

Philosophy for Children with learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

The present study intends to provide empirical evidence on the effect of Philosophy for Children (P4C) integrated with English picture storybook instruction on adolescent learners of English as a foreign language. Previous studies have documented the instructional benefits of P4C in various fields; very little evidence, however, can be found in ESL (English as a second language) or EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts. The present study was therefore carried out to explore the beneficial effects of P4C applied in EFL instruction with picture storybooks as instructional materials. A total of 62 students participated in the study, divided into one P4C group and one non-P4C group. Participants in the P4C group underwent 10 weeks of English storybook instruction with P4C in a school club, and the effects of instruction were measured by questionnaires and reading comprehension tests. Results of the study showed that students in the P4C group experienced a slightly higher level of English learning anxiety, retained higher English learning motivation after the instruction, and improved their English reading comprehension. Finally, pedagogical implications are presented.

Key Words

Community of Inquiry, English as a Foreign Language, language learning anxiety,

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language learning motivation, Philosophy for Children, picture storybooks, reading comprehension

Introduction

As EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, many students in Taiwan spend time learning English from teachers in class. However, most of them do not have a lot of opportunities to use the English they have learned outside of the classroom. Many students regard English as a required subject for passing various exams, and they consider English learning as a long process of endless drills and memorisation tasks due to grammar-based instruction and test content (Chung 2006; Wang & Savignon 2001). However, learning a language can be learning a way of living, learning how to express oneself, and learning to think. Regarding the promotion of thinking in students through education, many scholars have proposed their solutions. Among them, Lipman's solution is philosophy. Lipman (2003) believed that philosophy taps one's natural curiosity and sense of wonder and puzzlement. It engages people in a search for meaning and enriches their understanding of different concepts.

In the context of EFL, apart from learning the knowledge and rules regarding the language, instructors have been striving to create a learning environment that can engage students in meaningful tasks so as to promote the use of target language in an authentic way. Therefore, encouraging students to communicate with each other and exchange ideas is one of the popular activities in language classes. Drawing on the strengths of Lipman's approach in cultivating the necessary skills for rational inquiry and in building ties between abstract thinking and real life issues the current study incorporates Lipman's approach in an English language learning context. The researchers hoped to add a new dimension to the students' language learning—that of thinking and reflecting collaboratively.

Philosophy for Children and community of inquiry

Philosophy for Children (P4C), briefly defined, is a movement that aims to teach reasoning and argumentative skills to children. P4C was developed based on the

Socratic tradition of dialogue. Discussions in P4C sessions are generated through children's questions in response to stimuli, such as poems, pictures or stories. Democratic processes determine which questions are given discussion time, and the teacher's role within the question is facilitative rather than authoritative (Haynes 2008). P4C emphasises logic and criticality and has been identified as a key approach to developing thinking skills in children (McGuinness 2000).

In P4C, the classroom becomes a community of inquiry (COI) focusing on exploration and questioning (McGuinness 2000). The COI is a technique involving a circumstance where critical thinking and dialogue can be engaged with and experienced. As a result, P4C should be seen as a group of practices and techniques meant to facilitate the achievement of knowledge and enable participants to make decisions autonomously (Vansielegheem 2005). Through the COI, children are encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs and experiences regarding a particular concept, and through dialogue with others, collaboratively arrive at a new set of beliefs. The COI also gives children the opportunity to acquire the habit of reflective thinking, respect for others, cooperation, self-correction, good judgement, and so on. As described by Kennedy and Kennedy (2012), a community of philosophical inquiry involves an ongoing process in which, through social interaction and dialogue, participating members undergo continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of concepts, on both interpersonal and intrapersonal planes. A community of philosophical inquiry is therefore a collectively constructed zone of proximal development. In the process of intellectual and collaborative inquiry, students are expected to develop not just language skills, but also important reasoning skills (such as supporting with evidence) and social skills (such as turn-taking and respecting differences), and an enhanced self-esteem (Fair et al. 2015; Perrott 1990; Topping & Trickey 2007a, 2007b). In the context of language learning, all of these could be expected to help the students take a more positive outlook on their language learning and become more dynamic language learners.

Instructional benefits of P4C

Research evidence has linked P4C to gains in academic ability and attainment, and to positive shifts in student interactions within the classroom. Research projects

adopting P4C have suggested benefits in a wide variety of aspects, such as thinking skills, social interaction, mathematics, reading, speaking and listening ability (Dyfed County Council 1994; Fields 1995; Topping & Trickey 2007a, 2007b; Trickey & Topping 2004; McLeod 2010). In fact, P4C is perceived as relevant throughout the school curriculum (Lewis & Chandley 2012). Also, the approach applies not only to young children. Several studies have been conducted and provided evidence for the benefit of P4C with older school children (e.g. Fair et al. 2015; McLeod 2010). In Lewis and Chandley (2012), researchers recommended embedding philosophical inquiry in secondary education, and the connections of various subjects in the curriculum to P4C were discussed along with practical guidelines and examples of designing P4C activities for each subject. Hannam and Echeverria (2009) proposed using philosophical inquiry as part of an educational reform to better prepare teenagers for an increasingly globalised world. Through thinking collaboratively and caringly, teenagers take fragments of tradition or old world-views and jointly reassemble them to create a new world-view that all can share to some degree. Also, Leng (2015) implemented a philosophical inquiry course to help high school students improve their academic engagement and develop a new philosophy of life, and positive results were reported. Therefore, although termed as Philosophy for Children, the approach of collaborative inquiry through discussing philosophical questions is relevant through childhood and adolescence.

Regarding the materials for use, researchers have also recommended using materials other than those especially developed for P4C practices (such as the novels written by Lipman), and among which picture storybooks are mentioned as particularly suitable (Haynes 2011; Murriss 1992; Murriss & Haynes 2000). For its perceived benefits, P4C has been practiced or promoted in many educational institutions around the globe, and positive results have been reported in projects targeting areas such as character education, environmental awareness, mathematics, logical reasoning, and language learning. Although institutions promoting P4C have stated a strong claim regarding its beneficial effects on learning, more empirical evidence is yet to be found in EFL contexts.

Based on the current researchers' observation, students in the vocational high school² selected for the present study generally have low motivation for learning English and have relatively low English proficiency. In search of a better way to help students become more active learners, the researchers decided to incorporate P4C as an innovative ingredient into the field of foreign language teaching and adopted one of the recommended types of materials—picture storybooks—as instructional materials. This study attempted to find out if philosophical questions and dialogues, using English picture storybooks as prompts, can strengthen EFL students' learning motivation, reduce their anxiety and facilitate their reading comprehension.

The study

Participants

Participants of this study include 62 Engineering majors, aged 16-17, from two different classes in a vocational high school in Taiwan. The students had similar English language learning backgrounds (8 years of English classes in school), and according to the raw scores of the Basic Competence Test (a nation-wide test students take upon completion of Grade Nine), most of the participants had basic English reading ability. In order not to take up time in the scheduled English classes, the research was conducted during extracurricular activity time (two school periods each week allotted for club activities), which lasted 100 minutes per week for 10 weeks. For the purposes of the research, the second author started a school club called 'Reading and discussion of English picture storybooks'. The study adopted a quasi-experimental design in which one of the two classes of students was assigned to PG and the other class to NG. Participants in PG received P4C integrated picture storybook instruction in their club activities. Other students (NG) had the choice of joining other language related clubs, such as 'Appreciation of English Songs and Drama', 'Appreciation and Study of Western Movies', and other language related activities.

² After completing Grade Nine, students in Taiwan can go to a general high school or vocational high school. Students in vocational high schools spend three years learning practical technical skills that can help them find jobs in related fields.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in the study to collect quantitative data on the effect of P4C instruction: (1) English Learning Motivation Questionnaire in Chinese, (2) English Learning Anxiety Questionnaire in Chinese, and (3) two Reading Comprehension Tests at intermediate level. Each instrument was administered as pretest and posttest. The two questionnaires were adapted from Hsu's (2004) study. Hsu developed the first questionnaire based on Deci and Ryan's (1985) learning motivation questionnaire and Gardner's (1985) ideas about integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. The second questionnaire was based on the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale by Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986). Both questionnaires consist of items with 4-point Likert-type scales. The motivation questionnaire focuses on participants' efforts on school English curriculum and English learning outside of class, while the anxiety questionnaire measures participants' feelings regarding three aspects: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Reading comprehension was measured using the GEPT (General English Proficiency Test), a widely-used general proficiency test in Taiwan. GEPT scores are usually used or required for the purpose of school admission and job application. The intermediate level of GEPT was designed for learners with senior high school education. The reading part of the test at intermediate level includes 45 multiple-choice items in three sections: vocabulary and structure (15 items), cloze test (texts with deleted words that students need to restore) (15 items), and reading comprehension (15 items). For the current study, only the reading comprehension section was used as the pretest and posttest to investigate the effect of instruction.

Instructional materials

The researchers selected English picture storybooks with topics corresponding to those in the curricular guideline, including friendship, persuasion, bullying, gender roles, honesty vs. cheating, bravery vs. courageousness, problem solving, and environmental protection. Picture storybooks with vocabulary and grammar at a similar level as the participants' textbook were preferred. The selected picture storybooks with grammar points and philosophical foci are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected English picture storybooks with grammar points and philosophical foci

A big fat enormous lie

Grammar: Father asked me if I ate the jar of cookies. / I know you're getting bigger and bigger. / I could have told the truth.

Philosophy: The nature of truth

Days with Frog and Toad: Alone

Grammar: Frog was too far away to hear. / I made it for you, Frog, so that you would be happy.

Philosophy: Friendship; happiness

Frog and Toad together: Dragons and Giants

Grammar: They ran past the place where they saw the avalanche.

Philosophy: Bravery/courage

The gift of nothing

Grammar: What do you get someone who has everything?

Philosophy: Friendship; the meaning of nothing

I will not ever never eat a tomato

Grammar: One day I thought of a good trick to play on her. / They look just like carrots to me. / You didn't think they were tomatoes, did you, Charlie?

Philosophy: Sibling relationships; imagination; points of view

The paper bag princess

Grammar: She shouted as loud as she could, "Hey, dragon!" / The dragon was so tired that he didn't even move.

Philosophy: Gender stereotypes; happiness

Prince Cinders

Grammar: He had three big hairy brothers who were always teasing him about his looks. / They spent their time going to the Palace Disco with princess girlfriends.

Philosophy: Gender roles; bullying

Two bad ants

Grammar: One by one the insects climbed out, following the scout, who had made it clear—there were many crystals where the first had been found, but the journey was long and dangerous. / In fact they left in such a hurry that none of them noticed the two small ants who stayed behind.

Philosophy: Conformity; points of view

Though intended for young children, these picture storybooks present issues that, given appropriate guidance, can develop into questions of high relevance to adolescents and worthy of philosophical inquiry; for instance, gender stereotypes or gender roles, conformity, bullying and the true meaning of friendship.

Instruction in P4C

The procedure of the COI in P4C was not familiar to the participants because they were used to being silent in class and waiting for the teacher's instruction in class, the researchers therefore trained the participants at the beginning of this study (by having a few trial sessions) for the purpose of familiarising them with the process and guidelines in the community of inquiry and motivating them to think independently and raise questions. In addition, since a successful inquiry also depends on the instructor to build a good atmosphere and a safe environment, the second author (instructor) attended several workshops held by Caterpillar Philosophy for Children Foundation prior to the study.³ This enabled a better understanding of the process of the COI.

Regarding the instructional procedure for each P4C session, some amendments were made to the routine summarised by Haynes (2008) to address the needs of EFL students. These amendments included efforts to stimulate interest (e.g. by using video or flash animations of the story), clarify meanings (e.g. by explaining important vocabulary and providing translations of keywords for use in discussion), bring in reading strategies (e.g. by predicting the story ending), and follow up and provide closure (e.g. by asking students to rewrite the story ending and providing feedback to students' works).

The entire study lasted for 18 weeks, including orientation to P4C, administration of pre and post questionnaires and reading comprehension tests, and 10 weeks of P4C integrated picture storybook instruction.

³ Caterpillar Philosophy for Children Foundation was founded by Dr. Young Mao-Xiu in 1990. The foundation is dedicated to the development of P4C in Taiwan, offering courses and workshops for parents and children, training P4C instructors, and publishing magazines and books in related areas.

Results and discussion

The following presents the effects of P4C integrated with picture storybook instruction on EFL students' English learning anxiety, learning motivation, and reading comprehension.

English learning anxiety

T-test analysis results showed no significant difference between the two groups in either pretest or post test. However, paired-sample t-test results revealed a significant difference in the non-P4C group only, indicating a decline of English learning anxiety in the non-P4C group (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: *English learning anxiety: T-test results of pretest and posttest*

Group	N	Pretest			Posttest		
		Mean	t	p	Mean	t	p
PG	29	42.41	.176	.676	40.83	.388	.536
NG	33	43.64			39.00		

Table 3: *English Learning Anxiety: Paired Samples T-test results*

	Group	N	Paired Differences			
			Mean	SD	t	p
Pretest – Posttest	PG	29	1.59	7.84	1.167	.285
	NG	33	4.64	9.19	4.269	.007*

* $p < .05$

Results showed that all participants experienced English learning anxiety at similar levels (moderate) before the instruction. After the instruction, contrary to our expectation, only participants in the non-P4C group experienced a significantly lower level of anxiety. The instructor tried to make the community of inquiry easy, enjoyable, and stress-free so as to lower the students' anxiety level, and native

language use was allowed as a final compensatory strategy during discussion. Also, the instructor expected that using picture storybooks would lessen anxiety because the stories were seemingly more interesting than the content of regular English textbooks. Even so, the participants' anxiety was not significantly reduced. The reason might lie in the nature of the COI. Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1986) identified communication apprehension and fear of evaluation as two of the three main components of foreign language learning anxiety, and the process of the COI, requiring oral communication with peers for exchange and evaluation of opinions, can cause anxiety to Taiwanese students due to some cultural factors. In studies of class participation in intercultural classrooms, Asian international students are often found to be less active due to two factors: previous academic experiences and cultural beliefs. The way classes are generally conducted in Taiwanese schools makes expressing and discussing opinions in search of consensus a rather unusual activity in class; moreover, the nature of most achievement tests results in students being concerned with accuracy and they therefore fear saying something wrong or appearing unintelligent. Additionally, certain cultural norms, such as the idea that the instructor is an authority figure, the tendency to avoid conflict, and the emphasis on modesty and quietness as signs of respect to the teacher, also contribute to Asian students' 'passive' patterns of class participation (Gelb 2012; Li & Jia 2006; Liu 2005; Xia 2009).

Investigating Taiwanese students' English speaking anxiety, researchers suggest that the anxiety stemmed from psychological, educational and socio-cultural factors. The students generally perceived English to be highly difficult, were not accustomed to speaking up in class, were unwilling to 'lose face' in front of others, and believed that students should just listen and memorise what the teacher said (Chuang 2016; Timina 2015; Tseng 2012). Given these factors, the P4C instruction, requiring comprehension and production of English on a weekly basis, was something quite different from the school culture into which the participants had been socialised. It is therefore understandable that, compared with other more relaxing club activities, like listening to songs or watching movies in English, the P4C instruction could be rather anxiety-provoking to the participants.

English learning motivation

Statistical results showed that for both groups, motivation dropped significantly after the activities, and a significant difference was found between the two groups in their post test results, indicating a significantly smaller decline for the P4C group (See Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4: *English learning motivation: Paired Samples T-test results*

Group	N	Mean (pretest)	Mean (posttest)	Paired Differences			
				Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
PG	29	63.79	51.62	12.17	10.94	5.995	.000*
NG	33	98.21	51.27	46.94	15.37	17.539	.000*

* $p < .05$

Table 5: *English learning motivation: Analysis of Co-variance of posttest*

Group	N	Adjusted Mean	SD	F	<i>p</i>
PG	29	60.007	2.658	14.260	.000*
NG	33	43.903	2.427		

* $p < .05$

A significant difference existed in the pretest scores ($t=9.067$, $p=.000^*$); ANCOVA procedure was therefore applied on the posttest scores of the two groups, and the results showed that despite the overall decline, the PG retained a significantly higher level of motivation after the instruction. Factors related to learning motivation include internal factors, such as self-efficacy and competency, and external factors, such as course content, learning environment, and assessment methods (Davis 1999; Liu & Huang 2011). Since students in the selected school were generally low-achievement English learners, they mostly viewed English as a fairly difficult subject. Furthermore, according to the instructor's observation, several policy-related measures may have constituted external factors that negatively affected participants' overall learning motivation. Based on school policy and parents' expectation, English

teachers were expected to help students pass the elementary or intermediate level of GEPT. To accomplish this goal, the school implemented some mandatory measures to boost students' English proficiency. For example, students were required to complete GEPT practice tests on-line, to take on-line English listening tests, and to pass particular levels of vocabulary tests, which would be included in the monthly examinations. Moreover, supplemental requirements, such as the learning of 4500 vocabulary items for vocational high school students, were added to the regular courses and included in the monthly examination and daily quizzes. Though devised with the best intentions in mind, adding many tests and memorisation tasks could lead to higher test-related anxiety and hence lower motivation to learn. It also created heavier workload for the participants which might have worn out their patience or appetite for learning and therefore led to a drop in learning motivation as they progressed through the semester. However, for participants in the P4C group, the interesting content of picture storybooks and relevance of discussion questions to daily life could mean a challenging yet more meaningful course content that contributed to a significantly less decrease in learning motivation. Moreover, according to Anderman and Anderman (2010), students' motivation to learn can be enhanced when they have opportunities to build social relationships and feel connected in the classroom. Through having dialogues with their peers and collaboratively arriving at decisions, participants in the P4C group had more opportunities to share viewpoints and build social relationships with each other. From this perspective, the pedagogy of P4C with English picture storybooks seemed to have had a positive influence on the participants' learning motivation.

Reading comprehension

Results of reading comprehension test scores showed a significant improvement for both groups, and no significant difference was found between the two groups, as shown in the tables below.

Table 6

Reading comprehension: Paired Samples T-test results

Group	N	Mean (pretest)	Mean (posttest)	Paired Differences			
				Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
PG	29	7.03	12.28	5.24	3.16	8.937	.000*
NG	33	4.85	10.67	5.82	3.00	11.123	.000*

**p* < .05

Table 7

Reading comprehension: Analysis of Co-variance posttest

Group	N	Adjusted Mean	SD	F	<i>P</i>
PG	29	11.458	.585	.008	.930
NG	33	11.385	.546		

As with motivation measures, a significant difference was found in the comprehension pretest scores ($t=11.142$, $p=.001^*$), and ANCOVA analysis results showed no significant difference after the instruction. All participants' scores increased in the posttest of GEPT reading comprehension test and, interestingly, the increased means of the two groups were very close. It is to some extent within expectations that through regular instruction and the school's emphasis on memorising more vocabulary and taking practice tests, the participants' reading ability, as reflected on a standardised test, progressed. On the other hand, for the P4C group, despite the interesting materials and ample opportunities to think and express themselves in English, the effect was not substantially reflected in the comprehension measures. On the surface, such results did not seem to be congruent with previous claims in which improvement of students' reading comprehension in the native language after the implementation of P4C was evident (Fields 1995). However, considering the limited instructional time, the results were hardly surprising. In a replicate study of Topping and Trickey (2007a), Fair et al. (2015) found that there is a threshold for the minimum number of times a typical student

needs to engage in P4C sessions before a marked effect in any measured domain can be observed. In their study, the group with 22-26 weeks of implementation displayed significant positive effects while the group with only 4-10 weeks failed to show noticeable improvement. With only 10 P4C sessions implemented, participants in the current study might still be in the process of developing acquaintance and comfort with an activity unfamiliar in their educational context, which might have delayed the emergence of any meaningful outcomes.

Conclusion

The present study offers empirical evidence on the instructional effects of P4C integrated with English picture storybooks in an EFL context. Results of the study indicate that such pedagogy has some beneficial effects on vocational high school students' English learning, especially in the affective domain. Though the instruction did not significantly reduce students' anxiety level, probably due to tasks requiring demonstration of oral skills, a significant beneficial effect was observed in English learning motivation. Through reading, thinking, and talking about issues emerging from the picture storybooks, students established a stronger text-to-life connection which helped them view English learning as more closely related to their everyday life instead of just a required subject.

Pedagogical implications

Contrary to findings of previous P4C studies in Western contexts, participants' anxiety level was not significantly reduced after the instruction, which, as discussed in the results section, highlights the importance of cultural factors in applying teaching methods from different cultural contexts. The potential benefits of philosophical discussion through the COI cannot be reaped without taking into account students' cultural backgrounds. Cultural factors such as the Confucian ideas of a hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, silence and obedience as reverence to the superior, the collectivistic cultural feature of viewing communication as more relationship-oriented than information-oriented (Scollon & Scollon 2001), and social norms in relation to politeness and face all affect students' willingness to participate in discussion, their discourse style, and group interaction.

To allow the positive impact of P4C integrated instruction to manifest more fully, instructors need to make efforts to accustom students to the relatively unfamiliar instructional activity. More orientation activities are therefore needed beforehand to ease the students into P4C sessions. Also, instructors need to find all possible means to focus students' attention on expressing their thoughts instead of monitoring their language in the process of the COI, especially for the less proficient students. Several strategies are recommended to ease students' anxiety in orally expressing opinions in class, such as using clear and simple language and reminding students it is natural to make mistakes (Timina 2015). Though conducted in a language learning context, instructors need to refrain from placing too much emphasis on students' language errors during discussion. In an inquiry, the instructor should take the role of an active and attentive listener who facilitates the thinking and discussion process (Haynes & Murriss 2012). On the other hand, instructors may provide needed language assistance (e.g. giving students more useful key terms or phrases for discussion) before or during the COI to help the discussion proceed more smoothly. Finally, finding materials on topics that students are highly interested in might also engage the students more actively in the discussion and make the learning process more relevant to their lives.

Limitations and future studies

Finally, due to the constraint of time, school curriculum, and the limited number of participants, the current study can only provide limited evidence for the beneficial effect of P4C integrated with English picture storybooks. To gather more substantial evidence for such effect in an EFL context, more empirical studies are needed with a larger sample size and longer duration, and with a more carefully manipulated design, preferably within the regular school curriculum. More importantly, researchers can look further into the issue of how cultural factors impact on the effectiveness of teaching approaches, or focus on finding effective ways to conquer the barriers imposed by cultural factors in order to achieve better learning results.

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