

Laina Ho teaches communication skills and thesis writing to postgraduate students from foreign universities in Asia. Her research interests are in children's literature of East Asia written in English, Chinese, and Malay, and reading response.

Laina Ho

Children's Literature in Adult Education

This article investigates the possible role of children's literature in the education of adult learners of English. This three-year study on adult learners of English from the People's Republic of China shows that children's literature can be effective in teaching linguistic skills such as pronunciation practice and improving language acquisition. Using and reading children's literature is an initial step to developing literary competence, critical thinking, increasing knowledge, and multicultural understanding as well as exposing learners from developing countries to effective innovative educational methodology. Despite the limitations of children's literature—identification with child protagonists—it paves the way to developing literacy in adult literature.

KEY WORDS: English as a foreign language; adult learners; language education; literacy competence; social learning; creativity.

Whither Children's Literature?

Thirty years ago, Isaac Bashevis Singer remarked, "while adult literature, especially fiction, is deteriorating, the literature for children is gaining in quality and stature. It might have been true then, but I believe it may be truer today. Children's literature has burgeoned over the decades, offering an overwhelming variety of stories for children of all ages. It has been read and researched and reviewed, studied and integrated in universities, critiqued, translated, illustrated, rewritten in simpler versions, promoted and publicized, discussed and presented and adapted for all sorts of media and format. All this has mostly been undertaken by adults with a professional or academic interest in children's literature. Given my own teaching commitments, I began to wonder whether there might be a role for children's literature in the education of adult readers studying English as a foreign language. In the new century might children's literature become the main reading diet of some adults from developing countries? But first, a brief look

Singer, I.B., Quoted in "The present state of English children's literature"

at some of the claims often made for the value of children's literature in education.

Why Children's Literature?

Advocates of children's literature testify to its usability and value in the reading programs and in teaching literature in the classroom for children. Collie and Slater are certain that children's literature, "is able to stimulate personal involvement, arousing learners' interest and provoking strong positive reactions from them; it is meaningful and enjoyable, and reading it has a lasting and beneficial effect upon learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge." Sometimes it is used in literacy programs for adults and teenagers with reading difficulties, or simply used to enhance language learning of children and teenagers. In the United States, Karlin points to its variety of language activities for children and adolescents. It offers a varied and wide range of literature from real life to imaginative topics. There are stories with well-developed characters, engaging plots and vivid themes, offering good sources of knowledge, particularly concerning history and culture (folklore), sociological and psychological insights into realistic fiction, and a story framework for reading and writing when exploring genres, whether comprehending or composing. Children's literature also enriches the arts and humanities, such as visual arts and drama, and encourages the faculty of imagination. But how might such literature work with the adults I teach? How can it be motivating for them? What is the response of such readers to children's literature as a whole? In what ways does children's literature contribute to the education of these readers?

To find out I did a study with a group of students from the People's Republic of China using children's literature initially to help improve their language. Along the way, however, I found that children's literature has much to offer in the education of foreign students.

What Kind of Adult Readers?

My work at this English Centre is teaching English and communication skills to foreign students from Asia. Every year for the past three years I have also taught English to a group of 20 students from the People's Republic of China. They come from the northeastern, western, central and southeastern parts of China. These are young adult EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners with an average age of 19. Before admission to this university, they are required to do an Intensive English Course at our English Centre to equip them for university education. This English course follows a syllabus that concentrates on listening, speaking, reading, and writing with considerable

Bosma, B., and De Vries Guth, N. (eds.), *Children's Literature in an Integrated Curriculum*.

Collie, J., and Slater, S., *Literature in the Language Classroom*

Handel, R., and Goldsmith, E., "Children's literature and adult literacy: Empowerment through intergenerational learning"

Johnson, H., Pflaum, S., Sherman, E., Raylor, P., and Poole, P., "Focus on teenage parents: Using children's literature to strengthen teenage literacy"

Sharp, P., "Picture books in the adult literacy curriculum"

Karlin, A., "Picture story books to use in the secondary classroom"

Cullinan, B. (ed.), *Invitation to Read: More Children's Literature in the Reading Programme*.

practice in grammar, pronunciation, summary writing, and so on. As it is taught intensively it is not uncommon to find that the students sometimes get tired of the same assignments and academic texts. This is where children's literature comes in, I thought. Why shouldn't I use children's literature to teach some of the language skills to my students? Besides, it was the right time to explore a pressing question that had been on my mind since I started teaching foreign postgraduate students in 1995: What is the role of children's literature in the education of adult students from developing countries? In what ways can it be used effectively in the EFL classroom? This would have important implications for English teachers and educators in the countries of East Asia where English is becoming a very important tool of communication, especially in countries that are beginning to trade with the world communities.

The traditional attitude that children's literature is just for children is very much upheld in Asian countries regardless of whether it is written in English or ethnic languages, and normally children's literature is not integrated in the language curriculum of secondary or tertiary education. In tertiary institutions in East Asia, Literature Studies means the ancient and modern classics in Asian languages. English literature is offered in former colonial countries like Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong. Thus, going by the book, my adult students should be reading adult English literature. However, if you can imagine a group of young Chinese who are not only suffering from cultural shock but who find that they have to struggle very hard to use English in all forms of communication in a foreign country, especially in oral skills where they could hardly utter an intelligible sentence in English, it will be clear why we should start their English language program by introducing simple but stimulating and engaging reading such as children's literature.

I introduced children's literature to my students with a picture book, progressing to short stories meant for older children for my classroom language lessons. I also recommended a short reading list of children's books for homework reading. There were three groups of students, 20 in each, a third of which were females, all of whom were first year undergraduates from the People's Republic of China. I taught each group every year in the second semester from 1996-1999.

Children's Literature in Adult Education

Naturally, my students were highly motivated in their English learning because they knew they would have to read avidly to improve their English. It was thus easy to encourage them to read children's literature whether in class or for homework. Generally, there are advan-

Lazar, G., "Using novels in the language-learning classroom"

tages in using children's literature with EFL adult learners. Children's literature, compared to adult literature, has arguably simpler language, fewer lengthy stories, fewer abstract ideas, less complicated themes, and offers just as wide a variety of stories. All of these features were encouraging, especially in boosting reading confidence. I did not use adult literature because its length of a novel, vocabulary difficulty and idiomatic expressions, and complex themes, plots, and characterization can be problematic and discouraging.

Language Education

Children's books can be used effectively for oral language practice such as reading aloud and pronunciation. Picture books are particularly effective. For example, I used Joan Aiken's *The Moon's Revenge*, meant for older children, but which my students found difficult to read aloud:

Once there was a boy called Seppy, and he was the seventh son of a seventh son. This was *long* ago, in the days when women wore *shawls* and men *wore hoods* and *long* pointed shoes, and the cure for an earache was to put a hot roasted onion in your ear. (p. 1)

They found it difficult because of words with long vowels such as *wore*, *shawls*, *hood*, *long shoes*. Put them together in a sentence and it can be difficult as there are no such long vowels in their native language. In addition, children's poetry and nursery rhymes were equally difficult, such as *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, *Merrily Down the Stream* because there are no consonant sounds such as *r* and *l* in Chinese. This paragraph proved to be a real challenge for my students:

From a long way off he could see the seven shoes on the *wall*, *throwing long* shadows as the sun slipped up out of the silver water. But just before Sep got there, a huge wave came *rolling*—green and black and blue, curved *like a claw*, *rolling from far* over the sea's *rim*—snatched up the seven shoes in its *foaming lip*, and carried them away, back over the *rim* of the sea. (*The Moon's Revenge*, p. 7)

The words underlined posed a great difficulty for my students because the consonants *l* and *r* occur in successive words. *L* is often substituted with *n* and *r* for *l* where these occur at the beginning of words. For example, *long* is pronounced as *nong*, *like* as *nike*, and *rolling* is pronounced as *lolling*, *rim* as *lim*. Simple though these words are when pronounced correctly in isolation, they can become unintelligible when read in a continuous paragraph, as in the above example.

In spite of the difficulty, my students found children's literature more interesting than the drills in prescribed pronunciation textbooks be-

cause of the challenge it poses for dramatized reading. They had to learn to read with the correct intonation, pitch, stress, diction, and enunciation.

One of the reasons that children's literature is unusual for my students is because of the vocabulary, which they normally would not find in their textbooks. Consider these: *cobbled, clattered, brimful, foaming, fiddle, frisking, scowling, prickles*. These words were considered interesting because the students had never seen them before. Thus, what we take for granted as simple can be totally new to adult learners of English. Literature programs in the English language teaching class often presuppose that EFL learners can cope with the language in adult literature, but as research has shown, they cannot.

Lazar, G., "Using novels in the language-learning classroom"

Literary Styles

Most interesting of all for my students, *The Moon's Revenge* taught them about literary devices that they found enjoyable. They were able to learn and identify figurative language and other literary devices such as alliteration, onomatopoeia, assonance and consonance, hyperbole, personification, rhythm, and rhyme. My students learned to appreciate English literary style as in this paragraph:

The crowd scattered, screaming and terrified. For the monster churning toward them through inky waves had two great horns on its forehead and a jawful of teeth as long as doorposts; it had spines or prickles or plates of shell on its back and sides; and it had seven great feet at the end of seven great legs, which stomped and splashed through the water. As the creature came closer, townspeople caught a whiff of its smell, a damp, rotting, sickly, weedy breath, like water that flowers have been in for far too long. (p. 20)

In fact, my students found the introduction of figurative language intriguing because they could compare it to the Chinese literary styles and techniques. It was as though they had suddenly become enlightened to the fact that English literature is similar to Chinese literature and would then gleefully give me examples of Chinese equivalents of English metaphors and similes. They described these as "interesting and poetic," saying that the language was "beautiful," and they would like to use such "beautiful" language in their essays. Having learned about literariness they would look out for these features in English fiction. These lessons show that children's literature can be motivating even when we use picture books with adult readers, and it is the first step toward developing literary competence with learners of English.

Literary Competence

A third motivating factor for adult readers is that children's literature is stimulating and interesting in terms of its plot, theme, and charac-

terization. At the same time, because it is simple in the language and storyline, facilitating reading comprehension and reading interests, it builds up the confidence of my students in using the target language. They could, therefore, readily and freely offer their critical evaluation of the stories I used in the classroom. It must be pointed out that expressing individual opinions and public speaking is an activity that is normally lacking among Chinese students, including the postgraduate research students that I also teach. This is because classroom activities in China are rather teacher-centred, and critical thinking and freedom of speech are not often encouraged. (This kind of student behavior is also not uncommon in the classrooms in Asia where activities are teacher-dominated, necessarily so because of the large class size.) Using children's literature has succeeded in encouraging them to voice their opinions compared to other classroom group discussions that use academic texts. My students often found those discussions intimidating because they did not have adequate English language skills to participate spontaneously and actively.

However, what was most interesting was that in their reading response my students showed me that they have more perceptiveness than I. I gave them short stories to review—Geraldine McCaughrean's *A Pack of Lies*, which I thought should be easy reading for them. One of the stories was "The Plate: A Question of Values," which I thought should arouse their interest since it is set in China. My students did not at first consider this story very interesting because they are familiar with the theme of romantic love in folk tales. They were disconcerted by the ending, which is a happy one, unlike the traditional Chinese love story that always ends tragically. In McCaughrean's version, the lovers manage to flee and buy their freedom from a Portuguese sea captain with the precious willow pattern plate. But, after having discussed this story in a group, the majority of the students were thrilled with this happy ending. They admired the guts and ingenuity of the young lovers in their scheme to run away. This story was set in the Qing (Manchu) dynasty when China was beginning to open to the West, and for my students, the lovers' escape symbolizes a bold move in shaking off the shackles of Imperial China and its old feudal ways and customs. Thus, as one of them said, "maybe you will question the possibility of the two lovers' success in running away, but I think it doesn't matter; it just indicates that people's struggle against the restrictions can succeed one day." In short, this story symbolizes the spirit of freedom from authoritarianism. Taken in today's political context, these students seem to imply their present government is repressive and old-fashioned. Coming from a country with centuries of historical turmoil, my students were able to comment on the allegorical reference to human rights and freedom from a simple story like the "The Plate," taking the flight for freedom as a symbol for the

fight of individual rights and democracy—a view that I had never considered before, having read it as a typical children's story with the usual happy ending.

Nodelman, P., "Cultural arrogance and realism in Judy Blume's *Superfudge*"

Using children's literature with adult readers has shown me that young adults unfamiliar with Western culture can read them differently. Although "The Plate" is a typical folk story with a happy ending, which most readers (children and adults) would accept readily because this is how we identify with the characters and read it as a fantasy, there is, however, the danger of being confined to a "solitude of our own consciousness," and a "cultural arrogance" in our reading response as described by Nodelman. He suggests that television shows may be an affecting factor for such a response. My students had no access to Western television shows (none had access to cable/satellite television) back home and, therefore, would not have read a Western story, even if it is based on a Chinese folk tale, in the same way as us; that is, not as fantasy but as an allegory of the social/cultural problems of their country.

Similarly, their response to "The Writing Box: The Story of a Liar," from the same book was rather unusual. This is a story of a Victorian girl whose parents left her in a boarding school in England when they were assigned to serve in the civil service in British India. Grace is a terrible liar and bully, a lazy pupil trying desperately to get away to India because she thinks England is boring. Once in India, she finds it a trying place and bullies her maid, implicates her in a theft, and worse of all, cuts off her long black braid. For this Grace, is bitten by a poisonous snake planted in her writing box by her maid's fiancé, and dies. The moral of such a story is that children should not lie, but the moral of the story for my Chinese students is that revenge is justified. They read this story as an "empire strikes back" kind of morality, that the British colonial masters deserve their punishment for lording over the natives. They may consciously or unconsciously have some prejudice against Westerners who humiliated the Qing rulers in the 19th century but they, who love Chinese martial arts stories where the dashing knight-errant risks life and death to save the less fortunate and the downtrodden and who will kill without a blink of an eye to avenge wrongs (as I discovered from a survey I did on their reading interests in Chinese), would certainly feel that justice has been meted out in this story. They probably feel an affinity with the poor and oppressed, mostly of peasant stock, and although they may not know much about Indian history, they know from their own history the kind of abject misery suffered by the peasantry. Thus they felt no tinge of pity or regret that although Grace is only a child, her behavior being the result of parental neglect, she nevertheless deserves her fate.

In another story, "The Clock: A Story of Superstition," from the same collection, my students said that it was too familiar a theme. This is a story of a very superstitious and wealthy Irishman who rears Derby-winning racehorses, and who brings about his own miserable end because he foolishly believes in fortune-telling. It was familiar because obviously the Communist regime frowned on reasonless superstitions, and many children's novels set in the pre-Communist era satirize the superstitious beliefs of the gentry as well as the peasantry. Thus, "it's like all those Chinese stories we read before, and it is not interesting or even funny. We can't believe that Westerners are so superstitious." Their rather bland response shows their impatience with a familiar theme, a result, I suspect, of frequent intensive indoctrination against the old ways. This does not mean they disliked the story. Although the theme is familiar, they were intrigued by the references to Irish culture: *leprechauns* and *witches*, *Sunday mass* (Christian ritual in juxtaposition to superstitious practices) and *gypsy*, all of which generated a special lesson and discussion because of the students' keenness to learn.

Sebesta, S., et al. "A hierarchy to assess reader response"

Reading children's literature by these adults elicited unusual responses because they are mature and articulate enough to successfully evaluate the story critically and aesthetically. Responses can be unusual because such readers have not had much exposure to Western culture. This is refreshing because most research is done on children's literature written in English and the reading responses of readers from developed nations. Most of the work has focused on children's reading, including those of immigrant children or adolescents, but responses from adult readers such as my students are hardly documented.

Social Education

Strehle, E., "Social issues: Connecting children to their world"

Reading Western literature also heightened student awareness of some of the moral, ethical values, and issues with which they are unfamiliar: for example, developing empathy and compassion, charity, or the importance of *esprit de corps* and cooperation. Understanding Western social issues, such as the issue of human rights and freedom of worship also arose from reading children's literature. This does not mean my Chinese students have none of these feelings, but it must be remembered that most of them come from single-child families and as such, they tend to be individualistic, preferring to work alone rather than with other people. Also, they come from an egalitarian society and may not be very much aware of contemporary social injustice and inequality. This situation is gradually fading as China is becoming more open, but my students would have been imbued with these ideals in their primary and secondary education. Thus, it is not un-

common to see them showing total disregard or no emotion when we tell them about war and suffering in other parts of the world, or that there are destitute, disabled, and poor people in the world. They may or may not know that such problems exist in their own country (censorship is strict in China), but, in general, they are often not moved. This kind of behavior is also observable with the postgraduate Chinese students. This is not to say that these are unemotional, detached, passionless, uncaring people. A possible reason for an appearance of a lack of affect is that China was isolated for so long and there had been little exposure or involvement in worldly affairs. Besides, censorship took care that its citizens were not unnecessarily bothered with ideals and ideas contrary to those of the Communist regime, or those that would threaten the political stability of the country. Therefore, reading children's literature opened my students' eyes to social, economic, and cultural problems of worldwide communities.

Creativity

Lastly, in writing, my students soon showed me that, given the opportunity, they could hone their creative skills. Having enjoyed reading "The Everlasting Shoes," from McCaughrean's *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, they rewrote it as a dramatized script and turned it into a bloodthirsty, mudslinging, slapstick comedy. "The Everlasting Shoes" is a very funny story about a miserable miser of Cairo who lost all his fortune because of his despicable shoes. It is not the funny elements that helped my students turn it into a successful drama, but the fact that they come from a background rich in its traditional theatrical performances dating back to the 13th century. Since they were familiar with Chinese operatic performances, they could transfer some of the more expressive Chinese phrases used in drama to English. This exercise was a rich and rewarding language experience for them. Compared to the first time I met them, when they could hardly utter an intelligible English sentence, it was also rather astounding to see these young adults throwing off their inhibitions and shyness when they acted the parts of the characters from their scripts. Naturally, after such an intensive course in English they would start to become more confident in using English; however, I am not talking about their language skills but their theatrical performance when they presented a scene based on their script. They may have had acting or theatrical experience back home, but this would be in their native language; it is therefore amazing how professional and fluent they could become in a foreign language. I do not think the same students could have done so well if I had given them an adult play by Oscar Wilde. Introducing adult plays can come later, but first they need the confidence to start with something simple.

To summarize, my belief is that children's literature can play a crucial role in the education of EFL adult readers. Other than the obvious advantages of language acquisition and improvement, using and reading children's literature is an initial step in developing literary competence, critical thinking, increasing knowledge, and multicultural understanding, as well as exposing learners from developing countries to effective and innovative educational methodology. For foreign students like these from China, the simplicity of children's stories paves the way for easy peer interactions in group discussions and team workshops, easily generating critical comments and enhancing confidence in public speaking. In this way, my students learned to adapt to our Western style teaching methodology and learning styles and have become educationally more motivated, receptive, and responsive to our teaching.

Limitations

However, using children literature with young adults has its limitations. The main disadvantage concerns child protagonists. *The Moon's Revenge*, for example, was usable in teaching linguistic and literary skills; there was no sense of empathy for my students. This was why I chose the other stories with adult protagonists. Thus, stories that are better suited to adult readers are stories with an international appeal such as mythology, legends, science fiction, fantasy, or supernatural tales. Realistic fiction on unfamiliar social, economic, or cultural issues is not always suitable. This is mostly because the readers' lack of knowledge is a result of either strict censorship or unavailability of information. Certain moral and ethical issues may be too sensitive for some readers because of their cultural moral values such as Confucian values. Thus, a novel like Robert Cormier's *After the First Death* is not easily readable because the betrayal of a son by a parent goes against the grain of Confucian teachings. I can predict that some quality children's novels will not appeal to my students. I can think of Robert Westall's *The Scarecrows* (ambiguous ending), Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* (disrespect for elders), Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (anarchy in the school system), Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer* (unfamiliar history), to name a few.

This does not mean that adult EFL students will not be able to read and respond positively to these novels. It will take time—first of all, they need the time to improve their English proficiency and second, to be more familiar with Western culture since leaving their country. Briefly, what interests this group of readers are stories with simple plots, language, and characterization, with which they can identify and can read quickly and easily. Those that succeed are young adult novels with protagonists with whom they can identify. Since coming

here they have a better knowledge and understanding of Western culture, for example, through watching American television programs. From their responses to the recommended titles for homework reading, they enjoyed young adult novels that posed no reading difficulty: *Tunes for a Small Harmonica* (Barbara Wersba), *The Outsiders* (S. E. Hinton), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Lois Duncan), *A Very Long Way from Anywhere Else* (Ursula Le Guin), *Fifteen* (Beverly Cleary), *A Solitary Blue* (Cynthia Voight), *No Place Like* (Gene Kemp), *Pennington's Seventeenth Summer* (K. M. Peyton), *A Summer to Die* (Lois Lowry) (which is a familiar theme because of the familiarity of tear-jerking modern stories from Taiwan), *Madame Doubtfire* (Anne Fine), the movie of which they had seen. The stories of teenage angst and teenage problems are easily identifiable—regardless of the different backgrounds, culture, and experiences of the Chinese students from the various regions of China. However, those from the coastal cities such as Shanghai and Guangdong are more westernized and may have even fewer cultural problems with these books because of their accessibility to Western media.

This study also shows that reading children's literature has beneficial spin-offs for the students. For example, some of my married EFL post-graduate students with whom I first experimented with using *The Moon's Revenge* in 1995, learned to appreciate children's literature for the sake of helping their children with English language problems. It is very reassuring to know that my students have a permanent interest in children's literature. There are also many more classroom activities I could have done with my students if I had not been obliged to complete the course syllabus. If I had the time I would have asked them to prepare a puppet show based on a children's story they have read. This would allow them free creative rein in visual arts and drama. This assignment should pose no difficulty for my students as they are no strangers to puppetry, a form of theatrical performance, and the oral tradition of storytelling, which began in Imperial China. Although I have frequently referred to my Chinese students, I would have no doubts about trying out the same kind of activities or assignments with other foreign students who come from a culture rich in performing arts, such as the Malaysian and Indonesian *wayang kulit*, a shadow play using puppets to tell the stories of the Indian legend *Ramayana*, or the well-known Japanese theatrical drama, *kabuki*.

Conclusion

On the whole, children's literature works well with adult students because it is intellectually stimulating, encouragingly readable, linguistically challenging, literarily fulfilling, and educationally rewarding. The use of children's literature may be limited as it cannot be

used for all language skills instruction; neither can it be effective all the time as the protagonists are children and identification for adult readers is difficult. Similarly, unfamiliar Western culture may discourage reading, and this applies to young adult fiction even if the protagonists are adults. Generally, foreign adult readers like these from China are able to appreciate English literature, but first they must be comfortable and confident about reading in their target language and not be deterred by sophisticated linguistic style, themes, or unfamiliar genres. Once they have become more linguistically competent it will not be difficult for them to move on to adult literature. Although the main objective of introducing children's literature was to aid in language acquisition, it also helped readers to develop literary competence and aesthetic response, as well as enriching their education. Learning and classroom activities using children's literature helped to provide stimulating materials for peer interaction, foster cooperation, open up avenues for free individual expression and critical thinking, encourage the faculty of imagination and creativity in drama, and increase multicultural exposure. Finally, children's literature takes on a new perspective as it can be enjoyed by adult readers, and it can expose them to a new world of education. This study was confined to one small group of foreign students, but it can be generalized that using children's literature could be just as effective with other foreign students from countries where English is a foreign language.

Lastly, English children's literature will play a prominent role in the reading preference of East Asians, most of whom are from mainland China. "There are more people learning English in China than there are native speakers of English in the world," observed David Blunkett, the British Education Minister. The marketability of children's books in English will take on a significant meaning if it can reach the millions of Chinese readers and others keen to learn English, such as Japanese and Taiwanese people who recently have started introducing English as a second language in the primary schools. So, whither children's literature? I would say its future looks promising, if not in the West then certainly in East Asia.

Blunkett, D., "Britain swaps Mandarin for English in its bid to teach China"

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