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Word Play in English by Reading Nonsense Books: An Approach to Vocabulary Building and Comprehension at Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This paper clarifies the effect of introducing word play for English practice at elementary schools by using nonsense books. There are various types of word play in nonsense books, and they are useful for helping students learn how to use simple words and phrases in English. Additionally, students can memorize the connection of each word and phrase, which consequently results in better comprehension and a wider vocabulary. I also argue that the sound of English and its rhythms in nonsense books are sophisticated and easy to recite in class, because the words are chosen by authors in a condensed way, and they have 'stories' like other novels even though they look superficially 'nonsensical'. I suggest several examples of word play which seem to be appropriate for motivating students and show the fascinating aspects of gathering the thread of words, which they might find difficult if they concentrate on only monotonic practice.

Keywords: nonsense, words, phrases, practice, literature

Introduction: New Curriculum and Problems

The current curriculum for English class in junior high schools is fully compliant with the policies and procedures of the government's guidelines for junior high school education, which prioritize the improvement of communicative skills in English.¹ This has resulted in authorized texts containing lots of short conversation skits that are based on temporary situations in our daily lives.² The same can easily be predicted for the model skits and methods of teaching English at elementary schools once English becomes a compulsory subject in 2020, because the government's policy of prioritizing communicative skills

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in English for junior high school students will also be applied to educational policy for elementary school students. The government's policy has caused a phenomenon wherein the adaptation or revised versions of traditional literary works or citations from famous stories are drastically reduced in the main skits in the authorized texts for English class. This is based on the gratuitous idea that reading fiction in English is impractical and that stories of literary works are not directly related to our daily necessities, though there is no evidence that the drastic change in texts and increase in the number of conversational skits have improved students' English skills discernibly.

The important thing is not *what* we should use but *how* we should use possible course materials. This means that literary works should not be blamed for slower improvement of English skills. They can offer a lot more possibilities and tips for learning English if teachers realize that literary works are a great source of ideas and are rich in the flow of conversations, sequence of situations, and beautiful languages, because any literary work, even a short poem or verse, reveals the characteristics of its authors and, at the same time, illuminates their backgrounds. This inevitably leads readers to the wider world of imagination by which they connect one word with another and create original stories. Authors of literary works usually polish their words again and again so that they can use the best words to express their own ideas and convey the finest scenes to readers through the charm of the words. Further, reading literary works enables students to understand different customs, foods, histories, and other cultural aspects of foreign countries. The effects of reading literary works and using them as material for English class should be paid more attention to if we want to improve students' communicative skills and encourage them to develop an interest in another culture.

In this paper, I suggest that teachers introduce word play in English class at elementary schools by using simple words and phrases that are not independent but are incorporated into a certain kind of story. In particular, I analyse the effect of using nonsense books for vocabulary building and creative thinking so that students can also develop their imagination. Nonsense books are full of rhetoric — which is often expressed by word play — and such books have been popular with both parents and children in English-speaking countries. Children can practice English both grammatically and phonologically and can enjoy the stories at the same time. In that sense, nonsense books have already penetrated various cultures as a kind of standardized workbook for children.

Creative Activities by Reading Nonsense Books

The genre of nonsense books was established in the nineteenth century and became

popular mainly among the upper-middle and higher classes in Britain. They were read by parents (usually by mothers) or nannies to children from one generation to the next. In British literature, Edward Lear (1812-1888) was the first poet who wrote a short poem called a 'limerick'. A limerick consists of five lines in total with 'two long lines that rhyme with each other, followed by two short lines that rhyme with each other and ending with a long line that rhymes with the first two' (*OALD*, 'limerick'). Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) followed Lear and wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) for the three daughters of Henry Liddell, the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford. In a later period, these books were included in the genre of nonsense books.

In this section, I clarify why I choose Lear and Carroll's books and indicate how we can apply them to practical activities in English class. First, they are rich in word tricks, including rhymes, acrostics, anagrams, and mirror letters. Carroll was a mathematics professor at Christ Church, Oxford, from 1855 to 1881, and so he could have had a professional perspective of alphabetical letters and could play with them by turning logical thinking upside down as if the words were numbers for calculation. Second, the above authors' word play is based on the consistency of their belief in correct English. Noakes says, 'His [Lear's] words follow accepted rules of word formation. His two most famous neologisms . . . have adjectival suffixes, and his apparently capricious spelling has its own rationality, sometimes observing phonetic consistency, at others challenging this by imitating apparently illogical common usage' (xxvii). Carroll's mathematical viewpoint also made him strict on the issue of how to use words. The technique of using letters and words in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* is based on Carroll's knowledge of correct English. As Haughton introduced Carroll's letter to his sister Mary in 1892, he said,

Good *English*, and graceful arrangement, are higher qualities, not attainable by *rule*, but only by having read much good English, and so having got a musical 'ear', so to speak. . . . How few novels of the day are written in correct English! To find any such, you must go back 50 years or more. That is one reason why I like reading the *older* novels—Scott's, Miss Austen's, Miss Edgeworth's, etc.—that the English is so perfect. (302) ³

Finally, many of Lear's and Carroll's books are well known in Japan. Many elementary school students in Japan have the chance to purchase their Japanese translations, and so it is easier for them to widen their imagination and think about the world of these stories by comparing them with other stories. Reading Japanese translations before practicing English through these books helps them enjoy word play thanks to the attractiveness of the contents.

(1) Alphabetical Letters and Rhyme

Rhyme is a typical way of ordering the rhythms and sounds of poems. In the history of British literature, both alliteration and rhyme have been used and elaborated on by many poets in a sophisticated way. Children's books also include many poems that have various patterns of rhyming. Nursery rhymes are a good example, and some of them are sung in accordance with melody and traditional choreography so that elementary school students can do physical activities while they recite some rhymes. There are simple and short examples in Lear's alphabet song, most of which are accompanied by his drawings. Some of these examples are as follows:

A was once an apple-pie,
 Pidy
 Widy
 Tidy
 Pidy
 Nice insidy
 Apple-Pie! (279)⁴

D was a Duck
 With spots on his back,
 Who lived in the water
 And sometimes said Quack!
 d!
 Sear little duck! (123)

In the first song, the word 'insidy' just rhymes with the other lines and has no specific meaning. Lear did not like to define the meaning or connotation of each word or phrase (Noakes, xxvi), and so the best way to use this kind of material in class is just to recite the phrases and enjoy the sound of the rhythm in English.

(2) Tongue Twisters

In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, there are many rhythmical expressions that seem to be useful for students to perform muscle exercises. In the following scene, for example, students can enjoy uttering the same sound in a tongue twister play. This is also related to word play through rhyme:

“Dinah, my dear! I wish you were down here with me! There are no mice in the air, I’m afraid, but you might catch a bat, and that’s very like a mouse, you know. But do cats eat bats, I wonder?” And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, “Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?” and sometimes “Do bats eat cats?”, for, you see, as she couldn’t answer either question, it didn’t much matter which way she put it. (11)

Students can speak the phrase ‘Do cats eat bats?’ rapidly and simultaneously count how many times they can say this phrase without errors in a limited period. Just as Alice becomes confused by repeating the same phrase, students can do word play by finding other words in their dictionaries. Other examples are ‘Do rats eat fats?’ ‘Do cats eat fats?’, and exchanging these words. They can notice that these words are rhymed and, at the same time, learn the pronunciation symbols. Moreover, they might find definitions of other phrases like ‘I’ll eat my hat if . . .’ meaning ‘it is not likely to happen.’

(3) Jabberwocky: Feelings and Images for Sounds

The word ‘Jabberwocky’, the name of the monster in *Through the Looking-Glass*, is itself meaningless, but Humpty Dumpty explains to Alice that each syllable of this word comes from another word, which has a specific meaning. This gives teachers some hints for word play in class. For example, the sounds of some words can make a person comfortable or uncomfortable, and so students can create words that are easy for their ears to hear or uncomfortable sounding in both English and Japanese by mixing various letters. The sounds they like or dislike may have some common points, and they can discuss why this or that sound makes them uncomfortable.

Students can also draw a picture of a Jabberwocky or other characters in the book through the images they form from the sound of words.

(4) Portmanteau Words

In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty explains the meaning of the word ‘Jabberwocky’ to Alice. He says that ‘mimsy’ means ‘flimsy and miserable’, a blend of two words. Teachers can give their students time to start the practice of word-mixing play by adopting it for creative activities. There are also a lot of portmanteau words in Japanese. Young children are especially good at creating new words or phrases by omitting a certain part of each word. Examples are ‘Akeome’ (Akemashite Omedeto), ‘Kotoyoro’ (Kotoshi mo Yoroshiku), and ‘Disuru’ (disagree with something, which is the mixture of the English verb

'disagree' and Japanese verb 'suru'). However, unlike Lewis Carroll, Lear refused to use portmanteau words in his nonsense books, perhaps because he favoured correct English.

(5) Acrostic

The last part of *Through the Looking-Glass* consists of a typical acrostic, in which the first letter of each line makes sense if we read the text vertically. Carroll writes Alice's full name, 'Alice Pleasance Liddell', in this acrostic, which starts as follows:

A boat, beneath a sunny sky
Lingering onward dreamily
In an evening of July —

Children three that nestle near,
Eager eye and willing ear. . . (241)

The words or phrases that appear at the top of the lines usually match the topic or themes sung in that poem, but teachers can arrange the play into a simple task so that elementary school students can find the words in their vocabulary. For example, if teachers ask students what words they can imagine with each letter in their names' spellings, they only have to say one word for each letter: Apple, Lemon, Ice, Cake, and Egg. Further, they might be able to create some simple stories using these words in Japanese or compose short melodies, all of which will make it possible for them to imagine specific scenes.

The Effect of Using Paper-Based Dictionaries

As mentioned above, there are various ways to teach English at elementary schools by using nonsense books. It is important for us to realize that, in any case, students need some time to perform an assigned task on their own. This means that thinking time is needed for students and that teachers should give an opening for that purpose. I suggest that students be given time to look into paper-based dictionaries.

The number of the students who use paper-based dictionaries has been decreasing. Even the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology insists that teachers should promote the use of more ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in English classes so that students can absorb what they learn visually and aurally. It is true that visual images make it easy to inculcate various impressions in our senses and have an effect on mastering certain kinds of subject. However, we should not

forget that that kind of stimulation is transient. I suggest that students be given more time to look into paper-based dictionaries so that they can search for not only their targeted word but also the surrounding words to discover new words. By doing so, they have the opportunity to read definitions of other words or related phrases that come into sight by chance. This practice is similar to search playing on maps, because children often enjoy discovering new and strange names of places or speculating how the names of these places are pronounced. This practice enables students to widen their vocabulary and gives them enough time to consider the meaning of each word and understand the use of that word adequately. This is an experience that we cannot realize if we use only ICTs, because visual images are usually one way. An ideal class will use both methods by mixing them without exception.

Conclusion

There are a lot more hints and materials for word play in nonsense books, and teachers can arrange and elaborate these materials for English practice according to students' levels. The style of word play in Lear's nonsense is slightly different from Carroll's, and, as Carroll insists, there is no other rule for word play than that it is based on the knowledge of using correct English. Therefore, teachers can improve students' grammatical skills in English by preparing several options for classes and by motivating students to create new ideas and situations by linking their materials to other ones. All of these activities will only work if teachers understand that, first, it is important for them to make students realize that learning English is interesting, which the government has already insisted on in its former course materials.

Notes

1. Details of the required English skills for elementary and junior high school students are indicated on the following site: 'Globalization ni Taiou shita Eigo Kyoiku Kaikaku Jisshi Keikaku ni tsuite'. 13 Oct. 2017.
<http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kokusai/gaikokugo/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/31/1343704_01.pdf>
2. I checked two major authorized English texts for Japanese junior high school students, *New Horizon English Course 1-3* and *Sunshine English Course 1-3*. Neither of them adopts famous literary works for lesson chapters. The former one has a column for 'reading great books', which includes 'I'll Always Love You' for the second grade and 'Toad and Frog' for the third grade, but there is no mention of the original source of each story in the text.
3. This paragraph is Haughton's citation from Carroll's *The Letters*, Vol. 2. (London: MacMillan, 1979)
4. There are several versions of alphabet songs in Lear's *The Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*. All of his songs are accompanied by his original drawings.

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