

# Communicative Language-Teaching through Sandwich Stories for EFL Children in China

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### *Introduction*

With more than 3.6 million presecondary schoolchildren (below 13 years of age) learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in mainland China (Ji, 1998b), publishers have acted quickly to reap profits from this sector of the school market. Drop into any average-size bookstore and you will have no trouble at all collecting 20 to 30 kinds of EFL textbooks for children, almost all of which are advertised as being the latest in communicative language-teaching (CLT) and having "communication" as their main aim. Today, almost 20 years after CLT was first introduced into China, EFL practitioners in the Chinese mainland have generally come to agree with the idea of teaching English as communication. However, CLT textbooks are problematic in the primary EFL classroom. Communicative techniques fail to work and information gaps are found to be not "worth filling" (Prodromou, 1988, p. 76) at all. This article presents a discussion of two problems with current CLT textbooks for EFL children in China, followed by an explanation of the rationale for the use of stories and sandwich stories, as well as a demonstration of sandwich stories being used in the classroom.

### *Communication for Children or Adults?*

Few textbook writers ask the question "What kind of communication do EFL children in China need?" It can be argued that all communication is rooted in need. From an adult point of view, communication obviously means *doing things*, for example, asking the way, going shopping, booking a hotel, meeting a guest at the airport, or applying for a job. Adults' needs, it may be further argued, are mostly extrinsic, stemming from concerns about social position, financial security, professional competition, and so forth. They do business with foreigners in China; they go abroad to study or work or travel. CLT textbooks for adults are, therefore, well justified in providing their users with situational dialogues, problem-solving tasks, communication skill-building practices, role-play, and pair work exercises, all of which are meant to equip their users with the ability to communicate in English efficiently to deal with real-world problems.

But what are the needs of Chinese EFL children? Do they really need to use English to tackle real-world problems as their adult counterparts do? Surveys of various kinds have continued to confirm that the whole idea of motivating Chinese-speaking children to introduce each other, or to talk about the Chinese Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, or their favorite pets among themselves in English is at best unrealistic, if not ridiculous (Ji, 1994; Bik-may, 1999). A change of focus from the grammatical syllabus with its drill and practice to a thematically organized syllabus with lessons centered around such topics as "my school," "my family," "animals," or "colors" has not helped much to make textbooks communicative or meaningful to Chinese EFL children. It should be recognized that children's needs are primarily intrinsic and formative. To them, communication tasks that are suitable for adults are simply "vacuous and empty of life" (Prodromou, 1988, p. 76). They have special needs that are satisfied only by special kinds of nutrition. They are, ironically, willing to use English, as it were, not to accomplish things, but to make links with the world of the imagination, as they do by caring for someone (e.g., the hero or heroine of a story) who does not exist at all by making friends with someone (e.g., the author of a story) who, although unable to provide them with food, drink, clothing, or shelter, is able to help them grow by satisfying their curiosity, tickling their imagination, broadening their horizons, and stimulating their creativity. In other words, children communicate to *understand things*, to get to know the unknown, to play (let's not forget that stories are at the semantic level a kind of play, Cook, 1998) and to feel happy, thereby satisfying the needs and wants and desires within themselves for their cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development.

Development, therefore, becomes the key word from a wider view of EFL education. EFL practitioners must not forget that China's educational policy is still that learners be developed morally, intellectually, and physically so as to be able to contribute to the prosperity of their motherland. We must see to it that even in an EFL classroom the act of learning contributes to the personal development of the young learner. Harmer (1991) is positive about this view, stating that language-teaching is not just about teaching language, it is also about helping learners to develop themselves as people. Dufeu (1994) labels this development-oriented approach to language-teaching as "a pedagogy of being" as opposed to "a pedagogy of having" (p. 3) in which the foreign language is seen as knowledge to be transferred or transmitted to the learner. He asserts:

Whatever approach we take to the foreign language, even the most traditional, we are always teaching more than just the language. What is at stake goes beyond linguistic learning: it relates to the self-confidence of the participants as well as their intellectual and personal development. (p. 12)

Language-teaching should be concerned with real life (Halliwell, 1992). Life should not stop as children enter the classroom. CLT textbook writers are so concerned with promoting reality in the classroom that they forget that "reality for children includes imagination and fantasy" (p. 7) and that the act of fantasizing, of imagining, is very much an authentic part of being a child.

### *Where the Learner Was or Is*

Another problem with CLT textbooks for Chinese EFL children is that writers seem to have worked against the educator's adage "Teaching must start where the learner is." Eight- or even 10-year-olds are treated as 3-year-olds. This reminds us of Burling's (1968) criticism that our "usual" methods "assault the finer sensibilities of our students by limiting them to the simplified sentence structure and impoverished vocabulary of a child" (p. 75). Although there is nothing wrong with beginning with EFL words, phrases, or short sentences in small dosages, the problem is that they are not taught in a contextualized way, being divorced from the young learner's interests. On the other hand, textbook writers may rightly complain of being on the horns of a dilemma: they start either where the learner was or where the learner will be, but never where the learner is. If they choose a story that is developmentally appropriate for the young learner, being intrinsically interesting and intellectually challenging, how do they take care of the English level of the learner? The story "The Hatmaker and the Monkey" (see Garvie's, 1990, three versions of the story for L1 children, pp. 70-71, for EFL children, p. 72, and for ESL children, p. 75), for example, is indeed to many children an interesting and enjoyable story, but it takes a vocabulary of at least 2,000 words to get a good comprehension of it. These 2,000 words "comprise the form words, the prepositions, conjunctions and pronouns, and all the commonest nouns and verbs, without which we should not be able to say anything at all" (Fry, 1979, p. 34). However, does this mean that EFL children have to be deprived of the enjoyment that stories are capable of affording before they hit the 2,000-word target? The answer should be a definite No.

We can ensure that teaching does start where the young learner is by preparing whatever the learner would be interested to hear or read in his or her mother tongue in such a way as to make it satisfying to the young learner's interests and appropriate to his or her level of English (Ji, 1998b). Suppose we were to reduce the range of vocabulary from 2,000 words to 10, we could be sure of posing no great difficulty for the learner. Yet it would be absurd to try to write, for example, a story with a vocabulary of 10 words and expect it to be interesting and enjoyable. Jacobs and Tunnell (1996), in fact, ask the question "Can an author write a book with rigidly controlled vocabulary and an interesting story at the same time?" Their answer is: "It is

unlikely because a book can't serve two masters—the one more important to the author almost always takes over" (p. 30). A story or text, therefore, seems to serve either those who read it to learn the language in which it is written, or those who read it to have their vision widened, their imagination tickled, their creativity sparked, and their intellect challenged—but never both. Experiments in China, however, have confirmed that the use of a sandwich method is a practical solution to this problem (Ji, 1998b, 1999).

### *Why Sandwich Stories?*

Using stories as an effective way of language-teaching is well documented in the literature on language development. Chambers (1970), for example, describes storytelling as "a technique of teaching that has stood the test of time" (p. 43). Advocates of storytelling as a pedagogical tool claim many advantages (see Fitzgibbon & Wilhelm, 1998, for a review), the most frequently mentioned being affective benefits: storytelling interests students, lowers affective filters, and allows learning to take place more readily and more naturally in a meaningful, interactive communication context. With ESL or EFL children, storytelling is regarded as "one of the most powerful tools for surrounding the young learner with language" (Pesola, 1991, p. 340). McQuillan and Tse's (1998) "narrative approach," which focuses on a simple yet powerful medium that provides students with interesting and comprehensible stories, has "proven successful in L2 settings for children at the beginning and intermediate levels" (p. 18). Wright (1995) observes,

We all need stories for our minds as much as we need food for our bodies ... Stories are particularly important in the lives of our children ... Children's hunger for stories is constant. Every time they enter your classroom they enter with a need for stories. (p. 5)

Maley goes so far as to assert that stories "virtually solve the 'problem' of motivation at a stroke" (Wright, 1995, foreword).

However, as discussed above, in an elementary EFL context in China, a story methodology will have to be modified before being adopted in the classroom. In order to make CLT classes developmentally appropriate and enjoyable but language-focused (Bik-may, 1999), a sandwich method has been used to produce stories with English words, phrases, or sentences embedded in Chinese (Ji, 1998a, 1998b; Ji & Xu, 1999). The idea of making sandwich stories came to me partly from my observation of (mainly southern) Chinese parents who, using a dialect with their children as their first "language," have intuitively used the sandwich method to teach them to speak Mandarin (Ji, 1998b), and partly from my own family situation. Seven years ago, when I married, my wife had a 4-year-old daughter, then capable of speaking both Mandarin (Putonghua) and her native (Hunan) dialect fluently but incapable of accepting a man whom she had never seen before and whom she had to call father. All my efforts with the immersion method

to teach her English resulted only in hostility toward English on the part of the innocent girl. However, she enjoyed listening to me read stories aloud in Mandarin, which gave me an excellent opportunity to "smuggle in" some English in my oral interpretations, beginning from 1% to 2% and on to 60% until a story could be told and understood almost completely in English.

In recent years, through my reading and communication with EFL/ESL experts across the world, I have discovered that the sandwich method, also called code-switching or diglot-weave (Blair, 1991), or the "bilingual" method (Morgan & Rinvoluceri, 1986), has been in use for foreign-language-teaching for at least 30 years. Best known for the promotion of this method is the work of Burling (1968, 1978, 1982), an anthropologist at the University of Michigan who, starting in the 1960s, developed a diglot-weave model for teaching reading in French. In the 1970s Rudy Lentulay, a professor of Russian at Bryn Mawr University, inspired by Anthony Burgess's novel *Clockwork Orange* in which the teenage characters use Russian words as slang, used this method to teach young children oral Russian (Blair, 1991). Morgan and Rinvoluceri (1986), like Lentulay, got the idea of using bilingual texts from reading *Clockwork Orange*, and they "have found it an excellent way of getting beginners gradually to assimilate new vocabulary by setting it in a context that has not been denatured" (p. 36). A good, sustained example in German/English is Werner Lansburgh's novel *Dear Doosie* (Morgan & Rinvoluceri, 1986). Tongue, in the 1970s and 1980s, used this method to teach Bahasa Indonesian to English-speakers who had to learn to read this language fast for church work (Burling, 1978; M. Rinvoluceri, personal communication, 1998). Experience in China has shown that the sandwich method allows such flexibility that the problem of comprehensibility, and consequently of motivation, is solved at a stroke.

### *How to Make Sandwich Stories*

Stories are selected according to two criteria: (a) they are likely to have a vital and constructive influence on the young learner's development as a person "toward mental, emotional, and social maturity" (Mursell, 1949, p. 3); (b) they have a high interest value and are capable of entertaining children (Morgan & Rinvoluceri, 1983). The sandwich is developed in a gradual, step-by-step manner: the percentage of EFL items increases story by story until it reaches somewhere between 80% and 100% English. On average, new target language items are introduced at a controlled rate of 7-8 per story. Choice of EFL items is made in accordance with the principles of *learnability* and *prominence* (Ji, 1998b; 1999). Learnability refers to the degree of ease with which an English item is acquired by Chinese children. Learnability estimations involve such considerations as phonological transferability (i.e., items composed of sounds or sound patterns similar to those of Chinese are taught earlier than those containing dissimilar sounds and sound patterns); gram-

matical similarity (i.e., the simple present, the simple future and the present continuous tenses, and the active voice are taught earlier than the others; and phrases or sentences with a word order similar to that of Chinese are taught earlier than more distinctively English ones); lexical commonality (i.e., content words are taught earlier than function words (the opposite of Burling's (1968, 1978) sequencing), and expressions common to both Chinese and English, for example, *go to hospital*, are taught earlier than those reflecting different conceptualizations, for example, *go to see a doctor* where the equivalent in Chinese, translated literally, would be "go to see sickness"); and cultural acceptability (i.e., culturally neutral terms are introduced earlier than those heavily loaded with typically Western cultural meanings). Prominence, which is different from frequency—the number of times that an English item appears in the story or in the corpus—has to do with the importance of a specific item (e.g., *eye, ear, teeth, wolf, granny*) to the development of the story to be used (e.g., Little Red Riding Hood).

For those who do not know Chinese I would like to illustrate how a sandwich story looks by giving a reversed version of a part of the story "Little Red Riding Hood," in which the target language is Chinese and the mother tongue is English. In this story, the name Little Red Riding Hood, important as it is, is not chosen as a target language item due to phonological and conceptual complexity.

Little Red Riding Hood asked, "Oh, *Nainai*, how come your *yanjing* are so big?"

*Lang* answered, "My *yanjing* are very big so that I can see you clearly."

Little Red Riding Hood asked, "Oh, *Nainai*, how come your *erduo* are so long?"

*Lang* answered, "My *erduo* are very long so that I can hear you clearly."

Little Red Riding Hood asked, "Oh, *Nainai*, how come your *yachi* are so sharp?"

*Lang* answered, "My *yachi* are very sharp so that I can eat you up quickly."

Here the context enables children to make out the meanings of *lang* (wolf), *nainai* (granny), *yanjing* (eye/s), *erduo* (ear/s), and *yachi* (tooth/teeth).

### *How to Use Sandwich Stories*

At present in China, in the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong, three types of experimental classes use the sandwich story methodology: Type I classes with children aged 4-5; Type II classes with children aged 6-7; and Type III classes with primary 4th and 5th graders (aged 10-11). Each type of class is further classified into video/book classes and audio/book classes. A typical video/book class in Types I and II is conducted through the following two steps:

1. *Revision.* The teacher helps review the EFL items covered in the previous lesson either by:
  - a. (mostly in Guangdong) having the children act out the story with the teacher as the narrator and each child playing the part of a story character (as in the case of small classes with 10-15 pupils), or (as in big classes with 30-50 pupils) with a group of children acting as one character, such as the first little pig, so that every child gets a chance to practice without taking up too much of the limited class time; or
  - b. (mostly in Fujian) by retelling the story with such techniques as "intentional deviation" (e.g., "The first little pig built a house of bricks"), "information gaps" (e.g., "The wolf first came to which little pig's house?"), "translation mistakes" (e.g., "The wolf shouted, 'Open the door!' The word 'door' means 'house.' Am I right?"), and "pretend forgetfulness" (e.g., "Oh, granny, how come your ... sorry I forget the English word for [the teacher points at his or her eyes]"). Children seldom tire of hearing the same story two or three times and are usually enthusiastic about correcting the teacher's "mistakes" and filling in the information gaps.
2. *Story on TV.* The pupils watch the new story lesson on television, and the narrator tells the hard-to-act parts of the story with the help of pictures. Children (young actors and actresses) act out the dramatic parts of the story with the narrator's voice in the background. At the end of the story, the narrator talks about the moral of the story, usually asking questions. Then the narrator goes over the new English items with the help of flashbacks of the pictures and actions previously shown and by asking the pupils to repeat after him or her. Finally, for some stories, a song or rhyme is taught to enhance the pupils' memory of the new English items, for example, for the story "The Three Little Pigs," a song is sung to the tune of "London Bridge is Falling Down," which goes like this: Little pig, open the door, open the door, open the door. // Big wolf, *wo men jue bu gei ni* (we will never for you) open the door. // *wo men de* (our) house *jiu shi lao* (is strong). Big wolf *chui bu dao* (can't blow it down). // Big wolf *weiba zhao liao ta wang jia pao* (tail is burning he has to run home).

In Guangdong, most sandwich story classes are run on a story-drama basis, that is, a small performance is put on after each story is learned. So after step 2, there is a third step: rehearsal, in which the teacher and the pupils discuss and decide who is (are) to play which role in a story. Then the teacher helps with the rehearsal to prepare for step 1a described above. In Fujian, however, most classes are run through steps 1b and 2, with the rehearsal step postponed until 7-10 stories are learned. Then there comes a long rehearsal period (2-3 weeks) followed by a drama festival in which the pupils act out the stories in a more formal and professional way.

For Type III classes, the teacher follows roughly the same steps as those described above except that: (a) a “thicker” kind of sandwich story is used, that is, a story with its dramatic dialogue (e.g., the dialogues between Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf in the woods and in Granny’s bedroom) completely in simplified English and the rest of the story in a normal sandwich manner; (b) a reading-aloud session follows the “story on TV” step, in which pupils go through word recognition and phonic drills. There are two reasons for these modifications: first, the 4th and 5th graders have learned some English (about 100 words) before they come to their sandwich classes; second, they have mastered the Chinese phonetic alphabet system (*hanyu pinyin*) so that the introduction of English reading does not make them confused, as would be the case with Types I and II classes.

For the audio/book class, the teacher follows the same steps as for the video/book class, except that step 2 is done by the teacher with the help of an audioplayer and pictures and gestures.

### *Discussion*

Over three years of experimentation with the sandwich method in Fujian and Guangdong has met with general approval. Teachers and parents are happy to see the young learners after class spending more time listening to their English recordings and reading their English books. And they have noticed a remarkable difference between sandwich-class pupils and non-sandwich-class pupils in the degree of willingness to use English in their everyday conversations. “They never open their mouths.” is a frequently heard complaint from parents of non-sandwich-class children.

However, as anticipated by sandwich method advocates, doubt has been raised about the legitimacy of this method in terms of authenticity. Indeed some people “fear that taking such liberties can only lead to a ‘pidginized’ corruption of the authentic language” (Blair, 1991, p. 30). After all, a sentence such as “I want to *chi diao ni*” (Ji, 1998a), *Chi diao ni* meaning “eat you up” in Mandarin, is anything but authentic. But the sandwich method experimenters in China are encouraged by three facts:

1. The pupils are happy and so are their parents, who are often heard to say that the new method gives their children far more than just English and a positive feeling toward English. Some parents even say that they would be willing to pay for such lessons even if they did not teach English at all because the stories themselves and the drama activities work wonders in providing their children with the nutrition necessary for their social, emotional, intellectual, and moral development.
2. The pupils are enthusiastic about piecing together the bits of English they learn from the sandwich stories. Sentences like “I want to go to bed,” “I don’t like Sly Fox,” and “My mother is beautiful,” are produced



as whole chunks before they appear as whole sentences in sandwich stories.

3. Some of the pupils in Type III classes have happily crossed the sandwich bridge to a new world of experience where monolingual EFL stories (written with a beginning vocabulary of 700-1,000 words) continue to provide them with nutrition for thought, communication, and consequently development.

Also, some teachers question the prospect of developing children's communicative competence through sandwich stories. However, our sandwich experiments seem to have confirmed the following arguments.

1. Because sandwich stories provide children with interesting and comprehensible input, intake occurs easily and in large quantities. As children acquire more and more words and their sentences change from sandwich to monolingual, from short to long, their ability to express themselves and to communicate in English increases. It must be pointed out that for Chinese EFL young learners, communication is not foreign. They know, for example, how to be polite, how to get information, how to persuade others, how to describe, and how to introduce themselves. What they mainly do not know is English words and ways of putting words together. Their initial English sentences might not be idiomatic or native-like, being stripped of grammatical morphemes and function words similar to the first sentences produced by their English-speaking (though younger) counterparts, but they are never far from their communicative intent, be it a request, apology, command, or exclamation.
2. Stories to children are as real as, or even more real than, reality. They actively take part in dramatizing the stories they hear, prolonging and adding more details to the stories. They are highly motivated to talk and shout. This kind of talking, although in a sandwich way, is anything but artificial. They have both intent and content for communication, two of the most important components of communication (Harmer, 1982). If communicative competence is acquired best through communication, it follows that children stand a good chance of developing their English communicative competence through talking about and acting out their stories, a kind of communication that is so meaningful to children.
3. No matter how old or how fictional, stories are the best vehicle for teaching everyday language. For example, much of the dialogue between the three little pigs and the men who carried straw, wood, and bricks respectively can be used by children when asking for help today. The same is true of the dialogue between the Town Mouse and the Country Mouse when children express their likes and dislikes. Such examples are innumerable.

## *Conclusion*

This article begins with the observation that current EFL textbooks for Chinese children suffer from two shortcomings in the primary school classroom: (a) children's needs for communication appropriate to their level of development are neglected; and (b) monolingual (English) texts often do not match the actual level of competence of the students. When Brumfit (1991) says that young learners are "by definition too young to have clearly identifiable needs" (p. iv), he does not mean that children's needs are not easily identified, but that their needs do not quite fit into the picture of needs analysis for adult learners. It is argued that children's needs are primarily intrinsic and formative and must be satisfied by special kinds of nutrition. Children are always hungry for stories that cater to their constant search for adventures and experiences beyond the small world they live in. To make primary EFL classrooms truly communicative and meaningful to Chinese children, this article proposes a sandwich story methodology, which entails the use of stories and the sandwich method to solve both the problems of meeting students' communication needs and of EFL starting where the learner was.

To conclude this article I would like to quote the last paragraph of Burling's (1978) article published over 20 years ago. It expresses exactly the feeling I have now.

Preparing materials for a course such as I have described is a laborious process, but it can have a peculiar and rewarding fascination. It has ... shown me how easy and natural the processes of borrowing between language[s] can be. And, of course, I have also had the satisfaction of watching students avoid some of the agonies of language learning that I still remember so vividly from my own education. I would be endlessly pleased if others found the methods that I have proposed to be sufficiently intriguing to merit imitation. (p. 128)

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