Exploring the Issue of Exclusion through Reading English Picture Storybooks

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Abstract
This paper describes a four-phase inquiry project which applied essential elements of literature-based instruction. The research results have shown that through utilization of theme-based illustrated storybooks and interactive literacy activities, participating young adult learners not only appreciated reading authentic children’s literature, but they also were able to generate thoughtful reflections on the issue of exclusion and learned to proactively mitigate bullying – a common problem in Taiwanese schools and worldwide (Wei & Huang, 2009). The ultimate objective of this focused study is to call attention to the significance of EFL literacy instruction which values language learners’ personal connections, multiple interpretations and critical evaluations.

Introduction
Immersion in authentic literary texts allows readers to gain enormous pedagogical benefits (Carter & Long, 1991). Since literature often accurately reflects the beliefs, norms, and ideologies of a given society, a reader is able to develop a deeper understanding about a particular place after being exposed to a literary text. By giving a reader the opportunity to vicariously experience another world through the written descriptions of a character’s thoughts, actions and words in a text, regardless of whether the character is real or fictional, authentic literature affords an individual the opportunity to empathize with and gain a greater appreciation for diversity in the world. Such constant examination of one’s own or others’ socio-cultural surroundings, in turn, has the potential to foster critical thinking skills within a person. Consequently, in a literature-based language classroom, a teacher is obligated to construct socially interactive literacy activities that support learners’ sharing, discussing, and thinking of the selected texts with the furthermore goal being that they will become better able to read, write, and reflect upon meaningful issues (Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989).
The study presented in this paper utilized a curriculum with the above-mentioned literature-based literacy instruction and tackled two main research questions: (1) how would participating students react to the subject of exclusion; (2) how would they respond to the children’s literature-based (specifically children’s picture storybooks) instructional approach? Research results revealed that through reading, writing, and discussing about exclusion, a group of Taiwanese freshman non-English majors seemed to have gained respect for diversity. The participants also had mostly positive feedback toward reading picture storybooks, perceiving themselves as becoming more competent in terms of spoken grammar, reading comprehension, etc. Following the findings is a discussion on strategies of how to incorporate illustrated storybooks in the language classroom for their maximum benefits. Tentative recommendations include empowering students with necessary language acquisition knowledge, adding variety and flexibility to one’s material selection, as well as seeking out opportunities for professional development. As the class involved in this study consisted of students with different genders and academic backgrounds, such findings and conclusions are believed to potentially shed further light on the effectiveness of a children’s literature-based program for improving young adult learners’ language development and awareness of social issues.

Literature Review

Literature-based Instruction

Research studies (Carter & Long, 1991; Collie & Slater, 1990; Ghosn, 2002; Hismanoglu, 2005; Khatib, Rezaei, & Derakhshan, 2011; Liaw, 2001; Mckay, 1982; Stern 2001; Takagaki, 2002; Tseng, 2010; Van, 2009) have uncovered that exposure to authentic quality literature brings forth multiple benefits for language learners, including deeper cross-cultural knowledge, enriched imaginations and interpretative skills of texts, as well as steady development of vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and creative writing. For instance, Dong (2004) points out that a literature-based writing class encouraging free interpretations of a literary text can provoke reflective responses from student writers.

Of all the types of literature, children’s literature is recognized as an equally effective instructional tool. Classically defined as trade books written for children between birth and twelve years old, it exposes children to the norms they are expected to follow in society, along with teaching content knowledge such as mathematics, geography, history, etc. It also
opens children’s eyes to the outside world, which can lead to a broader understanding of different social/ethnic communities (Morgan, 2009). It has been particularly found to enhance young learners’ development of emerging literacy (Elley, 1989; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Galda, 2000; Glazer & Giorgis, 2005), oral skills (Ho, 2000; Johnston & Frazee, 2011; Zhang, 2008), social awareness (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999; Lewison, Leland, Flint, & Moler, 2002; Stewart, 2011), as well as cross-cultural empathy (Bishop & Hickman, 1992; Mendoza & Reese, 2001; Morgan, 2009). As children’s literature is “…intellectually stimulating, encouragingly readable, linguistically challenging, literarily fulfilling and educationally rewarding” (Ho, 2000, p. 269), there seems to be an increasing number of language teachers utilizing such material to teach adults who are learning English as their second/foreign language. For instance, after a three-year longitudinal study which children’s literature was vastly supplied to several university English classes, Ho (2000) concludes that participating Chinese students have made overall progress in reading comprehension, cultural understanding, confidence of public speech, and motivation to learn English. Likewise, Chen’s (2006) four-week writing workshop with 43 Taiwanese freshman students (mostly females) uncovers that through intensive reading and writing about children’s stories, these young adults appreciated children’s literature as helpful writing models, which thereby contributed to the story-writing exercise being a self-healing, rewarding process. Another study conducted by Kuo (2006) further confirms that when critically examining seeming trivial fairy tales, four grown females welcomed the opportunity to self-reflect on gender roles. A more recent study by Kuo and Wang (2010) finally suggests that multimodal presentations of children’s literature have successfully promoted 23 Taiwanese adult learners’ awareness of social issues.

**Picture Books in College Language Classrooms**

Picture books, one format of children’s literature, possess the following characteristics that have earned them a special place in adult language education (Appelt, 1985; Bradbury & Liu, 2003; Flickinger, 1984; Johnston & Frazee, 2011; Mikulecky, 2007; Morgan, 2009; Wu, 2009): (1) They are written in natural but comparatively simple language; (2) They are widely available at schools, libraries and online; (3) They present appealing and sometimes mature stories that learners of all ages can appreciate; and (4) The illustrations provide a notably unique aesthetic experience which stimulate readers’ creative imagination. In Taiwan, Wu’s study (2001) investigated the effect of an extensive reading program on 50 college
students’ reading attitudes and English improvement. Given access to 250 English picture books/chapter books throughout the entire semester, 76% of the participants seemed to display more positive attitudes toward reading, recognizing its potential enjoyment beyond solely a means to learn English. Wu nonetheless failed to discover significant English growth in students’ follow-up cloze-tests. Later, Garcia (2007) used picture storybooks to teach 22 American college students who were learning Spanish as a foreign language. The results showed that except for one participant, the rest of the class responded favorably toward such reading material, believed their Spanish improved, and reported gaining knowledge of Hispanic culture. Beyond being readers of picture storybooks, Wang, Chiu and Wu (2010) required a group of 52 Taiwanese college students to work on an EPBC (English Picture Book Creating) project. The majority of the participating adults agreed that the assignment facilitated their critical thinking skills.

For this study, the researcher took the same position as Coats (2001, p. 409), who stated “the riskiness of teaching children’s literature at the university level is more than compensated for by the gains that students achieve in intellectual and personal insight,” and that “reading it as an adult also gives one a sense of responsibility toward its intended audience, making critical response a mandatory and self-motivating task.” Note that the choice of a subcategory of children’s literature -- picture storybooks -- is based partially on the researcher’s personal interest but primarily on its pedagogical strengths.

**Methodology**

**Participants and Setting**

This study was conducted at a Taiwanese university with 30 freshman students, who were then enrolled in a compulsory NMFE (non-major Freshman English) course because their English entrance exam scores fell within the range of 30-40 points (mean = 38.5, out of 100; nation-wide mean = 54). 60% of the students were majoring in Art Industry while the rest came from the departments of Chinese, Life Science, and Public and Cultural Affairs. The gender ratio was one male to two females. A brief entrance survey suggested that over one third of the class expressed difficulties making effective conversations and were thus

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1 One example occurred during a class discussion when a male student repeatedly described his relationship with his elder brother and two younger sisters as “no comment,” meaning there was little to say about the limited interactions among siblings. Although the utterance was easily understood by the class, it seemed to reveal these students’ overall inability to articulate elaborate thoughts.
inclined to improve spoken English. Most of the participants were apprehensive about the mandatory exit English exam due to their own belief that they lacked sufficient knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar.

This NMFE course lasted one year. The study took place over a period of one semester (eighteen weeks), with the class meeting for two hours weekly. Since the university did not follow a fixed curriculum, the instructor (i.e. the researcher) was given a great deal of latitude in choosing the teaching materials and textbooks to be used in the research.

**Course Design**
The course development followed several basic guidelines. To begin with, it dealt with a topic of high relevance to target participants’ life. In this study, freshmen students explored the subject of exclusion, which someone would likely encounter when arriving in a new environment. By rigorously studying the causes and solutions to three types of exclusion -- disability, gender, and race, which focuses were determined owing to their social significance -- the hope was that the students could not only overcome possible discrimination, but further make friends in the new school. Secondly, the class incorporated many language art activities aiming at facilitating emotional responses and multiple interpretations. The literacy practices specially emphasized team effort for forming a close-knit interactive learning community among the students. One activity the researcher experimented with, for instance, was Tableau (French for “Frozen Picture”): Groups of students cooperated to re-create a frozen image of a story scene. Once a person was called, s/he then “unfroze,” self-identifying the character s/he played and speaking a few sentences that would reflect the story role’s personality and/or mental state. Another activity being utilized, Literature Circle (LC), was of a similar nature. In researching an event or a person, each individual group member took up a task and collaboratively pieced together the details. This sense of accountability compelled students to speak and listen intensively to one another. Lastly, extra efforts were devoted to promoting critical evaluations. During the course of the study, the entire class was instructed to

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2 The university mandates all students obtain proper language proficiency certificates upon graduation. For non-English majors, they need a minimum TOEIC score of 550 or equivalent English exam results. An extra non-credit course is enforced should they fail to fulfill the requirement.

3 Students’ writing pieces confirm their own self-assessment. In a role-play exercise, they wrote “I worry my son will suicided (grammatical error),” “I wonder why choice him (grammatical error),” “I cry you don’t have enough ability to rice your baby (misspell of the word raise),” and “I feel struggle (awkward sentence, possibly meaning I am conflicted).”
proactively play devil’s advocates and challenge one another’s existing perspectives. They did so by means of the principles of critical literacy developed by Lewison and Leland (2002): (1) interrogating the commonplace: to examine what is taken for granted; (2) questioning power relationships: to challenge inequitable power relations; and (3) appreciating multiple realities and viewpoints: to understand and appreciate other social/cultural/ethnic groups.

Material Selection
A total of 18 picture storybooks were supplied to students so as to engage them in the readings (either in groups or as a whole class). These texts, all having received numerous favorable reviews and/or awards, use authentic yet arguably simple language. The nice illustrations of the books, on the other hand, provide visual enjoyment and possibly facilitate comprehension. For the purpose of the study, all the readings revolved around the central theme of exclusion. For instance, in Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991), a little African American girl named Grace is discouraged to play Peter Pan in the school play because of her gender and race. Another book Mississippi Morning (Vander, 2004) tells a story about how a boy finds out that the father he admires is involved in Ku Klux Klan activities. Still some others, such as Tacky the Penguin (Lester, 1990), further touch upon the significance of respecting individual differences, which could be the necessary key to minimizing exclusion. Each storybook was categorized according to one of the three sub-domains.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Theme</th>
<th>Reading Texts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Whole class: Tacky the Penguin (Lester, 1990)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Group reading: A Very Special Sister (Hoffman, 1992)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Andy and His Yellow Frisbee (Thompson, 1996)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Be Good to Eddie Lee (Fleming, 1993)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ian’s Walk: A Story about Autism (Lears, 1998)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Whole class: Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Ballot Box Battle (McCully, 1996)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tea with Milk (Say, 1999)</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Group reading</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frida Maria (Harcourt, 1994)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oliver Button is a Sissy (dePaola, 1979)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars (Merrill, 1997)</td>
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<td>The Playground Problem (McNamara, 2004)</td>
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<th></th>
<th>Whole class</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First Day in Grapes (Perez, 2002)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Mississippi Morning (Vander, 2004)</td>
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<th>Group reading</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Baseball Saved Us (Mochizuki, 1995)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Bracelet (Uchida, 1993)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The Other Side (Woodson, 2001)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>White Socks Only (Coleman, 1996)</td>
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Table 1: Selected Picture Storybooks

Procedure

Introductory Workshop
On the first day of class, students received detailed information about the study, including the main objectives of the project, the requirements, and perhaps most importantly, the learning benefits they might get upon completion of the course. It was explained to them that they would take part in a focused study about “exclusion,” which reveals itself in many different ways and could possibly happen to anyone. Students were then introduced to research findings regarding the educational strengths of reading children’s literature while samples of the picked picture storybooks were passed around for the class to see. In a subsequent Q & A session, students were encouraged to raise questions or concerns about the project.

Inquiry Project
After the introductory workshop, students began four phases of focused study. Each phase of inquiry was aimed at one peculiar objective: (1) initiating experience: students tried to open up discussions about exclusion; (2) shared reading: in pairs or groups, they examined root causes of prejudice; (3) conceptually related texts: they studied other relevant texts, such as news articles; and finally (4) exploring critical issues: they reevaluated the subject of exclusion and together developed strategies to enhance mutual understanding. Below are summaries of each of the stages, followed by brief outlines of some standard activities executed in the study:
Phase 1
Initiating Experiences
Main focus: opening up a conversation about exclusion
-- What We Can and Cannot Do [Amazing Grace, Activity #1]
-- How Did We Become Friends [Tacky the Penguin]
-- First Impressions [Tea with Milk]
-- What Makes You Different From and the Same as Everyone Else [First Day in Grapes]

Phase 2
Shared Reading
Main focus: examining common stereotypes
-- Reading Partners [The Ballot Box Battle]
-- Literature Circle [Mississippi Morning, Activity #2]
-- Nonfiction Reader Response [Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech: I Have a Dream]

Phase 3
Conceptually Related Texts
Main focus: exposure to a variety of texts dealing with the same subject
-- Types of Exclusion [group text sets, Activity #3]
-- Exclusion Today [news article: Columbine shooting, Activity #4]
-- Pop Culture [news/video clips illustrating exclusion in the media]
-- The Power of Friendship [Movie: Simon Birch4]

Phase 4
Exploring Critical Issues
Main focus: making critical reflections and recommendations
-- Let’s Make A Deal! [Activity #5]
-- Scavenger Hunt: Extending Friendship [wrap-up]

Table 2: Four Phases of Inquiry

Activity #1
Phase 1: Initiating Experiences
What We Can and Cannot Do

At the beginning of the class, students responded in writing to the following prompts:
1. Activities they thought only men could do and why
2. Activities they thought only women could do and why
3. Activities they thought both men and women could do and why

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4 This movie vividly describes a teenage boy’s struggle to keep faith in life while dealing with dwarfism, a birth defect which causes him to be teased and looked down upon. His only friend, Joseph, tries to be supportive of him in every way possible.
After they answered the questions, students shared them with a partner first and then the class as a whole. The instructor then read aloud from the book *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991) and discussed with the class the following questions:

1. Do you agree with the audition results? Why or why not?
2. Are Grace’s classmates’ attitudes an example of exclusion? Why or why not?

Drawn upon the discussion, students had the choice to add to or revise their original answers.

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**Activity #2**

**Phase 2: Shared Reading**

**Literature Circle (Malcolm X)**

Students read *Mississippi Morning* (Vander, 2004) using the Jigsaw technique. Each person was given 20 minutes to study three different pages of the book. Later they were organized into several expert groups where each person took turns to explain the storyline to the rest. They pieced together information (the “puzzle”) to discover what happened to the young boy.

After the Jigsaw reading exercise, students proceeded to study the life of Malcolm X in groups of four. Each individual was assigned a specific role.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biographer</td>
<td>This person was responsible for locating basic information about Malcolm X’s life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographer</td>
<td>This person looked for pictures of Malcolm X at different stages of his life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historian</td>
<td>This person created a timeline of important events during the time of the civil rights movement. This person could choose to work with the biographer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Events</td>
<td>This person investigated current issues related to exclusion, e.g. campus bullying, gay bashing, or class barriers.</td>
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**Activity #3**

**Phase 3: Conceptually Related Texts**

**Types of Exclusion**
Students formed three interest groups in order to explore subcategories of exclusion, namely disability, gender, and race. They read the provided text sets closely (see the list of books in Table I) and worked on creating a “frozen picture” exemplifying the chosen type of exclusion. It could be based on one of the books, or a cross textual combination of elements. Later in a whole-class presentation, each group took turns to demonstrate their picture and then held a book talk session to introduce to the class the materials they had studied.

When all three groups finished the book talk, they focused their discussion on three questions:
1. Have you experienced similar situations as described in any of the stories?
2. What are the similarities and differences among these three types of exclusion?
3. Can they be effectively prevented or mitigated? How?

Students were informed that they were welcome to borrow any of the unread texts from the instructor.

Activity #4
Phase 3: Conceptually Related Texts
Exclusion Today (Columbine Shooting)

In April of 1999, two students from Columbine High School in the American state of Colorado took their own lives immediately after shooting and killing twelve students and one teacher. These two young men allegedly were the victims of extended bullying at the school. This incident has known as the Columbine shooting.

All the students read a news article titled “I prayed that he would kill himself” Mother of Columbine massacre shooter wanted son to commit suicide before he could hurt more people” (Mail online, November 18 of 2012). In groups of seven to eight people, the students then collaborated on creating a poem for different people who had been personally involved in the tragedy. This “I am Poem” guided writing exercise (an excerpt is included below), by putting oneself in another person’s shoes, encourages development of alternative perspectives.
I Am Poem

I am _______________________________________________________
I wonder __________________________________________________
I hear ________________________
I see ______________________________________________________________
I want _____________________________________________________________
I am ______________________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1</td>
<td>Dylan Klebold</td>
<td>They imagined what drove this young man to shoot and finally take his own life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 2</td>
<td>Sue Klebold</td>
<td>They wrote about the guilt feeling the mother of the shooter underwent after the massacre took place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Victims</td>
<td>They expressed tremendous fears/confusion/anger when the gunman threatened to kill others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 4</td>
<td>Reporter</td>
<td>They tried to pinpoint the causes for the campus violence and offered resolutions.</td>
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Activity #5

Phase 4: Exploring Critical Issues
Let’s Make a Deal!

Students worked in groups to come up with classroom rules about exclusion. They each presented 10 do’s and 10 don’ts to the whole class along with explicit explanations as to why certain behaviors were considered proper and others not. In the end, the class tried to decide on a final version of classroom rules that everyone would comply with.

Data Collection

In lieu of traditional written tests, students were expected to fulfill the following course requirements in order to receive a semester grade. First, it was mandatory for students to attend classes and take an active part in activities and discussions. The researcher kept field notes of her weekly classroom observations. Secondly, after each class, they had to submit a
minimum 250 words of online reflections with respect to the book(s) studied or issues discussed on that given day following four guiding prompts: (1) one thing they would like to keep in mind; (2) one surprise they have; (3) any question or concern that might have drawn their attention; and (4) any association they have made with other incidents or experiences. They, being non-English majors, were given permission to write their reflections in Chinese for the first four weeks. Afterwards, all assignments were composed only in English (Appendix A). Besides the weekly reflections, students kept a log recording their thoughts and ideas in relation to the inquiry topic. They were allowed to include such things like summaries of crucial points, comparisons with another text or their own life, to name just a few. This learning log was due on the last day of class (Appendix B). Eventually, near the end of the semester, students filled out an open-ended perception survey specifying their general enjoyment of the supplied children’s picture storybooks and whether the inquiry process had enhanced their understanding about exclusion (Appendix C). While given the option of answering the questions in either language, everyone in the class chose to complete the survey in Chinese.

The first three assignments (mostly of qualitative nature) were designed for a few purposes: (1) to help students recognize literacy as a meaningful social practice instead of dull skill training; (2) to immerse them in constant reflection about the chosen topic; and (3) for the instructor to monitor the entire class’ learning progress over time. The survey responses, which were tallied and categorized in accordance with emerging themes, were used as the main source of information for data analysis. Because the present inquiry project was the researcher’s initial attempt to teach social awareness through picture books, at this stage of study, it primarily focused on seeking students’ perceptions about the appropriateness of children’s literature as an alternative instructional tool and did not intend to assess the class’ actual language growth.

Results
Question 1: How would students react to the issue of exclusion?
   a. Through this program, what insights (if any) into the given issue did they gain?
   b. Which literacy exercises were most and least effective for facilitating their examination of the subject? Why?
Deeper Understanding into the Issue of Exclusion

In response to whether they gained any insights into the given topic, all students reported having benefitted from reading, writing, and discussing about the subject of exclusion. As “everyone was born equal,” they found it unjust to “feel superior” and to “judge people based on individual differences” (quotes are from students). Some started to pay closer attention to the issue, feeling they had learned to get along better with others. They wrote the comments (translations done by the researcher, hereafter selective):

“It is human nature to shun away from things or people that we do not know much about. Having said so, in a society of diverse ethnicities and cultures, one will only deny himself access to a wider social network if s/he is unwilling to tolerate individual differences.”

“The reading materials have deepened my understanding about the issue of exclusion. We should not decide whom to be friends with simply by how one looks. Rather, we must see into a person for what he is truly worth and stop excluding or holding prejudice against other people.”

“This whole project thing reminds me of this Vietnamese transfer student I met in junior high school. I did not (and quite honestly, had no desire to) understand why others avoided her like the plague. I befriended her and we instantly hit it off. Thinking back now, I am so glad I did the right thing.”

“I gave little thought to the issue of exclusion prior to this course. Through the readings, I realize that we are sometimes unknowingly victimizing others who may be of different religious beliefs or sexual orientations.”

“I know better about the subject now. I found it somewhat dull, though, to only study one subject and repeatedly write about it every week.”

With regard to the effectiveness of the given assignments, over half of the class expressed difficulties about keeping a learning log, mainly because some students were not exactly clear about the requirements for the assignment, and others found it to be uninteresting, or felt it
was merely a repeat of the weekly reflections they had been working on. Another 46% of the participants found the English reflections to be hard to accomplish, which may be the reason they had for turning in late homework during the project period, or their completing the homework right at the moment in which it was due. As for the literacy activities implemented in the class, students seemed ambivalent about working with their peers. Jigsaw reading, for example, was rated by them as both the most (33%) and least helpful (23%) exercise; some felt rather awkward interacting with people outside the department, or disappointed that the so-called expert students of certain pages failed to explain the story in a comprehensible fashion. One participant thereby commented: “Most Taiwanese students are accustomed to traditional grammar instruction. A class built on student collaboration, albeit refreshing, might cause confusion. I suggest there be a balance between routine grammar practices and interactive literacy activities.”

Question 2: How would students respond to this children’s literature-based approach?
   a. To what extent did they learn to appreciate children’s picture storybooks? How did this experience influence their English learning?
   b. Which selected literary texts did they find to be most and least compelling? Why?

**Favorable Responses to Reading Children’s Literature**

The survey feedback has generally confirmed other study findings about the helpfulness of children’s literature in language education. Nearly everyone in the class welcomed reading the supplied illustrated storybooks, deeming them to be adult-appropriate reading texts. Moreover, they seemed to be confident that they had made progress in aspects of spoken grammar (46%), reading comprehension (30%), and reading speed (16.6%). There were two students, nevertheless, who found the materials boring and linguistically easy, and three others felt children’s literature was not suitable or helpful for adult learners like themselves. Sample responses included:

*Positive*

“This is interesting. I never had this kind of English course. Although some storybooks are a bit difficult for my current level of English proficiency, I found it generally comprehensible.”
“Great. I am not good at English so I am glad we start with illustrated storybooks. I learn English while studying significant issues.”

“I feel I have got better at English. For example, my reading skill has improved. And I am more confident and motivated to read English materials. As children’s literature is really for beginners, it is less intimidating for someone like me.”

“I often read silently so I guess it has helped me in terms of speaking and reading.”

**Negative**

“I do not like to read. Period. I understand that the teacher is trying her best to make the class more fun but I am just uninterested in reading picture books.”

“I don’t like it. I overheard that another class is studying *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Pride and Prejudice*. If we read more challenging texts, we probably can learn more.”

“Maybe little kids would be attracted to the illustrations. Not adults, though. The stories are usually not appealing to grown men, either.”

“I don’t think children’s literature is meant for adults. I can see, however, why it would be useful for EFL beginning learners. I still prefer studying more advanced materials. No pain, no gain.”

When rating their relative enjoyment of the selected texts, students were instructed to choose among the six picture books shared in whole-class readings. The group reading text sets were not taken into consideration for the obvious reason that they were made available only to selective groups at that time. Students’ written responses, nonetheless, indicated a wide difference in their reading preferences: three storybooks, *Amazing Grace* (Hoffman, 1991), *Tacky the Penguin* (Lester, 1990), and *Mississippi Morning* (Vander, 2004) were voted both as the most loved and hated books among the class. Students gave their reasons:

**Positive**
Amazing Grace (23%): I appreciate the inspiring message the author sends: irrespective of one’s skin color or gender, one can achieve anything in life as long as s/he exerts great efforts.

Tacky the Penguin (23%): Even though the penguin is silly-acting, I like the fact that he is true to himself. He does not conform to the social expectations.

Mississippi Morning (20%): It touches on the issue of racial discrimination while dealing with the sometimes complicated family relationships.

Negative
Mississippi Morning (53%): This story is too “heavy” for a children’s book.

Tacky the Penguin (20%): I don’t get the story. I don’t understand the meaning behind it, if there is one.

Amazing Grace (6%): The story is too childish for me.

Discussions and Recommendations
In light of the research findings, language teachers are strongly recommended to bear in mind a few curriculum-planning principles so that they can use children’s literature to its full potential. They can start with informing the class about basic knowledge of second language acquisition theories in case of possible resistance from students. In addition, they should add diversity and depth to the lesson plans. Utilizing information about the students’ standardized test scores along with their self-reported difficulties and interests, teachers will be able to determine the amount of instruction that should be devoted to explaining relevant SLA theories or the intensity of literacy activities a given group of learners is able to accomplish. Finally, teachers must constantly search for professional development, and strike a balance between form and meaning. Each point will be discussed in the following sections.

Instilling SLA knowledge
For young adults who are skeptical about the usefulness of children’s literature as an instructional tool, their attitudes could change once they become empowered with prominent
SLA principles. Many participants in this study showed a great enthusiasm for improving spoken English. They may appreciate learning that extensive reading of authentic texts provides a solid foundation for one’s general linguistic development (Lee, 2007; Lee & Hsu, 2009), including speaking competence (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). On the other hand, a few participants favored excessively difficult texts, e.g. original full-length *Pride and Prejudice*, as a result of the notion of “no pain, no gain.” They may be well disappointed to find out that such ambitious attempt can be in effect jeopardizing. During the study, the participating students were found struggling at times with reading speed and passage comprehension, and their writing frequently contained grammatical errors, which were indications that they only possessed a very rudimentary understanding of English language. If they are given over-challenging materials to read, students can easily become frustrated and resist engaging in much free voluntary reading. Over time, they will be quite unlikely to acquire a robust vocabulary or adequate reading skills, which further reduces their motivation to read or to learn English at all. To prevent this disastrous outcome typically known as the Matthew effect from happening, second language learners should be made aware of the *i+1* Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), which maintains that one benefits most from accessing materials only slightly beyond his current linguistic proficiency. In fact, texts which exactly match or are one step behind (in other words, *i* or *i-1*) a person’s existing level can be instead even more helpful in certain contexts, such as assisting with one’s reading motivation/confidence/fluency. Accordingly, students should not automatically reject course materials which they deem to be too easy or unrealistically work on texts which far exceed their current level of English language ability. Teachers are advised to speak truthfully, but cautiously, when discussing this delicate issue with students so as to never make them feel as if they are incapable of learning to read and comprehend literature written at a more advanced level.

*Adding Diversity and Flexibility to the Course Design*

In order to best accommodate children’s literature in the language classroom, teachers can add diversity to their curriculum. One strategy is to pay attention to art work in different picture books; colorful illustrations enhance visual literacy and trigger varied artistic responses. By involving students in discussions about the details of fine art, students may gain a holistic learning experience and start to appreciate the complexity of children’s literature. Another strategy is to have the whole class carry out a focused study similar to the
inquiry project described in this paper. Teachers can require students to read a wide selection of picture storybooks on one single subject, e.g. death, homosexuality, or parental relationships across cultures. Being presented with multiple perspectives and sometimes competing ideas, young adult learners may possibly develop a deeper understanding about the researched topic in addition to the richness of children’s literature publications. Still another possibility is to incorporate multimodal representations, such as films, animations and music. As this paper is being written, a search of Snow White produced 200 results at the popular website Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Of all the versions, Enchanted (2007) is an interesting twist on the classic story. Starting out as a typical fairytale female character, Princess Giselle is adamant about finding the love of her life. Upon meeting a divorce lawyer in modern Manhattan, Giselle learns to base her marital decision-making on solid mutual understanding rather than blind faith. The concept of a “date,” which couples do prior to making a marriage commitment, is rare in most old-time fairy tales but is used in this movie as a vital symbol of women’s self-awareness. Through reading, watching, and critically analyzing the variances of Snow White stories by time or location, even high-level students will likely be open to the option of reading children’s literature.

Probably the ultimate answer to successful incorporation of a children’s literature-based curriculum is for teachers to maintain flexibility in the lessons. After carefully examining students’ test scores and their self-reported learning needs/interests, teachers can assess whether children’s literature should be used as a main source of texts or simply as a supplement. At schools where standard commercial textbooks are enforced, teachers can still occasionally bring in storybooks as additional material so as to facilitate the class’s understanding of the topic being studied. For instance, a book such as Voices in the Park (Browne, 1998) may serve as a great conversation starter about a textbook chapter on socioeconomic barriers. If a fixed curriculum limits any time and opportunities for alteration, teachers can instruct students to do voluntary reading outside of class and have them turn in reports which document their weekly progress. Such an activity is possible to do since numerous websites, e.g. International Children’s Digital Library (ICDL) and Children’s Storybooks Online, provide free access to e-books. In a course context in which a focus is placed on test preparation or peer competition, which is a common occurrence in Taiwan, teachers especially need to seek a balance between traditional grammar instruction and literature-based language interventions.


Professional Development

In order to ensure that teachers keep abreast of current developments in the field of children’s literature, or for those who are considering incorporating such materials into their class for the first time, it is suggested that they pay regular visits to local children’s libraries and read firsthand the various types of materials available. Provided that libraries have a limited number of books, teachers can receive catalogs from publishers and view free sample pages online, which is essentially helpful if they are thinking of purchasing a particular book. It is also useful for teachers to communicate with associates and colleagues who are knowledgeable about teaching language through the use of picture books. Attending workshops/conferences related to children’s literature, for instance, is one good approach for them to discover different perspectives concerning how to effectively and efficiently implement such information into the classroom. As for the cost involved, teachers can easily locate quality children’s literature in an economical fashion. Strategies include collaborating with co-workers who share the same interest, starting a class library to which every student contributes at least one book, as well as utilizing free online resources.

Conclusion

The study described in this article constructed a socially supportive learning context in which a group of EFL students went beyond merely performing rote grammar exercises, but instead engaged in active reading of alternative texts in order to reflect upon the ways in which they viewed individuals in society. Through reading well-written illustrated storybooks, the participating young adults on the whole acknowledged the usefulness of children’s literature for critical awareness and reported becoming more skilled in English. This self-perceived sense of achievement, as resultative motivation contends, may drive them to further their learning and brings about solid language growth in the long run. Students’ overall fondness of the selected picture storybooks especially yielded one significant implication: given their maturity level, adults seem able to realize that reading is a meaningful practice, which they need do in order to gain knowledge, to understand other socio-cultural groups, or to start self-examination. However, the difficulty level of a book is not and should never be the primary criteria for determining the value of a text. This finding may be a great relief for teachers who fear using children’s literature because they could offend their adult students, or worse, be considered less professional by colleagues for not using heavy literature.
In closing, this one-semester inquiry project is the researcher’s humble effort to contribute to a more inclusive society both as a citizen and a language teacher. Indeed, as “…awareness of our situation must come before other changes, which in turn before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ‘real world’ unless it first happens in the images in our head” (Anzaldua, 1987, p.87; cited from Chumbes, 2010), special attention must be called to the issue of exclusion if there is to be any possibility at all for cultivating a future generation of global citizens who not only respect individual differences but embrace cultural diversities. EFL educators are recommended to experiment with the above-presented literature-based curriculum in any class whose students have comparable proficiency levels or learning needs.

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References


**Children’s Literature Cited**


Appendix A

Samples of students’ unedited weekly online reflections

One thing to remember

- We should like grandma, Mrs. Stanton, for unreasonable things, we should be brave to express. Do not be afraid of the others make fun or hate. Because we are right, we have our rights.

- The boy always believed his father is a great businessman, he does not believe his father set fire to the house or do other bad things, he believes that everyone likes his father.

One surprise

- Mrs. Stanton first time heard her father say, she does not sad. A re even more tried to make her more and more like a boy. Would not let him feel sorry. She is a good daughter.

- Mrs. Stanton father, he said ‘I wish you were a boy.’ I think the father how like son, and can not say it for daughter. Because mean that you do not like their own daughter. Daughter will be very sad.

One question

- After reading Amazing grace, I considered a lot of issue about gender and race. I thought no matter we’re male or female, we can do all the work. Why a man can’t be a nurse? Why we have to distinguish the work is man’s work or woman’s work? I thought I can try my best and enjoy the work is good work.

- Before this incident occurred, do not at any point omen? Everything before I think there will be some omen, but we had overlooked these omens. Murderer really is entirely sinners? Murderer is not a complete sinner, the murderer would become so brutal part is caused by our neglect.
One connection

- I know a movie including religion, race and asperger syndrome. The movie called “My Name Is Khan”. It is the most toughing movie I have ever seen. The background is happened around September 11 attacks. After attacks happened, leading man became a disgusting. For his dignity and lover, he set up his journey.

- I think we have to look at each person holding empathy should not be biased. We have to stand in a fair and impartial perspective to look at this whole thing, not totally on the victim's point of view this tragedy, we have to think about the reasons for the murderer to do so. And most important, we should not lose sight of each child, we should pay attention to their thoughts, and perhaps a little more understanding, a little more Care, this tragedy would not have happened.
Appendix B

Samples of students’ learning logs

Poetry
Movie

Exploring the Issue of Exclusion through Reading English Picture Storybooks

Lee
Song lyrics

We are the world

We are the world, we are the world,
All we are is one.

We are the world, we are the world,
All we are is one.

不管這個有關種族、性別的故事，讓我聯想到：“We are the world”，這首歌，
雖然這首歌一開始誕生的本質是Michael Jackson為了整個世界的愛而寫的，但我
覺得它的歌詞十分符合作者想要藉由Gracia所傳達出的訊息。“We are the
world”，我們都是相同的，無關種族、無關宗教、無關男女，不論貧富，不論高低。
Exploring the Issue of Exclusion through Reading English Picture Storybooks

News article

MALCOLM X

In 18th-century U.S. slavery制度中，大约分成两种黑奴：一种“家中黑奴”（house nigger），另一则为“田野黑奴”（field nigger）。田野黑奴很惨，每天要在棉花田外受力求生存。主子也不曾照顾他们，可是毒打与折磨却不知少。然而家中黑奴则受到白人地主的照顾，在地主的屋内，作些简单的任务。

家中黑奴穿得不错，吃得也佳。一旦主人生病了，他會说：主子！您怎樣了？

“我們”生病了嗎？“我們”不舒服嗎？“我們曾經不一樣的人，現在為何我們要分開？”麥爾坎不羁的表示，這些搞不清狀況的黑奴，會用“我們”來稱奴役自己的人。

如果有一天，田野黑奴倆便家中黑奴一起逃命，家中黑奴會說：逃命！為何，我過的非常好阿！

“我們”隨即回覆主持人道：所謂主張非暴力，然後當上博士、博士頭銜的黑人領袖，就是這群家中黑奴——a house nigger。

其暗指金恩博士的意圖，再明顯也不過了。

雖然金恩博士跟Malcolm X都是民權運動的重要推手，但兩者的作風卻截然不同，以下是兩者的差異：

Martin Luther King Jr.  
Malcolm X

宗教
基督教
伊斯蘭教

風格
和平非暴力
暴力

在提倡平等的民權運動中，包括公車前後坐位的平等問題，還有在百貨公司、電車上不讓黃色等規定，都被拒絕。因這些事件而持續地

ELTWorldOnline.com
Appendix C. End of the Semester Perception Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue of exclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. After participating in this inquiry project, have you gained deeper understanding regarding the issue of exclusion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. During this semester, you have been instructed to complete three course requirements, i.e. class discussions, weekly online reflections, and learning logs. Which one did you find to be most challenging? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. During this semester, you have participated in a wide variety of literacy activities. Based on what you can recall, which activity did you find to be most helpful as far as promoting understanding of the issue of exclusion? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following question 3, which activity did you find to be least helpful? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Picture storybooks

Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991), The Ballot Box Battle (McCully, 1996), First Day in Grapes (Perez, 2002), The Mississippi Morning (Vander, 2004), Tacky the Penguin (Lester, 1990), Tea with Milk (Say, 1999)
4. How do you feel about reading children’s literature in this class? Explain.

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________________________________________________________________________
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5. In general, how interesting or boring did you find those stories to be?

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7. Which book did you like the least? Why?

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8. Some people say children’s literature is childish and inappropriate for adults. What do you think about this?

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
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9. Do you think reading children’s literature is helping your English skills? If yes, how? If not, why?

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Final thoughts

10. (optional) Provide three suggestions as to how this English course can be improved.

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About the author

Hsiang-Ni Lee, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of English at National Taitung University, Taiwan. She earned her doctorate in Language Education and has conducted research in the field of EFL adult literacy. Currently, she is interested in children’s literature, literature-based reading instruction and material development.