A Corpus-Based Analysis Comparing Vocabulary Input from Storybooks and Textbooks

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ABSTRACT

The present study was an attempt to investigate the potential advantage of using picture books to help young children's English acquisition by examining the corpora in the 65 storybooks read to a group of EFL children in Wang & Lee (2007). Our analysis included five categories: (a) total number of word tokens, (b) total number of headwords, (c) parts of speech, (d) theme related word usage, and (e) frequency of word recurrence in the stories. The results of this corpus analysis were compared with the vocabulary provided by three representative textbook series used in the Taipei area. The results show that children listening to the 65 books obtained vocabulary input that was far larger than that provided by any textbook series used in public schools, with more overall words and more different headwords. More content words (nouns, adjectives, and verbs) recycled three or more times within the 65 books than in the text series designed for the six elementary years. Also, the number of words that appeared in the books with a common theme was about two thirds of the vocabulary requirement set by the Ministry of Education. These results explain Wang & Lee's finding that EFL children who hear stories become independent readers after only four years, while most students cannot reach this level after six years of instruction.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the proper teaching material is no less crucial than the use of the proper teaching methods in the field of language education. Only a few published writings, however, have discussed the problem caused by the textbooks used in public schools (Chan, 2000) and the lack of a standardized requirement for the amount of vocabulary students are expected to learn from school regulated textbooks (Yang, 2006).The goal of this paper is thus to consider the issue of materials for children learning EFL, an important means of providing comprehensible input for second language development.

Textbooks are currently the main materials used in the English curriculum in public schools. Most teachers use the texts, which consist mostly of dialogues and the exercises on phonics and grammar, as the central class activities for two 40 minutes sessions per week. An important goal is to reach the requirement for vocabulary acquisition set by the Ministry of Education (MOE). Yang (2006) has pointed out that the English requirement for elementary pupils set by the MOE is only 380 words. This is far less than what is needed to read most authentic texts: Studies show that the most frequently occurring 1000 word families cover about three fourths of the words in English texts and 2000 word families covers about 80% (Nation, 1990 & 2001). It is unlikely that our elementary school students will be able to actually use English in any way after six years with only 380 words. The situation becomes even more worrisome when we consider that junior high school students in Taiwan are required to know 2,000 words, about 1,200 word families (MOE, 2003).

This study thus intends to ask how and where our EFL children will get input of sufficient quantity and quality that will help them fill this gap. A related question is whether schools provide our children with the chance to apply what they have learned in independent reading. To answer this question, some scholars in Taiwan have recommended including a reading program that is independent of any language arts classes, with a focus on comprehension, instead of analyzing words and patterns (Chang, 2007). It has also been suggested that rich input, e.g. stories with complete contexts, should be provided (Li, 2007).

Interviews conducted by Lee and Wang (2008) provide some insight into the factors preventing teachers

from following these suggestions. In addition to the time constraint, a lack of the knowledge of how to do read-alouds, and the difficulty of book selection for pupils of different language proficiency levels, two main reasons were considered to be obstacles: (1) pressure on the teachers to help students pass the language proficiency test required by Taipei County (where the interview was conducted) to meet the MOE requirement, and (2) their unswerving belief that reading stories is fun and therefore cannot be a serious and effective way of teaching English.

These findings reveal a general misconception about storytelling in the teaching of English as a foreign language and a serious deficiency in knowledge of the abundant research results on the impact of storytelling on L1/L2 children's language and literacy development. A number of research studies support the multifaceted effects of storytelling on children's language development in L1, including vocabulary, reading comprehension, and expressive language (Krashen, 2004; Lee & Wang, 2007; Trelease, 2006; Also see Wang for an extensive review). These studies all confirmed that telling stories to children helps with pupils' reading improvement and vocabulary acquisition.

In Taiwan, research on storytelling is still in its infancy, with few empirical studies on effectiveness, but several studies have been done on how children's attitudes toward learning English changed and how they developed more interest and confidence in learning English and reading English (see Wang, 2007, for an extensive review).

Wang and Lee (2007) may be, thus far, the first longitudinal study done in Taiwan on storytelling, a four-year ethnographic observational study with 10 EFL Taiwanese children in an after-school program. In this study, sixty-five storybooks were read to children who had had little to no English background. Chapter books were introduced in the third year, and students had progressed sufficiently in English so that they were able to participate in sustained silent reading in year four, using authentic English books. This is an unusual and encouraging result, even when we take into consideration that the storytelling experience was done in an after-school class.

The present study therefore was an attempt to further investigate the possible advantage of using picture books for young children's English acquisition. By examining the vocabulary in the storybooks used in Wang and Lee, and comparing them to the content of textbooks used in school instruction, we hope to provide an empirical foundation for the positive results seen with the use of storybooks in class.

METHOD

In this study, we present a corpus analysis of two types of input: The three most representative textbook series designed for pupils from grades 1 to 6 in Taiwan, and texts of authentic storybooks, investigating which kind of input has a better chance of providing children with the vocabulary they are expected to acquire.

Materials

Two sets of reading materials were included in the corpus analysis: Storybooks and textbooks.

Storybooks

In Wang & Lee (2007), 65 storybooks were read aloud to pupils in EFL classrooms during a four year period. This took place in an after-school program taught by one of us (Y.W.). The choice of books to be read was based on the instructor's experience with young children in EFL classes, and was consistent with results of research showing which kinds of books stimulate children's curiosity and capture their attention (Berlyne, 1960, cited in Elley, 1989). For instance, The True Story of the Three Little Pigs was read to the children. This version takes the familiar Three Little Pigs text and presents a different point of view, told from the point of view of the wolf. Children were very interested in this book.

Several stories in The Little Critter series use humor to deal with the situations children frequently have to deal with, e.g. problems with bullies in school, not being invited to a party when most of their friends were, and losing a ball game. The classic Frog and Toad series vividly illustrates how good friends tolerate and take care of each other.

Textbooks[1]

Table 1. Features in Each Text Series

Text series	Longman/Longman English		Hess Hi ABC		Starter/Joy English
Common features in each text series	.	Vocabulary	.	New Words (Vocabulary)	Vocabulary & Sentence Patterns
	.	Language focus (Sentence Patterns)	.	Let's Practice (Sentence Patterns)	.
	.	Story (Dialogues)	.	Let's Talk (Dialogues)	. Dialogues
	.	Sounds (Phonics)	.	Phonics/ Let's Spy (Phonics)	. Phonics & Practice
Other	.	Activity (games, matching, or puzzles)	.	Let's have Fun! (chants or songs)	. Practice Reading & Writing (comprehension questions using pictures)
	.	Review (Comprehension check by listening or reading)	.	Review (Dialogues using words and patterns in previous units)	. Everyday English (Phrases, short sentences)
	.	Culture and Festival			. Culture and Festival

According to our discussions with several elementary schools and text publishers, among the most widely used texts for children in EFL in Taiwan are Longman English, Hess Hi ABC, and Joy Starter/ English. Each series contains 12 volumes and each volume contains five to six units. Nearly all schools base their English curriculum on the text series they select, and use the text's activities and exercises, including dialogues, short stories, writing and grammar exercises, and phonics and pronunciation exercises. Frequent quizzes and tests are administered.   There are more similarities than differences among the three text series. Table 1 shows the features common to all three series as well as aspects that are not shared by all three.

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1 Please note that only the materials used in public schools were considered because private schools may have more instructional hours, better stocked libraries, and more teachers (native speakers and non-native speakers). These advantages tend only to be available to pupils from families with a socio-economic status higher than the average.

Identifications of Words to be Analyzed

Word Count: Word, Headword, and Word Family

Prior to our analysis, a clear definition of words to be counted is necessary. In analyzing the number of words that can be encountered in authentic storybooks and textbooks, it is important to distinguish "word," "headword" and "word family." The word "read" and its morphological inflections, such as "reading," "reads," "read" (the past tense) belong to a headword; while "reads," "readable," and "readability," which are three words, belong to one word family (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Yang, 2006, pp. 35-36). In actuality, it has been difficult to reach an agreed-upon standard of counting words, and different corpus systems, e.g. the Brown corpus (1982, cited in Nation, 2001), the Carrol,

Davis, and Richman corpus (1971), and Michael West's General Service List (1953), have different definitions for these terms, and certainly have different categorizations. However, according to Nation (2001), if the research is based on a well-designed corpus, about 80% agreement can be reached.

Eyckmans (2004, cited in Yang, 2006) has estimated that there are approximately 5,000 words in 3,000 word families in English; Yang thus used the ratio 5:3 when presenting her analysis and arguments, e.g. if one knows 2,000 words, then s/he may know 1,200 word families. This study followed the same ratio in presenting our results so that a broader comparison across studies can be made.

What to Include, What to Exclude, and Why

In our main analyses, high frequency words, such as the, a, an, and, it, in, on, you, I, etc., were not included. According to previous research results (Gardner, 2004 & 2008; Nation, 1990 & 2001), these words belong to the first 1,000 most frequent word families in English and cover nearly 74.1% of English texts. These words are also frequently taught in textbooks.

While high frequency words may be acquired or taught in nearly all materials, the words we are interested in are those that do not appear in textbooks and can probably only be encountered in authentic (not simplified) children's books. We predict that it is the content words, e.g. adjectives, nouns, and verbs, appearing in the stories that can help meet the challenge of developing enough vocabulary to become an independent reader. Children acquire vocabulary when listening to stories from the context of the story itself, and often from adult readers making special efforts to make the story comprehensible (Elley, 1989).

In addition, it is claimed when children hear several stories that deal with a single theme or are written by the same author, vocabulary is naturally recycled, which enhances acquisition (Hwang & Nation, 1989; Krashen, 1985). These considerations led this study to focus on three aspects: parts of speech (with a focus on nouns, adjectives, and verbs), theme-related corpus, and frequency of word recurrence.

Rationale for the Three Aspects of Analysis and Comparison

Parts of speech. According to Elley (1989), nouns are much more easily acquired by young learners than verbs and adjectives. In Elley (1989), children made a 24.2 percent gain on nouns by reading without discussion and a 5.9 percent gain on adjectives and verbs. With some brief explanations of the word meanings, however, "an appealing 8- to 10-minute story, read three times… can produce 40% gains in vocabulary for typical children" (p. 186). Since nouns, adjectives, and verbs are words that are considered essentially important in the description associated with the messages or meanings in the story, this study focused the analysis on nouns, adjectives and verbs. Adverbs were not included in this analysis because of their relatively few appearances in the stories and textbooks.

Theme-related or single author corpus. Nation (2008) demonstrated that it is easier to learn words if they are presented in meaningful clusters, e.g. grouping "sunshine, the beach, going for a walk" may be more effective than learning the days of a week all together. "Narrow reading," reading on one topic or several books by one author (Krashen, 1985), provides readers with "a familiar ground" to enter the reading mainstream. He contends that "each topic has its own vocabulary, and to some extent its own style…Narrow input provides many exposures to these new items in a comprehensible context and built-in review" (p. 73). Wang and Lee (2007) found that some stories of the 65 books used could be grouped in terms of their themes, such as relationships, emotions, disciplines, and fanaticism. It was reasoned that when the teacher presented stories on the same theme, the children would recall the words and stories they had previously heard, and would have a better chance of acquiring the new vocabulary.

Frequency of word recurrence. Following the claims of narrow reading, it is hypothesized that words that recycle in the stories, e.g. words having a higher recurrence rate, facilitate vocabulary acquisition. Also, as shown by Elley (1989), a story read aloud three times helped ESL children improve about 40% in the vocabulary measure. Gardner (2004) reported that there is a greater proportion of general high frequency

words in children's narrative stories than in children's expository materials, which places less of a lexical demand on the reader and thus provides more linguistic support for incidental vocabulary acquisition to happen.

Data Analysis

Five Measures Used in the Study:

1. Total number of word tokens, regardless of their frequency of occurrence in the texts. This was done to investigate how many words in total were in the 65 books read to the pupils over the four year period, compared with those in the three textbook series used in the six years of elementary school. This comparison examined the difference in the overall language context provided in the storybooks and in the textbooks.

2. Total number of different headwords (lexis) in the stories and the textbooks. This measure was intended to compare the quantity of vocabulary input between the storybooks and the textbooks. In this study, a headword includes its inflected forms, e.g. -s, -ing, -ed, -'s, -ied, but not the derived forms and irregular forms of verbs, which would be more likely to belong to a word family.

3. Numbers of adjectives, nouns, and verbs that appeared in the stories and the textbooks. This analysis measured the amount of content words, i.e. the quality of vocabulary input, encountered in the stories and the textbooks. If a noun and a verb share the same form, e.g. control, the computer program we used (see below) would place it into only one category of the parts of speech, regardless of our knowledge of its different uses in different linguistic contexts2. The same rule would apply to, say original, a noun and an adjective as well. (See discussions in Nation, 2001 & Schmitt, 2000).

2　　This was done due to the limited function of this designed program. And, our way of categorization seemed limited in defining one's knowledge of a word that may have different meanings in different contexts, thus somewhat underestimating one's word knowledge. However, this kind of word is not likely to occur too frequently in most children's books.

4. The number and frequency of content words in theme-related texts. We measured the frequency of the content words appearing in the storybooks with a similar theme in order to investigate the potential effectiveness and efficiency of vocabulary acquisition by telling a number of theme related stories. In the present study, we did not analyze words in single author texts because the instructor (Wang) had not intentionally chosen books written by the same author. Thus the frequency of words in single author texts was not sufficient for our analysis.

5. The total number of words that have 3+ repetitions and 6+ repetitions. In Elley's study with storytelling (1989), words that appeared three or four times were considered to be helpful for acquisition. In Gardner's study on the corpus of book collections for extensive reading (2008), six occurrences of the same word (6+) was considered to be the threshold at which vocabulary is acquired. To gain a more comprehensive picture of how words recycle in the material, the current study therefore included the two standards for presenting the results of our analysis.

Procedure and the Software

All texts and stories were first keyed in onto an EXCEL data page to create the corpus for our planned analyses. Each unit in the text series contains different kinds of exercises and activities besides the dialogue which is the main text of each unit; other parts are usually presented for pattern or phonics practice and have little linguistic context. It was therefore decided to exclude the phonics practice from our analyses, because words presented in this part were mostly decontextualized and were only included for pronunciation practice and practicing letter-sound-correspondences.

Following the establishment of the corpus was the use of the online software, Stanford Parser, designed by The Natural Language Processing Group at Stanford University3, to classify the parts of speech of the vocabulary appearing in both types of materials. Double-checking was done in order to obtain a higher reliability. Another specially designed computer

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3　　http://nlp.stanford.edu:8080/parser/index.jsp

program, Action Script 2.0 Flash, was then used to perform the counting task (e.g. word frequency).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Total Number of Word Tokens, Headwords, and Word Families in Each Type of Text

Table 2 shows the total words (tokens) and total number of headwords for the storybooks and the three textbook series used in school. The 65 storybooks contain a total of 24,689 words (tokens) and 2,117 headwords (different lexis). Using Yang's (2006) ratio of 5:3, the 2,117 headwords contain about 1,270 word families. In contrast, the three textbook series possess fewer total words and headwords: Hess has 7,337 total words and 895 headwords, Joy 8,398 and 1,034, and Longman 5,951 and 811. Note that the textbooks cover all six years of EFL in elementary school, while the storybooks were used over a four-year period.

Table 2. Numbers of Word Tokens, Headwords, and Word Families

Material	Total Words (tokens)	Headwords	Possible word families
Storybooks	24,698	2,117	1,270
Hess	7,337	894	536
Joy	8,398	1,034	620
Longman	5,951	811	486

The results reveal that storybooks contained far more total words (five times as many as one series) and far more headwords (more than twice as many as the textbook series). In storybooks, a large proportion of the words used are high frequency function words that serve to make the context more coherent and comprehensible. These results also suggest that class time can be better spent in telling stories to children. Storytelling is a far richer source of the input required for vocabulary acquisition and reading development, far more

effective than vocabulary and the dialogues provided in the texts.

The pupils' eagerness and ability to do sustained silent reading as reported in Wang & Lee (2007) demonstrates that storytelling can function as a bridge to reading authentic material, even chapter books such as Marvin Redpost, by Louis Sachar. This clearly could not have been done had the students only had instruction from the required textbooks. Even if they had fully mastered all the words in the most vocabulary-rich textbook series, Joy, and had done this in three years instead of six, their vocabulary size would be far too small to understand this level of authentic reading.

Storybooks also give elementary school children a good chance of meeting the junior high school 2,000 word requirement, and, most important, provides them with enough vocabulary to read authentic English books on their own, which allows them to improve in English in a pleasant and relaxing way anytime.

Results on Parts of Speech

As seen in Table 3, storybooks contain nearly two and a half times as many content words as the textbook series, 1,709 versus 700, 800, and 614.

The stories contained far more nouns than verbs and adjectives, which provides context that makes nouns easier to acquire (Elley, 1989). The 65 stories analyzed here contain about twice as many as nouns as the textbooks, and also contain about three times as many verbs and adjectives.

Table 3. Nouns, Verbs, and Adjectives Appeared in the Stories and Textbooks

Materials	Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Total Number of Different Content Words
Storybooks	1073	364	272	1709
Hess	502	128	70	700
Joy	579	145	76	800
Longman	441	102	71	614

The ratio of nouns to verbs in the storybooks is 2.9 (1073/364), that is, for every verb there are three nouns. In textbooks, the ratios range from 3.6 to 4.3 nouns per verb. The ratio of nouns to adjectives in the storybooks is 3.9 (1073/272). The ratio of nouns to adjectives in the texts ranged from 6.2 to 7.2 nouns per adjective. A plausible assumption is that the textbooks focus more on building children's ability to recognize and name objects and far less on the ability to describe and express, which requires more use of adjectives and verbs.

Results of Theme-Related Words

The numbers shown in Table 4 confirm that storybooks can provide ample input for young EFL children's vocabulary acquisition. Table 4 is organized by theme; books on similar themes are efficient for vocabulary acquisition because the same words tend to be recycled in a given theme, providing built-in review and raising the chances for successful acquisition.

Table 4. High Frequency Theme-Related Content Words

Theme (#of books): #of total different content words	Frequency of Occurrence	N	V	ADJ	Total
Friendship (10 books):698	3+	124	83	43	250
	6+	50	43	15	108
Family (7 Books): 381	3+	47	38	17	102
	6+	17	17	4	38
Problem solving (4 books): 325	3+	32	32	5	69
	6+	8	9	1	18
Holidays (7 Books): 368	3+	47	25	13	85
	6+	14	6	3	23
Emotion (5 Books): 312	3+	34	28	17	79
	6+	12	12	5	29
Witchery (3 Books): 247	3+	42	35	12	89
	6+	15	10	3	28
Fanaticism (8 Books): 500	3+	66	44	17	127
	6+	21	17	7	45

Friendship is one of the seven themes included in the 65 storybooks, and there were ten storybooks on this theme, containing a total of 698 different content words (about the same number that the typical textbook series contain for all six years). As expected, the Friendship-themed books contained more nouns than verbs and adjectives, with a considerable number in each category appearing more than three times and more than six times. A total of 250 content words appeared at least three times, and 108 appeared at least six times, providing a good chance for their acquisition.

Also, as noted earlier, content words recycle across different themes, which helps build children's background knowledge when encountering new stories and new words. In addition, many words that appear three times in texts actually appear more frequently, because teachers (storytellers) often take extra time explaining new vocabulary and helping children recall words that have appeared in other stories.

Word Frequency in Storybooks and Textbooks

In this analysis, our interest was to determine how many content words were included in the headwords of each type of material. Table 5 presents the number of content words occurring at least three times and six times in all texts examined here, including storybooks and textbooks, and their percentage of occurrence among the total number of headwords for each kind of text. For example, storybooks contained 466 nouns that appeared at least three times. They made up 22% of the total of 2117 headwords contained in all storybooks.

The percentage of

content words appearing 3+ and 6+ times among the total number of headwords was similar for all types of texts, but storybooks contained far more words with 3+ and 6+ repetitions than any of the textbook series in all parts of speech.

Table 5. Frequency of Content Word Recurrence

Materials/ # of headwords	Frequency of Occurrence	N (%*)	V (%*)	ADJ (%*)	Total repeated content words (%*)
Storybooks	3+	466 (22%)	214(10.1%)	129 (6%)	809 (38.2%)
2117	6+	267 (12.6%)	130 (6%)	84 (4%)	481 (22.7%)
Hess	3+	219 (24.5%)	60 (7%)	44 (5%)	323 (36.1%)
894	6+	107 (12%)	39 (4%)	33 (4%)	179 (17.9%)
Joy	3+	260 (25.1%)	68 (7%)	44 (4%)	372 (36%)
1034	6+	131 (12.7%)	39 (4%)	31 (3%)	201 (19.4%)
Longman	3+	224 (27.6%)	54 (7%)	42 (5%)	320 (39.4%)
811	6+	99 (12.2%)	30 (4%)	16 (2%)	145 (17.9%)

*% shows the percentage of the content words among the total number of headwords for each type of material.

These results confirm that storybooks do a much better job of providing EFL children with richer and more comprehensible input than textbooks do. Our findings also confirm Elley's assertion (Elley, 1989) about the distribution of parts of speech, with nouns the most frequent type of words, verbs the next and adjectives the least likely met in any text.

CONCLUSION

This study employed a corpus-based analysis to illustrate the power of storybooks in providing input of sufficient quantity and quality for building young EFL learners' vocabulary repertoire, which in turn contributes to the children's ability and confidence to read independently. The findings obtained from the data revealed that textbooks are seriously deficient as teaching materials.

The 65 storybooks provided far more exposure to vocabulary, nearly 25,000 total words and over 2000 tokens, or individual word-types. The storybooks also contained twice as many nouns and about three times as many verbs and adjectives as the textbooks and had a higher ratio of nouns to verbs and adjectives, which may also contribute to comprehensibility and hence language acquisition.

The 65 storybooks analyzed here were read during a-four-year period, bringing children from nearly zero English to the independent reading stage, an outcome rarely found among most Taiwanese children. This suggests that the EFL curriculum should at least include storytelling and independent reading. It may be the case that the textbook has, at best, a small role to play in English instruction.

Of course, gaps remain in the research. It will be of interest to determine what the impact of storybooks is on measures of reading, writing, vocabulary, listening and speaking. It is quite plausible that hearing stories also has a positive impact on aural ability in English (Huang, 2006). In addition, it is of course of interest to investigate additional texts, including storybooks intended for older children.

Compared to its counterparts, the three representative textbook series, storybooks offer acquirers a substantial amount of vocabulary in the text, which helped pave the way for the children in Wang and Lee (2007) to reach the stage where they were able to do and enjoy independent reading. These results strongly suggest that if we can provide extensive, coherent, and interesting input in the form of interesting stories, EFL children will be much better prepared to proceed to the next stage of English learning, the junior high school.

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