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Children's Literature for Cultural Understanding between Students in Taiwan and Mainland China

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Based on a portion of the results of a research project that explores the possibilities of using Mandarin children's literature for cultural understanding between the students of Taiwan and Mainland China, this paper discusses in depth what existing U. S. research may or may not help in constructing Mandarin reading lists and thus provides insights for applications in other settings. It also comes up with a new strategy for cultural understanding with twin texts from two cultures.

Children's literature has long been a vehicle for fostering cultural awareness and understanding, both within a country to promote multicultural education (Bieger, 1995; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Norton, 1990; Rasinski & Padak, 1990; Thompson, 1993; Walker-Dalhouse, 1992; Wham, Barnhart & Cook, 1996); and across nations to foster a global perspective (Diakiw, 1990; Labbo & Field, 1998; Lo, 2001; Stan, 1999; Thompson, 1993). Among articles and studies examining children's literature for use in cultural studies with students, some propose theoretical models for integrating multicultural literature into the curriculum or for studying multicultural literature (Bieger, 1995; Norton, 1990; Rasinski & Padak, 1990); some suggest general guidelines for selecting multicultural or international literature (Lo, 2001; Yokota, 1993); some provide specific recommended reading lists (Diakiw, 1990; Labbo & Field, 1998; Lo, 2001); and still others offer examples of learning activities and student's responses (Diamond & Moore, 1995; Walker-Dalhouse, 1992).

This study explores the possibilities of using Mandarin children's literature for cultural understanding between the students of Taiwan and Mainland China. Since there is no Chinese study to build upon in this field, the researcher borrowed the theoretical framework from the United States and adapted it to fit the Chinese context. Taiwan and Mainland China share the same roots of Chinese culture, but subtle cultural differences do exist not only because of geographical division, but also due to separate political and social systems developed over the last half-century. Recently, with more frequent and closer interaction for economic and political reasons, time seems to be right to help students across the Straits to get to know each other better with the help of children's literature.

Based on a portion of the results of a research project funded by the National Science Council of Taiwan on cultural exchange through children's literature and e-mail based correspondence between children in Taiwan and Mainland China, this paper shares the process of the first two phases of the project: constructing Mandarin reading lists for cultural understanding and developing relevant learning activities. The purpose of this paper is threefold. First, by carefully examining the U. S. literature on how to select children's books for cultural understanding,

this paper discusses in depth what existing research may or may not help in constructing Mandarin Reading lists. This discussion, in turn, can provide insights for applications in other settings. Secondly, after presenting a review of literature on how to design activities for cultural learning, this paper also has come up with a new way of helping students to develop cultural awareness and understanding. As there is relatively limited published research that provides concrete examples of relevant activity design, this part also adds an alternative dimension to the existing possibilities. Finally, this paper can serve as a direct resource for students in Hong Kong, Singapore, and other parts of the world where there are children whose primary language is Mandarin, so that they can learn more about the cultures of these two regions.

What existing research may help in constructing the Mandarin reading lists?

In the first phase, bearing in mind the purpose of constructing Mandarin children's literature book lists for cultural understanding between the students of Taiwan and Mainland China, the researcher was curious about the following questions and found the U. S. experience helpful. 1) What is culture? 2) What are the general guidelines to follow when selecting books for cultural learning? 3) At what ages are children most receptive to learning about other cultures? And 4) what genres are most suitable to be used as the medium for cultural understanding?

With regard to the first question on the definition of culture, the researcher found that dimensions of culture include life styles, the family, recreation, feasts and holidays, values, customs, languages, work, beliefs and so on (Banks, 2001; Corsini, 1999; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1993).

For the second question on guidelines of selecting books for cultural learning, the researcher agrees with the argument made by Lo (2001) that, to avoid stereotyping, the most authentic materials by which to study another culture are books written by authors from that culture for the participants of that culture. Then, in order to provide guidelines for selecting multicultural or international literature, based on suggestions made by Yokota (1993) and Lo (2001), the researcher proposed a work

appropriate for cultural learning should 1) have cultural accuracy; 2) be rich in cultural details; 3) contain in-depth treatment of cultural details; and/or 4) provide insights into multicultural or cross-cultural differences.

Concerning the third question on the ages when children are the most receptive for cultural learning, generally speaking, children ages 10 to 13 are more receptive than others when it comes to learning about people from other countries (Evans, 1987). Educators also agree that the most appropriate age to introduce children's literature for a global perspective is at the elementary level (Diakiw, 1990; Monson, Howe, & Greenlee, 1989; Stan, 1999).

And finally, regarding the fourth question on the genre most suitable for cultural learning, literature is recognized to be a powerful way to transport students to places and cultures different from their own. After conducting research in both elementary and middle school classes, Norton (1990) proposed a comprehensive five-phase model for studying multicultural literature: 1) general traditional literature; 2) traditional tales from one area; 3) autobiographies, biographies and historical nonfiction; 4) historical fiction; and 5) contemporary realistic fiction, poetry, and biography written for children by authors whose work represents that cultural group. A closer look at research that provides reading lists or cited examples of books for cultural learning (such as in Bieger, 1995; Diakiw, 1990; Labbo & Field, 1998; Lo, 2001; Rasinski & Padak, 1990; Walker-Dalhouse, 1992) reveals that contemporary realistic fiction and historical fiction were the most popular kinds of genre, and folktales were also used in some situations.

Therefore, the researcher decided to construct two book lists. The first is a reading list consisting of books from Taiwan which have to be:

- contemporary realistic fiction or historical fiction;
- at the reading level of the fifth and sixth grades;
- written by Taiwanese writers;
- within the guidelines for selecting for cultural learning defined earlier;
- of a high literary quality (which is a general rule for any reading list); and

- published after 1985 (since children's literature is a relatively new field across the Straits and most books have been published after that time).

The second reading list applies the same guidelines for books from China written by Chinese authors.

What existing research may not help in constructing the Mandarin reading lists?

In the process of constructing book lists of children's literature in Mandarin for cultural understanding between students of Taiwan and Mainland China, the researcher found it hard to locate any research that provided guidelines on specific procedure one should follow to come up with a recommended reading list or even a couple of titles for cultural learning.

The researcher asked three experts on Taiwanese children's literature, all college professors who teach children's literature courses and are very active in the field, to each recommend ten works for a Taiwanese children's literature book list with the guidelines mentioned in the earlier section, in order to construct reading lists in a more objective manner. Similarly, for the Chinese children's literature book list, the researcher invited three Chinese children's literature experts with the same background to each offer ten titles of works. However, because China is very large and has various coexisting subcultures, the researcher asked the Chinese experts to focus on books that represent the culture of the highly populated area along the coast, including Peking and Shanghai.

At the beginning, the researcher thought that the experts had been given an easy task because they had been given such specific guidelines; nevertheless, these experts reported being challenged by the idea of what a good work for cultural learning about a specific region is, or what kind of work possesses "cultural representation." In other words, even though they were aware of the dimensions of learning about culture and the criteria that good books for cultural learning should possess, they still had no clue on how to proceed with the selection. Among the hundreds

of qualified works of fiction written by their own authors for fifth and sixth graders from 1985 to the present, where should they start? This situation is similar to inviting experts from the U. S. and from the United Kingdom (or Canada or Australia) to recommend books for cultural learning about their own country. There are simply too many possibilities. Since the researcher was unable to locate related literature and to provide theories for the experts to follow, she decided to remain open-minded and ask the experts to develop their own orientation.

After the recommended titles were collected and the complete lists were constructed, it was interesting to find each Taiwanese expert has his own philosophy about "cultural representation." One expert was inclined to pick up books casually from the long book list, because he worried about "cultural over-representation" by ten books. Another expert favored historical fiction and problematic fiction. He said historical fiction provides more cultural details and explanations for already existing values and customs; and problematic fiction manifests the problems children in Taiwan encounter. The third expert approached this task by first selecting the most distinguished children's book writers in Taiwan and then selecting from their works in order to represent the unique faces of Taiwan. Since the three experts all had their particular positions on book selection, it was not surprising to find they tended to pick multiple titles by an author on their own list but there was little consensus among experts on whose works to pick. On the other hand, the three experts from Mainland China had quite the same idea on whose works to pick. This is because a lot of children's literature in Mainland China is published in children's periodicals and only some of them are favored enough by the publishers to be printed in the format of books. The experts were in general agreement on selecting children's works that were published as books and had received various kinds of awards, along with other criteria mentioned earlier.

While existing research implies how to come up with a recommended reading list or a couple of titles for cultural learning, the children's literature experts in this study offer us some explicit directions: 1) randomly select from a long list of qualified titles; 2) purposefully focus on particular genres (such as historical fiction or problematic fiction); 3) select the most recognized authors and then pick

out works with rich cultural content; and 4) select titles that have received various awards and then pick out those with rich cultural content (Chen, 2004).

A strategy for cultural understanding with twin texts from two cultures

In the second phase of developing cultural learning activities based on works from Taiwanese and of Chinese reading lists, the researcher found several useful approaches or strategies in the U. S. research. First, with a single work about a particular culture, teachers can always apply the “Webbing” approach to develop a thematic unit and focus more on topics of the cultural domain for the purpose of improving cultural awareness and appreciation (Diamond & Moore, 1995; Huck, Helper & Hickman, 1993). Second, with a collection of works about a particular culture, teachers can develop a language chart to guide discussion across cross-cultural books. For example, in a unit on visiting South Africa, the chart may consist of elements of title and author, genre, characters and region, theme of story, events that provide cultural insights, and vocabulary of the cultural group (Labbo & Filed, 1998). And finally, Bieger (1995) and Rasinski & Padak (1990) suggest a four-level model for integrating children’s literature for cultural learning into the curriculum, based on Banks’ (1988; 1989) theory. The lowest level is the “contributions approach”, where students read about and discuss holidays, heroes, and customs. The second level is the “ethnic additive approach”, where content, concepts, and themes that reflect other cultures are added to the existing curriculum without changing its structure. The third level is the “transformation approach”, where the structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view problems, themes, concerns, and concepts from the perspective of different ethnic and cultural groups. And at the highest level “social action approach”, students identify social problems and concerns and then make decisions and take action to resolve them. This model in some degree echoes the four goal areas emphasized in teaching a global perspective: knowledge, abilities, valuing, and social participation (Evans, 1987).

In addition to the above approaches and strategies, the researcher and the elementary school teachers who participated in developing leaning activities for this project also thought that another meaningful strategy for cultural learning would be to present twin texts from the two cultures. Texts should share the same theme or overlap on important topics; cultural similarities and differences could then be compared and contrasted. We came up with three examples where this strategy could be used.

(1) *Young Dragon Boat Team* by Li Tung (1993) from the Taiwanese reading list and *A School with Classrooms Made of Grass* by Tsao Wen Hsuan (1997) from the Chinese reading list have been put together as a twin set. Because these two authors are recognized as the most representative children's literature writers from their region, especially for their language use, an enjoyable cultural learning activity focuses on the differences in Mandarin usage between Taiwan and Mainland China. When students finish reading these two works of fiction, among various learning activities, for instance, a Taiwanese teacher can invite his students to find out what the unfamiliar words, phrases, and sentences they have encountered in the mainland book mean. At the same time, this Taiwanese teacher can also invite his students to find examples of dialect and slang usage in the Taiwanese book and to decode their meanings. In this way a teacher can enhance students' cultural awareness of language use and the origins of certain colloquial expressions.

(2) *Map Girl and Whale Boy* by Wang Shu Fen (1999) from the Taiwanese reading list and *A Boy Named Chia Li; A Girl Named Chia Mei* by Chin Wen Chun (1994) from the Chinese reading list have been put together as a twin set. These two works are both contemporary realistic fiction that depict typical modern boys and girls in an urban setting. In the first book, a girl who loves to study maps and a boy who is crazy about various kinds of whales are two good friends in school. In the second book, Chia Li and Chia Mei are twin brother and sister. Here, the sex role can be the focus. A teacher can invite students to pick out adjectives for the male and female characters in both books, to cite the emotional reactions of the male and female characters in both books, and/or to see how the male and female characters interact with each other

in both books. By guiding students to compare and contrast the similarities and differences of how male and female characters are treated in these two books, and to express and reflect on themselves, a teacher can stimulate students' cultural awareness and understanding and help students' to examine their own value.

(3) *I Love Green Turtles* by Tzu An (1998) from the Taiwanese reading list, and *Cheng's Pet Turtle* by Liu Ho Ming (2000) from the Chinese reading list form the third set of twin texts. The first book tells the story of two boys and their affection toward Green Turtles, an endangered species. The second work is about a boy, Cheng, and his pet turtle; and a memorable incident in the story is Cheng's confusion over whether he should kill his pet turtle in order to treat his father's illness. A teacher can invite students to describe the relationship between the human beings and turtles as depicted in both works and then encourage students to do a little research on the Internet on how people treat endangered species in Taiwan and in Mainland China. The focus of this set of twin texts is on cultural similarities and differences across the Straits with regard to attitudes toward animals, especially endangered species.

Although the strategy of using twin texts provides an alternative way for promoting cultural awareness and understanding, it should be kept in mind that this is only done when it is meaningful. Moreover, it should be used with caution so that we do not over-generalize with only a few works on cultural issues; it is best used in combination with other kinds of approaches and strategies mentioned earlier.

Final Words

Children's literature is a good medium for vicarious learning. This paper shares the results of the first two phases of a research project that explores the possibilities of using Mandarin children's literature for cultural understanding between Taiwanese and Mainland China's students.

In the first phase of constructing Mandarin book lists for cultural learning about Taiwan and Mainland China, the researcher found the

U.S. research helpful in deciding what kinds of book genres were best for promoting cultural learning; what ages was most appropriate for introducing books for cultural learning; and what general guidelines one could follow when selecting books for cultural learning. The researcher also found the researchers quite vague in describing exactly how they came up with specific recommended reading lists or titles for cultural learning. Both general guidelines borrowed from the U.S. research and possible procedures generated from this study provide insights for application in other settings, especially when educators intend to construct reading lists for cultural understanding across regions that share the same language.

In the second phase, developing learning activities based on the Taiwanese and Chinese reading lists, the researcher discovered, in addition to approaches already suggested by existing research, a strategy of using twin texts from two cultures for cultural understanding. This paper offers three examples on how to employ twin texts, to explore the cultural similarities and differences across the Straits with regard to language use, gender roles, and attitudes toward endangered species. However, this strategy should be used only when it is meaningful.

The complete Mandarin reading lists and activity designs for cultural learning between Taiwanese and Mainland China's students are posted at <http://mx.nthu.edu.tw/~suychen/> where the researcher intends to create the first Taiwan-based website emphasizing children's literature and classroom instruction (Chen, 2003). Educators and students from other parts of the world where there are children whose primary language is Mandarin can make use of the website.

Finally, the identification of possible books for cultural learning and the development of feasible learning activities are only the first two steps on the long way to accomplishing multicultural education with a global perspective. In the implementation phase, teachers should take students' reading responses into consideration, remembering that children's books should not be treated as vehicles for instructing young readers in cultural customs, but rather as stimuli for children to think and discuss, and to achieve cultural understanding and appreciation in social interaction.

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