabulary learning achievement through picture-word inductive model and readers' theater. The study questions of this study are: first, are picture-word inductive model and readers' theater effective for improving Chinese EFL learners' vocabulary learning achievement?; second, what are the learners' opinions towards learning English through the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are 1) to examine the effectiveness of picture-word inductive model and readers' theater on Chinese primary EFL students' vocabulary learning achievement; 2) to explore the students' opinions towards learning English via picture-word inductive model and readers' theater.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Picture-word Inductive Model

Picture-word inductive model is originally developed by Calhoun (1999), which was applied to help young learners to improve English literacy with the aids of the picture. As Calhoun (1999, p. 21) stated that "picture-word inductive model is an inquiry-oriented language arts strategy that uses pictures containing familiar objects and actions to elicit words from children's listening and speaking vocabularies." Moreover, the picture-word inductive model is not only suitable for young learners to achieve language literacy but also for old beginners who learn language from the very beginning (Calhoun, 1999). According to Calhoun (1999), the instructional sequence of the model contains the following steps:

1) Select a picture.
2) Ask students to identify what they see in the picture.
3) Label the picture parts identified.
4) Read and review the picture-word chart aloud.
5) Ask students to read the words and to classify the words into a variety of groups.
6) Read and review the picture-word chart (say the word, spell it, say it again).
7) Add words, if desired, to the picture-word chart and to the word banks.
8) Lead students to create a title for the picture-word chart. Ask students to think about the information on the chart and what they want to say about it.
9) Ask students to generate sentences or paragraphs about the picture-word chart.
10) Read and review the sentences and paragraphs.

Readers' Theater

Readers' theater is initially utilized in reading fluency improvement. Many scholars have given definition to readers' theater. Martinez et al., (1998, p. 326) claimed that "readers' theater is an interpretive reading activity in which readers use their voice to bring characters to life." Keehn, Harmon & Shoho (2008) stated that readers' theater is an educational practice that transfers a text into a script. More specifically, Worthy & Prater (2002) defined readers' theater as a teaching method that provides opportunities for learners to practice the different skills related to language learning. In this activity, students are asked to read the script or texts in front of the audience as a performance. The texts can be anything, including the literature, notification, poetry, parodies, or students created by themselves. In order to achieve the performance, students are required to reread and rehearse the script or text again and again, which can effectively improve the students' language skills in different aspects (Young & Nageldinger, 2017; Millin & Rinehart, 1999).

Considering the characteristics of Readers' theater, a five-day instructional plan for readers' theater was developed by Martinez et al. (1998, p. 331):

Day 1: The teacher introduces the script, and organizes the mini-lesson that helps to make comprehension.

Day 2: Students gather in repertory groups, and the teacher provides help.

Day 3: The procedures are the same as Day 2. The teacher assigns the specific reading part for students.

Day 4: Students practice the part in the repertory group.

Day 5: Repertory groups perform in front of the class.

Chinese Cheng-yu

As one of the four ancient civilizations in the world, China has a rich historical culture and profound traditional culture. In five thousand years, Chinese people invented a tremendous number of cultural treasures which were inherited generations by generations. Chinese Cheng-yu is one of the precise and essential lexical part in the Chinese lexical system by its unique formation and wisdom background. Chinese Cheng-yu is one of the four types of formulaic expressions, together with collections, two-part allegorical sayings, and proverbs.

The study about Cheng-yu is one of the most popular sessions in the Chinese lexical system. It is the fixed phrase that is conventionally used with characteristics of history and nationality. Nine chapters of Chengyu (Ni & Yao, 1990) defined Chinese Cheng-yu as a set of phrases, which has complete meaning, stable structure, concise form, and has been used as a whole unit by people for a long time. Zhou, Zhou and Chen (2004, p. 28) also stated that "Chinese four-character idioms (Cheng-yu) are a kind of concise and meaningful phrases that have been in long public usage."

It should be noted that understanding a Cheng-yu not only involves its form but also its related background story. Generally speaking, most Cheng-yu are originated from historical stories or mythologies that give enlightenment to people. Therefore, many Cheng-yu stories are purposefully chosen as teaching materials in Chinese textbooks.

Adopting Chinese Cheng-yu and its background story to English vocabulary learning has the following benefits. First, it is practical to teach learners vocabulary by the Cheng-yu story. As Shin (2006) stated that appropriate use of stories and context with background knowledge in L1 could help young learners acquire languages better. Hence, teaching English by incorporating appropriate Cheng-yu content is a new attempt and practical consideration.

Furthermore, "Chinese-Cheng-yu are the most vivid and interesting part of fixed phrases in modern Chinese lexicons (Fang, 2007, p. 2)." Teaching vocabulary using Chinese Cheng-yu stimulates learners to acquire vocabulary effectively. Apart from this, Elli & Brewster (2014) argued that teaching vocabulary using stories offers vivid and clear context, and the illustration can significantly help learners convey meaning. The context and illustration of the amusing plot can enable learners to remember vocabularies faster and firmly.

With the consideration of the above reasons, Chinese Cheng-yu and its background story were applied in this study to investigate the effects of the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater in vocabulary learning achievement.

METHOD

Population and Samples

The population of this study was 100 students from 3 classes of the 5th-grade in Tieshan primary school, Changsha, Hunan province, who were studying English in the first semester of the academic year 2020 in China. By using cluster random sampling, 34 students were chosen as the samples of this study.

Instrumentation

There were two categories of instruments: instruments used in the study procedure and instruments used in data collection. The instruments used in this study procedure were three lesson plans based on the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater using Chinese Cheng-yu as the content. The vocabulary learning achievement test and a questionnaire were the instruments used for collecting data.

Data Collection

Before the treatment, the 34 students received a pre-test to examine their vocabulary background knowledge. Then, the three lesson plans were conducted. The experiment lasted for six weeks, with two weeks for each lesson plan. Next, the post-test was delivered to the participants to check their English vocabulary learning achievement after the treatment. Finally, the questionnaire survey was conducted to collect the participants' opinions towards learning English via picture-word inductive model and readers' theater.

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Data Analysis

This study employed a pre-test-treatment-post-test, pre-experimental design. The data from the pre-test and post-test of the vocabulary learning achievement was analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The data from the questionnaire was analyzed using mean ($\bar{x}$), standard deviation (S.D.).

RESULTS

The results were shown according to the two objectives of this study.

The Participants' English Vocabulary Learning Achievement Before and After the Treatment

Figure 1 shows the participants' pre-test and post-test scores in the vocabulary learning achievement test. As can be seen from the figure, before learning English through the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater, the lowest score of the pre-test was 8 (one student), and the highest score was 24 (one student). After learning the lessons, the lowest score of the post-test was enhanced to 10 (one student) and the highest score to 33 (one student).

In addition, as shown in Table 1, the mean score of the post-test was 23.32, which was significantly higher than that of the pre-test (16.85) at .05 level. This revealed that the participants' English vocabulary learning achievement was significantly improved after learning English via picture-word inductive model and readers' theater.

The Participants' Opinions Towards Learning English Via the Picture-word Inductive Model and Readers' Theater

In the questionnaire, the participants were asked to respond to ten closed questions related to learning English through the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater by ticking a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The results were shown in Table 2 below.

As can be seen from Table 2, the assessment issue with the highest score indicates that most of the participants strongly agreed that the knowledge from the lessons could
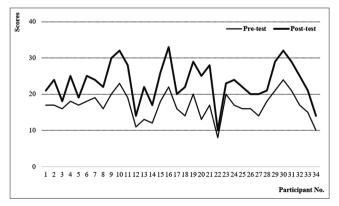
be applied to daily life use ($\bar{x}$ = 4.706). And the assessment issue with the lowest score reveals that most of the participants agreed that the learning activities were interesting ($\bar{x}$ = 4.324). The overall mean score of the questionnaire is 4.512, which means the majority of the participants showed a high satisfaction towards the learning.

In conclusion, the results showed that the vocabulary learning achievement of the fifth-grade students was significantly improved after taking the lessons through the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater, and the participants strongly agreed that learning English via

Table 1. Comparison of the participants' mean scores in the pre-test and post-test

Mode of assessment	n	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	M.D.	t	Sig.
Pre-test	34	16.85	3.61	6.47	13.53*	.000
Post-test	34	23.32	5.36			

*p<.05

Table 2. The participants' opinions towards learning English via the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater

Assessment issue		$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Meaning
1	The lesson is an enjoyable learning experience.	4.618	0.493	Strongly Agree
2	The contents of these lessons are appropriate for my level.	4.382	0.604	Agree
3	The learning materials are well-designed.	4.588	0.657	Strongly Agree
4	The learning steps are well-arranged.	4.412	0.657	Agree
5	The learning activities are interesting.	4.324	0.638	Agree
6	The learning activities help me to master the knowledge effectively.	4.500	0.615	Strongly Agree
7	Learning English through the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater can improve my vocabulary learning achievement effectively.	4.441	0.613	Agree
8	The knowledge from the lessons can be implied to daily life use.	4.706	0.524	Strongly Agree
9	This kind of learning can enhance my motivation to learn English.	4.588	0.609	Strongly Agree
10	I like to learn English and vocabulary through the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater.	4.559	0.561	Strongly Agree
Total		4.512	0.597	Strongly Agree

Figure 1. The participants' pre-test and post-test scores in the vocabulary learning achievement (Total score = 40 points)

the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater can effectively improve their English learning achievement.

DISCUSSION

The results indicated that the participants' vocabulary learning achievement got significant improvement after learning English through the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater. In addition, the result of the questionnaire showed that the participants strongly agreed that picture-word inductive model and readers' theater could effectively improve their English vocabulary learning achievement and enhance their learning motivation. The positive results may be explained from the following aspects:

First of all, the picture-word inductive model is an appropriate approach to teach young learners vocabulary. Mansourzadeh (2014, p. 57) stated that "the use of pictures could attract the students' curiosity in learning new vocabularies." He also verified that teaching vocabulary by using pictures is advantageous over other audio-visual aids for young learners. Jazuli, Din and Yunus (2019) also claimed that colorful pictures help learners, especially lower learners, acquire the vocabulary memorably. Moreover, the picture-word inductive model is an inductive teaching way, which encourages learners to acquire knowledge by themselves.

It could be found that all the steps of the picture-word inductive model were designed to guide learners to share opinions and discuss rather than receive knowledge from the teacher directly. The participants got learning achievement when they were encouraged to extract the rules by themselves. There were lots of academic outcomes in recent years that applying the picture-word inductive model in language instruction. Jannah (2020) proved that participants' English vocabulary mastery got great improvement after the treatment of the picture-word inductive model. Hamdani (2020) did classroom action study to investigate the effectiveness of the picture-word inductive model. The result suggested that the participants' vocabulary learning ability was improved especially in the aspects of spelling and pronunciation. Zhao and Lornklang (2019) also conducted a study by applying a picture-word inductive model to improve grade six students' vocabulary acquisition using Chinese culture. The findings revealed that the picture-word inductive model could enhance the learners' vocabulary acquisition effectively.

Besides the picture-word inductive model, readers' theater also played an indispensable role in this study. Readers' theater is "a staged presentation of a piece of text or selected pieces of different texts that are thematically linked" (Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995, p. 406). Learners are asked to read the script in order to make a good performance in front of the class. In this reading process, the learners have to read and understand the target word many times and to reach the aim of knowing a word. Keehn, Harmon and Shoho (2008) stated that readers' theater could effectively improve learners' vocabulary acquisition because the repeated reading exposes the new words, which enables the learners to review the vocabularies in the context again and again.

Moreover, Millin and Rinehart (1999) claimed that language learners could get improvement in vocabulary recognition and knowledge of meaning in the procedures of readers' theater. Chinese EFL learners usually acquire English vocabulary relying on vocabulary books by rote memorization. Such separated vocabulary learning strategy not only caused the low efficiency of learning outcomes but also degrade their motivation towards English learning. In comparison, readers' theater can enhance the learners' motivation to practice English so as to improve their vocabulary learning achievement. Moran (2006) stated that readers' theater is a rich addition that enhances early learners' motivation and improves their language literacy. In English teaching, assigning appropriate tasks can ignite learners' motivation and lead to more satisfactory learning outcomes. In Moran's (2006) opinion, the learners will get motivation intrinsically if they know that they will perform readers' theater in front of the classroom, which is different from the traditional English classroom which asks the students to read the article repeatedly.

Last but not least, choosing Chinese Cheng-yu as the content is also the key element for implementing this study successful. Most of the Chinese Cheng-yu are extracted from the stories in daily life, which provide background knowledge for learners in English learning. As Shin (2006) stated that appropriate use of stories and context with background knowledge in L1 could help young learners acquire languages better. Chinese Cheng-yu got more attention in English instruction in recent years. Some scholars (Wei, 2019; Shao, 2019) found that Chinese Cheng-yu stories have positive effects on Chinese students' English language learning, such as helping learners comprehend English knowledge intensively and igniting learners' motivation.

According to the questionnaire survey, the participants hold that the contents of this learning are enjoyable, and they liked to study English in that way. Take the first lesson as an example. The Cheng-yu "Borrowing power to do evil" is about a story that is related to animals, which talks about the conflict between a tiger and a fox. The fox cheated the tiger successfully in the end. This story is often heard and well-remembered, and was chosen to use in the textbook for primary students to improve their native language literacy. It contains many vocabularies related to animals which added usefulness and entertainment to the learning content. Moreover, mastering the English version of the Cheng-yu story is a challenging task with a sense of accomplishment, which could improve their motivation and engagement in English learning.

CONCLUSION

This study attempted to improve Chinese EFL learners' vocabulary learning achievement through the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater by using Chinese Cheng-yu stories. It examined the effectiveness of the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater on Chinese primary EFL learners' vocabulary learning achievement and explored the learners' opinions towards this way of learning. The experiment lasted for six weeks with 34 fifth-grade Chinese EFL learners as the samples. An English vocabulary learning achievement test and a questionnaire survey were used to collect the data.

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Results of the pre-test and post-test showed that after the treatment, the participants' English vocabulary learning achievement was improved significantly, which indicated that the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater with the incorporation of Chinese Cheng-yu is an effective way for English vocabulary learning. Results of the questionnaire showed that the students were highly satisfied with this way of learning, reporting that it was interesting, practical, and effective. The positive results of this study can be attributed to the following reasons: First of all, the colorful pictures could help the students, especially those lower-level students, acquire the vocabulary memorably (Jazuli, Din & Yunus, 2019). The lessons of the picture-word inductive model begin with a picture or photograph, which contains a lot of images and objects. The students were asked to identify the objects in the pictures, recognize and read the words repeatedly. This move could enable the students to recall their prior knowledge and acquire new knowledge at the same time. In addition, the inductive teaching way developed the students' ability to make generalizations, which enable them to know the conventions of language (Calhoun,1999). Moreover, the readers' theater also played an important role in this study. The picture-word inductive model focused more on the vocabulary recognition, and the readers' theater provided the content for the learners to acquire vocabulary. Keehn, Harmon and Shoho (2008) suggested that repeating the scripts of readers' theater can increase vocabulary exposure, which can enhance the acquisition of vocabularies. Finally, the Chinese Cheng-yu story offered appropriate learning materials and interesting content that enabled the learners to have an enjoyable experience in English learning.

From this study, there are some suggestions for further study that are: 1) Even though the learners' vocabulary learning achievement got a significant improvement via the picture-word inductive model and readers' theater, but there was not any retention test to exam whether the students' ability to command the learned vocabularies could be retained for a long time. So, further study can adapt the present study, and deliver a retention test after a few months later. 2) Chinese Cheng-yu is a good resource in language teaching. Further study can do more study on Cheng-yu so that the heritage of China can be not only heritage but also the abundant wealth in foreign language development.

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