
Developing Extensive Reading Skills with Culturally Relevant Folktales

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In China, where I have wrestled with the task of teaching English for six years, extensive reading is rarely taught, in the true sense of the word, in many college/university departments devoted to the teaching of English. Frequently, teachers employ a text which they painfully inch through during one or more terms.

Intensive and extensive reading courses are seen by the student as being the same. The former course is theoretically an exercise in grammar, sentence structure, and shades of meaning, while the latter course is intended to develop general reading skills, the ability to read quickly, and an ability to grasp main meanings.

Many students faced with distasteful job assignments (i.e., middle school teaching where little knowledge of English is actually required) quickly lose interest in English and find they need to do virtually no reading outside of class--the teacher will explain all, sentence by sentence in class. This is particularly common in colleges and universities outside such major metropolitan areas as Beijing and Shanghai.

The Need for Extensive Reading

This painful situation is exacerbated when foreign teachers suddenly appear on the scene with images dancing in their heads of third or fourth year Chinese English majors having virtually the same command of English as do native speakers

of the same age. This is especially true of veteran foreign college teachers who have had no prior experience teaching ESL. Such teachers are frequently asked to teach 'American Literature' and 'British Literature.' Foreign teachers may then ask students to read as much as one long short story per class drawn from numerous anthologies of American/British literature currently being published in China. Such readings may be seasoned with lectures by the foreign teacher (desperately trying to fill up the standard two hour class period) on various aspects of literary thought, genres, and history--in short a reproduction of what they would do if asked to teach a class of native speakers. Depending on the sensitivity of the teacher, more or less time may pass before he or she realizes students' eyes are open but their brains have been lulled into a near comatose state by a host of culturally unfamiliar terms and illusions in addition to simply not being able to come to terms with such long reading assignments. Often students are not even able to follow events in the story, let alone comprehend a discussion of point of view, elements of plot, symbolism, style, and theme.

Building Students' Confidence in Extensive Reading

What I have found useful is first to accustom students to reading extensively. Several Chinese cooperators and I have prepared a lengthy manuscript of translated Chinese folk tales which I assign as reading material for the first few weeks,

gradually increasing the number of pages for each reading assignment.

Fifteen minutes or so of each class are also devoted to small group work. In these groups, students retell the story they have read. (This may be the only time most students actually speak English.)

The final grade in the course (the only thing that interests many students) is solely dependent on quizzes during each class period over the assigned reading. These quizzes seek simply to ascertain whether or not the student has read the material. Some students, of course, balk at reading anything outside of class—old habits die hard—but many students discover for the first time that far from being an enemy, an assignment of quickly reading many pages of written English can be what they thought it never could be—something they can understand and identify with.

Advantages of Reading Folktales

The reading of folktales is especially appropriate in colleges where a sizable portion of the students are from the countryside. For example, I presently teach students who graduated from English programs in county-level three-year normal schools, taught in middle schools for three years, and now mostly in their early twenties have come to Qinghai Education College for an additional two years of study. Virtually all

of these students were raised in peasant villages and from a very early age have been accustomed to hearing folktales, often told by a grandparent as a means of entertaining children. Thus, reading folktales drawn from their own culture, which many of them are intimately familiar with, brings back a host of pleasant associations and hopefully, a new appreciation of English.

Outcomes

After students have actually developed confidence in reading English in reasonably large doses, the teacher may move on to simplified popular novels in English, then to those which have not been simplified, and then finally take the plunge into something on the order of American and/or British literature.

A number of pitfalls remain in rendering the writings of men and women from a very different Western culture comprehensible to students who may have received little if any coursework in the basics of Western culture. But at the least, students will have learned that written English is capable of giving them something other than a headache.

About the Author

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